DEP Deportate, esuli, profughe
Rivista telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile

The Mexican Antinuclear Movement: the Madres Veracruzanas and the Struggle to Close the Laguna Verde Plant

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Abstract: Mexico is one of only a few Global South countries using nuclear technology to produce electricity. The Laguna Verde nuclear power plant, which began operation in 1988, is located near the port city of Veracruz, on the Gulf of Mexico. After the accident at Chernobyl in 1986 an antinuclear power movement made up of over seventy organizations emerged to demand that the Mexican government shut down the plant because they argued that it represented a significant threat to the people and environment of Veracruz. The movement, led by the mothers' group Madres Veracruzanas, engaged in a variety of tactics – from blockades of highways to meetings with the president and top government officials. Some of their actions were consistent with the "novel practices" concept in the New Social Movements literature. Ultimately, the Mexican government responded with both co-optation and coercion measures and the Laguna Verde plant continues to operate today. Though some feminists criticize mothers' movements for their conservatism and their tendency to reproduce the traditional sexual division in society, the Madres defied that criticism; their thinking broadened to include a resistance to the gender boundaries they had supported at the beginning of their mobilization.

Antinuclear activism emerged in the Global North in the aftermath of World War II, as the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki showed that advancing nuclear technology could lead to previously unfathomable devastation. Initially, movements in the United States and Western Europe focused on nuclear weapons, but over time, as nuclear technology was utilized in energy production, movements against nuclear power plants also emerged in the U.S., against plants such as Shoreham on Long Island, as well as in Western Europe where the antinuclear movement in Germany was especially active[1]. But there have also been antinuclear movements in the Global South, though few countries possess nuclear technology in the region. This essay is about the Mexican antinuclear power movement, which opposed the Laguna Verde nuclear power plant, located near the coastal city of Veracruz. After the accident at Chernobyl in 1986 residents of the state of Veracruz realized that they could potentially be in danger as Laguna Verde was in the finishing stages of construction.

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[1] Will Davis, *Showdown at Shoreham*, "Nuclear Newswire", May 16, 2018.; https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WIUocDgC7g2X28PWc6Mgevq1jdcJrcWX7oEVfFtoACM/edit; Joachim Radkau. *The Anti-Nuclear Movement in Germany*, "Polygraph", 2010. http://large.stanford.edu/courses/2017/ph241/chang-h2/docs/radkau.pdf.

 ISSN 1824 - 4483

Though the majority of the countries of the Global South do not have access to nuclear technology, Mexico's nuclear energy program is now decades old; it began in 1965, when President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz expressed interest in bringing it to Mexico[2]. Despite the fact that Mexico is an oil producer the Mexican government was nevertheless interested in nuclear power: proponents at the time believed that it would provide limitless cheap energy and Mexico had not yet discovered some of its most productive oil fields (they were found in the 1970s). In addition, the Mexican government was anxious to modernize the country overall, including its energy sector, and in the 1960s nuclear technology was considered to be cutting-edge, available only to the wealthiest countries of the world[3].

In the beginning, the Mexican government had planned to build a nuclear plant in northern Mexico, near the border, but after input from several government agencies and the Stanford Research Institute, the government chose to build the plant near Palma Sola, Veracruz, along the Gulf Coast, near the port city of Veracruz. Several companies participated in a bidding process and, finally, in 1972 the Mexican government chose General Electric to build a Mark II BWR5, a boiling water plant with two nuclear reactors. Subsequently, several companies participated in the construction process, including Bufete Industrial, Burns and Roe, and Bechtel[4]. During this historical period political scientists classified the Mexican government as authoritarian, based on the political party Partido Revolucionario Institucional, and indeed, often the government's decisions were not transparent. Thus, the plant took twenty-three years to build – an unusually long period of time for plant construction – perhaps because certain presidents did not prioritize its creation as much as others. The government never provided detailed information on why the plant was sited in Veracruz. Mexico's government-owned Comision Federal de Electricidad, the electricity ministry, is in charge of the plant.

The Laguna Verde plant was not completed until 1988, but the Mexican antinuclear power movement began two years earlier, sparked by the nuclear accident at Chernobyl in 1986. When then President Miguel de la Madrid subsequently announced in September of the same year that the plant would definitely begin operations in the near future, multiple organizations mobilized to stop the nuclear project. Some groups formed specifically to address the Laguna Verde situation, such as the mothers' group, Madres Veracruzanas. Others were already-existing organizations who now turned their attention to the plant: these included local Lions Clubs, labor unions, as well as the Catholic Church. Some seventy organizations worked together as a social movement and the members came from varied backgrounds, from workers to important artists and intellectuals. The Grupo de los Cien (Group of one hundred), for example, included most of the top artists and intellec-

[2] Research for this essay included participant observation and interviews as well as primary and secondary sources. For a more thorough discussion of the Mexican antinuclear movement see Velma Garcia-Gorena. *Mothers and the Mexican Antinuclear Movement*, University of Arizona Press, Tucson 1999.

[3] Hugo Garcia Michel, *Más allá de Laguna Verde*, Editorial Posada, Mexico City 1988, p. 102.

[4] Carmen Buerba, *De Pátzcuaro a Laguna Verde: La experiencia antinuclear en Santa Fe de la Laguna*, in Jose Arias Chavez, Luis Barquera (eds.), *Laguna Verde Nuclear? No Gracias*, Claves Latinoamericanas, Mexico City 1988, p. 245.

tuals in Mexico. In general, most of the mobilization against the nuclear plant took place in the state of Veracruz, where the plant was located.

All of the groups in the Mexican antinuclear movement agreed that the Laguna Verde plant should not operate and that it should be shut down permanently. However, the various organizations did not necessarily agree on other points beyond their rejection of nuclear technology. The Pacto de Grupos Ecologistas and the Grupo de los Cien had perhaps the most comprehensive understanding of the relationship between high technology, the economy, and the political realm in the emergence of Mexico's nuclear program. They were upset by the Mexican government's authoritarian and top-down behavior in its refusal to shut down the plant, especially after the accident at Chernobyl[5].

