

# LETTER FROM MEXICO CITY

**G**ARBAGE has become an obsession for the inhabitants of Mexico City, spawning any number of fantastic stories, all of them true. There is, for example, the story of the open-air garbage dumps that spontaneously ignited one day in July, spreading fire and toxic fumes over acres of refuse stacked twenty yards high. There is the story of the cacique who controlled more than half the city's seventeen thousand-odd *pepenadores*, or garbage pickers, demanded sexual favors from the garbage pickers' daughters, and also took all his workers off to Acapulco on vacation once a year. There is the story of a sixty-square-mile garbage dump that the city government decided to turn into a park, complete with picnic tables—tables that have since been sinking gently into the settling layers of trash and loam.

Then, there are the rats. One of the most memorable stories dates from the beginning of the decade, when an evening paper announced above the fold that a "giant mutant rat" had been discovered floating dead in a sewage canal. The article said that the rat was the size of a Volkswagen, and in the accompanying photo one could verify the caption's claim that the beast had "the face of a bear, the hands of a man, and the tail of a rat." Two days later, a morning paper explained that the corpse belonged to a lion owned by a three-flea travelling circus. The old thing had finally died, but before throwing the corpse into the sewage canal the owners had decided to skin it, in case the pelt proved salable. Purists among those who collect accounts of Mexican trash dismiss this story on the ground that it turned out to be false, but the point is not that the mutant rat was a figment but that in the general state of decay and disrepair of

one of the world's most chaotic cities many of us who read the story assumed at the time that it was true. The fact is that once started on the subject most city residents can come up with giant-rat stories of their own, and few are more thoroughly documented than the one told by Iván Restrepo, a genial scholar of garbage who directs a government-financed institute for ecological research called the Centro de Ecodesarrollo. Five years ago, in Chapultepec, the city's most popular public park, Restrepo and his center mounted an exhibit on the subject of garbage. A tent, designed by an artist, had a long, dark entrance, filled with giant illustrations of microbes and garbage-related pests, from which the public emerged into "the world of garbage." One of the exhibits, Restrepo said, was "the most gigantic rat we could find."

Dr. Restrepo was telling his story in one of Mexico City's best restaurants, and he interrupted himself briefly to order roast kid, guacamole, and a

millefeuille of poblano chilies and cream. "It was huge!" he went on, gesturing descriptively. The rat, one gathered, must have been about the size of a large cat. "It weighed almost eight pounds. But we had a problem. We began to realize that the rat was dying on us. It wasn't used to the nice, healthy pet food, or whatever it was, that we were feeding it. So we went out and collected fresh garbage for it every evening. Kept it happy. And that was important, because thousands and thousands of people came to see the garbage exhibit, and the rat was the absolute star of the show."

If *capitalinos*—the residents of Mexico City—flock to an exhibit on garbage featuring a giant rat, it is because the subject is never very far from their minds. The problem of waste disposal may be only one of the critical aspects of the city's ongoing public-services emergency, but it is certainly among the most visible. One of the world's three largest urban conglomerates, the city never had a proper service infrastructure to begin with and has been growing too much too fast for

too many years. Figures from the 1990 national census show that although the Federal District, or capital proper, has a relatively stable population of 8.2 million, the surrounding sprawl in the neighboring state (also called Mexico) brings the total urban population to sixteen million. This is triple the 1965 estimated total, and the rate is not slowing. By the year 2000, if current trends persist, the urban area will be home to twenty million souls, all clamoring for services that are already strained to the breaking point in some areas and nonexistent in others.

Not only are services dangerously insufficient but there is almost no way to expand them. Water is now piped in from as far as fifty-five miles away. Ringed by mountains,





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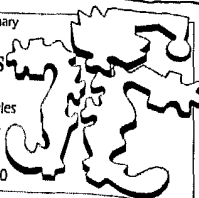
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the urban area is also gasping for fresh air. At least fourteen tons of waste, including lead, carbon monoxide, and what is known euphemistically as the products of "open-air fecalization," now floats in what the city breathes every day. Visibility has improved markedly since late last year, when the government passed a law restricting circulation of a fifth of the city's 2.5 million vehicles each weekday, but, because public transport is also in an awful state, car owners are now buying spare vehicles to use on the day their regular cars aren't allowed out. The poor, who can't afford any car at all, can spend as much as four hours a day travelling between the outlying shantytowns and their urban workplaces: the metro system, which has seventy miles of track and provides more than four million rides a day, serves only a small part of the Federal District, which covers some five hundred and seventy-nine square miles, and the same is true of the crowded, aging buses that spew their fumes along the city's uncharming streets. Twelve million more rides are provided by a network of *colectivos*—privately operated minivans and small buses—which clog traffic and gouge working-class salaries. And the deep-drainage system—nine miles of cavernous tunnels and thousands of miles of pipes, hailed as an engineering marvel when it was inaugurated, barely fifteen years ago—is now hopelessly overloaded, as anyone knows who saw the sewers backing up during each of this summer's downpours.

