

From Oil to Lithium: Extractivism in the Mexican Social Imaginary as Political Legitimizing

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Del petróleo al litio: el extractivismo en el imaginario social mexicano como legitimador político

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Abstract

ESince the expropriation of 1938, oil has occupied a central place in the Mexican social imaginary, strongly linked to nationalism. Despite time and changes in the economic model, oil continued to be part of the country's magma, providing legitimacy to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) governments for many years. Likewise, with the discovery of considerable lithium reserves, the actual Mexican Government seeks to monopolize its exploitation, creating a state-owned company, as PEMEX used to do with oil. Furthermore, the Government has generated a nationalist discourse that tends to place lithium within the social imaginary, as the PRI did years ago with oil. Based on the theoretical proposal of Cornelius Castoriadis and the differentiation between social theory and social imaginary proposed by Charles Taylor, this paper presents how the Mexican government has used extractive products, oil and lithium, to legitimize itself, favoring their incorporation into the social imaginary.

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Keywords

Oil, lithium, social imaginary, extractivism.

Resumen

Desde la expropiación de 1938, el petróleo ha ocupado un lugar central en el imaginario social mexicano, fuertemente vinculado al nacionalismo. A pesar del tiempo y los cambios en el modelo económico, el petróleo siguió siendo parte del magma del país, legitimando a los gobiernos del Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) durante muchos años. Asimismo, con el descubrimiento de considerables reservas de litio, el actual gobierno mexicano busca monopolizar su explotación, creando una empresa estatal, como lo hizo PEMEX con el petróleo. Además, el gobierno ha generado un discurso nacionalista que tiende a situar el litio en el imaginario social, como lo hizo el PRI hace años con el petróleo. A partir de la propuesta teórica de Cornelius Castoriadis y la diferenciación entre teoría social e imaginario social propuesta por Charles Taylor, este artículo presenta cómo el gobierno mexicano ha utilizado los productos extractivos, petróleo y litio, para legitimarse, favoreciendo su incorporación al imaginario social, al control político y a la legitimidad de su gobierno.

Palabras clave

Petróleo, litio, imaginario social, extractivismo, control político.

Introduction

In Mexico, oil is intimately linked in the social imaginary to nationalism and has been used to legitimize governments since at least 1938 (Morales, 2020). This product, which for other countries is only a commodity, is considered by a significant part of Mexican society as an element of its own, as something that belongs to “all Mexicans.” Although Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution states that all subsoil wealth belongs to the Nation, this sentiment is not for other products, such as gold, silver, or copper.

Recently, governmental discourse has sought to do something similar with lithium. Assuring to have nationalized it, the government of Andres Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024) hopes to

take a place in history as President Lázaro Cardenas (1934-1940) did with the oil expropriation of 1938. Using similar ideas to those related to oil, for example “lithium belongs to the people of Mexico”, the president attempts to put this product in a similar place to the Mexican social imaginary as oil has had for decades. To understand these phenomena, it is important to dedicate a few lines to the concept of social imaginary itself, starting with the proposal of Cornelius Castoriadis (2013). According to Castoriadis, the social imaginary presents itself in the social-historical. Every society lives a series of historical processes, and history is always given within society. Thus, for him:

The “social-historical” is neither the indefinite addition of intersubjective networks (although it is also that) nor, indeed, their simple “product.” The historical-social is the anonymous collective, the human-impersonal that fills any given social formation but also encompasses it, that encircles each society among the others and inscribes them all in a continuity in which in some way are present those who are no longer, those who remain outside and even those who are yet to be born. It is, on the one hand, given structures, institutions and “materialized” works, whether material or not; and, on the other hand, that which structures, institutes, materializes. In a word, it is the union and the attention of the instituting society and the instituted society of the history made and the history that is made. (Castoriadis, 2013, p. 172)

In other words, what Castoriadis proposes with the social-historical is the union of elements already constituted and those that are constituting. The social imaginary is not formed only by previously given and static elements but a constantly changing process that elaborates and modifies. Hence, it is central to know what happened in the past, but at the same time, what is built in the present.

Castoriadis presents the social imaginary as a magma of meanings, “that from which one can extract (or, in which one can construct) conjunctive organizations in indefinite quantity, but which can never be reconstructed (ideally) by conjunctive composition (neither finite nor infinite) of those organizations” (Castoriadis, 2013, p. 534). It is not something static, a theory, but a series

of emerging elements that mix and form an almost liquid mass. These elements are presented through *teukhein* (to do socially) and *legein* (to represent). Thus, the imaginary is formed by social actions and language.