The Madres Veracruzanas, meanwhile, were more narrowly focused on closing the plant itself and many of them did not consider themselves to be environmentalists, especially during their early years of mobilization. They argued that, like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, they had been moved to stop the nuclear plant because they were afraid of its effects on their children should there be a nuclear accident. Except for a few exceptions, most of the members had not been active in politics before joining the movement.

Yet other participants, including a group of cattlemen from the village of Palma Sola, which is adjacent to the plant, opposed Laguna Verde because they worried that their agricultural products would be rejected by consumers as a result of their proximity to Laguna Verde. The cattlemen also did not consider themselves to be environmentalists and at one point offered to help pay the government for the transformation of Laguna Verde into a conventional gas-fired plant.

Finally, residents of the state of Veracruz, from towns such as Coatepec, Misantla, and Martinez de la Torre, also joined the antinuclear movement. Many of these residents were not from privileged backgrounds; their main motivation for participation was fear, as they had been affected by the Mexican media's extensive coverage of the Chernobyl accident. The residents of these towns were convinced that an accident at Laguna Verde would be devastating for their towns.

The antinuclear groups opposed the plant for several reasons[6]. First, as noted above, the Laguna Verde plant was built over an unusually long period of time. By the time the plant was completed, in the late 1980s, the General Electric's plant technology was already obsolete, and in addition, this particular GE model was poorly designed. Marco Antonio Martinez Negrete, an antinuclear activist, warned that a similar GE plant built in La Salle, Illinois had been known to have design flaws: the cooling system's circulation pumps had experienced problems because the pipes were too narrow. Indeed, GE engineers themselves had admitted that the Laguna Verde model had inherent design flaws[7]. To make matters worse, during the construction process one of the reactors' vessels was damaged, thus adding to the overall instability of the plant.

[5] Interview with Feliciano Bejar, February 22, 1990. Mexico City.

[6] This discussion of the movement's reasons to oppose Laguna Verde is based on participant observation in 1987 and 1988.

[7] Daniel Ruiz, "Diario de Xalapa", August 9, 1988, p. 1.

The antinuclear groups also argued that the plant was situated in a problematic location. Not only is the plant located at the Gulf Coast, which is often the site of dangerous hurricanes, but that area of the coast is also near an earthquake faultline and a dormant volcano. The federal government was never transparent about the decision to build the plant near the port of Veracruz, and the antinuclear groups worried that a possible earthquake or hurricane would cause a nuclear accident.

Another reason for opposition concerns the inherent nature of nuclear technology. All nuclear plants emit low levels of radiation, even when they are operating normally. The antinuclear activists argued that no level of radiation was acceptable. Pro-nuclear individuals, including the head of the Laguna Verde plant, countered that the levels of radiation were so low that they posed little to no risk to residents, however. A related argument was that nuclear technology produces radioactive waste. In the case of Laguna Verde nuclear waste would be stored near the plant. The activists maintained that this waste would also pose a risk to the environment.

Yet another reason to oppose the plant was its flawed evacuation plan. All nuclear power plants are required to have an evacuation plan, following international norms. The villagers of Palma Sola, however, were unaware of the necessity of such a plan until a group of soldiers, together with nuclear engineers arrived to explain how the evacuation, in case of an accident, would proceed. The villagers felt that the engineers were condescending and dismissed their questions without taking them seriously[8].

The antinuclear movement argued that the evacuation plan was deeply flawed. The map on which the plan was based had roads in the wrong places; during the summer, the rainy season, these roads can actually be impassable due to mud and flooding. In addition, the main road in this area – the federal highway running along the Gulf Coast – is only a two-lane road that would be woefully inadequate were the population required to evacuate. The plan also called for future construction of shelters, to house the population in the event of a major nuclear disaster. The local population, however, did not have a high degree of trust in the government and were skeptical that shelters would actually be built. The plan also advised parents that they should not pick up their children at school, as the government would provide buses which would take the students directly to shelters.

The last reason the antinuclear activists opposed the Laguna Verde plant was the price of electricity produced by nuclear technology. In the 1950s experts had argued that the electricity produced by nuclear power plants would be extremely inexpensive: this cheap power would be the basis for robust economic growth. But the antinuclear activists of the 1980s countered that that was no longer true. In fact, electricity produced by nuclear plants was no longer inexpensive because of the price of the technology along with all of the safety measures that had to be in place. Indeed, over ninety percent of Mexico's electrical power is produced by hydroelectric plants which have been productive and cost effective.

[8] Interview with Marta Lilia Aguilar, resident of Palma Sola, October 21, 1988, Rancho Brazo Fuerte, Palma Sola, Veracruz.

Tactics

The antinunclear groups initially voiced their opposition directly to the government. On October 12, 1988, for example, hundreds of activists from the state of Veracruz and from Mexico City attended a meeting of the federal government's Chamber of Deputies where the Laguna Verde plant was being debated. The activists spoke to numerous deputies, trying to convince them to shut down the plant[9]. They also recommended that the plant be inspected by the country's Comisión Nacional de Seguridad Nuclear y Salvaguardas, the government entity responsible for running the plant, to make sure the plant was safe before it began to operate, Unfortunately for the activists, the PRI delegates all voted in favor of the plant and the opposition simply did not have the votes to stop it.

Perhaps the most dramatic and visible form of protest for the movement was the road blockade, both at the main Gulf coast highway and in the capital city of Xalapa, Veracruz. Throughout 1988, when the federal government sent mixed messages about whether the plant would definitely operate, antinuclear marches and road blockades emerged almost round the clock. A three-day blockade of the coastal highway in June 1988 was finally dislodged by the military. Not only were passenger cars stuck on the highway for hours, but trucks carrying agricultural and other products were also unable to move.