Bad as the city's public-service difficulties are, most of them appear to have fairly straightforward solutions: build more subways, install more phones. Not trash. The question is not how to put more of anything in but how to reduce the sheer bulk of what exists. The poor, who constitute the vast majority of Mexico's population, have lately produced almost as much waste as the rich; eager initiates into the world of junk consumerism, they find some consolation for their fate in the First World's plastic-encased gewgaws. And although the city has so far heroically managed to keep more or less abreast of the growing tonnage of waste, cleanup-service problems merely have their beginning in the dumps. Here Mexico's First and Third Worlds meet and fester. Rats are the least of it. There is pollution and,

above all, the tangle of human misery and political intrigue represented by a peculiar sector of Mexico's body politic—the thousands of *pepenadores*, and their leaders, who stand in the way of neat solutions.

CONTEMPLATING the lovely city of Tenochtitlán, rising from the now vanished waters of Lake Texcoco, the conquistadores marvelled not only at the personal cleanliness of the inhabitants but at the immaculate streets that fanned out in an orderly grid from the great plaza, now occupied by the National Palace and the Cathedral. The Aztec people could hardly conceive of waste: they used cornhusks to wrap food in and inedible seeds to manufacture percussion instruments. All organic waste went into the compost-filled rafts with which the Aztecs compensated for their lack of agricultural land. Each street was swept clean every morning, and the day's cargo of excrement was deposited in a special raft tied at the street's end.

By contrast, colonial Mexico was a filthy place, but the long-term accumulation of waste did not really become a problem until after the 1910 revolution, which yanked the Indian population out of self-sufficient subsistence economies and into the world of buying, selling, and discarding. In the nineteen-forties, when the economy finally stabilized after the long devastation of civil war, consumerism made its first inroads. Waste multiplied. Each month, thousands of peasants abandoned their land and came to the capital looking for a better life. By the nineteen-sixties, urban prosperity had proved to be a mirage, but the situation in the countryside was infinitely worse, and the mass urban migration continued. The newcomers settled in shacks along the roads leading into the city, stole their electricity from the highway power lines, and made do without running water, drainage, or garbage-collection systems. The communities grew at such a rate that one of them, Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, is the country's fourth-largest city. Thoroughly integrated by now into the consumer economy, its million-plus inhabitants carry their groceries home in plastic bags, use their spare change to buy hair spray, splurge at United States-based fast-food chains on soda pop served in plastic-foam cups, and pour milk for their children from plas-

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tic-coated-cardboard cartons. The intractable accumulation of mixed waste—rotting, toxic, and non-biodegradable—generated by this fraction of the Third World's urban poor can be contemplated at the Bordo de Xochiaca municipal dump, on the southern edge of what was once Lake Texcoco, and a few blocks away from Nezahualcóyotl's city hall. Not many who pass by it linger; the stench causes motorists to accelerate way past the speed limit, and in their haste they may fail to notice what is most striking about this vast expanse of putrefaction. Scarecrowlike figures can be seen moving slowly over the dusty mounds, poking methodically. The garbage is inhabited.

The best view of Bordo de Xochiaca is from the driver's seat of a tractor that is used all day long to flatten out the incoming loads. From this vantage point one can look north across the clay-colored lake bed to the volcano-ringed horizon. In the opposite direction, the garbage dunes recede for half a mile to Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl. A few people work the edges of the dump, and a few others live in plastic-and-cardboard shanties there, but most of the dump's activity takes place in a clearing in the center—where people try to sift through a newly deposited truckload of garbage before the tractor runs over it—and in an expanse just to the west of this clearing, where Celestino Fernández Reyes, the dump boss, weighs and purchases the scavengers' daily take of glass, rags, tin, cardboard, wood, plastic containers, animal bones, and other recyclable materials. Behind the scales and Celestino's headquarters, a row of shacks marks the beginning of the living quarters—scores of lopsided houses, some of them quite large, that are built of and on rubbish, along reeking alleys and paths with names like Virgin of Guadalupe Lane.

It proved a little difficult to get into Bordo. At a sentry gate set between two small hills of garbage, a stocky man in dark glasses, jeans, and cowboy boots waved in a procession of trucks and quite a few mule-drawn carts—the latter belonging to the Nezahualcóyotl municipal service and decorated with the red-white-and-green logo of the nation's ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI. The sentry said there was no access to the public. As I argued with him, loaded trucks continued to file by, and



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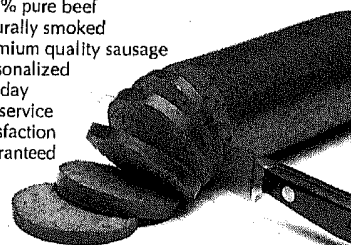
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the drivers of trucks not belonging to Nezahualcóyotl's municipal fleet stopped to press the sentry's hand, which then flew to a pocket in his quilted vest. During the seconds required for these transactions, children climbed up on the trucks' back wheels and then onto the loads of refuse, and as each truck moved past the gate the children scrabbled frantically through the load, throwing things overboard; they would return to collect them as soon as the truck reached the dumping site, which is invisible from the gate, being hidden by hills of piled-up trash. Eventually, the sentry agreed to let me in for a brief visit.

