

SHANTYTOWN MEXICO: *THE DEMOCRATIC OPENING IN CIUDAD NEZAHUALCÓYOTL, 1969–1976*

The article analyzes political conflict in Mexico through a powerful social movement that erupted in the massive shantytown of Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl between 1969 and 1973. In the summer of 1969, after decades of abysmal living conditions, the residents of Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl (Neza) launched a payment strike to demand the federal government expropriate the land from private land developers, with the intent to gain urban infrastructure and formal property titles. The rebellion that plunged Ciudad Neza into a state of perpetual strife reflects a juncture in Mexican history when the urban shantytown emerged as a distinct and influential site for mass politics. This article historicizes Mexico's urban shantytown as a political space where the ruling party's entrenched clientelism contended with embryonic forms of local democracy. Revealing numerous contradictions, this case study is emblematic of how the urban periphery was a precursor to the vibrant yet incomplete democratization that would come to define national politics in Mexico and much of Latin America in the 1980s.

Mexico, 1970s, urban social movement, informality, shantytown

On June 19, 1970, presidential candidate Luis Echeverría visited Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl at a moment when the municipality was embroiled in a bitter land conflict. Since the 1940s, various *fraccionadores* (land developers) had taken advantage of the area's multiple land tenure systems—federal, private, and communal—to sow discord and confusion among residents and local officials. However, in the summer of 1969, after decades of abysmal living conditions, negotiations, nominal legal reforms, and widespread corruption, the residents of Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl launched a payment strike to demand Mexico's federal government expropriate the land from the private land developers. The movement's demand was rooted in the area's long-standing status as federal property located near Mexico City, and the strike was viewed by residents as a means to gain urban infrastructure, municipal services, and property titles for their land plots.

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It was during Echeverría's visit to Ciudad Neza that a 30-year-old resident named Rogelio Vargas Soriano pushed his way through the crowd of onlookers to shake the hand of the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) presidential candidate. True to form, Rogelio Vargas did not simply greet the presidential candidate: Vargas grabbed Echeverría's hand and refused to let go until he felt he had fully conveyed the severity of Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl's (Neza) problems.¹ Just one year later, Rogelio Vargas found himself at the same table with President Echeverría (1970–76) in the National Palace to discuss the demands of the Neza-based Movimiento Restaurador de Colonos (MRC).² Echeverría's fiery discourse inadvertently unleashed a social movement from below that entangled residents, private land barons, local politicians, and the federal government in a tense struggle over the land in Latin America's largest informal city (roughly one million people in 1970).³ Although several core demands remained unfulfilled, in 1973 Echeverría was able to negotiate a highly contested agreement that effectively ended the reign of Ciudad Neza's land barons and represented the largest singular land regularization program in Mexican history.

The rebellion that plunged Ciudad Neza into a state of perpetual strife reflects a juncture in Mexican history, when the urban shantytown emerged as a distinct and influential site for mass politics. At the end of the 1960s, in Durango, Monterrey, Acapulco, Mexico City, Cuernavaca, and Coahuila, the informal city developed into a site and object of political contestation.⁴ While the particular histories and conditions varied from one city another, the period witnessed a confluence of events that upon reflection challenge the conventional frameworks through which historians have analyzed Mexico in the late twentieth century.

An analytical shift to the urban periphery forces scholars to reconsider the period in two respects. First, to focus on Mexico's urban periphery decenters the 1968 student movement and its multiple afterlives. The tumultuous protests and counterculture surrounding the student movements of the "Long Sixties" have justifiably garnered considerable attention from both scholars and activists

1. Rogelio Vargas Soriano, interview with author, June 13, 2018; "Una visita de Echeverría a Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl," *El Día*, June 20, 1970, 1.

2. "Se dará una solución rápida al problema de la tenencia de la tierra en Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl," *El Día*, August 3, 1971, 1.

3. From the *Anuario Estadística*, 1975, tabulated in Martín de la Rosa Medellín, *Promoción popular y lucha de clase* (Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl: Servicios Educativos Populares, 1979), 45.

4. The disparate urban movements united into a national coalition (CONAMUP) in 1980–81. This broad coalition was independent of the PRI and played an important role in Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's 1988 presidential election campaign. For background, see Ricardo Hernández, *La Coordinadora Nacional del Movimiento Urbano Popular; CONAMUP: su historia 1980–1986* (Mexico City: Praxis, Gráfica Editorial, 1987); and, Juan Ramírez Saiz, *El Movimiento Urbano Popular en México* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1986).

alike.⁵ However, more importantly—and problematically—the intense focus on the student movement has narrowed the thematic scope of the period and muted local histories, and has generally cast political and social phenomena in the shadow of '68. There has also been a parallel tendency to focus on the intentionality of Echeverría's social reforms, without analyzing how they affected the lives of ordinary citizens. Second, the assessment of Echeverría's "democratic opening" has mainly been based on an analysis of official policies and state institutions.⁶ To solely evaluate "the opening" through the lens of state-centered politics overlooks how political discourse from above took on a life of its own throughout Mexican society. The payment strike and protests in Ciudad Neza underscore why an analysis of the democratic opening requires an assessment of how, and to what degree, Echeverría's official discourse influenced ordinary citizens to participate in the affairs of the day. More succinctly, this article seeks to move beyond '68 and below Echeverría.

The land politics of Mexico City's periphery constitute a local history with global resonance. Beginning in the 1970s, the paradigm for the urban poor's demands shifted from labor to land. This shift, as anthropologist James Holston observed, was "an achievement of the poor in cities of the global south who have posed their struggles of urban life much more in terms of residence and basic everyday resources rather than in terms of the kinds of conflict between labor and factory discipline that characterized working-class movements in Europe during the last century."⁷ While our collective understanding of urban politics in Latin America has largely benefited from the ethnographic studies of anthropologists and sociologists, it has also been limited and stunted by the lack of attention to archival research.⁸ This article historicizes Mexico's urban shantytown as a political space where the ruling party's entrenched clientelism contended with

5. For more recent and nuanced takes on the period, see Jaime Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture during the Long Sixties* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); and Mary Kay Vaughan, *Portrait of a Young Painter: Pepe Zúñiga and Mexico City's Rebel Generation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). For a work reflective of scholars who stress state violence and local politics in this period, see Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith, eds., *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938–1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

6. The democratic opening was a series of liberalizing reforms that included the release of political prisoners, the promotion or appointment of leftist intellectuals in state agencies, and the expansion of Mexico's social welfare system that took place under Luis Echeverría's presidency. For more see, A. S. Dillingham, "Indigenismo Occupied: Indigenous Youth and Mexico's Democratic Opening (1968–1975)," *The Americas* 72: (2015): 549–551.

7. James Holston, "Insurgent Citizenship in an Era of Global Urban Peripheries," *City & Society* 21:2 (October 2009): 247. For this phenomenon in Mexico, see Emilio Duhau, "Urbanización popular y política de suelo en la Ciudad de México" in *Espacio y vivienda en la Ciudad de México*, Martha Scheingart, ed. (Mexico City: Colmex-CEDDU, 1991), 139–160.

8. For examples of seminal works, see Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Larissa A. de Lomnitz, *Cómo sobreviven los marginados* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1975); José Matos Mar, *Las barriadas de Lima, 1957* (Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1977); and Janice Perlman, *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

embryonic forms of local democracy. Depicting a phenomenon riddled with contradictions, this case study is emblematic of how events on the urban periphery were precursors of the vibrant yet incomplete democratization that would later define national politics in Mexico and much of Latin America in the 1980s.

THE MIGRANT AND URBAN POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA

By the 1970s, Ciudad Neza had become a national symbol for the failures of rapid urbanization in Mexico. It was portrayed as an extreme concentration of urban poverty where patronage politics was the order of the day.⁹ In more recent times, moviegoers were able to catch a glimpse of this world in the film *Roma*, when its main character, Cleo, arrives in Ciudad Neza in a beat-up *chimeco* bus.¹⁰ Through Cleo, we are introduced to a dizzying scene of muddy streets where pigs, chickens, and stray dogs roam free with schoolchildren, long-haired *rockeros*, and construction workers returning home from their daily commute to the city.

While the scene from *Roma* may possess a surreal quality to the foreign eye, this chaotic mixture of the countryside and the city was a common sight for Mexican city dwellers, who tended to view this visual dissonance as a kind of vulgar hybridity. For the middle-class family in *Roma*, Ciudad Neza was not part of the city, yet not part of the idyllic countryside they would visit on vacation. Politically, this vulgar hybridity was perceived in the merger between the rural peasant and urban populism, represented by the bombastic PRI orator and cheering crowds in *Roma*. The fictional politician's calls for "the will of the people" to "unite around the illustrious leadership of governor Hank González and president Echeverría" to gain their rights to water echo the language and slogans found in the archives of the period considered here.¹¹

Moreover, a closer look into the archives reveals the degree to which Echeverría's prioritization of the urban shantytown was unprecedented; politicians who had traditionally sided with private land developers over residents finally realized that the "thousands of votes trapped in the mud" were worth more than the money.¹² Cleo's quest, however, was personal not political, and she soon leaves Neza after a heartbreaking encounter. Unlike Cleo, in this article we remain in

9. For examples, see Jesus Pablo Tenorio, "Un polvorín llamado Ciudad Neza," *Jueves de Excélsior*, April 19, 1973, 14; and Julio Scherer, "Desaparecerá la leyenda negra de Ciudad Nezahuatlcóyotl," *Excélsior*, March 7, 1971, 9.