To talk about the same concept, Charles Taylor (2006) presents the following differentiation between social imaginary and social theory:

There are essential differences between a social imaginary and a social theory. I adopt the term imaginary 1) because I am referring specifically to how ordinary people “imagine” their social environment, mainly not expressed in theoretical terms but is manifested through images, stories, and legends. On the other hand, 2) theory is often the preserve of a small minority. In contrast, the exciting thing about the social imaginary is that broad groups, if not society, share it. This brings us to a third difference: 3) the social imaginary is the collective conception that makes possible standard practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy. (Taylor, 2006, p. 37)

For Taylor, the social imaginary is not a logical theory but what people imagine. Moreover, he says that it is not something private to the elites but shared by society as a whole. Moreover, it allows for a broad sense of legitimacy. Thus, the social imaginary will allow certain practices (*teukhein* in Castoriadis terms) to make sense.

Following these two authors, I propose the following working definition of the social imaginary: A social imaginary is the union of specific thoughts, concepts, words, and images shared by a society that allow communication and the practice of certain shared activities, giving them meaning. This imaginary will not have a theoretical-rational sense and is often not conscious, so its representation is very complex.

Thus, if we consider the Mexican case, the social imaginary is precisely those elements that give meaning to communication and certain standard practices that Mexicans would have. *Tequila*, *mariachis*, and the *cielito lindo* would be some of the elements that together give meaning to Mexicanness. This imaginary makes communication accessible among Mexicans and

allows certain practices, such as the celebration of Independence Day. On the other hand, oil and lithium are also present in this imaginary, but not as elements that come in celebrations. Instead, they are elements that heat the national political debate, as we will see next.

Based on this idea, the aim of the present paper is to show how the Mexican government has used extractive products, oil and lithium, to legitimize itself, favoring their incorporation into the social imaginary. To do this, we will do a historical overview of oil in the social imaginary from 1938 to the present, dividing it in three sections.² After that, we will analyze how the government of López Obrador has tried to do something similar with lithium.

From the oil expropriation to the end of the “mexican miracle” (1938-1970)

On March 18, 1938, President Lázaro Cárdenas announced on the radio his decision to expropriate the oil industry, mainly in the hands of foreign companies. This decision, a consequence of the oil companies' contempt for a labor resolution of the Mexican Supreme Court of Justice, received massive support (Meyer, 2022). Shortly after that, the *Palacio de Bellas Artes* in Mexico City became the site where Mexican women from all social groups gave up their jewelry to support the purchase of the oil companies, turning the political event into an authentic social movement. “Never, neither before nor since, has the Nation displayed comparable solidarity. For a brief period, the CTM's populist front seemed to embrace the entire population”, assures the English historian Alan Knight (2001, p. 286). Thus, oil became part of the Mexican social imaginary in a relatively short time, turning the oil expropriation into one of the most important events of post-revolutionary Mexico and General Lázaro Cárdenas into one of the most popular presidents in the country's history. This expropriation also took place at the very moment when the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) acquired the corporatist structure it still has today (Córdova, 2010; Hernández, 2016), so that the achievement went from being that of a single man, President Cárdenas, to that of the entire regime.

²) A much wider historical overview of this subject can be found in Morales J (2020) *El petróleo en el imaginario social mexicano. Nación, patrimonio y soberanía*. México: Tirant Humanidades/UPAEP.

After Mexico entered World War II in 1942, President Avila Camacho (1940-1946) started officially celebrating the Oil expropriation every 18 of march. From then on, and as seen in the following presidents, all celebrated the oil expropriation, taking advantage of the occasion to make a connection between them and President Cárdenas. At the same time, thanks to the alliance between Mexico and the United States during the period, the country started its industrialization process, and oil became an important factor for it (Loeza, 2022). Both elements, commemoration and industrialization, had a positive impact over the social imaginary that would remain during the rest of this period. To talk about the commemorations, let us go back to March 18, 1952, when the Government of President Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) organized the celebrations at the *Palacio de Bellas Artes*. This celebration, according to the president, was double since his Government had settled that year the payment to the American oil companies and reached a good agreement with the English ones. According to Alemán, this could be considered the “culmination of a long historical process”, the oil expropriation. By saying this, President Alemán connected its government with that of Cardenas, legitimizing it.

That year’s celebrations were not limited to the official ones. Around the country, and specifically in the oil-producing areas, there were several celebrations. According to the *Sindicato de Trabajadores Petroleros de la República Mexicana*’s leader, they were “very joyful”. In Poza Rica, Veracruz, the largest festivity in the country’s interior, was held with floats and around 30,000 people (El Universal, 1952, p. 12). As can be seen with this example, the commemoration of the oil expropriation quickly became one of the year’s most meaningful events, thus reinforcing the position of oil within the social imaginary. Let’s now see another example, an announcement published in *El Universal* in 1959:

Image 1

PARA CONMEMORAR
EL "18 de MARZO"
NOS ESTAMOS EXPROPIANDO
20% de descuento

ASTROVOX

Argos

ALTA FIDELIDAD
EN ATENCIÓN LINEAS
MODERNIZADAS.

ANTES \$ 6,995.00 AHORA \$ 5,596.00
solamente el mes de Marzo

TENEMOS EL APARATO QUE UD. NECESITA PARA SU OFICINA Y HOGAR

ABONO 1300

MODELO 181

CHAPLESPIC
RADIO Y
TOCARTORRE

HOLIDAY

ABONO 2100

ABONO 1100

HASTA 24 MESES PARA PAGAR

CASA JAUREGUI • LA FERIA • CASA ASTROVOX

Source: National Newspaper Library, UNAM.