After a week of rain, the pickers were working ankle-deep in a thick slush; it was tinted blue or bright red in patches, and these exhaled a mist of choking chemical fumes. Oblivious of the smell, a cluster of children crouched in a blue puddle, poring over a small pile of plastic comic-book figures—the Joker, Superman, and the like. The children did not want to talk to a stranger (indeed, they avoided even looking at me), but after I made a couple of tries the tallest boy answered a question, saying that he and his friends wanted the toys not to play with but to sell. Nevertheless, as they salvaged the few dolls that had no arms or legs missing they deployed them in a brief, soundless mock battle before tossing them into a scavenging sack.

One of Celestino's overseers waved each arriving truck to a spot on the edge of the clearing, where a family or a team of friends was waiting, each member equipped with only a long-handled pitchfork, and no boots, masks, or other protective gear. The team began sifting through the waste even before the truck's shower of refuse ended, expertly plucking out the salvageable bits with their bare hands. The fork was designed to help the pickers separate the mounds of trash on the ground, but an elderly man in faded blue overalls said that since the tractor had been brought in there was hardly any time for the garbage to pile up, so a lot of salable material was left unsalvaged. (The tractor was somebody's idea of a landfill operation, but since the garbage wasn't covered with anything after being flattened out it seemed to serve no practical purpose.)

The garbage pickers proved to be a closemouthed lot, especially when I

asked their names or put questions about Celestino, but the man in overalls was willing to explain the various stages of trash-picking. "You have to know what to select," he said, working with precision and delicacy as he talked. "For example, this pair of trousers is good, because the buttons and zipper can be removed and sold. If they were made of natural fibre, like cotton, you could sell the cloth as rag. There are a lot of tennis shoes in this pile, but they're not good enough to sell to the secondhand-clothes dealers." He was picking through a revolting pile of what seemed to be the refuse of a very large family, but by the time the things he had chosen to keep reached his sack they looked almost clean. He waved toward a point in the rubbish heap which I found indistinguishable from its surroundings. "That's my spot," he said. "When I'm through for the day, I take my sack over there and sort it. It's not enough just to pick the garbage. We have to put work into it afterward to make it salable."

A truck unloaded a pile of refuse from what someone said was an open-air market—a cascade of burst tomatoes, crushed bananas, empty egg crates, clear plastic bags, and wadded-up vegetable peelings. None of it was rotting yet, but, according to a group of women and children investigating the pile, there was nothing of any use other than a score of orange halves that had had most of their pulp pressed out of them, and that one woman picked up and immediately began eating.

I struck up a conversation with another member of the team, a woman with long gray braids who was wearing a clean checked apron over a faded dress. She told me that in general market waste was virtually worthless, except for an occasional pile of butcher-

shop bones, which gelatin and bouillon-cube manufacturers would buy. Other pickers were saving the organic waste for pigs they kept along the edges of the dump, but she said she didn't own any. While quite a few of the garbage pickers looked filthy, her clothes, I noticed, were not only clean but crisply ironed. "I used to wash clothes for a living," she explained. "But now my arms can't take being in the water so long." The sun was directly overhead, and hitting hard, so the smells around us—acetone, vegetable rot, used disposable diapers—ripened and concentrated in the heat. Several of the workers had stopped for a noonday snack at a lopsided tent made of bits of plastic and wood, but the woman told me she would not buy the potato chips or lemonade available there. "The younger people make more money, but I can only clear about five or six thousand pesos a day," she said. Six thousand pesos is about two dollars. "I get here at ten or so, and work as long as my arms and legs can stand it. Then I eat when I get home." Soon, she said, she would carry her sacks, one at a time, to the weighing area and collect her pay from Don Celestino. Then she would try to make the hour-long walk back to her squatters' community before the afternoon rains started.

Others told me they lived near the weighing area, in shacks made of salvaged cardboard, plastic, and tin. Mexico's continuing economic crisis is constantly expelling residents from Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, where they can no longer afford to pay rent, mortgage, or utilities. Many are emigrating to the edge of the urban sprawl, where they must begin life over again, as they did two decades ago in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl—in bare fields, with no lights or other services. Some of the poorest, or frailest, of these exiles appeared to be ending up in Bordo. I walked away from the picking fields in the general direction of the dump's headquarters with a woman carrying a sack of glass jars which was almost as tall as she was. She lived a few blocks away, she said, but she couldn't afford the payments on her plot of land now that her husband was out of a job. Soon, if Don Celestino would permit it, she would move to the dump with her family. There was no electricity here, and the nearest public water faucet was



a half hour's walk away, but at least it was free, and she wouldn't have to pay for transportation to get to work. "He's a very nice man," she said of the dump boss. "He doesn't charge anything for letting you live here. All you have to do is ask permission to come in, and promise to sell your material exclusively to him."