Other forms of protest, which could be considered novel "New Social Movement" practices also were evident. During several evenings the antinuclear activists organized coordinated blackouts in Xalapa: a large percentage of the residents turned off their lights at a designated time at night, producing dramatic blackouts. This was to express their displeasure with the nuclear plant. Further, the movement recruited Superbarrio, a masked anonymous figure who dressed like a wrestler, to participate in protests. The Madres Veracruzanas also expressed their displeasure by using mourning imagery. On October 17, 1988 they brought a coffin to the main square in Xalapa and placed a sign directly in front of the coffin. It read "Here lies the sovereignty of the citizens of the state of Veracruz." The Madres lit candles around the coffin and intoned prayers, as they would have done for a deceased person. Hundreds of protesters gathered around to join them. The next day newspapers described "a strange protest of repudiation for Laguna Verde" in which "upper middle-class people intoned chants"[10]. While some reporters thought this protest was strange, it was very meaningful for the Madres, who still recall this act fondly as a form of resistance to the authoritarian political practices that had led to the emergence of the Laguna Verde plant.

The Villagers of Palma Sola, Veracruz

One group heavily involved in the movement experienced the most repression on the part of the Mexican government: the villagers from the town of Palma Sola

[9] I was in attendance at this meeting and witnessed how only middle and upper class activists were allowed into the building. Peasants, workers, and other members of the lower classes waited outside the building and experienced harassment from police.

[10] Carlos Jesus Rodriguez, *Opinion*, "El Dictamen", October 17, 1988., 1.

eventually had to end their participation because of this repression[11]. Other groups, notably the Madres Veracruzanas, never experienced repression though particular individuals in other elite organizations did receive threats.

Palma Sola has a population of about a thousand people spread over a wide area. The town is located on the Gulf of Mexico, next to the Laguna Verde plant. In fact, the plant is visible from certain parts of the town. Most of the people in the town work in agriculture and the area produces mostly milk, beef, and fruit. Initially, when the plant was in the early planning stages, the people of Palma Sola were pleased – they were proud that their town would host such a high-tech plant and they liked the idea that there would be more jobs for them, as the village overall is poor. After the accidents at Three Mile Island and then Chernobyl, however, the townspeople realized they might be in imminent danger, since they lived so close to the plant. The wealthiest group in the town, the cattlemen, quickly began to mobilize the residents. The cattlemen worked especially closely with the Madres Veracruzanas as they wrote letters to the government and organized protests.

As the Comisión Federal de Electricidad began to realize that the villagers were nervous about the plant, they attempted to make them feel better by sending engineers and military personnel to Palma Sola to give them information about the plant and about the evacuation procedure in the event of an accident. But, as mentioned above, according to the villagers this information was delivered in a condescending and brusque manner, which further upset the residents. The engineers handed out pamphlets, and to the villagers' horror they realized that the evacuation plan (Plan de Emergencia Radiológica Externo PERE) was deeply flawed: the plan's map had missing villages while other villages were in the wrong place. Dirt roads were listed as paved evacuation routes. The pamphlet also advised people to take certain precautions to prevent contamination. For example, they were to seal cracks in their houses, but many of the villagers' homes were of poor quality and they did not have the resources to improve them. They were told that in order to prevent the inhalation of radioactive gasses they were to fold a handkerchief sixteen times and hold it to their noses. The villagers tried this and realized that a typical handkerchief could only be folded at most three to four times.

The most disturbing part of the evacuation plan, however, involved the village's children, as noted above. The pamphlet informed them that in the event of an accident parents were not to pick up their children at school; instead, the government would provide buses that would take the students to specially designated shelters. The villagers realized that the plan and these procedures were ludicrous, and many mothers sat down in the main plaza and cried. When the villagers asked questions, such as how they should protect their pets and farm animals, the engineers replied that they were only concerned about human lives – there was no plan for pets and farm animals.

Most of the town now supported the antinuclear movement and began to participate in movement activities. The town was the site and host of three blockades of traffic and the longest lasted three days, as noted above. On June 24, 1988 the mili-

[11] This section is based on an interview with Marta Lilia Aguilar, resident of Palma Sola, October 21, 1988. Rancho Brazo Fuerte, Palma Sola.

tary finally dislodged this last blockade, which had involved hundreds of people. Villagers also joined protests in the capital city of Xalapa and in Mexico City, traveling in caravans of cars and trucks.

Palma Sola's activists soon felt threatened, however. On October 15, 1988 the CFE/federal government definitively decided that the plant would operate, as noted above. At that point the movement's mobilization stepped up: there were protests every day in the city of Xalapa and rumors flew that the Grupo de los Cien would engage in various types of civil disobedience. This led the federal government to send the military to Palma Sola and the area was now in a state of siege. The town was filled with jeeps, helicopters, and soldiers and at the coastline four warships from the Mexican navy were clearly visible. The military told the townspeople that they could not congregate in groups larger than five and they were no longer allowed to leave the town in vehicle caravans, presumably to prevent them from joining protests. The government also announced that anyone participating in road blockades would receive an automatic three-month jail sentence. This meant that they were now deprived of their most important form of protest.

From the beginning the government had imposed censorship on the coverage of the antinuclear movement's protest activities: their marches and demonstrations were not covered by television news and only one newspaper, the Diario de Xalapa, covered certain movement activities against Laguna Verde. The groups thus often had to pay for their own ads in newspapers to express themselves and in the case of the military occupying Palma Sola various groups purchased ads to condemn the military presence. The cattlemen criticized the harsh security measures, saying that children and many adults were afraid to walk near the military posts and that many townspeople were suffering psychologically. The town doctor also explained that many townspeople were suffering from various physical ailments that could be traced to anxiety because of the military's presence.