10. *Roma* (Dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2018).

11. Quoted dialogue from *Roma* (Dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2018).

12. Feike de Jong and Gustavo Graf, "How a Slum Became a City," *City Lab/The Atlantic*, last modified June 28, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-28/how-a-slum-became-a-city>, accessed October 8, 2020.

Neza to see how the political and personal converged in Mexico City's periphery at the end of the 1960s. The outcome of this combustible mixture proved to be quite different from what was predicted by most experts and prominent voices in the Americas during the mid twentieth century.

Fear of the “unassimilated peasant” in the city was compounded by the massive numbers of migrants and the character of their living environment. Ciudad Neza's explosive population growth was fueled by internal migration, severe housing shortages, and legislative restrictions that placed new subdivisions within the bounds of the Federal District. Between 1940 and 1970, approximately 2.6 million people moved to the Federal District, coming from all 29 states in Mexico.¹³ The mid twentieth-century internal movement of people from the countryside to the city was truly a global phenomenon. As historian Barbara Weinstein writes, “In many ways, this massive movement of millions of rural and small-town dwellers to larger metropolitan areas . . . can be considered the most transformative social phenomenon in the recent history of Latin America.”¹⁴ These dramatic demographic shifts coincided with the rise of Cold War tensions, which turned potential sites of urban rebellion into targets for state-led modernization.

If the geopolitics of the postwar era added a sense of urgency to international development projects, the leading figures in the social sciences offered the practical tools and ideological coherency necessary for their implementation. In the transnational circuits of knowledge that ran from the Harvard-MIT Center for Urban Studies to the Chilean-based DESAL Center, the urban shanty dweller was also a potential urban guerilla. Roger Vekemans, director of the Centro de Desarrollo Económico y Social para América Latina (DESAL) in the 1960s, warned, that “after a lack of participation, the first essential characteristic of marginality is its radicalism.”¹⁵ Political scientist Samuel Huntington predicted, “At some point, the slums of Rio and Lima, of Lagos and Calcutta, like those of Harlem and Watts, are likely to be swept by social violence.”¹⁶ In reflecting on mass migrations from the countryside to the city, British economist Barbara Ward forewarned, “Unchecked, disregarded, left to grow and fester, there is enough explosive material to produce in the world at large the pattern of bitter class conflict . . . erupting in guerrilla warfare.”¹⁷

13. Baja California Sur and Quintana Roo became states in 1974. For migration statistics, see Humberto Muñoz et al., *Migración y desigualdad social en la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1977), 43–47.

14. Barbara Weinstein, foreword, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo*, by Pablo Fontes (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), vii.

15. Vekemans is cited in Janice Perlman, *The Myth of Marginality*, 123.

16. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 282.

17. Barbara Ward, “The Uses of Prosperity,” *Saturday Review*, August 29, 1964, 27–28.

The “squatter as revolutionary” theory began to lose ground among the following generation of urban sociologists, who cut their teeth on Latin America’s shantytowns in the 1970s. When the revolutionary character of the lumpenproletariat failed to surface, many were inclined to gravitate toward Eric Hobsbawm’s position on squatters and populism: “They understand personal leadership and patronage alone. . . . Untouched by any other tradition, the new migrants look naturally for the powerful champion, the savior, the father of his people.”¹⁸ Similar positions can be found in the works of Oscar Lewis (Mexico, Puerto Rico), William Mangin (Peru), and Gino Germani (Argentina). For Mexico, no work was more representative of this school of thought than Wayne Cornelius’s *Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico City* (1975).¹⁹ Through a comparative study of six neighborhoods (including one in Ciudad Neza), Cornelius characterized the city’s poor migrants as overwhelmingly conservative, susceptible to political demagoguery, and easily appeased by concessions offered by the PRI.

The 1980s witnessed the beginnings of a divergence among Mexican scholars on the question of urban marginality. Following Cornelius’s framework, sociologists such as Priscilla Connolly continued to view self-built settlements and precarious housing as a realm of social control that strengthened the PRI’s political machinery.²⁰ Writer and historian Héctor Aguilar Camín lamented the symbolism of television antennas installed on top of makeshift *jacales* (shacks), describing them as “a complimentary symbol of the new order, a sea of television antennas. . . that is one of the features of our barbaric modernization, access to the transistor culture without going through the culture of the alphabet.”²¹ Although the masses who populated the city’s informal settlements were derided as being pliant and narrowly focused on local demands, some Mexican intellectuals began to see the latent potential of shantytown residents. In the influential work *Entrada libre* (1987), writer Carlos Monsiváis recognized that the informal poor’s political exclusion, combined with their spatial segregation, provided the raw material for local democracy in the form of neighborhood associations.²²

18. Eric Hobsbawm, “Peasants and Rural Migrants in Politics,” in *The Politics of Conformity in Latin America*, Claudio Veliz, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 59–60.

19. Gino Germani, “Inquiry into the Social Effects of Urbanization in a Working Class Sector of Greater Buenos Aires,” in *Urbanization in Latin America*, Phillip M. Hauser, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 206–233; Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1959); William Mangin, “Latin American Squatter Settlements: A Problem and a Solution,” *Latin American Research Review* 2:3 (Summer 1967): 65–98; Wayne Cornelius, *Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico City* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

20. Priscilla Connolly, “Uncontrolled Settlements and Self-Build: What Kind of Solution?” in *Self-Help Housing: A Critique*, Peter Ward, ed. (London: Mansell, 1982), 160. See also Martha Scheingart, *Los productores del espacio habitable: estado, empresa y sociedad en la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1989).

21. Héctor Aguilar Camín, *Después del milagro* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1988), 153.

22. Carlos Monsiváis, *Entrada libre: crónicas de la sociedad que se organiza* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1987), 80–85. For later work, see Sergio Tamayo, “Del movimiento urbano popular al movimiento ciudadano,” *Estudios Sociológicos* 17:50 (May 1999): 499–518. In both works, the CONAMUP is the main reference point for urban popular movements.

The formal democratization of several countries in Latin America led to an effervescence in scholarship on urban social movements.²³ The neighborhood association became a vanguard in the movement against authoritarian regimes, generating cutting-edge interdisciplinary research on the relationship between urban citizenship and democracy in the late twentieth century. With the exception of Brazil, consideration of these questions has largely remained the province of political scientists and sociologists. Archival research into the struggle over land in Ciudad Neza illustrates that popular movements are not inherently linked to greater democratization.²⁴ Instead, they can produce multiple outcomes, and in the case of Mexico, allow us to more deeply understand how the PRI remained resilient in the face of multiple crises throughout the 1980s. This argument is based on newly discovered material in Ciudad Neza's municipal archive, which includes government reports, community newspapers, resident testimonies, and documents produced by the Jesuit priests who came to live in Neza during the 1970s.

The history of Jesuits in Ciudad Neza serves as a link between grassroots politics on the urban periphery and the expansion of civil society in Mexico more broadly. Inspired by the work of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, these former Universidad Iberoamericana students embraced the call to serve the people (to take up “the preferential option for the poor”). While the transformation of the leaders of the MRC into violent caciques followed the “natural order” of politics in postrevolutionary Mexico, the presence of the former Jesuit students breathed new life into these mass movements with a revolutionary ideology and democratic organizing principles. Demoralized and distraught after the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, the young Jesuits decided to leave behind the comforts of middle-class life in the capital and moved to Ciudad Neza in 1969—the same year a payment strike ignited a mass movement on the urban frontier.