This newspaper announcement shows an electronics store that, to commemorate March 18, is “expropriating” a 20 per cent discount. Beyond seeing it as an advertising hook or as part of a commemoration, it is interesting to note the socialization of the term. With this advertisement, we can realize that 21 years after, the oil expropriation is already part of the social imaginary of Mexicans. The date on which President Cárdenas announced the expropriation was already clearly in the Government’s civic calendar, but more importantly, in the imaginary. Commemoration was an important part of this.

On the other hand, industrialization was also important in this process. After World War II, the country’s industrialization was the main objective of the government. For this reason, most of the oil production was dedicated to domestic consumption. In the official discourse, oil was presented as a national patrimony, so selling it abroad would be considered “selling the nation” (Morales, 2020; Rousseau, 2017).

By the combination of the commemoration of the oil expropriation and the new symbol of national patrimony exclusive for domestic consumption, oil became an important part of the Mexican social imaginary in less than 30 years. At the same time, it was used by the governments of the official party as an element of legitimization. Let us now move on to a second period, in which oil will no longer be only a symbolic value for Mexicans but an authentic macroeconomic element.

The oil boom (1970-1982)

In contrast to the first thirty years of oil in the hands of the Mexican State, in which economic policies were very stable and the international hydrocarbon market also maintained relative stability, the following 20 years saw significant economic changes both in Mexico and in the world. One of the main protagonists of this change was precisely oil.

At the beginning of the administration of President Luis Echeverría (1970-1976), the economic model showed its wear and tear, forcing the Government to adopt Keynesian measures, which were already questioned worldwide at that time. As for oil, the subsidy model used by the previous governments had left the industry in a position of technological backwardness, turning the country into a net importer of hydrocarbons. By that time, the Yom Kippur War (1973) significantly changed international geopolitics, at least as far as oil was concerned. Arab countries, many of them essential oil producers, ordered the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to declare an oil embargo against the Western powers that had supported Israel during the war. This situation caused international oil prices to soar.

Nevertheless, this oil crisis did not last. In 1974 the exploitation of the Reforma oil field began, making Mexico an oil producer again. This year, production reached 209.8 million barrels, the first in history to surpass the record set in 1921, more than fifty years earlier (Morales, 2020). Also, during the government of José López Portillo (1976-1982), the engineers of Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) confirmed the discovery in the Gulf of Mexico, the second largest oil well in the world up to that time, called *Cantarell*. Thus, with large oil reserves and exorbitant in-

ternational prices, President López Portillo assured that Mexico's problem from that moment on would be to learn to "manage abundance."

Unlike the apparent economic good situation, the political scenario was more complex. López Portillo was the only official candidate for the presidency in 1976. The *Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)*, the only real opposition party in Mexico at the time, did not present a candidate due to internal divisions (Woldenberg, 2018; Loeaza, 2010). The new government needed some legitimation, and oil might be the answer.

Given the symbolic and nationalistic weight of oil in the social imaginary, the Government would have to find a way to convince Mexicans of the convenience of returning to the export model. To achieve this, the Government characterized oil as a "lever for development," generating other industries. This is what the president said in one of his States of the Union:

Few issues have ever been as exciting to public opinion as oil and gas. We have expressed our satisfaction because participation shows interest, and the broader it is, the more it obliges us to meditate to act better. [...] With this awareness, I proclaim before these generations the duty and the right to use our from now on our oil to ensure the future of the Nation. We do so not only with this resource, which, although abundant, is not renewable, but by converting it into a generator of others that can be renewed and multiplied by work. (Cámara de Diputados, 1985, pp. 590-591)

In this statement, we can notice that the president recognizes that oil has aroused the passion of Mexicans precisely because of its importance in the social imaginary. However, the Government proclaims the duty and the right to use it as a lever for national development. Thus, the project of the new director of PEMEX, Jorge Díaz Serrano, was to increase crude oil production three-fold, from 700,000 to 2.2 million barrels per day by 1982, as well as to increase exports by 1.1 million barrels per day. To achieve this new objective, the Government had to convince Mexicans that oil was so abundant in Mexico that its sale did not represent a threat to the country but an opportunity. The data on reserves

were maximized, even to the disbelief of some (Meyer and Morales, 1990, p. 187).

Mexico's economy grew at an annual rate of 7.8 per cent between 1977 and 1981, while inflation averaged 24 per cent. Public investment increased by 22 per cent, while the private investment grew by 13 per cent. The Government's objective during these years was to take advantage of oil revenues to develop the industry so that progress would be sustainable in the long term. In order to increase the productive capacity of *Petróleos Mexicanos*, the Government allocated a large number of resources from oil revenues. At the same time, loans were acquired in the international financial system, and the printing of paper money continued. At this time, the Mexican economy entered a process of "petrolization." Around 75 per cent of Mexican exports were from oil while representing 38 per cent of fiscal income. The change of oil within the social imaginary was noticeable, as the Government sought to change its image from that of "national patrimony," a product whose sale was irresponsible and even unpatriotic, to that of "lever of national development" through exports.

