The Urbanization Process in Mexico and China, 
And its Social Impacts

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I. Introduction

Although in the history, urbanization used to represent modernism, civilization and development, in the modern social-economic context, it has becoming a big issue or headache both in the developed countries and under-developed countries. China represents a typical example of former socialist economical planning model, which in the last three decades, started to adopt capitalist market system; and Mexico represents a typical example of comparatively more developed Third World countries, which copied the traditional capitalist model to develop their economy after the independence. The economic development of Mexico during and after the II World War, and the economical rising in the first 30 years and the second 30 years of the People’s Republic of China brought a massive urbanization miracle with surprising speed, which caused many social, political, economical, and environmental problems not only to their own countries but also to the rest of the world.

This paper will first review the historical process of the urbanization of the both countries and its social-political and socio-economic backgrounds. Then, I will follow a comparative approach to analyze the characteristics of urbanization processes and patterns of the both countries.

The author of this paper suggests that the urbanization patterns that both Mexico and China have shown so far have damaged the human living environment, may brick the balance between agriculture and industry, greatly expanded the polarization between the poor and the rich, have made the cities less convenient for living than before, and brought all kinds of crimes, social insecurity, and moral and physical inanity. Therefore, modern urbanization is now the synonymous of an anti-civilization or counter-
civilization process. It is necessary for the both countries to change the current urbanization pattern, and plan for a better urban development model.

II. Urbanization process of Mexico and its social-economic context

Today, the population of Mexico has reached 130,000,000, the number one largest Spanish Speaking country in population and eleventh largest population in the world, with the annual increasing rate of 1.18 - 2%. Urban population occupies the 80% of the total population of the country, more than half of the population now is living in the 55 large and middle side cities, and near 1/3 of population lives in Mexico City, whose population is between 190,000 and 200,000. Due to the massive immigration of more than 400,000 to 600,000 young labor forces towards USA each year, the real Mexican population growth has been not very high in comparison with other third world countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, the immigration to America also brought a huge problem of increasing the old age population, whose 6% are above 60 year old.

At the very beginning of 19th Century, i.e., the time of Mexico Independence from Spain, the vast majority of the population was concentrated in the rural areas, where peasants or farmers occupied 80-90% of the total Mexican population. During that period of time, Mexican territory included today’s seven Southern States o USA. During the next 50 years from 1820 to 1860, Mexican population reached 8 millions and 400 thousands, with the increase rate of 1%. Mexico City’s population reached 210,000. Because of the Civil Wars and Wars against France and USA, the both the national population in Mexico from 1877 to 1911 had been decreasing bit. Up till 1884, the four large cities in Mexico, Mexico City, Guadalajara, Veracruz, and Puebla increased their population in 40-60%, and the population in Mexico City reached 300,000.

The 20th century marked the huge boom of Mexican population. In 1921, the urban population in metropolitan area of Mexico City reached 660,000. The First and Second World Wars brought huge opportunities for its economic development, and both agriculture and industry had been growing at tremendous speed. Before the beginning of the 20th century, Mexican cities were consuming or commercial areas without any real industry, and at the turning point of the 20th century, Mexican urban areas were becoming the centers of industrial and mining activities. In 1940, the population of Mexico City reached one million and 500 thousands, and the total population of Mexico was about 49 millions. From 1940 to 1950, the annual urban population-increase rate in Mexico was 5.9% in average. The annual urban population-increase rates in 1950s and 1960s were respectively 5.5% and 4.9%. In 1970, the urban population occupied 28% of the total national population. In 1980, the 15 largest cities in Mexico had the
majority of the national population. As far as to the urban geographic
distribution is concerned, urbanization began in the Central Plateau, and
started to expand towards the Southern areas and the Northern borders
areas with USA. In 1970, although Mexico City had 36.2% of the national
population, its net industrial production occupied 45% of national total net
industrial production of Mexico, and its commercial and service occupied the
55% of the national third industry. In the last 30 years or so, the national
population increased 200%, and the populations of Mexico City had
duplicated. Also due to the popularization of basic education and the college
education of this largest city in the world, many people living in small cities
and towns have been massively moving to the capital of the country.

While rural population moves to urban areas and people living in small
and middle side cities moves to the big cities, Mexican population, specially
labor forces, move to USA as cheap and non-technical labors there. Now,
the main Mexican economic resource comes from the income of those labor
forces, which send their money back to Mexico. This constitutes more
important “industry” than petroleum and manufacture. Since 1810, when the
Mexican Revolution started, the first immigration wave began. From 1849 to
1924, American-Mexican boarder was totally open to emigration without the
need of visa. Since 1942, the second wave of immigration from Mexico to
USA began with the legal emigration of 50,000 – 60,000 annually. From
1942 to 1968, 5 millions of Mexican people had moved to USA, without
accounting the illegal emigration. After 1968, the annual legal and illegal
emigration reached 600,000 to 700,000. Now the total Mexican emigrants in
USA are more than 11 millions.