THE ORIGINS OF THE SETTLER MOVEMENT FOR LAND RESTORATION IN CIUDAD NEZA

The initial sparks for the payment strike were struck on May 20, 1969, with two public demonstrations. The first demonstration took place in Mexico City's

23. For an example, see James Holston, *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

24. For Brazil, see Brodwyn Fischer, “A Century in the Present Tense: Crisis, Politics, and the Intellectual History of Brazil's Informal Cities,” in *Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Urban Latin America*, Brodwyn Fischer et al., eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 11; and Bryan McCann, *Hard Times in the Marvelous City: From Dictatorship to Democracy in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). For points on popular movements, see Alan Knight, “Comments,” in *Mexico's Alternative Political Futures*, Wayne Cornelius et al., eds. (La Jolla: Center for US-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1989), 436–437.

zócalo, while the second protest was organized by a group of teachers in Ciudad Neza's Colonia Aurora. The protests were largely uneventful and failed to gain any momentum, but they nevertheless piqued the interest of a local carpenter named Artemio Mora Lozada. Emboldened by the teachers' protest, Mora Lozada saw an opening to organize neighborhood association leaders into taking a more militant stand. The following month, several neighborhood committees united to form the *Movimiento Restaurador de Colonos* (Settlers' Movement for Land Restoration) on July 17, 1969 and elected Mora Lozada as the organization's president.²⁵ The MRC's central demand called for the federal government to expropriate Ciudad Neza's land from private land developers. After years of broken promises and brute repression, the MRC tied the imprisonment of the land developers to its struggle for land rights. Frustrated with symbolic protest, the group decided to mobilize residents to stop making monthly payments on their land plots. The controversial demand captured the imagination of several young men on the fringes of local politics, and a 23-person executive committee was established that summer. The committee included three key leaders: Ángel García Bravo, Odón Madariaga Cruz, and Rogelio Vargas Soriano.

The individuals who emerged as the core leadership of the MRC represented a new generation of social leaders in Mexico's informal settlements. When the student movement erupted in Mexico City on the eve of the 1968 Olympics, they watched from afar, as young fathers who had recently settled down on small plots of land in Ciudad Neza. The rustic towns and villages they left behind were part of their past and their homes in Ciudad Neza were their future. On Saturday nights, they scraped together the little money they had to go out on the town. They made their rounds of the local pool halls and ramshackle dance clubs, wore sunglasses at night, and preferred the Rolling Stones over the Beatles, drinking over marijuana, mezcal over pulque (when they could afford it)—only to go back to their shacks at dawn before another week of commuting into Mexico City to work as carpenters, street vendors, security guards, and mechanics. Like most residents in Ciudad Neza, they knew their options to move ahead in life were slim, but found some hope in the small plots of land they "owned" and could gradually transform into respectable homes through their own labor and willpower.

When the first rumblings of the payment strike began, Rogelio Vargas was just one of the thousands who had placed their hopes in a new home in Ciudad

25. The origins of the MRC movement can be found in Distrito Federal, December 1969, Archivo General de la Nación, Secretaría de Gobernación, Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales [hereafter AGN IPS], caja 1702 B, exp. 137845/2; and "Estado de México," November 25, 1970, AGN IPS, caja 1702-B, exp. 7. For the founding date of MRC, see *Boletín de Prensa*, December 28, 1971, personal archive of Ángel García Bravo [hereafter PA/AGB].

Neza. Rogelio was born into a poor family of farmers at a time when much of rural Mexico was bereft of major roads (1939). His family, in the Mixteca Baja region of Oaxaca, spoke Spanish peppered with Mixtec. As a young man, in 1954, he traveled for days on badly paved roads to the San Lázaro bus terminal in Mexico City. After several years of living in a tenement near Tepito, Rogelio moved to Ciudad Neza in 1963, the same year it became the State of Mexico's 120th municipality. When asked more than 50 years later why he had moved to Ciudad Neza, his response was simple, "To become a homeowner and not rent."²⁶ After signing the contract for his lot, he asked the salesman where his property ended; the salesman threw a rock into a lagoon: his property ended where the rock had splashed in the water. Despite the area's harsh environment, Rogelio never involved himself with the local neighborhood association until the announcement of the payment strike. It was at this moment that he first met Odón Madariaga.

When the payment strike began, Odón Madariaga was a 26-year-old handyman who had recently bought a plot of land in Colonia Aurora with his wife and two children. As a teenager, he walked for miles through the sierra of the Huasteca until he reached a highway that connected the region to Mexico City. The Huasteca, a region located along the Gulf of Mexico, is home to several indigenous communities that include the Nahuatl, Totonaco, Huastec (Mayan), and Otomi. Odón's family were Otomi corn farmers who had lived in the Sierra Huasteca for several generations. When Odón turned 20, his father gave him 50 pesos and told him: "Listen, son, here in the Huasteca you are going to live and die like I have lived, and like I will die, with nothing, without learning anything, without knowing anything, and never making it out of poverty. Go to Mexico City. There you will be able to make something out of yourself, God willing."²⁷

After a few years of living in the Federal District, Odón tried his luck in Colonia Aurora, a relatively new settlement established on the barren plains of Ciudad Neza's eastern section. Aurora had grown by leaps and bounds since land developers Bernardo Eckstein and Abraham Slotnik established it in 1957.²⁸ Over the course of ten years, it expanded from a few dozen families to 13,000, although roughly 16,000 lots still remained vacant in 1969.²⁹ Like many of

26. Quote and description of moving to Mexico City based on Vargas Soriano, interview with author, June 3, 2018.

27. Fernando Benítez, "Una ciudad dentro de otra ciudad: Nezahualcóyotl," en *Viaje al centro de México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1975), 84.

28. Acuerdo del Ejecutivo del Estado Relativo al Fraccionamiento Aurora, Municipio de Chimalhuacán, Distrito de Texcoco, March 8, 1957, Centro de Información y Documentación de Nezahualcóyotl [hereafter CIDNE], caja 16, exp. 21.

29. From the 1970 Auris report, *La problemática de la tierra en la Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl*, 1970, CIDNE, caja 16, exp. 34.

Aurora's residents, Odón was attracted to the area by the radio ads and brochures that promised modern services, a cinema, a bullfighting arena, and most importantly, one's own home. Advertised in mainstream newspapers and on popular radio stations, Colonia Aurora's seeming openness lent it an air of legitimacy and hope to the poor families desperate to leave Mexico City's overcrowded tenements.

Together, resident testimonies, photographs, and government reports paint a picture of Colonia Aurora and Ciudad Neza that is very different from the images found in the company's brochures. A 1964 study carried out by the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS) found that 97 percent of the colonia's roads were unpaved, 80 percent of the residents lacked drainage services, and at least half the dwellings were built on bare ground with no foundation or floor (*piso de tierra*).³⁰ In an area prone to torrential downpours and flash flooding in the summer months, the lack of infrastructure was disastrous for residents. A 1969 government survey found 64 percent of the homes in Ciudad Neza lacked running water, 60 percent lacked electricity, and most houses (88 percent, or 72,000 units) were constructed with cinder blocks, metal doors, dirt floors, and corrugated steel roofs weighted down with rocks and old car tires.³¹

The main source of anger and discontent for Aurora's residents was the absence of urban services promised to them in their land contracts (referred to as urbanization certificates). In 1967, a neighborhood association in Aurora sent a letter to president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz stating, "We bought our homes in these marshy lands with the firm promise that they would be urbanized with services: water, electricity, drainage. It has been several years and we still do not see these services, despite the fact that we paid for these lands."³² When Odón Madariaga bought his lot, he made a down payment of 1,332 pesos and signed a standard contract that stipulated a monthly fee of 437 pesos for land and services, to continue over 15 years.³³ Far from being squatters who operated beyond the law, Ciudad Neza's informal settlers were parties to lucrative business agreements intimately bound up with local officials.

30. Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, *Investigación de vivienda en 11 ciudades del país* (Mexico City: IMSS, 1965), no pages, listed as estrato 69.

31. Comité Especial de Planificación Cooperación, Municipio de Nezahualcóyotl, Informe sobre el estudio preliminar en Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, Estado de México, 1969, CIDNE, caja 16, exp. 382.

32. Oficio 201-I de la Dirección General de Gobernación, December 4, 1967, Archivo de la Secretaría de Obras Públicas, Archivo Histórico del Estado de México [hereafter ASOP AHEM], caja 21-Colonia Aurora, exp. 087-0499/56-021008.

33. Benitez, *Viaje al centro*, 85.

Water, the most basic element of life, was the most vexing problem in Ciudad Neza. Neza's water problems included both its consumption and containment. For most of the year, the municipality was a windy dust bowl, but the summer months brought storms that flooded the streets with polluted, undrinkable water. A bitter irony was felt among residents, particularly women, who had to travel long distances to procure water for cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, bathing, and drinking. Beginning with the first settlements in the late 1940s, Ciudad Neza's residents spent countless hours hauling buckets of water from *pipas* (trucks that sold water) that lined the highway (Zaragoza) separating the Federal District from the State of Mexico.³⁴ Natividad Trejo, who moved to the area in 1951, remembers the years without access to water: "We were so poor, we had nothing. . . . It was all one big salty swamp. We lived here for seven years before the first public water tank was installed [1958]. Before that we had to leave the municipality and get water from the city."³⁵ In 1969, little had changed for the municipality, where, as *El Día* reported, "the lack of drinking water in the majority of neighborhoods in Netzahualcóyotl increases with each day. In the face of desperation, hundreds of families impatiently await the arrival of the water distribution trucks."³⁶

The elections of governor Hank González and president Echeverría did bring about some reforms to water access in the area. The government invested 400 million pesos in a water distribution system and created 15 deep-water wells. Overall, between 1970 and 1975, the government invested a billion pesos in Neza's urban infrastructure and public services.³⁷ The images of governor Hank breaking ground on a new water system or electric transformer suggest that government projects did make a difference in the lives of Neza's residents. Yet the reams of quantitative budget reports by the state's Dirección de Obras Públicas failed to convey the poor quality of those services for most residents.