Furthermore, the Government proposed a world energy plan to the United Nations, which sought to turn oil into an instrument for non-industrialized countries to achieve better development conditions. Thus, Mexico sought to become the new standard-bearer of the North-South dialogue. In addition, Mexico gained political power in the continent by offering, together with Venezuela, oil on credit to Central American and Caribbean countries. As stated by the president in his third State of the Union:

The world's largest hydrocarbon reserves give Mexico new responsibilities to which we are not accustomed. We have a non-renewable resource, valuable and desired by all. It is the exclusive patrimony of the Nation. This entails commitments and obligations to ourselves and solidarity with humanity injured by an unprecedented energy crisis. (*Cámara de Diputados*, 1985, p. 615)

This takes the social imaginary far beyond reality, with clear political objectives. Using the imaginary, President López Portillo allowed decisions that affected the Mexican economy in the short and long term.

Contrary to the Mexican Government's expectations, the international oil price fell moderately in 1981, clearly indicating that the oil bonanza was nearing its end. Although the private sector took measures to reduce the effects of this contraction, the government continued with its policy of growth and indebtedness, hoping for a prompt recovery of oil prices, which did not happen. Mexico's structural problems, hidden by the oil bonanza and the corruption that existed during this government, led the country to bankruptcy. Oil, the national patrimony that had made stabilizing development possible during the previous decades, went from being the great solution to national problems to being the leading cause.

In his last state to the union, President López Portillo cried and asked for forgiveness. At the beginning of his administration, he used the great Mexican oil reserves to do economical projects that would legitimize his government after being the only presidential candidate. Due to bad decisions made by his administration and to corruption among the ruling elite, this legitimation rapidly banished. In addition, the social imaginary took a heavy toll because if the country was said to be immensely rich in hydrocarbons, the dire economic situation it was going through was highly questionable.

The neoliberal period (1982-2018)

The country was in a severe economic crisis when President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) took office. His campaign was based on a 'moral renovation' since the Mexican people were tired of the corruption scandals surrounding the López Portillo administration. In the specific case of oil, corruption was evident, so the Government sought to clean up the image of the state-owned oil company. President de la Madrid said in his first state of the union: "We reaffirm our commitment to renew the administrative order of Pemex to increase its efficiency and productivity and reinforce honesty in its operations. The new Pemex, the country's most important public company, must be a source of pride for Mexicans. This is what the spirit of Lázaro Cárdenas' nationalization demands" (Cámara de Diputados, 1985, p. 816). A month before, Jorge Díaz Serrano, former director of the company, had been imprisoned for fraud.

Oil in the social imaginary was tainted by corruption and mismanagement, so the Government's objective was to change its image. Nevertheless, despite the image change, the reality of oil in the macroeconomic order of the country was unalterable. However, its function changed from "lever of development" to economic sustenance for foreign debt payment. During these years, oil continued to be an essential part of the country's foreign exchange income and tax collection for the State, which in 1985 received 70 per cent of its income from the oil company (Meyer and Morales, 1990, p. 228).

In 1982 Mexico began to use the model known as neoliberal, which "implied favoring market mechanisms in economic activities, reducing its [the state's] participation, regulation and size" (Pardo, 2010, p. 82). A gradual process of privatization by the State was initiated. From 1983 to 1985, many companies that were not profitable for the Government were closed. Subsequently, from 1986 to 1988, small and medium-sized companies were sold, and in 1988 the privatization process of large companies began, among them *Teléfonos de México* (TELMEX), the Cananea mining company, and the banking sector. Only those considered strategic, such as PEMEX, *Luz y Fuerza del Centro*, and *Comisión Federal de Electricidad*, all linked to the energy sector, remained in the hands of the Government.

In addition, in the early nineties, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was negotiated between the United States, Canada, and Mexico. During these years, Mexico went from being a closed economy, where the role of the State was central, to one where the private initiative was the central player. However, the most important thing for our objective is to understand that despite these changes, PEMEX will continue to be a company very similar to the one created in 1938. The idea of privatizing the company began to spread among some officials even though it was impossible to suggest it due to its symbolic weight in the social imaginary.