Nevertheless, some of the women decided to protest when the governor of the state of Veracruz visited the Laguna Verde plant on October 21, 1988. A group of mothers and their children decided to march to protest the plant. As they reached the edge of town, however, the military stopped them. The mothers explained that they only planned a peaceful protest, hoping that the governor would listen to them. But the soldiers blocked their way, telling them that they had orders not to let anyone out of Palma Sola. The soldiers were menacing, waving their weapons, suggesting that they would use force if necessary to keep them away from the governor. One of the women told the soldiers "I know my civil rights. I can leave if I choose to." The soldiers answered, "All we know is that we have our orders. This is a restricted area"[12]. The women were forced to abandon their march.

In the next few days the residents describe the village as afflicted with a collective depression. They could no longer host highway blockades, they could not organize peaceful marches, and they could not congregate in groups larger than five. At this point the residents of Palma Sola ceased their participation in the antinucle-

[12] Interview with Marta Lilia Aguilar, resident of Palma Sola, October 21, 1988. Rancho Brazo Fuerte, Palma Sola, Veracruz. I personally witnessed this incident. I also saw military personnel take a camera away from a journalist attempting to take photographs.

ar movement's activities. Many parents were so fearful of the government that they stopped sending their children to school. Many believed that the government did not care about their welfare, and was only interested in the financial investment it had made in the nuclear plant.

Nevertheless it is important to note that some residents did in fact benefit from the plant's presence. A few small business owners' sales increased because of the presence of workers at Laguna Verde, so they supported the government's decision to operate the plant. The CFE also attempted to win the residents' favor by building a new school, a health clinic, and by improving some roads.

The people of Palma Sola did not share the advantages of many other antinuclear activists. First, their geographic location meant that they were especially vulnerable to government repression – the Laguna Verde plant and vicinity were under constant surveillance from the Mexican army and navy. Further, social class was important. Unlike the Madres Veracruzanas or the Grupo de los Cien, the villagers did not have high levels of education and connections with government and cultural elites. Thus they experienced the highest level of repression of all of the antinuclear organizations.

The Madres Veracruzanas

Perhaps the best known and active of the antinuclear organizations was the Madres Veracruzanas, a group of mothers, mostly residents of the cities of Veracruz and Xalapa. Like the other groups, they mobilized after seeing television and news reports about the accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. They consciously followed the example of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo of Argentina, arguing that they were apolitical and motivated simply by the need to protect their children. Just like the mothers of Argentina they protested once a week in front of the Governor's palace, many holding pictures of their children as they protested. The Madres included about two hundred members, though approximately twenty-five participated every week. The members were mostly upper middle class, and they included two doctors, a dentist, teachers, lawyers, and some housewives.

The founders of the Madres Veracruzanas group believed that, though other groups were already mobilizing to oppose Laguna Verde, there was a need for an organization that would allow for mothers' participation. Below is an excerpt from an interview conducted with the original members on July 22, 1988. These members were Claudia Gutiérrez (psychologist), Adela Chacón (schoolteacher), Rebeka Dyer (school administrator), Mercedes Sole (linguist), and Irma Landa (physician).

VGG: How did your group get started?

REBEKA: In September 1986 I published a letter against nuclear power, saying that Mexico should think about how nuclear accidents harm children. This was after accumulating some knowledge about nuclear energy.

ADELA: The news in the paper worried me, especially the accidents at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl. My knowledge of Laguna Verde was vague. No one gave the plant much thought. In fact, earlier, if anyone thought about Laguna Verde at all, they thought it was a great idea. I was against nuclear energy, but I knew that I couldn't do anything by myself, so I called Rebeka. At first, our only goal was to

inform the public about the dangers of nuclear energy. So we called a meeting for mothers concerned about the Laguna Verde plant.

VGG: Why only women?

REBEKA: We didn't know what to do at first. We saw that other groups already existed; for example, there were demonstrations in the Parque Juarez (in Xalapa) in 1986. We were aware of the Niño Ecologista – a ten-year-old who, along with his father, walked all the way from Oaxaca to Veracruz to protest the plant. Yet I didn't feel comfortable joining the already-existing groups because of my work and family schedule.

CLAUDIA: We decided to call a meeting for mothers; we brought our friends. I invited Antonio Bretón (one of the cattlemen from Palma Sola); I knew him through our children at school. But no club would lend us their hall. So finally we managed to land the Casino Espanol. There I met Consuelo Landa and also Letti Tarragó (a well-known artist), who volunteered to create posters for the group.

REBEKA: The problem was that we didn't know *whom* we were fighting against. The government has different faces. My husband warned me to be careful; he was a student in Mexico City during the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre. We're not in this because we want political positions or jobs.

MARGARITA: Men don't participate until they know they're going to win. Women are different: they're participating because they want to protect life, above all their children.

LETICIA: Though we're of middle-class background, we've decided to join a movement instead of playing canasta, as many upper middle-class women do in Mexico. We spent three days learning about nuclear energy from Thomas Berlin (antinuclear activist).

MERCEDES: I remember seeing pictures of antinuclear women in England chained to fences. Mexican women are not like Europeans. The Madres would never chain themselves to anything; we would lose our dignity and the respect of Mexican society, and our group would fail in its mission.

REBEKA: We have begun to see more differences within the coalition – for example, voting, claims for justice, and housing. Some of their goals are too radical. We also don't identify with some of their tactics; for example, some of the other groups use obscene language in the streets during demonstrations. The mothers try to maintain a dignified posture. Other groups also tend to be less organized. We've incorporated a division of labor.

Thus, the Madres created their own group for two main reasons: they believed that their own view of the world, which centered on the protection of their children, was different from that of the other antinuclear organizations. The women's goals and tactics differed from the rest of the antinuclear movement. Similarly, the Madres also believed that other organizations would not understand the nature of their participation; for example, at times they simply could not attend meetings or demonstrations because of family demands. They believed that having their own group would allow them to participate in their own way, without incurring criticism.