In the 1970s, diseases and infections related to water were the leading causes of death in Ciudad Netzahualcóyotl. A 1973 study from the Secretaría de Salud's Department of Epidemiology (DGE) found that the leading cause of death in Ciudad Neza was diarrhea. In a single year, nearly 1,000 people died of diarrhea and intestinal diseases caused by contaminated water—homicide was

34. Maximiliano Iglesias, *Netzahualcóyotl: testimonios históricos, 1944–1957* (Ciudad Netzahualcóyotl: SEPAC, 1978), 22–23.

35. Cited in De Jong and Graf, "How a Slum Became a City."

36. "Dramática situación provoca la escasez de agua potable en Ciudad Netzahualcóyotl," *El Día*, March 6, 1969, 9.

37. Antonio Huitron, *Netzahualcóyotl: miseria y grandeza de una ciudad* (Toluca: Editorial Libros de México, 1975), 234. For more background on Carlos Hank, see Rogelio Hernández Rodríguez, "Challenging Caciquismo: An Analysis of the Leadership of Carlos Hank González," in *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, Alan Knight and Wil Pansters, eds. (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2005), 249–271.

ranked eighth, with 92 deaths.³⁸ The World Health Organization, in a 2018 fact sheet, noted, “People, particularly children, who die from diarrhea often suffer from underlying malnutrition, which makes them more vulnerable to diarrhea. Each diarrheal episode, in turn, makes their malnutrition even worse.”³⁹

As one of the young Jesuit students who went to live among the poor in Neza, Martín de la Rosa remembered a time when he helped a couple in Aurora make funeral arrangements for their youngest child, who died at six months. Before the funeral services, the doctor turned to De la Rosa and confided to him, “The illness on the death certificate was just a pretext, starvation and poverty killed the baby.”⁴⁰ In these conditions, the numerous infrastructure projects carried out by the state between 1970 and 1973 raised the expectations of residents. Those expectations later became the fuel for the movement of resistance from below.

FORCES IN THE FIELD, 1970–72

For the first several months, Ciudad Neza’s payment strike failed to gain any traction and its outcome was shrouded in uncertainty. The residents had a personal stake in their plots of land but were well aware of the land developers’ power. Land developer Raúl Romero had virtual control over the local police force, judiciary, school officials, priests, and *pistoleros* (hired gunmen), and also had close ties with governor Juan Fernández Albarrán in Toluca. The MRC began small, organizing through the quotidian activities of residents, in marketplaces, bus stops, churches, and bars. Soon its organizers were a regular and visible force in Ciudad Neza’s neighborhoods, rolling slowly down unpaved streets in pickup trucks with megaphones and flyers, holding rallies, knocking on doors, and organizing neighborhood meetings at night.⁴¹

Land was at the heart of the MRC movement. In 1862, when the area was still covered by Lake Texcoco, Benito Juárez issued a presidential decree that designated the lake and its surroundings as federal property. After roughly half of the lake was drained under public works projects at the turn of the twentieth century, Porfirio Díaz continued to treat the dried-out lake bed as federal

38. Tabulation of deaths, Dirección General de Epidemiología (1970), table reprinted in Medellín, *Promoción popular*, 48.

39. “Diarrhoeal Disease,” World Health Organization Fact Sheet, accessed on July 8, 2018, <http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/diarrhoeal-disease>

40. Martín de la Rosa Medellín, *Netzahualcóyotl: un fenómeno* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974), 8.

41. Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez *Rituals of Marginality: Politics, Process, and Culture Change in Urban Central Mexico 1969–1974* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 109–110.

property.⁴² This status survived the violent upheavals of the Revolution (1910–20) and was only slightly changed in the 1930s when 10 percent of the former lake bed was distributed to local villagers in the form of *ejidos* (communal lands for agrarian purposes).

Despite significant federal investment, the briny and brittle soil proved to be too arid for land cultivation.⁴³ With the area still largely a dust bowl at the end of the 1940s, president Miguel Alemán decreed that the federal lands be converted into “suburban developments,” although he never outlined or specified what that process would entail.⁴⁴ For the former lake bed, and throughout Mexico, the urbanization of ejido lands produced an intractable legal discrepancy—usufruct land for agrarian purposes was sold and approved by local courts in direct contradiction with federal laws. The presidential decrees were wielded by the MRC to claim that the land was federal property, and therefore, not rightfully owned by the private land developers.

Although only sporadic at first, the repression was swift and predictable. Activists publicly associated with the MRC were evicted from their homes, and several leaders were temporarily jailed in nearby Texcoco. At times, the MRC was able to confront the land developers’ repressive apparatus through direct action tactics. When a single mother was evicted from her home by the police, Odón Madariaga and Ángel García Bravo led a crowd of 500 people to reclaim the land. Odón later recounted:

There were two police officers guarding the door of the house . . . 500 people ran toward the police with rocks and *garrotes* (clubs). We said to the woman: “Don’t go. You are going to keep living in your house. We are going to defend you.” We put her furniture and things back into the house and stood guard out front. The police had disappeared from sight. It was like a miracle. In 15 days we got thousands of members.⁴⁵

Similar actions became more frequent, and the strike gained momentum. In 1970, the MRC released a five-point program that was subsequently published in *El Día*. In addition to claiming the land’s status as federal property, the MRC pointed to a statewide law passed by the governor that affirmed land

42. Luis González Obregón, *Memoria del desagüe del Valle de México* (Mexico City: Oficina Impresora de Estampillas, 1902), 4.

43. Matthew Vitz, *A City on a Lake: Urban Political Ecology and the Growth of Mexico City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 159–166.

44. The presidential decrees related to the land tenure of Texcoco are compiled in Margarita García Luna, *Nezahualcóyotl: tierras que surgen de un desequilibrio ecológico. Decretos relativos a los terrenos desecados del Lago de Texcoco* (Toluca: CIDNE, 1990).

45. Benítez, *Un viaje al centro*, 89.

developers were legally responsible to provide *colonos* (residents or settlers) with the services stipulated in their contracts, under the Ley de Fraccionamientos passed by governor Salvador Sánchez Colín in 1957.⁴⁶ Here we find an example of how a largely nominal law, hastily passed by the PRI to weaken political unrest, could later be revived to legitimate the demands for particular rights.

By the end of 1970, moral certitude based on legal rights was being translated into collective political action. In December 1970, the MRC held a rally attended by 900 people in front of its offices in Colonia Metropolitana. People in the crowd carried signs that read, “The problems of Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl can be resolved in only one way—EXPROPRIATION!” and “The Fraccionadores are the Enemy of the People.”⁴⁷ Speakers appealed to the crowd to stop making payments to the fraccionadores and praised president Echeverría for his courage to stand with the people.

As the MRC grew, observers commented that it was common to see armed guards in front of their offices and at the home of Artemio Mora Lozada. Neighborhood disputes were settled by the MRC’s ad hoc tribunals, and monthly payments were collected by subcommittee leaders. Roughly one year after the strike began, the MRC had deposited one million pesos in Nafinsa (an escrow account).⁴⁸ By the end of 1970, nearly 20,000 homes had joined the strike and the MRC had 48 subcommittees.⁴⁹ More than a social movement, the MRC was beginning to establish an alternative authority and parallel bodies of informal governance.

What factors explain the emergence and ascendance of the MRC? Unlike many other examples in history, the movement was not caused by a single dramatic event. In this case, the stirrings of the masses coalesced into a movement when a sense of change in the government started to become palpable among those on the bottom of society. First, the victory of Carlos Hank González as governor of the State of Mexico signaled a possible shift in policies to the people of Neza. Today, Carlos Hank is seen as the personification of modern corruption in Mexico; it is widely believed he used his political career to build a business empire and was party to several high-profile scandals that linked him to organized crime. However, in 1969 Carlos Hank González was most associated with his role as the general director of CONASUPO, a government-run food program that subsidized basic goods sold in

46. Hugo Sánchez, “Proponen a Hank González un plan de ayuda a Ciudad Netzahualcóyotl,” *El Día*, February 2, 1970, 9.

47. “Informe,” Estado de México, December 27, 1970, AGN IPS, caja 1702-B, exp. 7.