Amid the economic modernization maelstrom, in 1992, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) sent Congress the proposal for the *Ley Orgánica de Petróleos Mexicanos y Organismos Subsidiarios*. By this time, the official party was divided by the departure of the party's left-wing members. This group was headed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of former President

Lázaro Cárdenas, so oil quickly became one of its main banners. During the discussion of this law in Congress, the weight of oil within the social imaginary can be observed due to a higher presence of the opposition. Let us take as an example the following intervention of Deputy Gabriela Guerrero of the *Partido Popular Socialista* (PPS):

Within the framework of privatization of the national economy, some sectors demand that the oil company pass into private hands, although they do not dare to raise their voices so stridently, as they have done in the case of the nationalized electric industry, because in the case of *Petróleos Mexicanos*, as we all know, there is too much historical weight in its nationalization. (Cámara de Diputados, 1992)

In this statement, it is clear that the congresswoman recognizes the social imaginary, even if she does not call it that way. For her, those who favor oil privatization are not willing to say so in public because they know that the political cost would be too high. Thus, the leftist parties, such as the PPS and the recently created *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD), were the ones who took for themselves the banner of the non-privatization of oil. The discussions within both chambers were very heated because, although the president and his party still had the necessary majority to carry out the legal modification, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) could not show its opposition to what was, for many years, its banner. Thus, the Government would no longer use the social imaginary, as on previous occasions. It will benefit the Mexican left.

Finally, the new law reorganized the company but kept total control of the industry in the hands of the State. During the following years, and in part thanks to the sustained growth of international oil prices, the possibility of opening up the sector ceased to be an objective of the government. The weight of oil in the social imaginary was substantial, and Presidents Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) and Vicente Fox (2000-2006) didn't had enough congressional support to change it. However, oil continued being an essential source of income for the State, charging PEMEX more than 90 per cent of its profits in taxes.

In 2008, President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) decided to send a bill allowing private participation in the oil industry, but the PRI and the PRD blocked this possibility. In addition, the left organized several protests against the reform. Without the support of the political parties and the population, the proposal ended up as a minor modification that provided some administrative flexibility to the state-owned company but without any substantive change. The substantive modification would take five more years to arrive.

On July 31, 2013, the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) presented the first energy reform initiative that, almost five months later, would allow the opening of the oil sector. Although only five years had passed since President Calderón's attempt, political circumstances had changed. The PRI was again in power and willing to open the oil sector. However, the new president and his party faced a complicated situation since the place that oil occupied in the social imaginary, and its relation with national sovereignty called into question any idea of opening up the sector. The same day the PAN's proposal was presented, three articles, an opinion column, and a cartoon related to the oil issue in Mexico appeared in the *Reforma* newspaper. On the day the president presented his proposal, there were six articles, an opinion column, and a cartoon. The following day, the number increased to twelve articles, including one on the front page, a full-page federal government advertisement, and five opinion columns.³

³) These numbers will be relatively constant during the presentation of the three initiatives, i.e., it is not just a matter of specific days. Data collected from the newspaper review was made personally. The *Reforma* newspaper was reviewed between the presentation of the PAN initiative and the PRD initiative from July 31 to August 19, 2013. The newspaper *Reforma* was chosen because it is one of the largest newspaper in Mexico

³) Five of these spots are on YouTube on the official account of the Government of the Republic. For some reason, the second spot, which we will refer to below, appeared as private when reviewing them, so it was impossible to consult it

The president presented its initiative two weeks after that of PAN. Along with delivering its initiative to Congress, the Federal Government proposal came with a costly marketing campaign, one thousand 181 million pesos, or almost USD 10 million (Proceso, 2016) which assured that it took up “word for word” the constitutional text of the time of the expropriation. The Government launched six television spots -between August 12 and 27, 2013- referring to the initiative.⁴ Of these, the second is the one that shows us most clearly what we have talked about here. The ad, which lasts just under 40 seconds, presents a young, casually dressed narrator who begins by saying: “In March 1938, President Lázaro Cárdenas nationalized the oil industry. Yes, the oil is ours.” In the background, various black-and-white videos show President Cárdenas and the oil industry at that time. At one

directly in the source. Cfr. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhSGfplcAs0&index=126&list=PLvtp80ozfi572UC3PWj-vK-2wWPwxo09eW>. The missing video is at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQYdBztIALEF>. Date of consultation: August 14, 2016.

point, the narrator appears within the videos, as if speaking from the past, while asserting that President Cárdenas said that “private participation was needed to develop [... the] industry.” Let us analyze these first seconds of the video. Its purpose is to present the proposal as something from the past, recovering what Cárdenas did in 1938. Likewise, the emphasis presented when saying “yes, the oil is ours” clearly refers to oil nationalism and the realization that oil belongs to all Mexicans.

Next, and outside the videos that appear again in a later shot, the narrator says, “what the energy reform seeks is for Article 27 of the Constitution to say again what President Lázaro Cárdenas left written word for word”. At this moment, the phrase “WORD FOR WORD” appears in the background, telling us about the emphasis being sought. Thus, going back to the past, the announcement seeks to convey a sense of continuity between the oil expropriation and President Peña Nieto’s proposal. From that moment on, the narrator continues talking about the proposal presented. The images in the background are no longer black and white but show, among other things, marine platforms and oil barrels in color. Thus, with the image of the latter in the background and then images of the industry today, it is possible to convey the sense that the proposal is from Cárdenas. However, it is doubtful that the sense of the oil expropriation was respected. Once again, the Government used the place that oil has in the social imaginary as an element of legitimization.