**T**HOUGH it is estimated that some seventeen thousand people work in Mexico City's garbage dumps, no one has tallied the number that work in Bordo de Xochiaca and the other dumps in neighboring Mexico state—dumps that are for all practical purposes part of the same urban area, and so are often used by *capitalinos*. Like the cigarette peddlers, the street-corner fire-eaters and cartwheel turners, the windshield washers and parking-space finders, the pot menders, the sidewalk violinists and portrait painters, the curtain-rod fixers, and the outright beggars who swarm through the city, the *pepenadores* are a result of Mexico's constant failure to find a social space for its very poorest. But, unlike millions of their fellows who have to forage for each day's bread, they are a geographically stable population, tied to the arrival of a loaded truck. Their stability makes them easy to organize—a fact that the PRI, which has now been in power for sixty-one years, could not fail to notice. Throughout those years, the PRI has demonstrated a scavenger's genius for wasting nothing and no one, and a truly pre-Hispanic vocation for building pyramidal social organizations. Not long after Mexico City started producing serious amounts of garbage, the scavengers who flocked to it became small but extremely useful cogs in the PRI's political machine. Men like Celestino Fernández Reyes, who as a member of the PRI's Confederation of Popular Organizations became Bordo's overseer, make sure that the relationship between the Party and the scavengers is a smooth, productive one.

"Do you think I'm here for the pleasure of it?" Don Celestino asked me. "This is a terrible way to earn a living! Pickers can make good money—up to two hundred and forty thousand pesos a week. A lot of them have saved enough to move out of here and set up a little business on their own. Me, I have the thankless part. I have to

fight with the buyers, keep prices up, go offering the pickers' wares from factory to factory. Plus, I'm a sick man, a diabetic, and this is not a healthy place. I would never have chosen to come here—I was doing fine buying glass from the dump—but the Party asked me to come and establish some order. 'Celestino, we need you here,' they said. So I came." Don Celestino is rumored to be a wealthy man, but his office is a one-room, tin-roofed brick house in the heart of the dump, furnished with a cot, two rusting metal chairs, and a makeshift desk. A small, trim man with extraordinarily liquid dark eyes, he dresses neatly but unostentatiously in a white guayabera and sporty blue slacks, and, until he relaxes, he moves and talks with meticulous humility. Our interview took place somewhat earlier than I had hoped. While I was wandering through the dump's residential area, trying to estimate the total population, and, to my surprise, discovering further paths and alleyways at every turn, a horse pulled up just behind me with a loud snort. Riding it bareback was a very beautiful youth with long hair and cold eyes. He demanded my business. I answered that I was looking for Don Celestino, and he said firmly that he would escort me to him.

In his dilapidated office, Don Celestino gradually lost his air of subservient courtesy as he explained the garbage market. He made it clear that the *pepenadores* were utterly dependent on him. "It's not that they can't transport their salvage to the factories," he said. "A lot of the buyers have warehouses right across the highway from here. But who's going to pay any kind of price for a dozen empty bottles?" In his own eyes, he was the community's benefactor. "I brought a doctor in here to look after the pickers full time. She charges for the visit, but who do you think pays for the medicines? Me!" He didn't smoke, he didn't have the face of a heavy drinker, and he kept a close watch on prices and profits. "Times are hard!" he exclaimed. "It used to be that factory owners came after me looking for things to buy, but ever since Salinas de Gortari—the nation's President—'came up with his free-trade policies we've been getting undercut by United States waste products. There's trains and trains of them coming in! And, you know, American products are always

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better. The gringos are selling clean, nicely tied-up cardboard, and they're selling it cheap. Who would want ours? Now buyers are complaining that it's dirty, that often half the weight is moisture. I bought cardboard at three hundred pesos a stack the other day, and I couldn't get rid of it for a hundred and fifty. I tell you, I don't know how I let the Party talk me into this."