48. Folleto del Frente Zapatista de Nezahualcóyotl, 1971, CIDNE, caja 16, v-29/exp. 4.

49. Distrito Federal: Información de Netzahualcóyotl, September 15, 1970, AGN IPS, caja 1702-B, exp. 7.

CONASUPO markets throughout Mexico. Carlos Hank toured the country as the public face of CONSASUPO, appeared regularly on television to promote food security for the poor, and became a regular fixture in the State of Mexico's political scene.⁵⁰ Shortly after Carlos Hank assumed his position as governor, Luis Echeverría visited Ciudad Neza on his presidential campaign. Echeverría's decision to publicly support the MRC (sincere or not) gave sustenance to the movement in trying times of repression and chaos. One MRC document states, "We organized a large number of people to support Luis Echeverría's candidacy, and we developed a broad campaign in our municipality to spread his ideology and thought, and to fortify our hope in the message of our current president that his government would be a government of the poor."⁵¹

Echeverría was not the only political force attempting to make inroads into Ciudad Neza in 1969. That same year, a loose collection of former Jesuit students relocated to a small house behind a neighborhood church, where they established a literacy program for adults in a move that represented a new political development in the municipality's history. The student movement in general, and the young Jesuits in particular, played a contradictory role in the movement for land rights and services in Ciudad Neza. The contemporary and very visible rebellion among middle-class youth gave the urban poor in Neza more "breathing room," as it carved out more political space for them to maneuver under a repressive regime.

However, while the student movement's open challenge to the PRI's authority did create new openings for the MRC, the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre also had a chilling effect on some MRC leaders. The violent repression against students served as a cautionary warning to Neza's leaders to orient their movement within the framework of constitutional rights and nationalism in order to avoid another bloodbath.⁵² It was in this environment that young Jesuits arrived in Ciudad Neza. They remained resolute in their belief that if the working class did not come to the students, then the students should come to the working-class. Beyond this general principle, they had very little understanding about how to proceed through this uncharted territory.

It was during this decisive period that the young Jesuits in Ciudad Neza attended a lecture series by Brazilian philosopher and educator Paolo Freire at the Center

50. "Justo precio de garantía y regularizar el mercado agrícola, ofrece Hank González," *Excelsior*, December 22, 1964, 10; Guillermo Hewett Alva, "Compra total de cosechas; fueron autorizados a la CONASUPO para ese fin dos mil millones de pesos," *El Universal*, October 29, 1968, 6; Guillermo Ochoa, "Las promesas de Hank González," September 13, 1969, *Excelsior*, 7–8.

51. Letter to the Director General de Quejas de la Presidencia, October 29, 1971, PA/AGB.

52. Odón Madariaga stated, "There was the experience of October 2 [the date of the Tlatelolco massacre] and we were not prepared to suffer a defeat," in Benítez, *Un viaje al centro*, 92.

for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca.⁵³ The CIDOC was a nexus for radical intellectuals, missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, traveling hippies, and local educators. The leafy city of Cuernavaca had long been a popular destination for weekend retreats due to its charming atmosphere and close proximity to Mexico City. The CIDOC was funded by Fordham University and spearheaded by the influential Catholic priest and philosopher Ivan Illich.⁵⁴ Illich is most widely known for his promotion of democratic and decentralized forms of education geared toward countries outside of Europe and North America. Politically, Illich viewed president John F. Kennedy's initiatives in Latin America, such as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress, and the Vatican's renewed missionary work in the region as mutually reinforcing projects intended to flatten local cultures through Western modernization.⁵⁵ He later remarked, "I wanted to point out the damage, the damage done by volunteerism, the damage to the person who went there [Latin America] with a sense of superiority, a savior complex."⁵⁶ Illich's views on education and cultural imperialism molded the CIDOC into an international hub for radical thinkers, including Paul Goodman, Peter L. Berger, Susan Sontag, and Paulo Freire.

Freire's courses at the CIDOC in 1969 and 1970 had a deep impact on the young Jesuits and guided their work in several ways. Freire outlined his vision for an educational model that imparts critical thinking and acquisition by awakening the student's consciousness, combining reflection and action as part of what Freire called conscientization or *conscientização*. The young Jesuits gravitated toward Freire's maxim of "not working for the people but *with* the people."⁵⁷ Freire's outlook on education carried deeper ideological undercurrents for social activism. The young Jesuits interpreted and adapted Freire's pedagogical approach to their political project in Ciudad Neza: they did not define themselves as political leaders or members of a vanguard party, but instead as servants of Christ who manifested their faith through their community work with the most downtrodden. In addition to leading church services, they developed adult literacy courses where they experimented with more democratic and horizontal methods of pedagogy. As a result of their adoption of Illich's and Freire's views on leadership, they were reticent to intervene in the MRC's political conflicts.

53. Medellín, *Promoción popular*, 71.

54. Requests for Funds, Center for Intercultural Documentation, January 1966, Biblioteca Daniel Cosío Villegas, El Colegio de México [hereafter BDCV], CIDOC, cajas 1–2, folder 370.196 C- 397d.

55. Todd Hartch, *The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 21–22.

56. Training for Apostolic Service in Latin America, Center of Intercultural Formation, New York-Mexico-Brazil, no date, BDCV, CIDOC, caja 1–2, folder 370.196 C 397d.

57. This sentiment can be found in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Myra Bergman Ramos, trans. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1968/2017), 94.

By 1971, the Jesuits' project was in shambles. Their overall mission lacked the level of ideological coherence necessary to navigate and withstand the harsh realities of Ciudad Neza. Their outsider status only magnified the new and unconventional nature of the ideas they promoted in church services, literacy classes, and community programs. At an impasse, divisions emerged between those Jesuits who wanted to moderate their message to meet the daily needs of Neza's residents and those who felt a more radical vision was the only path commensurate with the conditions faced by residents. In the aftermath of the inner conflicts over the direction of the group, only three of the original members remained in Ciudad Neza.

As young clergymen, the Jesuits had not entered Ciudad Neza as independent actors but as individual members of an official institution with its own laws, hierarchies, and history within Mexico. Locally, the Jesuits encountered a conservative and hostile church clergy suspicious of their intentions and threatened by the prospect of liberation theology taking root in Mexico. This general hostility was particularly pronounced during Echeverría's presidency. Despite Echeverría's momentous trip to the Vatican in 1974 (the first Mexican president to visit the Vatican in the twentieth century), his introduction of programs promoting contraception in family planning programs and his friendship with Mexico's most prominent proponent of liberation theology, Sergio Méndez Arceo, were causes for concern among most of Mexico's Catholic bishops.

Already on edge due to the MRC strike, relations between the Jesuits in Ciudad Neza and conservative Catholic leaders in the State of Mexico reached a breaking point after the Jesuits signed on to the *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo* manifesto in the beginning of April 1972.⁵⁸ The *Sacerdotes para el Pueblo* (Priests for the People) manifesto presented a clarion call for religious leaders throughout Latin America to oppose capitalism, embrace elements of socialism, and dedicate their lives to the people. On one hand, the political ethos of the "Long Sixties" represented an unwelcome development to Mexico's largely conservative religious leaders and heightened the antagonism between the young Jesuits and the local diocese (in this case Texcoco). On the other hand, the growth of liberation theology in Mexico also opened up the possibility for the Jesuits in Ciudad Neza to align themselves with the emergent progressive forces within the Catholic church found in Mexico City, Colima, Monterrey, Cuernavaca, and Chiapas. The new alignment revitalized the Jesuit group, although they continued to distance themselves from the internal politics of the neighborhood associations until

58. See Medellín, *Promoción popular*, 109; Edward Cowan, "Mexican Families Are Wary of the Birth Control Clinic," *New York Times*, November 27, 1975, 12; and Young-Hyun Jo, "Movimiento 'Sacerdotes para el Pueblo' y la transformación socioeclesial en México," *Revista Iberoamericana* 21:1 (2010): 84.

later, in 1973, when the Fineza Land Trust agreements caused a major rift among Ciudad Neza's political forces.

DIVIDE AND (PARTIALLY) CONQUER

The rhythms of the MRC lot payment strike resembled the movement of waves—periods of slow activity that gathered, crescendoed, crashed, and withdrew to slowly build up again, yet were always in motion. Their daily activities consisted of holding neighborhood meetings, collecting lot payments, writing press releases, and building alliances with shopkeepers, bus companies, and lawyers. They remained in close contact with Juan Ugarte, a director in the Departamento de Asuntos Agrarios y Colonización (DAAC) and the main person in charge of the land investigation. In private correspondences with Carlos Hank, Ugarte assured the governor that he had obtained verification, using four records on file in the public registry and five presidential decrees published in the *Diario Oficial*, that most of the land in Ciudad Neza (8,819 hectares or 21,792 acres) was communal or federal property.⁵⁹ The combination of the MRC's favorable relationship with the head of the DAAC, Echeverría's public support of the movement, and Carlos Hank's condemnation of the land developers buoyed the hopes of Ciudad Neza's residents.