From oil to lithium: the Government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador

On December 1, 2018, after a historic election that gave him the victory with 53 per cent of the votes, Andrés Manuel López Obrador assumed the Presidency of Mexico. The undisputed leader of the left began his inauguration speech by criticizing the neoliberal model, which -he assured- would end in the country with the *Cuarta Transformación* (Fourth Transformation) that his Government would carry out. In his criticism of the failure of the economic model, the president used the energy sector as his first

example: “Before neoliberalism, we produced and were self-sufficient in gasoline, diesel, gas, and electric energy. Now we buy more than half of what we consume of these inputs.” (López, 2018) The biggest problem of the neoliberal model -the president continues- is corruption: “In the neoliberal period, corruption became the main function of political power, that is why if I am asked to express in one sentence the plan of the new government, I answer: to end corruption and impunity” (López, 2018). For López Obrador, the problem was not the individual but the model as a whole, which is why it had to be changed. As a result of the change in the model and its consequent fight against corruption, López Obrador proposed to increase public investment in the energy sector:

Thanks to the savings we will obtain from the fight against corruption and the application of austerity measures, public investment will increase to rescue the oil and electricity industries. [...] As I already expressed, the existing refineries will be rehabilitated, and we will build a new refinery in Dos Bocas, Tabasco, to stop buying gasoline abroad. (López, 2018)

Thus, since the beginning, it is clear that the Government’s project involves an increase in public investment -a apparent change compared to the opening to private capital initiated with the 2013 reform- to achieve self-sufficiency in gasoline, diesel, and other petroleum products. The oil industry is once again -as it was in the previous administration- at the center of the Government’s economic project, but from a completely different perspective. The focus is now on the domestic market rather than on the export of crude oil, the primary source of income for the State since the mid-seventies.

The return to the nationalist discourse on the oil issue did not take long for the president to have positive results. Despite the interest of the Federal Government in increasing fuel production, barely a month after the new administration began, the central part of the country experienced a severe gasoline shortage, which even affected Mexico City. The Government assured that the shortage resulted from the closure of Pemex pipelines, which was part of the strategy to combat *huachicol* (fuel theft), announced by the president on December 27. Although the opposition

blamed the Government for lack of foresight, polls showed significant support from the population.

According to a survey published by *El Financiero* on January 14, 89 per cent of those polled agreed with the Government's fight against *huachicol*; this percentage was maintained even in states with shortages. On the other hand, a study by *Consulta Mitofsky* showed that 57 per cent of those polled considered the strategy correct. Even 22 per cent of those who had not voted for AMLO supported the measure. On the other hand, the newspaper *Reforma* -a media highly critical of the Government- presented on January 11 a survey according to which 62 per cent of the population supported the measure. These data can be understood by the high percentage of approval that the president had at that time -around 80 per cent. Thus, this only explains some of the phenomena.

As we mentioned, the Government had announced the fight against corruption as one of its main pillars. With the offensive against *huachicol*, the Government fulfilled its promise on a crucial issue for the citizens: oil. Once again, the oil issue was at the center of political discussion. The imaginary would be clear again. The support shown in the statistics was not due to one more government measure but to the theft of the Nation's patrimony. The theft was not from a State productive enterprise, not even from the Government, but from all Mexicans, as we have seen. The social imaginary once again gave legitimacy to the Government in office.

On January 17, with the hashtag #RecuperemosLoNuestro, Pemex and the Ministry of Energy, among other entities and cabinet members, launched the following image on social media:

Image 2



Source: Twitter.

As can be seen, the Government is taking up the image of President Lázaro Cárdenas, with it, the idea of oil expropriation. With this campaign, the Federal Government intended to connect its project -that of combating fuel theft- with what had been done by President Cárdenas 80 years before. We have already pointed out that many governments that followed General Cárdenas sought to link themselves to him and his legacy after the expropriation. This shows us that the social imaginary is still valid despite the political ups and downs of the previous years. The phrase “oil in Mexico belongs to everyone” refers to this idea.

The hashtag #RecuperamosLoNuestro also leads us to understand that it seeks to recover what is “ours” -oil- that was lost due to corruption. Despite the changes that occurred in the social imaginary due to the 2013 reform, Mexicans continue to consider oil as part of the Nation’s patrimony.

It is interesting to mention that, amid the statements made after the shortage, Senator Ricardo Monreal -coordinator of the Morena party in the Senate- stated in a communiqué that the Mexican Government’s act was equivalent to a second oil expro-

priation. Once again, the current Government is compared to that of Cárdenas in search of legitimacy. Politicians once again use the imaginary to provide legitimacy to their decisions.

However, let us now turn to the case of lithium. In 2019, the largest lithium deposit in the world was discovered in the State of Sonora, in northern Mexico, with 243.8 million tons (Hernández, 2022). This soft metal, popularly known as white gold, is mainly used for producing rechargeable electric batteries, which are widely used in cell phones, personal computers, and electric cars. Like oil, it has belonged to the Nation since 1917. Its exploitation had fallen mainly in the hands of the private sector. However, on April 20, 2022, the Mexican Congress approved the Mining Law, which placed its exploitation and uses in the exclusive hands of the State.