IN the past, the PRI provided similar encouragement and support to Rafael Gutiérrez Moreno, a former garbage-truck driver who, in 1965, took over from his father as leader of the Mexico City garbage pickers. Gutiérrez Moreno turned his constituency into a rapid-response force at the service of his political sponsors. In the late nineteen-seventies, he also served briefly as an alternate member of the Chamber of Deputies, but after one term he chose to return to the political sidelines. Whenever a show of support was needed for the capital's appointed mayor, or for the President, or for a foreign head of state, Gutiérrez Moreno, known to his followers as El Líder, saw to it that his people were there, waving green-white-and-red paper flags or, it has been rumored, wielding billy clubs and metal pipes as part of the notorious

Halcones (Falcons), who operated against strikers and student demonstrators in the early nineteen-seventies. In exchange, the authorities looked the other way as he tightened his hold on the pickers. In 1983, city officials ordered Gutiérrez Moreno to close down his fiefdom, the vast dump of Santa Cruz Meyehualco. A fire that had raged there for five days in 1981 and reports that toxic chemicals were leaching through the trash into the city's water supply contributed to the decision. Gutiérrez Moreno negotiated room for half his followers at the city's second-largest dump, in the western part of the city, and moved the rest to land he had acquired east of Santa Cruz, in the district of Santa Catarina. El Líder, who was reported to distribute as much as ten million pesos a day in bribes around the city bureaucracy, built himself an extravagantly appointed house on the Santa Catarina

grounds; he also built housing there for the workers which was significantly better than the garbage hovels at the old dump. He paid for drinks and decorations for yearly fiestas, and it was he who took everyone off once a year for a beach holiday. All that, however, did nothing to diminish his reputation as a singularly heartless exploiter of the garbage pickers' penury. He punished them if they left the dump grounds, by cutting back on their allotment of garbage or by beating them, and—again, according to published rumor—assassinated those who questioned his leadership. In pursuit of his declared goal of fathering a hundred and eighty children, he took his pick of the community's teen-age girls, including his nieces. (Forty-five offspring have been legally recognized so far.)

Héctor Castillo, who wears a ponytail and plays drums with a pretty good rock band, is a social scientist, and he has spent a considerable amount of time trying to figure out how garbage communities and their caciques come into being. He began his research on the man he describes as "the most powerful of all the country's urban caciques" a decade ago, by sneaking past watchmen into Gutiérrez Moreno's dump several times, and he has since worked and drunk with the *pepenadores* often. At

the heart of the problem, as he sees it, is Mexico's finely wrought system of intermediation between the ruling party, the government, and the citizenry. "Mexico's system is patrimonial, and that means that it operates through concessions, from top to bottom," Castillo says. "The garbage-collection concession is granted to the Federal District's Sanitation Department. From that point on, a number of subsidiary choices have to be made: whose trucks are going to

collect the wealthiest garbage—the residential-zone garbage, with its mattresses and wine bottles and discarded clothes—and who is going to drive those trucks, because, of course, these things are scavenged by the truck crew long before they reach the dumps. At each step in the process where there is money to be made, a concession is granted, and at the end of the line are the garbage caciques, who tie the whole system together securely, and declare



that the garbage is in its place, that the city is clean, and that its politicians are even cleaner."

This is probably a fair description of a system that is now dying: for most of the century, the PRI has ruled Mexico through the web of patronage and concessions that Castillo describes. His account, though, leaves out the layer of commitment to social change underlying the regime's all-embracing populist rhetoric. For all its inefficiencies and other faults, the patrimonial system worked well enough to pull a largely rural and illiterate population into the twentieth century, insuring levels of education, health care, public services, and social mobility which comparable societies (Peru, Brazil, and Colombia, say) never achieved. For decades, Mexicans appeared to take equal pleasure in mocking the state—for its corruption, its verbosity, its ruthlessness, its endlessly scheming system of privilege—and in boasting of it to outsiders who failed to appreciate the subtleties of its achievements. The wily old PRI might have endured even longer in its pristine corporatist form except for three devastating blows. One was the

economic bonfire provoked by José López Portillo, who, as President from 1976 to 1982, promised to "administer the prosperity" generated by Mexico's newfound oil wealth. With the glee of a nouveau tycoon leaping into a pool full of naked women, López Portillo plunged the whole country into a reckless and corrupt spending binge, which came to a disastrous halt only with the collapse of the international price of oil, in 1981. By the following year, Mexico's eighty-three-billion-dollar foreign debt was draining the government budget, and even the money to pay for things that Mexicans had come to consider their right—things ranging from adequate schools to cheap public transportation—was scarce. Then came the 1985 earthquake, in whose aftermath the government appeared merely corrupt and inept, while tens of thousands of citizen volunteers rescued the concept of an engaged society from the rubble. And then there were the 1988 elections, in which, largely as a result of the previous two crises, the PRI lost enormous numbers of votes to a new left-wing coalition. Many members of the foreign press

who travelled through the country think that the PRI may actually have lost the election, but government officials angrily dismiss the charge as "nonsense." Still, the PRI certainly lost Mexico City, and even Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl and the area around it, where Gutiérrez Moreno had his power base.