The movement crescendoed in the summer of 1971. In March, shortly before the rainy season, the MRC organized a rally in front of the Palacio Municipal. The rally was attacked by the police, with protesters retaliating with bricks and bats, burning police cars, and shutting down the main intersection. Three days later, the MRC mobilized 6,000 people in Mexico City's zócalo to protest the repression.⁶⁰ The rally marked a turning point for the MRC: it was the first major protest they had organized in the capital. The crowd took over the adjacent cathedral and occupied the space until they moved to demonstrate in front of an office of the Departamento Agrario, the government agency that settled rural land disputes. Then, on June 22, 1971, a crowd of 500 protesters shutdown Bucarelli Street to demonstrate in front of a judicial assembly that was meeting to discuss the land tenure system in areas of the State of Mexico surrounding the Federal District.⁶¹

The specter of the masses descending upon the capital from Ciudad Neza became more tangible in the summer of 1971. The government grew concerned about the prospects of losing control of the movement, and officials began to think of Ciudad Neza as a powder keg. In a meeting with a consortium of wealthy

59. "Informe," Estado de Mexico, December 27, 1970, AGN IPS, caja 1702-B, exp. 7.

60. Benítez, *Viaje al centro*, 93.

61. "Una multitud de habitantes de Ciudad Netzahualcóyotl se reunió," *La Prensa*, June 24, 1971, 27.

businessmen, Carlos Hank warned the group, “Don’t you know it’s possible that one day these people could think it would be better to live around your homes in Las Lomas or Pedregal de San Ángel instead of the outskirts of Nezahualcóyotl? And they wouldn’t have to go too far. What would happen if 500,000 or 600,000 people from Neza simply marched into Mexico City?”⁶² At the end of July 1971, a private meeting was held between Echeverría, Carlos Hank, and representatives of the DAAC at Los Pinos, the historic presidential residence, to discuss possible solutions to the land tenure problem in Ciudad Neza. Those present came to an unofficial agreement that it was in the best interests of the parties involved to move in favor of land expropriation.⁶³

Meanwhile, at a moment when 25,000 households in 56 neighborhoods were active in the lot payment strike, the MRC split in two. The division was made public during a neighborhood meeting on July 8 in Colonia Maravillas where Artemio Mora Lozada denounced Odón Madariaga and Ángel Ávila Jácome for being “radical extremists of the left.” Although a definitive reason for the split remains uncertain, it is most likely that Artemio Mora Lozada’s aspirations of gaining a seat in the municipal government gave rise to internal power conflicts within the MRC. After the split, Mora Lozada retained a slim majority among the subcommittees (roughly 60 percent) and Odón Madariaga held on to the rest, mainly subcommittees in the eastern sections of Neza. Odón, Rogelio Vargas Soriano, and Ángel García Bravo quickly formed the Comité Ejecutivo del MRC (CE-MRC) and stepped up their militancy in the colonias.⁶⁴

It was in this period that both wings of the movement gravitated closer to state officials and the inner circles of the PRI. The CE-MRC (Odón Madariaga’s faction) was incorporated into the PRI’s Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC), while Mora’s MRC aligned itself with the ruling party’s Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares (CNOP).⁶⁵ The split pushed the CE-MRC to seek allies with a broader array of figures outside of Ciudad Neza’s local political milieu. Leaders of the CE-MRC began to receive legal advice from José Guadalupe Zuno, a progressive lawyer from Guadalajara who was

62. Alfonso Sánchez García, *Memorias de Nezahualcóyotl: un pueblo, un nombre, un hombre* (Toluca: Centro de Información y Documentación de Nezahualcóyotl, 1990), 27.

63. Reunión de trabajo en Los Pinos para resolver el problema de la tierra en Nezahualcóyotl, CIDNE, caja 16, v-21/exp. 264.

64. Estimates for the number of members before and after the split are given in Breve comentario sobre la creación del Movimiento Restaurador de Colonos de Ciudad Neza, 1974, CIDNE, caja 26, v-1/exp. 21. A description of the events surrounding the split can be found in Estado de México: Información de Nezahualcóyotl, July 21, 1971, AGN IPS, caja 1702-B, exp. 7. A reproduction of the flyer for the student march was printed in the local weekly *Radar*, July 11, 1971, 4, cited in Pedro Ocotitla Saucedo, “Movimientos de colonos en Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl: acción colectiva y política popular 1945–1975” (Master’s thesis: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, 2000), 191.

65. Boletín de Prensa, December 28, 1971, PA/AGB.

also the father of president Echeverría's wife, María Esther Zuno.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the land developers and local authorities viewed the split of the MRC movement as an advantageous time to intensify their repression against the movement.

As the summer storms subsided, a growing sense of terror and violence hung over Ciudad Neza. The land developers attacked the MRC leaders and their supporters on multiple fronts. Raúl Romero and Bernardo Eckstein routinely paid for private planes to fly over Neza to drop flyers on the roofs and yards of residents to notify them that anyone who did not make their monthly payments would be evicted from their homes.⁶⁷ The bombardment of flyers was more than a threat: hundreds of people were displaced from their homes in 1971 and 1972. A principal who ran several schools in Colonia Reforma, and who was allied with the land developers, froze the teachers' payments in an effort to turn public opinion against the strike.⁶⁸ Like the homes of many others, Rogelio Vargas Soriano's house was bulldozed to the ground. "They threw me and my family onto the street," he said. "They threw us out into the rain with nothing, they destroyed the house I built myself. Can you imagine?"⁶⁹ It was becoming more common for the police to arbitrarily harass, assault, and arrest residents walking home at night from work. An *El Día* article published in August reported, "Among the abuses that the local police commit, residents tell of being arbitrarily arrested, beaten in jail until they confessed to crimes they did not commit, and paying fines without ever receiving any paperwork for them."⁷⁰ The systematic abuse of residents was neither condemned nor condoned in public by the federal government.

After the split, the paths taken by the MRC movement were shaped by both internal divisions and external repression. Lozada's MRC and the CE-MRC were now competing with each other for the support and allegiance of Neza's residents. The CE-MRC escalated the militancy of their actions in a show of force intended to appeal to the anger and frustration felt among residents who were growing impatient with the endless meetings and rallies. Between August and November of 1971, the CE-MRC led hundreds of angry residents to burn down the land developers' collection booths that were set up throughout Colonias Aurora, Esperanza, Agua Azul, and Vincente Villada. The collection booths, typically small offices or kiosks where residents could make their

66. Carlos Corona Arreguin, *Cuatro años de lucha en Nezahualcóyotl* (Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl: self-published, 1973), 16.

67. CE-MRC to Director de Quejas de la Presidencia, October 29, 1971, PA/AGB.

68. "Represalias por la huelga de pagos a fraccionadores de Neza," *El Día*, September 24, 1971, 11.

69. Vargas Soriano, interview, June 12, 2018.

70. Hugo Sánchez, "Denuncian atropellos de la policía de Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl," *El Día*, August 30, 1971, 9.

FIGURE 1

Residents of the Ciudad Lago Neighborhood Gather to Discuss Payment Strike in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, 1970



Source: Centro de Información y Documentación de Nezahualcóyotl (CIDNE), Fototeca, vol. 13 (1970), fol. 47. Used with CIDNE permission.

monthly payments, were destroyed with Molotov cocktails and crowbars, sometimes by CE-MRC leaders and sometimes spontaneously by residents, particularly women during the daytime.⁷¹ (See [Figure 1](#))

Beyond the political struggles waged by the CE-MRC, the leaders and members of the coalition were close friends united by a common cause and shared history. They attended each other's birthday parties, saints' day gatherings, and children's christenings.⁷² These social bonds began to fray in March 1972. The month was punctuated with celebrations after the DAAC definitively announced that the municipality of Ciudad Neza sat on communal lands that were federal property. On March 17, 1972, the DAAC announced that "the land where Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl was founded is communal land."⁷³ Over 5,000 people took to

71. Hugo Sánchez, "Cierran casetas de los fraccionadores en Nezahualcóyotl," *El Día*, November 10, 1971, 11.

72. Handwritten note from Ángel Ávila Jácome, August 2, 1972, PA/AGB.

73. Corona Arreguin, *Cuatro años de lucha*, 6.

the zócalo to celebrate the news, with festivities continuing on through the night in all of Ciudad Neza's neighborhoods.

The CE-MRC leadership decided it was time to seize the momentum. The following week, they organized a rally of 3,000 residents to march down Avenida Adolfo López Mateos towards Ciudad Neza's Palacio Municipal. Scuffles broke out along the route and by the time they reached the plaza, the crowd was staring down a police force with guns drawn and aimed at the front of the crowd. Odón Madariaga eased the tensions and slowly dispersed the crowd amid the chaos and shouting.⁷⁴

Now that the verdict on the land was publicly announced, Echeverría had to move beyond empty promises and decide how to proceed in light of the DAAC's decision.⁷⁵ After two years in office, he had made little progress in resolving Mexico's housing problem. Considered a "crisis" since the 1950s, the complexity of the problem illustrates an example of a severe challenge Echeverría faced beyond the political turbulence of the 1960s. Mexico's rapidly growing population continued to outpace housing production. The national housing deficit grew from 3.2 million housing units in 1960 to 4.1 million in 1970, of which a majority were in urban areas.⁷⁶ Echeverría's platform consisted of four major components, which can be summarized as a national housing institute for workers, a program to regularize lands that had been illegally occupied or informally settled by city dwellers, a policy of regional decentralization aimed at decreasing the overconcentration of industries and resources in Mexico City, and a legal framework to support reforms in territorial policy and land speculation. That legal framework was later established in the 1976 Ley de Asentamientos Humanos (Law of Human Settlements).⁷⁷

Land regularization was the most crucial component for Ciudad Neza and the hundreds of informal settlements surrounding Mexico's major cities. In greater Mexico City, decades of bureaucratic land laws had accumulated into a heavy barrier for poor urban settlers to attain legal rights for their land. A 1953 land law that banned new subdivisions in the Federal District (the Ley de Planificación del Distrito Federal) had been lifted only four years before

74. Amado Escalante, "La policía de Barquín aporrea a Restauradores en la celebración de las efemérides juristas," *Radar*, April 21 1972, 9–10.