Concerning this reform, President López Obrador commented in his morning conference on April 18 as follows: “The authorization of mining concessions continues. Only lithium is reserved. In the case of lithium, there are no concessions. There are no contracts or concessions; that is the change. It belongs to the Nation and is administered directly by the Mexican State” (López, 2022). After accusing the opposition of “*vendepatrias*,” the president said the following: “In 2 years the price of lithium in the world market has increased ten times. So, we will protect our lithium, Mexico’s lithium, the lithium of our generation and future generations, of our children and our grandchildren.” Like oil for many years, lithium appears to belong to all Mexicans, to present and future generations. The day after the approval of the reform, the president commented as follows:

I am thrilled because lithium was nationalized, a strategic mineral that means the future of the industries and technology that will be used globally (...) It is something that has been solved, in short. We will present what these articles consist of so that everyone knows the legal framework. It was a triumph in the public interest, in the general interest, in the interest of the people, in the interest of the nation. (López, 2022B)

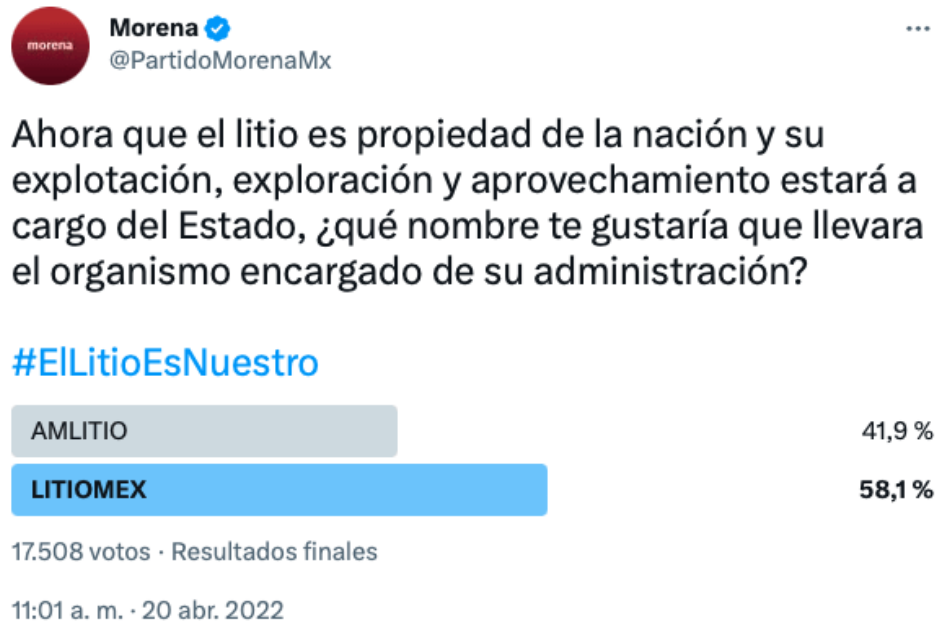
Later, the president thanked the Deputies and Senators who supported the reform so that lithium “would be the property of the

nation and in this way, no abuse would be committed by foreign companies or governments, who do not want to appropriate what belongs to the people of Mexico” (López, 2022B). Again, in the president’s arguments, we find the theme of the Nation’s interest as a source of legitimacy for his decisions. Although this is a common argument among politicians, what interests us here is that the theme appears in the case of Mexico, specifically with extractive products, whether oil or lithium. These two products go beyond the meaning of the constitutional mandate by becoming symbols of Mexican nationalism and thus legitimizing elements of the Government in office.

Returning to the subject of the reform to carry out the exploitation of lithium, on October 23 of that same year, a presidential decree created Lithium for Mexico, a decentralized public agency of the Federal Public Administration in charge of this task. The decree states that the new law “guarantees the Nation’s energy sovereignty over lithium and other minerals that are strategic and necessary for the energy transition, technological innovation and national development” (*Diario Oficial de la Federación*, 2022). The argument of energy sovereignty appears again in the official discourse and now in a legal document.