The combined result of these crises has been to open the doors for a new élite, whose head and symbol is President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. He and his youthful band of highly trained economists and statisticians take pride in representing everything that the old-style *priistas* do not—they scorn the pork-barrel theory of politics, disdain bribetaking as lower class, play squash regularly, and sound reverent only when pronouncing the word *modernidad*—but they remain, for better or worse, members and leaders of the party that brought them to power. The tensions between the old-time corporatists and the new neo-liberal technocrats may ultimately split the Party; for the moment, the two sides remain united, because neither can rule the country without the other. The

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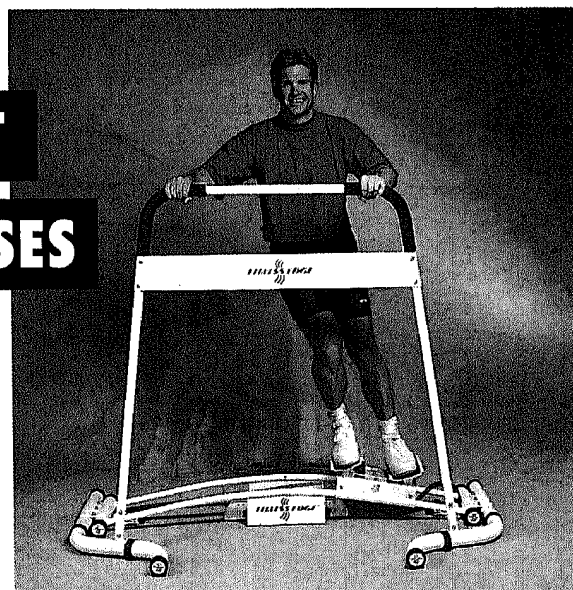
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newcomers need to keep the country running on a day-to-day basis while they implement a devastatingly painful program of structural economic reform. The Old Guard, for its part, senses that its methods may be bankrupt, but it must somehow start delivering results again if the Party is to avoid any more losses like its crushing electoral defeat in the capital's "circle of misery." As a result of such convergent renovating impulses, officials were desperately maneuvering to get rid of the lord of Mexico City's garbage pickers even before his death, in 1987, at the age of forty-eight.

Rafael Gutiérrez Moreno was shot to death in his own bedroom late one night, and his wife was sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for the crime. Gutiérrez Moreno had beaten her brutally ever since their marriage, ten years before, and had raped her sisters and nieces. She had many motives for attacking her husband, but so did any number of his subjects, and when the murder finally took place the only wonder was that someone had not done in El Líder long before. Héctor Castillo points out, however, that a community capable of fighting back could hardly have let itself become so abject in the first place. "Most of the garbage pickers have never known a different way of life," he says. "There are people here who are third genera-

tion. The pickers are born and grow up in the garbage fields. They have almost no schooling, and they know that their position in society is extremely weak." After Gutiérrez Moreno's death, the pickers proved incapable of choosing themselves a new leader—a situation that set off a battle for his political inheritance.

A colleague of Héctor Castillo's, Rosalinda Losada, has been following the succession struggle. She is a friendly, energetic woman who once spent some time picking garbage as part of the research for her graduate thesis, and she has struck up something of a friendship with El Líder's principal rival, the rather more genial Pablo Téllez. "When Gutiérrez Moreno had to move from his original power base to Santa Catarina, he sent nearly half of the other *pepenadores* to a dump at the opposite end of Mexico City, Santa Fe, then dominated exclusively by Téllez," she explained. "As his stand-in there Gutiérrez Moreno delegated someone known as El Dientón." (The name translates roughly as Bigtooth.) Téllez cannot have allowed El Dientón into his site willingly, since the partition effectively cut his own take in half, but he was almost certainly persuaded to do so by Gutiérrez Moreno's allies in the local government. "When Gutiérrez Moreno was killed, everyone thought El Dientón

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would replace him," Losada continued. "But then one of Gutiérrez Moreno's former wives appeared, out of the blue, to claim his inheritance. This wife—named Guillermina de la Torre—didn't even live in the dumps, and no one knew very much about her, but she seemed to have the support of a lot of local officials. Now the Gutiérrez Moreno *pepenadores* are divided into Guillermina's followers, at Santa Catarina, and El Dientón's, at a place called Prados de la Montaña, in the northwest of the city, built in the winter of 1986 to replace Santa Fe, which was overflowing by then."

Officials in the new city administration who are trying to keep Mexico's garbage problem under control

tend to get huffy in the face of insistent questions about garbage picking, for they have plenty of critical issues to worry about besides scavengers and the leaders who control them. There is the ecological problem represented by the old, unplanned dumps, which may still be polluting the groundwater and air in their vicinity. There is the logistical problem of transporting garbage across the enormous, chronically congested capital city. And there is the question of the increasing volumes of garbage generated by what Professor Restrepo defines as "this poor, underdeveloped society's penchant for consuming like a first-class industrial power, with everything wrapped in more and more layers of plastic." The director of Urban Services, José Cuenca Dardón, has his own list of hurdles: "We are behind in every aspect of sanitation, including the concept of what the service should be and the legislation surrounding the problem. If you add to this the social problem of people whose livelihood for generations has consisted of garbage picking, the issue becomes doubly complex. And we have to try to solve it with our municipalities' extremely weak financial base, historically backward infrastructure, and very poor citizen awareness." Politically, Cuenca represents the PRI's transitional stage; he is not upper class or foreign-educated, and he deals comfortably with the city's





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caciques, but he is a legendary compulsive worker, who can speak about garbage with unremitting intensity for hours at a stretch, reeling off figures and achievements that include the total number of kilometres of roadways swept clean every night, the percentage of garbage processed by the city today versus the percentage a decade ago, the total number of trips saved by a new system of transfer points. "We have learned," he says, eyes shining. "Now we know how many sweepable surfaces every main thoroughfare presents, and how many man-hours are needed to sweep two- and four-lane roads."