75. Ocotitla Saucedo, "Movimientos de colonos," 167.

76. Tomasz Leopold Sudra, "Low-income housing system in Mexico City" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1976), 53.

77. For a synthesis of this period, see Manuel Castells, "Apuntes para un análisis de clase de la política urbana del estado mexicano," *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 39:4 (December 1977): 1173–1176.

Echeverría took office, leaving many of Mexico City's poor settlements in an ambivalent legal state.⁷⁸ Echeverría began by regularizing the land for 37 informal settlements in 1973, and increased regularization to 80 percent of the Federal District's informal settlements by 1976.⁷⁹ For the State of Mexico, the Comisión para la Regulación de la Tenencia de la Tierra (CORETT) was created to study the metropolitan area's land tenure practices and formalize a system to regulate the urbanized land plots. But the scale and scope of Ciudad Neza's land problem was so immense that the government had to create a separate agency to focus on regularization for that colonia alone, an agency most commonly referred to as Fineza (Fideicomiso Irrevocable TraslATIVO de Dominio sobre Bienes de Nezahualcóyotl).

After the DAAC declared that Ciudad Neza was built on a mix of federal and communal land, Echeverría began a series of private conferences and planning sessions to determine how to move forward with the land expropriation. Starting on July 24, 1972, the DAAC and Carlos Hank held a series of meetings to review and discuss laws for land expropriation, the legal instruments that would be required to transfer ownership of the property lots, and plans for a systematic account of all the land "owned" by the fraccionadores and corresponding details of their property (vendor, cost of purchase, year, size). Daily briefings were sent to Echeverría as he met with Mexico's leading figures in urban affairs: Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, Carlos Fuentes, Carlos Monsiváis, and lawyers who specialized in property disputes.⁸⁰

Behind closed doors, it was decided that the land would be converted into national property under the jurisdiction of the federal government. A *fideicomiso* (community land trust) managed under the Nacional Financiera, a national development bank, would serve as a fiduciary to distribute the payments made by residents. For each resident with an outstanding balance on their land, the remaining payments would go into the Fineza Land Trust. Of that amount, 40 percent would go to the land developers to compensate for their losses, and the rest (60 percent) would go to the federal government to be utilized for urban services and infrastructure. Intended as a compromise to appease both sides, the federal government's decision to compensate the land developers was the most controversial clause of the

78. While the law did not ban new settlements outright, it was selectively used to make it virtually impossible for housing divisions for low-income residents to attain legal status. Ley de Planificación del Distrito Federal, *Diario Oficial*, December 31, 1953.

79. For statistics, see "Ya no habrá una ciudad perdida al final del sexenio," *El Día*, January 14, 1972, 11; "37 de las 106 ciudades perdidas han desaparecido y trasladado sus moradores," *El Nacional*, June 21 1973, 5; and "Han sido regularizadas un 80 por ciento de las colonias proletarias del DE," *El Nacional*, September 8, 1976, 8.

80. Memoria sobre la cuestión de la tierra en Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, 1972, CIDNE, caja 16, v-21/exp. 264.

agreement, no surprise considering that most residents thought they should be imprisoned for land fraud.⁸¹

The rumors of the resolution with payments to Fineza put the movement's leaders on edge. In public, both factions of the MRC denounced the land trust agreement. However, internally the prospects of a partial victory and a chance to end the struggle produced intense debates within the inner circles of the movement.⁸² In the period when the preliminary proposals for the land trust were being circulated, Odón Madariaga was offered an official position in the municipal government as *tercera regidor* (commissioner).⁸³ The cracks in the CE-MRC's public facade became apparent to its supporters when Rogelio Vargas split from the CE-MRC and formed the Coalición Depuradora de Comités del Movimiento Restaurador de Colonos (CDC-MRC). Vargas's decision to leave was prompted by Odón Madariaga's plans to sign the agreement and invade empty tracts of land in order to sell them to new families in the interim period when the lands would be in between the fraccionadores and the federal government (described in more detail below). With his departure, Vargas took most of the neighborhood committees from Colonia Aurora under his wing. On the precipice of signing an agreement, the movement for land restoration was on the verge of self-destruction.

As the public announcement of the Fineza Land Trust agreement drew near, Odón Madariaga and Ángel García Bravo decided it was time to close ranks and neutralize dissent. They shot up the meeting house of a subcommittee in Colonia Aurora (Third Section) and later hired gangs of youth to attack a committee meeting in Colonia Vicente Guerrero, due to the committee's refusal to go along with the land trust agreement.⁸⁴ The divisions between Odón and Vargas exploded into violence on the evening of March 22, 1973. In the days leading up to the shoot-out, Rogelio's group (CDR-MRC) had distributed flyers that demanded the arrest of Odón Madariaga, Aristeo Pérez López, and Ángel Ávila Jácome for "stealing and selling land plots, charging monthly payments for the land, and extorting local businesses for paid protection (*protección gangsteril*)."⁸⁵ Rogelio Vargas held a late-night meeting in Colonia Las Flores to discuss plans for dealing with the land trust.

81. Parts of the meeting were publicized in Ramón Jiménez, "Quedarán regularizadas dentro de un mes las tierras de Nezahualcóyotl," *El Día*, July 26, 1972, 9.

82. Arreguin, *Cuatro años de lucha*, 15.

83. "El auténtico Movimiento Restaurador de Colonos señala de fraude al fideicomiso de Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl," *Mercurio*, March 25, 1974, 1. Prior to Odón Madariaga's promotion, a small news column reported that a crowd of residents were led to murder Elezar López Nava, who held the position Odón Madariaga subsequently took shortly thereafter. "Lincharon a un regidor en Ciudad Neza," *El Universal*, August 28, 1973, 6.

84. Ocotitla Saucedo, "Movimientos de colonos," 214.

85. A los colonos de Nezahualcóyotl, March 1973, AGN IPS, caja 1702- B, exp. 8

By 10:00 PM, roughly 200 people had gathered in a heavily settled section of Las Flores. A group of 40 men arrived with the CE-MRC leader Ángel Ávila Jácome, who traded insults with Rogelio until scuffles broke out between the two groups. When shots were fired back and forth, both sides took cover on neighboring rooftops and in adjacent alleys. At some time after 1:00 am Rogelio escaped on foot and made his way to the Federal District.⁸⁶ After the gunfire subsided, two men were found dead from gunshot wounds, dozens were injured, and four cars were still on fire when the Red Cross arrived at the scene.⁸⁷ News of the gun battle appeared in all of Mexico City's dailies, with one local headline stating, "Four Hours of Gunfire in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl."⁸⁸ State officials questioned Rogelio Vargas about the shoot-out the following morning at the Hotel Cadillac. Government reports indicate several leaders from the CE-MRC, including Odón Madariaga, Aristeo Pérez López, Salomón Alemán García, were spotted waiting in a café a block away from the hotel.⁸⁹ "That was it. It was over," Rogelio remembered.⁹⁰

THE DEAL IS DONE: THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT EXPROPRIATES THE LAND

On March 28, 1973, president Echeverría signed the Fineza Land Trust agreement along with Odón Madariaga of the CE-MRC, Rogelio Vargas of the CDR -MRC, and Severiana Buendía of the Asociación de Comuneros de Chimalhuacán. Mora Lozada positioned himself to the left of Odón and refused to support the Fineza agreement. On March 31, 1973, Augusto Gómez Villanueva, head of the DAAC, held a press conference to announce the signing of the agreement and plans to invest 1,200 million pesos in Ciudad Neza's urban infrastructure. Gómez Villanueva told reporters that 34 fraccionadores were going to turn over their land, under agreements officially categorized as *carteras de crédito*, and the land trust would now be the only entity through which payments for land and services could be made in Ciudad Neza.⁹¹ Raúl Romero sat in front of a row of microphones as the reporters needled him about the process of the land transfer.⁹² The reign of the fraccionadores in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl was over.

86. Estado de México: Información de Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, March 1973, AGN IPS, caja 1702– B, exp. 8.