Both urbanization and immigration, as results of the application of
Liberalism, Neo-liberalism and Globalization, caused Mexico a big national
disaster. Mexico has 12-15% of agricultural land, and its 18% was under
irrigation. Its agriculture used to be a main part of the Mexican GDP, the
agricultural production was self-sufficient, and Mexico was able to export part
of their agricultural production to foreign countries. In 1910 Mexican
Revolution all the peasants received their land during the Land Reform
Movement. Now, since the majority of young labor forces have abandoned
their land and moved to USA and large cities of Mexico, the Mexican
agriculture was seriously damaged or even ruined. Now, besides tropical
fruits and vegetables, Mexico has to import most of its agricultural products
and foods from USA and other countries, for example, rice from USA, corn
from USA and Argentina, beans from Turkistan, Spain, Canada and
Australia, oats from Canada and Australia, and wheat from USA. In many
rural areas there are only women, old people, children and handicaps are
left.

As the results of liberal treaty, privatization of state-owned
corporations, liberal market, foreign capitalization of heavy industries,
transportations, telecommunications, banking systems, mining activities, and many urban services, globalization of the national economy, etc. Mexico became the “maquiladoras” industry of USA, Japan, South Korea, and other European counties. The vast majority of these manufactory and assembling industries totaling more than 3000 factories are concentrated in its northern bounders, where are becoming some of the most polluted areas in the world together with Mexico City. Under the competition with similar factories of Eastern and Southeastern Asian countries and the recent World Financial Crisis, many of those factories are in bankruptcy.

III. Urbanization process of China and its social-economic context

Today, China’s population is 1.3 billion, and the urban population occupies 45.7% or 44.9% of the total Chinese population, including the 1.47 million of urban floating population from rural areas. In 2008, the urban population was 6 millions. There are 655 cities, including 118 cities with more than one million population, and 39 super-cities.

However, in 1949, when People’s Republic of China was just founded, the urban population was only one million, which was bit less than 1/5 of national population. Thirty years ago, in 1980, right before the Chinese economical upraising, the urban population only occupied the 17.9% of the total urban population. During the first thirty years of People’s Republic of China from 1949 to 1979, each year only less than five millions had been added to the urban population. But, in 1980s the average annual increase of urban population reached 10 millions, and in 1990s, average annual increase of urban population reached 15 millions a year.

Due to the rapid increase of urban population, urban areas expansion has greatly affected the agricultural development and the land interest of Chinese peasants. In 1990s, each year urban expansion took annually 938 km² and in the 21st Century, the average annual urban expansion has been 1861 km. ², which constitutes the double of the last decade of 20th Century.

According to the governmental statistics and China’s State Council Central Planning for Development Device, in 2025, the total urban population in China could reach 900 millions, an in 2030, 1 billion, which means the 70% of the total Chinese population.

IV. Common problems of both urbanization patterns

Now, due to the bankruptcy of Mexican local industries and commerce, the American financial crisis and economic recession, and Mexican
agriculture crashing down, many Chicano labor forces, “maquiladoras” workers, and common peasants lost their jobs and land, and all runt into the large and middle side cities to look for living, although the urbanization had reached a dangerous level. Mexican urban areas, specially, the large cities like Mexico City, Guadalajara, Juarez, Monterrey, New Laredo, Oaxaca, Veracruz, etc. are extremely overcrowded, which brought all kinds of crimes, social problems, drugs, mafias, gangsters groups, assaults, air pollution, water supply shortage, etc. In some areas of those cities, after the darkness, common people do not dare to walk on the streets. In Mexico City almost half of the population is living in rubbish-mountains and shepherd’s hut/hovels. The only clean areas in the cities are the shopping areas, rich residential areas, office-building areas and tourist centers, which serve to the rich and the foreigners.

With the rapid urbanization, “modernization” and industrialization in China in the last 30 years, both Mexico and China has been suffering great amount of negative consequences including the following:

1. Massive environment contamination of the air, water, and noise, specially, in the large cities and industrial urban and rural areas.

2. Social environment worsening: drugs, violence, harassments, polarization between the rich and the poor, shortage of housing, moral education, basic education for rural children, and ethic.

3. Agriculture production, specially, grains production, decreasing from the 1980s to the present time. Now the agricultural land, specially, the land with good soil has been invaded by housing and industrial-commercial buildings in the East and South of China, and suburbs of the cities, and there are less manual labors to conduct more efficient agriculture. The grains production depends fully on chemistry fertilizers, insecticides, and high agronomic technologies.