CUENCA packed me off on a tour of the city's garbage infrastructure, beginning with a visit to the new transfer points, where small garbage trucks unload into trailers six times as large, and including a new landfill, whose main virtue, the engineer in charge of it said proudly, "is that it is garbage-pickerless." But the garbage itself *was* being picked through, at every stage of its collection and dumping, by Urban Services employees sensible enough not to let anything go to waste. Along the noisy thoroughfares, I saw orange-clad street-sweepers busy setting aside cans and bottles. A garbage truck pulled into a transfer point with a six-seat sofa tied neatly across its bow. The point's supervisor beamed. "We have very good-quality garbage here," he said. "It comes from first-class neighborhoods." Spontaneous recycling was taking place throughout the city. Then what was being left for the real pickers?

"Practically nothing," said Luis Rojas, Bigtooth's second-in-command, at my last stop on the official garbage tour. "The truck drivers are stealing us blind, no matter that it was El Líder who got them out of the dumps and onto the trucks in the first place. Now they want to forget where they're from, and we're at war." At the gate of the new Prados de la Montaña dump, I and a travelling escort of Urban Services officials had been met, in what is known here as the best *oficialista* style, by a lineup that included plant managers, chief engineers, Rojas, and Pablo Téllez, the man who had been Rafael Gutiérrez Moreno's fellow-cacique and lifelong rival. Téllez turned out to be a bouncy, loquacious man, who clammed up only when he was questioned about the practical aspects of his

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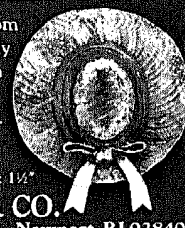
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business—how much he pays, and how he weighs the pickers' merchandise. (Some time ago, Rosalinda Losada revealed in an article the unsurprising fact that the scales he uses are fixed.) He shook hands amiably and chatted about the nice new dump facilities. Standing next to him, and looking steadfastly in the opposite direction, was Luis Rojas. He wore a torn pink-and-green polo shirt, with a heavy gold chain around his neck and a few diamond rings on his fingers. He was uncomfortable talking in the presence of Téllez, with whom he was apparently not on speaking terms, but he did loosen up enough to describe the truck drivers' unfair scavenging advantage and Bigtooth's betrayal by El Líder's former wife. And as we left he made a little goodbye speech, saying that he had been pleased to see us, particularly since this visit represented yet another instance of cooperation between city officials and the pickers. "Because if that cooperation ceased to exist," he went on, "there's no way you could have got past the entry gate." The city's top sanitation technicians, who just moments ago had been so full of talk about sweepable surfaces and pickerless landfills, now nodded and smiled gently. A barrel-chested thug was proclaiming that they were at his mercy, and they stood there and took it, because he was right.

The true extent of the garbage lobby's power, which enables it to pervert official goals, was only too evident at our earlier stop, which represents Urban Services' most ambitious attempt at change: the vast new landfill is supposed to take over in five or six years as the city's only dump site. Although scavenging there is strictly forbidden, no alternative arrangement exists for making the site economically viable through an industrialized recycling operation. "We didn't really have time to put one in," a site engineer explained apologetically. "In reality, we decided to open this site very quickly to give ourselves some kind of negotiating leverage with Rafael Gutiérrez Moreno, who was getting a little out of hand. Once he saw this site, and understood that we were planning to do without him, he became more manageable."

"The fact is that there are two or

three things you can't mess with in Mexico City," a city official remarked to me reflectively. Young, Harvard-educated, and as clean-cut a representative of the PRI's new whiz kids as can be found, he nevertheless seemed to have taken a crash course in pragmatics. "You can't touch the metro, the deep-drainage system, or garbage. Because, for better or worse, those things work, and the proof is that in this city, which is built on a lake, we've never suffered a major flood. But can you imagine what would happen if the sewer-system workers went on strike? It's the same thing with garbage. All things considered—that this is a Third World city in the middle of a financial crisis, that there are sixteen million people throwing tons of trash away every day—this is a clean city. But what would happen the day the garbage pickers shut down the dumps on us? Or if the truck drivers, most of whom have family ties to the pickers, went on strike? And you can't just solve the problem by removing the leaders; you have to find a way to replace them, or you'll have people killing each other just to get their own little garbage concession. We have to change things slowly, with the people we have."