The Madres in the beginning increased the size of the group by inviting other interested mothers to attend. They also created posters and asked businesses to dis-

play them and they participated in debates with supporters of nuclear energy. They then began their red ribbon campaign, the red ribbons symbolizing their resistance to the Laguna Verde plant. The mothers wore red ribbons and hung large red ribbons on private homes and businesses. They also initiated a letter writing campaign to important politicians, the media, and all the Catholic bishops in Mexico. Most of the bishops wrote back and expressed their support for the mothers and their cause. However, the Madres were best known for their weekly protests, held every Saturday morning in front of the Governor's palace, a very visible spot in downtown Xalapa, Veracruz.

The highlight of the Madres' participation occurred in November 1989 as they were informed that the president of Mexico would meet with them. The Madres had requested a meeting with the president 250 times but they either had not received a response or their request was rejected. Finally, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari was scheduled to meet with them on November 8, 1989 at the Hotel Xalapa. The president refused to meet with any of the other antinuclear groups.

Unfortunately for the Madres, the invitation from the president actually caused a crisis within the group. The President's office told the women that only eight members could represent the Madres Veracruzanas. The group had two weeks to come up with the eight members, but this proved to be very difficult. The Madres were proud of the fact that their group was non-hierarchical; instead, every member was valued equally, at least in theory. In reality two to three members acted as informal leaders during their weekly meetings and protests. New Social Movements scholars such as Alberto Melucci[13] have noted that these mostly grassroots groups tend to have fluid, informal structures and this allows them to respond in creative ways to problems they want to address. According to Melucci, the lack of structure is not necessarily problematic because their everyday, affective relations serve to bind the groups together.

However, in this particular case of the Madres selecting eight representatives it became clear that a lack of structure can cause problems. If they had had formal officers leading the organization the Madres probably would have sent them as their representatives. Instead, at a meeting, the Madres initially came up with a slate of eight by simply shouting out names haphazardly. Afterwards, however, one of the Madres in particular felt slighted and this caused tension in the group. After two days and multiple phone calls one of the eight decided to step aside and the mother who had felt snubbed took her place.

Despite this tension the meeting with the President went smoothly. In the half hour they were allotted each member presented arguments against the plant. Each member spoke clearly and with confidence and later the eight would marvel at how they had come a long way since the early days, a year and a half before. Each representative spoke about particular problems affecting the plant. A physician spoke of radioactivity's danger for the health of the population. A psychologist explained that an accident would cause long term psychological harm to the people of the region. One of the members proposed that Laguna Verde might be converted to a

[13] Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*, John Kean, Paul Mier (eds.), Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1989.

conventional plant, whether hydro-electric or coal-powered. The president and the governor, Dante Delgado, listened intently, though they interrupted often. At the end of their presentations President Salinas told the Madres that his technical consultants had told him that it would be impossible to convert Laguna Verde to a conventional plant. The Madres were disappointed, but their spirits lifted when the president announced that Laguna Verde would be studied by outside technical experts. The members of the inspection team would be announced at a later date[14].

During the meeting Salinas had not provided details about this audit and nothing more was heard until March 1990, when the CFE provided some information about the selection of the inspection team. The head of the CFE announced that the audit would be impartial, so the outside evaluators would have no connection to Laguna Verde. But no details were provided about the selection process.

The antinuclear activists continued to wait but became skeptical when a leaked fax indicated that the so-called independent study would be rigged so that the plant could keep operating. According to the newspaper *Política*, the fax was sent to a wrong number and the person who received it made it public but wished to remain anonymous. *Política* revealed that the CFE had rigged the audit and that officials at high levels of government were involved. Nevertheless, the antinuclear groups still were hopeful and suggested two names for the independent study team: Robert Pollack of the United States and Marco Antonio Martínez Negrete of the National University of Mexico (UNAM). But these names were not accepted and instead the government announced that a Spaniard, Manuel López Rodríguez, would head the team.

The antinuclear groups were then outraged, and many asked for a meeting with the government. But, once again, only the Madres Veracruzanas were invited. At this meeting, with Governor Dante Delgado, the mothers told him that they were skeptical of the audit's honesty and proposed the names of four more technical specialists to be included in the audit team, but according to the mothers this proposal simply "hung in the air"[15]. The governor reassured the Madres that the plant was not yet fully operational; the antinuclear activists had demanded that the plant should not operate without guarantees that it was safe. In sum, the antinuclear groups had no influence on the selection process.

Indeed, the audit did not seem to be impartial. The investigative team, which called itself Equipo Xalapa, was made up of eleven members including Manuel López Rodríguez and several other Spanish engineers who were connected to Spain's Lemoniz and Vandellos nuclear power plants. The antinuclear groups complained that the audit would not be impartial because all the members of the team were supporters of nuclear energy. They found López Rodríguez to be especially unacceptable because of his connection to Hidroelectrica Espanola, one of the companies involved in Laguna Verde's construction. López Rodríguez was also a friend of Juan Eibenschutz, the head of Laguna Verde. In all, the team spent eleven days at the plant, at a cost of $120,000. The antinuclear groups argued that the audit was superficial and not a thorough inspection.

[14] Regina Martinez, *L.V.: Primero, la auditoría*, "Política", February 26, 1990.

[15] Regina Martinez, *L.V.: Espana auditara*, "Politica", March 14, 1990.

The audit was completed in mid-August 1990 and the final report was released soon after, though access to it was restricted. Members of the press could read the report but were not allowed to photocopy it. The report said that "given the number of audits and inspections that have already been done, there was no reason to undertake yet another one"[16].

The document revealed how the audit had proceeded: the team visited the plant once, interviewed workers at various parts of the plant, and reviewed logs of the plant's operation. Not many details were revealed to the public, including the names and backgrounds of many members of the audit team. The report concluded that the auditors were "conscious that our work is not complete, and there will be issues that escape us"[17]. Nevertheless, the team recommended that the plant should be allowed to operate commercially.

Not surprisingly, the antinuclear activists were outraged. Pedro Lizárraga of the antinuclear organization CONCLAVE (Coordinadora Nacional Contra Laguna Verde) stated: "The obstinacy of operating a nuclear plant that is eighteen years old, obsolete, dangerous, with two acknowledged radioactive leaks and with exceedingly high production costs and unrecoverable investments, shows that the investigative team has responded to financial and industrial interests, technical sectors of power, and definitely to strong global economic interests"[18].