4. Urban areas are becoming more dangerous than before. Crimes, insecurity, and social riots have been greatly increased than any periods of Chinese modern history, specially, with comparison of Mao’s Age.

5. By introducing foreign technology, Chinese agriculture and food processing industries are no longer producing organic and healthy food for the common people.

6. The real state and construction industry have been becoming the major government income and occupies a major component of Chinese annual GDP, even more important than manufacture and
exportation, which constitutes a dangerous sign for Chinese economic development.

V. Differences between Mexico and China in their urbanization

Urbanization in both countries has been following the general patterns of urbanization of the third world countries under the globalization and neo-liberalist economic system. The author of this paper has shown those similarities in the fourth part of this paper. However, there are some differences between Mexico and China in urbanization patterns, process, and their effects.

1. While Mexico follows the total free market capitalist device to conduct urbanization, China’s urbanization is much more planned and in a more organized manner. The reason for this is that according to Mexican constitution, the land is totally private excepting mining geographic zones, governmental owned land, petroleum fields, and military zones, and according to Chinese constitution, the land of the whole Chinese territory belongs to the State, and according to the new laws promulgated during Deng’s Economic Reform, the land can be sold for use to both Chinese citizens and foreigners. As a result, the urbanization in Mexico has been unplanned and totally at random manner. And in China, the local government can sell the public urban land to private companies to do urban development. However, the urban development must follow general municipal plan including its types, designs, uses, and distributions. Therefore, China’s urban development planning is almost socialist, and its ownership and business are capitalist.

2. In China, the real state business is kind of joined venture of the local governments and private companies. In this way, the urban development is becoming the major income for the government. However, in Mexico the urban development is basically a private business. Officially, the local government is only in charge of street design and construction, but not involves in building, that is considered private affairs. As a result, urban business in China can be a very important component of corruption of the governmental officers. In the last 30 years, great number of Chinese governmental and CPC leaders got into corruption charges because of their illegal activities with urban development.

3. China now is the only country that has had the fast growing and huge urban expansion plan and the fast price rising of housing in the world under the world under the collapse of world real state business and international financial crisis. On the other hand, Mexican real state business and urban development business are some how
suspended in one way or another except some of the public officers who got rich and use their steeled money for private construction, and the highway construction that is related to state-owned petroleum company PEMEX and transportation ministry.

4. In China’s East Coast, South, and the three River Triangles Industrial Parks zones, due to immense magnitude of the local and rural manufactures for exportation, hundreds of small villages have developed huge projects of small side urbanizations. Now, all those small urban developments are connected by high ways and railroads networks, in which all small urban developments are built around large cities as their satellites. This urban develop patterns look very similar to USA pattern in recent urban development. However, in China it is well-planned and in USA it is conducted in a free readjustment model. In Mexico, however, the urbanization is a typical Latin-American model in which emigration is mainly towards a few large cities.

5. Mexican urbanization seems to have reached the top allowance for further development. As I mentioned before, urbanization and immigration are the top heartaches for Mexican government and civil society. However, Chinese government still has a huge and very ambitious plans for urbanization because for them urbanization is the most important means of a “socialist” modernization, human right of free moving, stable GDP grow, and economic development though sacrificing its human conditions we have listed before.

7. Although both countries have huge rural population moving to the urban areas, in China the 200,000 peasant-labor forces moving to the industrial areas are temporary emigrants and the majority of Mexican rural immigrants are permanent ones or of long-term migration and family migration. That is the reason why in China those temporary blue-collar workers still have their families, houses, and land in their villages. They only gain the salary and takes part of it to their families to assist economically their rural families. If they loose their jobs, they still can go back to their village to have their root and roof to survive. However, Mexican migration is in general permanent and the majority of them may become permanent migrant labor in urban areas. If they loose the job, they will be homeless, joless and foodless.

8.

VI. Future challenges

As a conclusion, in both China and in Mexico, urbanization is a more negative than positive terminology from the socio-economical, socio-anthropological and socio-political viewpoints, even though for most of
governmental officers of the both countries urbanization means development and modernization. From the traditional anthropological standpoint, it is true that in human civilization urbanization constituted once upon a time the mark of human civilization, during which the barbarians became civilized. However, after the Second World War, with the rapid urbanization process under the capitalist Neo-liberalist theory guiding and the globalization, urban areas, specially, the urban areas in the Third World Countries, including China and Mexico, are becoming human gathering monstrous, full of crimes, dangers, insecurity, low morality, under-education, violence, pollution, crowded transportation, drugs, corrupt market, mafias, gangsters, etc. Those negative elements of human society constitute all the opposites ideas of a civilized world, human cultural traditions, and dangerous elements of the modern society. Both Chinese and Mexican governments and people should find a way and different solution for the so-called modern urbanization patterns.