Sometime in the not too distant future, if the Mexican economy improves, if desperate communities of scavengers cease to rise on the fringes of Mexico's cities, if the PRI relaxes its hold on power, the *pepenadores* and their rulers will vanish as this society's most shameful blemish. In the meantime, Mexico City's garbage *líderes* have played old-time PRI politics in masterly fashion, not only to ward off the unemployment that poses a threat when any significant modernization of the waste-disposal system is undertaken but also to obtain benefits for their constituencies which the garbage pickers at Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl's Bordo dump—or at dumps in Bogotá or Santiago de Chile, for that matter—cannot yet dream of. A city official who was privy to all the talks between Urban Services and Gutiérrez Moreno and Téllez once told me that Téllez built his power base in city politics by playing good guy to the intractable Gutiérrez Moreno. While El Líder's people protested the move from the old



Santa Fe dump nearby to the new Prados by setting fire to government property, Téllez decided to make a deal. Out of that negotiation came what is now the pride of the Urban Services Department: a *colonia*, or residential neighborhood, for some five hundred pickers and their families, just across the street from the dump. It has a kindergarten, a grade school, a market, and houses with electricity and running water, all of which are shared by Téllez's people and Bigtooth's people.

As we wandered through the immaculate stands of the *colonia's* new market, admiring the produce and taking in the smell of freshly cooked tortillas at a stand operated by two former pickers, an Urban Services dump-site manager was obviously filled with pride. He had been involved in the move to the new housing compound from the beginning, he said, and he still couldn't get over the fact that at first the pickers had refused to move in, preferring to sleep in their old hovels and use the new houses as storage rooms. "Then they moved in and started scavenging the houses," he went on. "They unscrewed everything that was removable and sold it. They used the toilets to wash clothes in. We decided to bring in a team of social workers, and they helped the women adjust. They taught them things like home management, personal hygiene, and how plumbing works. One day, we noticed that the families had actually begun to settle in, and several of them had even bought real furniture to set up housekeeping with." The grade school and kindergarten are now at least partly occupied, though Luis Rojas is ambivalent about the dump's new restrictions on child labor. "I suppose my children will do something different," he said, when I asked if he thought there would be a fourth generation of *pepenadores* in his family. "Because, thanks to the gentlemen you see here"—he pointed to the Urban Services officials—"our children under the age of ten are no longer able to come in to work with us."

The brand-new *colonia* is the Mexican system at its old-time patrimonial best and also at its most typically inefficient: the investment to build it was not small, but when the dump reaches the scheduled end of its useful life, in two or three years, the housing complex will probably become obsolete. This

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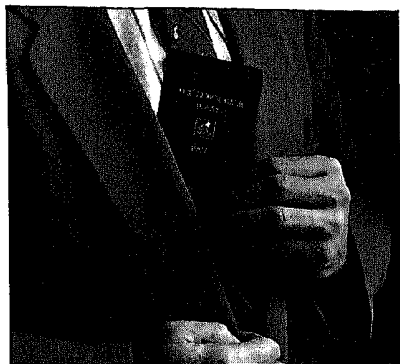
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seemed a quibble, though, on a recent sunny morning when I stood with María de la Luz López in the living room of her two-bedroom house and watched her point proudly to her kitchen, her bathroom, and her dining room, with its matched furniture and hard, dry cement floor. Her two small children were watching television peacefully, and a washing machine was giving off a comforting hum. She was born in a garbage dump twenty-one years ago, she said, and what she remembered most about the nineteen years she spent there was the older women's horror whenever rats climbed through the rubbish into the huts to bite the babies' cheeks and fingers. Now she hoped that her own children might study through ninth grade, and she was happy to stay home and take care of them, because her husband earned enough at the dump for all of them to get by on. "This house is very solid," she said when I asked what she thought its chief merit was. "It doesn't collapse." She waved goodbye to me from the doorway, next to riotously blooming geraniums that an Urban Services social worker had shown her how to plant, and I remembered a rather long lunch with the sociologist Héctor Castillo when he had said that the obsessive question for him was whom to blame for all the garbage pickers' misery. In the bright light of Mrs. López's home, an even more disturbing question arose: whom to thank for her new surroundings? Among the ghosts rising up to take a bow stood El Líder.

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*To answer your need, provide word and deed,  
There's our workshop on Limerick Lane,  
Selling verse rated best, tailored to your request,  
FAXed to you when time is a strain.*

*The work that we do, all original, too,  
Is not weighty or likely to pall,  
We keep our verse light, and feel that is right  
For the greatest enjoyment of all.*

*So, call us next time there's occasion for rhyme,  
We'll work out an arrangement and heed it,  
Give us background facts, sit back and relax,  
You'll have quality verse when you need it.*

Al Kracht  
President



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