87. "Balacera entre políticos en Nezahualcóyotl," *El Universal*, March 29, 1973, 19; Vargas Soriano, interview, June 3, 2018.

88. "4 horas de balazos en Nezahualcóyotl," *Diario de la Tarde*, March 29, 1973, 1.

89. Distrito Federal, March 1973, AGN IPS, caja 1702-B, exp. 8.

90. Vargas Soriano, interview, June 3, 2018.

91. Jaime Reyes Estrada, "Se aceptó el fideicomiso de Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl," *Excelsior*, April 4, 1973, 11–12; Distrito Federal, April 1973, AGN IPS, caja 1702– B, exp. 8.

92. Reyes Estrada, "Se aceptó el fideicomiso," 11.

The signing of the Fineza Land Trust agreement marked the end of one stage in Ciudad Neza's history and the beginning of another. The fraccionadores' speculation, sale, and control of the land in Ciudad Neza was coming to an end. Residents who still had outstanding balances for their land plots (the majority) now had to pay into the Fineza Land Trust until they paid the full amount stipulated in their contracts. Of that amount, 60 percent went to the federal government and 40 percent went to the land developers. Under the terms of the agreement, the residents' land titles would be recognized in court and among state agencies, the arbitrary threat of eviction would be dissipated, and the federal government would now be responsible for the installation of urban services and infrastructure.⁹³ The March 31 announcement reverberated through Ciudad Neza's settlements, bringing both celebrations and protests.⁹⁴ The hatred for the land developers was deep and widespread: to lead a movement against them and then grant them a degree of legitimacy at the negotiating table was a tricky proposition.

Despite the solid agreement reached between the federal government, the land developers, and the movement leaders, the viability of the land trust still depended on the support and participation of Ciudad Neza's residents. Most of the organized neighborhood associations supported the land trust, but three of them (Colonias Villada, Evolución, and Perla) refused to cede any legitimacy to the land developers. The three initial holdouts did not fundamentally alter the Fineza agreements but were substantial enough to constitute a base of residents in opposition to the compromises reached by the federal government and the MRC movement.

As in past experiences, the partial reforms offered by public officials could have been just enough to force residents to acquiesce temporarily, await the changes, and eventually recede back into everyday life (this happened previously in the area in 1953).⁹⁵ This time however, the moral certitude residents had acquired over years of struggle ran deep enough for a segment of the movement to break from past experiences of compromise and alignment with the PRI. In this case, the residents' demands were legitimated by legal norms (court rulings on land rights) and radicalized by a new political consciousness promoted by the young Jesuits' collective.

93. Carlos Hank González, Explicación del C. Gobernador Prof. Carlos Hank González respecto al Fideicomiso de Nezahualcóyotl a grupo de periodistas locales," May 5, 1973, CIDNE, Biblioteca Classification: 650/16-38.

94. Sergio Calvo Navarrijo, "Fiesta en Nezahualcóyotl," *La Prensa*, April 9, 1973, 2.

95. For neighborhood associations that opposed Fineza, see "En defensa de la justicia," *El Despertar del Pueblo*, no. 40, June 24, 1973, 6. For the events of the 1953 strike over housing conditions in the Vaso de Texcoco (name for area where Ciudad Neza is now located), see Iglesias, *Netzahualcóyotl: testimonios históricos*, 40-44.

In 1973, the Jesuits began to intervene more directly in local politics in Ciudad Neza. Prior to the land trust, they had gradually built a base of support through a network of popular education centers they operated in two neighborhoods. In the months surrounding the land trust agreements (March–July 1973), the Jesuits dedicated several issues of their monthly bulletin *El Despertar del Pueblo/The Awakening of the People* to the Fineza Land Trust. They hammered away at one central point: the fraccionadores had committed land fraud through the commercial sale of subdivided lots, and therefore they had no right to compensation for the land they had illegally purchased, sold, and profited from over the course of 20 years.⁹⁶ The contradictions bound up with the Fineza Land Trust provided an opening for the Jesuits to influence residents unaffiliated with the MRC movement to develop a political current independent of the PRI in the years to come.

The events surrounding the Fineza Land Trust agreement culminated in a rally organized by president Echeverría on May 10, 1973. Tens of thousands of people gathered in the Unión de Fuerzas, Neza's civic plaza, to celebrate the regularization of Ciudad Neza's land. Under a rainy sky, Echeverría, governor Carlos Hank González, and municipal president Oscar Loya Ramírez proclaimed that a new day was dawning. Echeverría outlined a new plan to urbanize Ciudad Neza, invest in a new technical college, and create a large park equipped with playgrounds, soccer fields, and lakes. Later, when pressed by reporters to explain why a compromise was made with the land developers, Echeverría responded, "Unfortunately, we can't deliver all of the land to the people, that's what the laws of Mexico say, as a government, we cannot transgress the law or we will fall into anarchy."⁹⁷ Despite the land trust's shortcomings and flaws, it represented a major victory for Echeverría. The land had been legalized, the fraccionadores had been expelled, urbanization projects were in the works, much of the social movement was contained, and an advance was made in dispelling the sulfurous stigma surrounding Ciudad Neza.

CONCLUSION

On the eve of the Fineza Land Trust agreement, Odón Madariaga used his new position in the municipal government to lead a series of land invasions in which thousands of families settled on empty plots of land (a process colloquially referred to as *paracaidismo*). Rogelio Vargas refrained from the

96. *El Despertar del Pueblo* was a monthly bulletin published by the young Jesuits under the name of SEPAC (Servicios Educativos Populares). CIDNE contains a collection that spans from February 1973 to December 1974.

97. "Si hay una coordinación de esfuerzos, no hay problema que no podamos resolver," *El Día*, May 11, 1973, 11.

illegal land grab and watched his former friends grow in wealth and power while he languished as a low-level PRI functionary. Rogelio's opposition to the land invasions placed him at odds with his former friends in the CE-MRC, while his affiliation with the PRI discredited him in the eyes of the Jesuits and dissident factions.

By the end of 1974, roughly 60,000 land plots had been invaded and sold by the core leadership of the CE-MRC.⁹⁸ Although this represented the main dynamic for the rest of the 1970s, the capitulation of the CE-MRC leaders created fertile grounds for small political collectives steeped in revolutionary politics to organize a restless base of residents (*colonos*). By the end of the 1976, the Jesuits were operating 15 adult education centers with an estimated enrollment of 500 students per term.⁹⁹ Along with the Jesuits, a group of local students from the nearby high school CCH Oriente emerged as the nucleus of a new and influential Maoist organization called the Frente Popular Independiente (FPI). In characterizing the formation of both the Jesuit and Maoist-oriented groups in Ciudad Neza, Andrew Selee wrote, "There were several movements in the 1970s which refused to play the rules of the game. Though they operated at a much smaller scale, their efforts also laid the groundwork for the changes that would take place in the 1980s and 1990s."¹⁰⁰

The MRC strike intersects with a broader history of state-society relations in Mexico under president Echeverría in the 1970s. In particular, the experience of the strike highlights the role of neighborhood associations in urban politics at a moment when the informal city acquired a mass character in Mexican society. First, Echeverría's "democratic opening" was met with less cynicism among the urban poor than within the student movement, and in the case of Ciudad Neza, it galvanized residents into a movement that went beyond the bounds of Echeverría's discourse. The urban social movements that arose in every major city in the 1970s underscore the need to widen our scope of inquiry to gain a richer and more comprehensive picture of the democratic opening among broad segments of the population. Second, while state violence has remained a central feature of life in Ciudad Neza from 1963 to the present,

98. "Paracaidismo" is a term used in Mexico to indicate the illegal takeover of unsettled land by large groups of people for the purpose of establishing homes. Typically, a person is responsible for leading the land invasion and will subsequently charge a monetary fee for each plot of land. By the time of the Fineza Land Trust, most land plots had already been subdivided by land developers, and very little land invasion took place during the 1950s and 1960s. "Paracaidistas activos: investigan 500 denuncias sobre invasión de terrenos baldíos," *Sol de Mediodía*, August 8, 1974, 6; "El auténtico Movimiento Restaurador de Colonos señala de fraude," 1; and Hugo Sánchez, "Miles de personas invaden terrenos en Nezahualcóyotl," *El Día*, April 7, 1973, 11.

99. Medellín, *Promoción popular*, 150.

100. Andrew D. Selee, *Decentralization, Democratization, and Informal Power in Mexico* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 140.

the early 1970s stand out as a period of limited yet significant reform. Although corruption and mismanagement weakened Fineza's ability to address deep structural inequalities, land regularization and public works projects had a direct and lasting impact on the quality of life for residents.

Finally, the limited nature of Echeverría's reforms, combined with the presence of independent political forces (Jesuits, Maoists, dissident colonos), contributed to a partial rupture with the PRI's entrenched clientelism. The presence of independent neighborhood associations in informal cities points to the existence of a significant segment of civil society that was active and influential prior to the economic crises and the neoliberal policies of the 1980s.

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