The president’s party even asked citizens to choose the acronym it should carry regarding the new company, giving two options. The first, AMLITIO, makes direct reference to the acronym by which President López Obrador himself is known, AMLO, while the second, LITIOMEX, is very close to the name of the Mexican oil parastatal, PEMEX. Let us analyze the tweet in which the poll was proposed:

Image 3

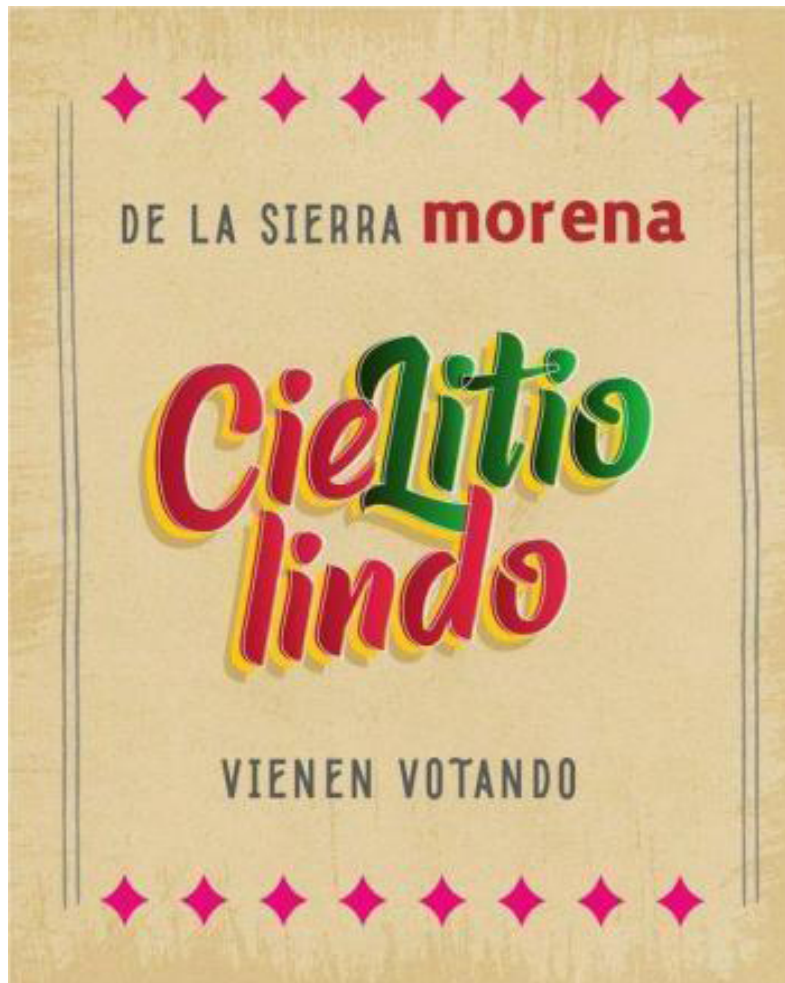


Source: Twitter.

In the first place, the statement “now that lithium is property of the Nation” is striking because, as we were saying, this comes from the 1917 Constitution. Secondly, the hashtag #ElLitioEsNuestro also brings us back to the idea that, like oil, Mexicans perceive lithium as their own, surpassing the constitutional mandate. Finally, the use of the acronym of the president’s name seeks to leave in the company the idea that the one who carried out this nationalization, as Lázaro Cárdenas did in 1938, was President López Obrador. Finally, the president rejected the proposal, inviting the legislators to choose LITIOMEX, influencing the voters in this poll.

As a last point, I would like to present the following image that presents us, like the advertising image of the 1950s, with a social appropriation of the supposed nationalization of lithium:

Image 4



Source: Twitter.

Based on the famous Mexican song “Cielito Lindo,” perhaps the most representative song for Mexicans, it presents the acronym of the president’s party (morena) and the word lithium. Thus, we can again see an appropriation of the concept from popular culture, which shows us that the social imaginary is not exclusive to the elite, but an element shared by Mexicans and used by political groups to provide legitimacy.

Conclusion

Oil has been a part of the Mexican social imaginary at least since the expropriation of 1938. Its official commemoration started just five years later, and has been used since to link every government to that of President Cardenas. By the same time, Mexico’s industrialization absorbed most of the hydrocarbon production,

and the government started presenting oil as a national patrimony. With these two elements, the governments used oil as a political legitimizer for more than 30 years, reinforcing its place within the social imaginary.

Afterwards, with the discovery of big oil reserves in the middle seventies, President López Portillo took advantage of the increasing international prices to accelerate government spending and legitimize its mandate after being the only presidential candidate in 1976. Due to bad decision making and corruption, this legitimacy rapidly banished. Nevertheless, the petrolization of the Mexican economy will be a reality since then.

During the neoliberal period, oil was a complex subject to the government. Due to its place in the social imaginary, it could not be easily privatized as many other industries were at that time. Moreover, with the separation of the left-wing members of the PRI in 1988 and the creation of the PRD, oil was taken by this group as one of their main issues. Oil was now not used to legitimize the government, but an opposition party. However, in 2013 the Peña Nieto's administration recovered the social imaginary to promote its own energy reform. With a costly marketing campaign in mass and social media, legitimation for the renewed PRI government was the main objective.

Finally, President López Obrador continued to use oil as a political legitimizer. Using the argument of combating oil theft, the government justified the shortage of gasoline at the beginning of the administration. Moreover, his administration assured it has nationalized lithium as President Cárdenas did with oil in 1938. Although it is still too early to know if lithium will take the place of oil in the Mexican social imaginary, it is clear that, once again, the Government is using an extractive product to legitimize its Government.

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