To make matters worse, two weeks after the audit Laguna Verde's Unit II was approved for operation. Until this point, the plant had operated only Unit I, which had been operating at 80 percent capacity. But now the plant's head of the Center for Information, Vinicio Serment, declared that the government would be spending an additional $350 million to allow for Unit II's commercial operation in two years, 1993[19].

This additional money would be available for salaries, training, and technical materials. He also took the opportunity to defend the independent audit, which had been severely criticized by the Madres and the rest of the antinuclear movement: "The results are reliable, despite the environmentalists, who are never content"[20].

Although the Madres Veracruzanas had been successful in finally getting an appointment with President Salinas and the Governor of Veracruz – something that no other antinuclear movement had managed – and though they were able to get Salinas to promise an independent audit, the Madres were disappointed with the results. They continued to insist that the audit had been a sham and they vowed to continue to work toward the goal of shutting down the Laguna Verde plant.

Repression

[16] Rodrigo Vera, *Solo un simulacro de revisión, hecha por un amigo, se hizo para abrir la planta*, "Proceso", August 20, 1990, p. 7.

[17] *Ibidem*.

[18] *Ibidem*.

[19] *Destina el gobierno federal más de 350 millones de dólares*, "El Dictamen", September 18, 1990, p. 1.

[20] *Ibidem*.

During this period, from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, many movement leaders experienced threats and harassment. One leader, Jose Arias Chávez, revealed that he received many telephone calls in which his life was threatened. Also, his home was burned and completely destroyed. This was especially significant because the structure, built in 1967, was Mexico's first self-sufficient house, erected following environmental principles. The poet and activist Luis Barquera also received death threats over the phone and Pedro Lizarraga, a university professor, was beaten by police and was harassed by unknown parties, at one point finding pictures of his family at his desk at the university, presumably to intimidate him with possible harm to his family[21].

In April 1989 a more serious incident occurred when Juan Marin of CONCLAVE was shot. His attacker was never identified. Luckily, Marin recovered from his wounds but the antinuclear activists were sure that he had been attacked in an attempt to intimidate the movement as a whole. The movement organized a march to protest this repression[22].

The Madres Veracruzanas, however, did not experience this type of harassment, despite the fact that they were one of the most active groups in the movement. Every Saturday, without fail, they protested in front of the Governor's palace in Xalapa, as a police officer watched and took notes. But the Madres were not physically attacked nor did they receive threatening phone calls.

Being upper-middle class and female may have protected them from the repression other groups experienced. It is important to note, however, that this is not necessarily the case for other mothers' groups; for example the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina did experience repression from the military government and thirteen of the members actually disappeared[23].

The Movement's Decline

While the antinuclear movement was very active between the years 1986 and 1989, by 1991 most of the antinuclear groups had gone dormant. Three years had passed since the nuclear plant went on-line and the participants had grown tired of the government's stubborn insistence on operating the plant. Yet the Madres Veracruzanas were as active as before – their Saturday protests continued, and they demanded meetings with government officials. Other groups, such as CONCLAVE, could count on the participation of only a handful of members.

In early 1991 the Madres decided that they had to meet with Miguel Alemán Velasco, a wealthy businessman who was running for the federal senate representing the state of Veracruz. As part of his campaign Alemán went for a swim in the vicinity of the Laguna Verde plant in order to convince the population that the

[21] *Jesus Aguilar: Laguna Verde ya causa estragos*, "Politica", April 22, 1989, p. 1.

[22] Interview with Feliciano Bejar, February 22, 1990. Mexico City.

[23] See for example, *The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo*, by Susana Blaustein Munoz and Lourdes Portillo, Film Arts Foundation, 1985.

plant was safe. Many residents of the state were incredulous – this politician chose to swim in an area that the antinuclear activists had warned was contaminated by Laguna Verde. One of the mothers had family connections with Alemán and the group thus was able to get an appointment with him.

The meeting with Alemán, who eventually won the seat for the senate, was on July 27, 1991, at the Hotel Xalapa. The Madres began by asking him to state his position on Laguna Verde and nuclear energy in general. They also challenged his assertion in the press that Laguna Verde was the second safest nuclear plant in the world. At the beginning Alemán claimed that he did not have information to state a position. They asked for his source for this information and countered that they had two sources – from Brazil and Great Britain – indicating that Laguna Verde was one of the most unsafe nuclear plants in the world. They went on to tell him that they had spent four years gathering data from local, national, and international sources and they had also personally visited the plant. They argued that their information indicated that the plant was contaminating the waters of the Gulf of Mexico and that he should support an extensive analysis of the water once he won the election. One of the mothers also discussed a political issue: Guillermina Domínguez, a business owner, told Alemán that she had been a loyal follower of his party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) but now she was against the party's position on Laguna Verde. Alemán Velasco was short with her, telling her "Well, vote for the opposition; perhaps in that way you'll resolve your problem." She replied: "I'm thinking of doing just that"[24].

According to the mothers, Alemán's attitude during the meeting ranged from authoritarian to condescending and his exchange with Domínguez offended them. Alemán ignored their explanation that they were well-informed about nuclear energy, stating that Laguna Verde was monitored by the United Nations, the World Nuclear Commission, and by Japan and Europe. The Madres also told him that they were aware that there had been minor accidents at Laguna Verde, according to a report from Radio America. He dismissed them promptly saying that he had never heard of such a network and that if it were true that there had been any problems at the plant "we would immediately have the North Americans here"[25].

Alemán condescending attitude towards the mothers created something of a backlash among residents. In an editorial the locally well-known journalist and editor, Ruben Pabello Acosta criticized Alemán for swimming in the Gulf, mocking the Veracruz citizens' concerns, and for patronizing the mothers.

"Although one of the Madres may have suggested she would change her political party, you should have tried to bring her around, or at least responded tactfully . . . Not only did you commit a civic and political error, but you also committed a human error because any affront to that group hurts all of us residents of Veracruz due to the fact that all of us have a mother, and the vast majority of those mothers

[24] Rosa Contreras Perez, *Entrevista de las Madres Veracruzanas con Alemán*, "Diario de Xalapa", July 27, 1991, p. 1.

[25] *Ibidem*.

are from Veracruz . . . And one last line: the Madres Veracruzanas represent honesty and civic valor in the face of oppressive political brutality"[26].

Pabello Acosta's editorial reveals not only his view of the Madres Veracruzanas, but also the perspective of many of the citizens of the region. The group was respected because it had kept its distance from any particular political party since the members were not participating in order to achieve power or economic gain. The mothers also had the respect of the population because of their identity as mothers, generally a valued role in Mexican society.

Though the Madres had continued to meet with government officials, between the years 1991 to 1996 the Mexican antinuclear movement lost most of its participants. Certain activists believed that other activists had been co-opted by the government in order to end their participation. The area of Palma Sola continued to experience heavy surveillance on the part of the military and government and even the cattlemen from the village toned down their opposition to the plant. One of its leaders subsequently served as a representative in the local government and later even became a mayor. The cattlemen were disappointed and said, "Many environmentalists used the movement for their own purposes and have forgotten about us"[27].

The Madres Veracruzanas also lost a few members, and actually expelled a mother whom they suspected had been co-opted by the government. But the group as a whole kept going even as most of the other antinuclear groups disintegrated. The mothers still held their weekly Saturday protests as well as Wednesday meetings where they gathered to plan activities and strategies. They vowed to continue their struggle against Laguna Verde.

Why were the Madres Veracruzanas different? The New Social Movements literature is particularly useful here. The Madres, unlike the other antinuclear groups, had built what Melucci calls a "submerged network." That is, the members had built affective ties that bound their lives together, and this allowed them to continue, even when circumstances became difficult. By the early 1990s the Madres had been attending the weekly Saturday protests as well as Wednesday meetings, for four to five years. Often, they also spoke to each other on the phone. These activities led them to have strong friendships that transcended even movement activities. As mentioned earlier, the Madres did not experience the repression of the other groups; they did not worry about threatening phone calls or a military presence. As a result, the group was still intact and active by the mid 1990s.

The Madres Veracruzanas as a Mothers' Movement

How does the case of the Madres of Veracruz compare to that of other mothers' movements? To begin, certain feminist theorists have criticized these organizations for several reasons. First, mothers' movements tend to reproduce the sexual divi-

[26] Ruben Pabello Acosta, *Al margen de la noticia, carta abierta al Licenciado Alemán*, "Diario de Xalapa", July 31, 1991, p. 3.

[27] Abel Hernandez Santos, *Laguna Verde operará comercialmente en 1994*, "Cuenta", December 1993, p. 1.

sion of labor in society, rather than question it. In addition, mothers' movements often promote an essentialist view of gender: women are peace-loving and pure, while men are aggressive and rational. Some scholars, such as Maria del Carmen Feijoo,[28] have also argued that mobilization with an identity of "mother" can lead to counter construction on the part of the government and other elites, and this can then keep mothers' movements out of the political arena.

Other scholars, such as Sara Ruddick, on the other hand, have looked closely at mothers' movements and have come to a different conclusion[29]. Ruddick, avoiding the essentialism trap, argues that "maternal thinking" is not based on biology or hormones, but on the work that mothers perform. Mothers, or anyone engaged in care-taking, come to have a different perspective and hence, a different political agenda that includes care of children, society, and the environment.

How do the feminist criticisms of mothers' movements fare in the case of the Madres Veracruzanas? It is true that initially the Madres employed a traditional paradigm of sex role differentiation. They often spoke about women's nature versus men's nature. They were clear that they joined this organization because they wanted to protect their children from possible harm from radiation. Like the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo of Argentina, they often protested with pictures of their children in order to remind the public and the government that their ultimate goal was to protect their children.

And as indicated above, the mothers often made essentialist arguments about their participation and Mexican society in general. They maintained that politicians and CFE officials running the plant were so infatuated with advanced technology that they forgot about protecting society, and children in particular. Thus, it was up to the Madres Veracruzanas, as nurturers of children, to remind them that not all technology is useful or desirable for society and for children in particular. The Madres' motto has always been "porque amamos la vida" (because we love life); they believe that their role as mothers gives them special insight into what is good for children and for the larger society.

But the Madres' maternal imagery also has multiple dimensions. Their identity as mothers reflects a belief in a particular traditional sexual division of labor but, on the other hand, it also serves to express their displeasure with the Mexican political system, and especially with the ruling party PRI. The mothers have always stressed that they are above politics, and their view of politics is that it is dirty and self serving – politicians often enter politics for economic gain, which is not their goal. They repeatedly stated that they do not respect politicians and that they have only entered the political arena to stop Laguna Verde in order to protect their children.

Critics of mothers' movements see the movements and their participants as static – they simply reinforce the sexual division instead of challenging it. The case of the Madres Veracruzans, however, shows that participants in mothers' movements

[28] Maria del Carmen Feijoo, *The Challenge of Constructing Civilian Peace: Women and Democracy in Argentina*, in Jane Jaquette (ed.), *The Women's Movement in Latin America*, Unwyn Hyman, Winchester, Mass. 1989.

[29] Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*, Ballantine Books, New York 1989.

can actually evolve and can eventually challenge patriarchal structures. The Madres spoke often of how they had changed over the years, because of their participation in the antinuclear movement[30]. In the beginning, they lacked confidence as they had to speak in public and publish their opinions in local newspapers. They were timid in the public sphere, as they saw themselves as mere mothers and housewives. Over the years, however, they thought nothing of confronting powerful politicians, even the president of Mexico. They became more confident interacting with the media, answering questions about the environment and nuclear energy. And this confidence then spilled over into their personal and professional lives. Carolina Chacon, a schoolteacher, said that she no longer was submissive in her exchanges with colleagues and superiors. She and other Madres used the word "awakened," meaning that they now question any injustice that they see around them. So, although the Madres initially did have a very traditional view of themselves and the sexual division of labor in Mexico, their experiences in the movement have changed them and they no longer automatically accept the status quo[31].

Feminist scholars have also warned that mothers' movements can invite counter constructions on the part of elites, which can undermine their success in the political/public sphere. Certainly, in Mexico supporters of nuclear energy have attempted to smear the image of the Madres and of indigenous activists, saying that they are not qualified to speak about nuclear energy. But the Madres managed to resist the attempts at counter construction by emphasizing their honesty and devotion to the welfare of society and their children. Always, they argued that they were above politics and they even expelled a member, in order to avoid any possible attack about co-optation on the part of the government. But the mothers' manner of dress, comportment, and tactics also distanced them from poor and working-class mothers. Their very definition of "mother" and "woman" included a certain dignified way of dressing and behaving that was not inclusive of lower-class women. Clearly, mothers' movements should not be romanticized. However, it bears repeating that mothers' movements are not necessarily static and their participants over time can come to challenge those very gender boundaries that they initially supported[32].

More recent activity

As noted above, most of the antinuclear mobilization in Mexico occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, after 2000 the government and nuclear energy supporters began a discourse about clean energy. As the issue of climate change emerged world-wide, nuclear energy supporters in Mexico argued that nuclear energy could be part of the solution to global warming. This position was challenged with the nuclear accident at Fukushima: environmentalists reminded the population

[30] Interview with Mirna Benitez, December 8, 1989, Xalapa, Veracruz.

[31] *Ibidem*.

[32] Of course, mothers' movements do not always pursue progressive goals. A mothers' group in Arizona formed to express their hostility for undocumented migrants. See Jane Juffer, *Mothers Against Mothering: Mothers Against Illegal Amnesty and the Politics of Vulnerability*, "Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement", vol. 2, n. 2, 2011, pp. 79-94.

that nuclear power plants can have catastrophic accidents. Once again at the forefront, the Madres Veracruzanas organized meetings and public debates about nuclear energy.The Fukushima accident occurred at a time when the Mexican government was considering building more reactors to increase production of energy. In order to attempt to reassure the public that Mexico's plant was safe, energy secretary Jose Antonio Meade, Governor Javier Duarte, and the CFE director Antonio Vivanco along with technical specialists toured and inspected Laguna Verde. The Governor subsequently announced that the CFE had guaranteed that Laguna Verde was in good running condition. Meade also announced that no new nuclear plants would be built in the immediate future but that more nuclear energy was definitely a possibility for Mexico[33].

But environmentalists were not convinced, and Greenpeace Mexico organized protests in Mexico City and the state of Veracruz, once again demanding that Laguna Verde be shut down. The director of Greenpeace Mexico declared, "There is talk about constructing two more reactors at Laguna Verde. In response, we are urging Mexican authorities to halt these plans. We want to underscore our concern that nuclear energy is not manageable, and as an example we cite the recent case in Japan"[34]. The Madres Veracruzanas joined Greenpeace at its protest in Xalapa, once again across the street from the Governor's palace.

At the present time (2024) the Madres Veracruzanas still exist as a group, though some members have dropped out and three of the most active members have died. Nevertheless, at an interview in February 2024 members Adela Chacón, Mirna Benítez, and Claudia Gutiérrez explained that they are still monitoring the situation at Laguna Verde and still contact legislators, encouraging them to close the plant. The mothers now resist Laguna Verde not only to protect their children, but also their grandchildren[35].

Concluding Remarks

Why was the antinuclear movement in Mexico unable to shut down the Laguna Verde plant? When the movement emerged, it was clear that the various groups did not have the same political opportunities enjoyed by social movements in more solidly democratic countries such as the United States and Western Europe. The Mexican government did not simply hear the movement's demands; instead, it responded with both co-optation and coercion tactics in order to undermine the antinuclear groups. The government's response varied based on the participants'class and gender. CONCLAVE members received beatings and threatening phone calls in order to get them to end their participation. Other leaders, such as one of the heads of the

[33] Carlos Navarro, *Mexican Government, Congress Support Nuclear Power to Varying Degrees; Detractors Want Laguna Verde Power Plant Closed*, 2011, https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la_energy_notien/37.

[34] *Ibidem*.

[35] Velma Garcia-Gorena, interview with the Madres Veracruzanas, Xalapa, Veracruz, February 2, 2024.

cattlemen's group from Palma Sola, dropped out of the movement because of favors they received from the government.

The antinuclear movement also was impeded by the government's use of censorship: when the antinuclear movement organized massive protest movements in Xalapa there was no television coverage anywhere in the country. It was difficult to recruit more members across the country because most people were unaware even of the existence of the Laguna Verde plant. Only two newspapers in Xalapa dared to provide any coverage of the antinuclear movement's activities, but these papers were not available outside of the region.

But it would be wrong to conclude that the antinuclear movement was completely unsuccessful. The antinuclear groups, especially the Madres Veracruzanas, took on a new role as watchdogs. They revealed that the evacuation plan was deeply flawed and sounded an alarm when minor accidents occurred at Laguna Verde. The movement achieved these small gains despite the government's opposition. Finally, the Madres Veracruzanas' members changed as a result of their years of opposition to Laguna Verde. The women became more confident as activists, even meeting with the president of Mexico. They also became more active in their professional lives and challenged traditional gender barriers, so long a part of Mexican society. And the Madres do not intent to give up their fight against Laguna Verde – one of their banners reads "hasta el final" (until the end).

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Madres Veracruzanas in Xalapa, Veracruz, circa 1988

Poster commemorating the Madres Veracruzanas' twenty five years of protests