

Canada is a singular and remarkable country, due to the complex and elaborate structures that this essentially bilingual society has created for itself. The United States originally aspired to becoming a way of life, rather than a nation within the traditional European definition of that word. Mexico has carried out a policy of integration and coexistence, defined by mutual respect and the right to differ. The history of each of these three countries points out how different forms of unity can arise out of diversity.

We live in a world that is characterized, among other things, by a growing economic, cultural, and political interdependence. Modern communications technology promotes a synchronousness of life and human history which undoubtedly constitutes one of the most disturbing features of today's cultural revolution.

In a way, humankind sees itself, for the first time, in all its diversity. Now that telecommunications enable us to witness, first-hand, history being made on the spot we are all, to a certain extent, responsible for history. To quote a classical author, "Today, for the first time, nothing human is foreign to us."

Needless to say, this potential identification with humanity, in all its diversity, cannot be achieved without a certain loss of self-identity, personal or social.

Another phenomenon must be noted within this convergence of life and human history, one which is no less incisive and powerful: the technological civilization, whose effects and premises, together with those of a growing cosmopolitanism, advances the anonymity which characterizes modern society. These two phenomena favor the uniformity of cultures and lead to a mass

Reflections on a North American identity and culture

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consumption that goes far beyond any political or cultural frontier.

National and cultural identities must redefine their function in a universe of increasing interdependence. If an alternative formula which allows the redefinition of these identities within their own tradition is not found, the populace may, in the end, attribute the anonymity of modern society to a loss of control by the nation-state in question; that is, to a breakdown of their concrete and recognizable community.

This is why dialogue and reflections upon the processes of identity and culture are so timely; they

cannot be postponed. The interaction between the two concepts is decisive.

To be precise, most cultural and national identities have been forged on the anvil of coexistence, peaceful or otherwise. They are the product, on the one hand, of the mixture and combination of different traits which model and influence them; on the other hand, they are also the result of geographical conditions which mark them with a permanent imprint: geography has always formed a physical dimension of culture.

In fact, these identities become apparent as a result of the interaction among peoples, and not only —as

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French thinkers of the eighteenth century believed (Montesquieu, for instance)— between humanity and geography.

Always dynamic, constantly evolving, this interaction favors some forms of behavior over others. It asserts material and moral values, it sustains orders of preference and direction in the physical world, as well as in the realm of emotions and ideas. Through repetition and persistence in a definite syntax, those values and behaviors add up to what are known as cultural identities.

If, by definition, such identities have always been—as mentioned previously—the fruit of cross-breeding and interaction, these cultures can only be understood in contrast to each other, always as a function of their differences, as in the classical model of Greek culture, confined but also nourished by the barbarian groups at its borders.

The pluralism of cultural identities in North America—Mexico, the United States, and Canada—is a topic that assumes a new and special relevance due to the fact that, in each of these nations, unique forms of social and cultural convergence and cohesion have resulted.

Indeed, the history of each one of these countries, their demographic, legal, religious, and cultural profiles illustrate, in a unique manner, how different forms of unity can stem from diversity.

They show how communities and institutions can be shaped and are able to survive, not only through spontaneous and instinctive processes, but also through choice and public decisions taken in the light of life-styles that a given society prefers or encourages, in spite of differences in relation to the prevailing norm.

When Jacques Cartier and the first explorers reached Canada, they soon discovered that the indigenous peoples—whom, for the sake of simplicity, they called Indians—



Arab and Islamic influence permeated the Spaniard culture

actually represented a wide range of peoples and languages, such as the Huron, Iroquois, and Mohawks, to mention but three of the best known among the numerous communities which they encountered.

Upon that human cornerstone of native North Americans of Asian descent, numerous waves of Europeans—mostly British (whether Celtic or Anglo-Saxon) and French—would be superimposed. These would soon be followed by groups of Hungarian, Polish, Russian, and Japanese immigrants, thus composing a human mosaic in Canada that has recently been further enriched by the immigration of Latin Americans and Southeast Asians.

The coexistence of these cultures, especially the English and the French, has given Canada the privilege of becoming a fully bicultural nation where not only two languages and two groups with different life-styles and moral values but two legal and judicial traditions live together on a daily basis. The consistency of such a unique amalgamation has, in some way, been responsible for the fact that Canada has been a mediator and neutral arbiter over the course of the whole of this hectic twentieth century.

The United States is no less illustrative an example of the pluralistic character of culture. In addition to the indigenous ingredients of the Athabascans,

Apaches, Chiricaguas, Dakotas, Cherokees, Hopis, Comanches, Cheyennes and other native peoples who have not completely succumbed to extinction, the American melting-pot has been enriched by more than just the predominant Protestant, Anglo-Saxon element.

There are, as well, a great many ethnic and cultural characteristics that came with settlers of different origins, such as Africans, Hispanics (Spaniards, Mexicans, Central Americans, and Caribbean Islanders), Latins (Italians), Slavs (Poles, Czechs, and Russians), Scandinavians (Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes), as well as Germans, Jews, and Asian peoples.

The United States became a nation not because it had a previous history as a community with a strong set of values and characteristics perceived as a unifying idea, but rather, in the words of Octavio Paz, "Their nation was not born out of the interaction of impersonal historical forces, but from a deliberate public act. They did not one day discover that they were North Americans, they decided to be so. It was not the past that founded them, they founded themselves."

The original political will to establish a nation and promote its self-creation has led the United States not only to recognize in that nation a unique set of characteristics and distinct customs linked to a certain national tradition—identified with the proclamation of and due respect for a body of legal rights and duties—but to conceive citizenship, at least in theory, as a civic practice founded on a belief in reason, on respect for the human being, and on an ethical public responsibility toward the individual. That is, opposed to the concept of citizenship as a spontaneous and gratuitous legacy handed down by the mere fact of belonging to a certain group.

The same impulse has forged the United States into a truly pluralistic and cosmopolitan nation: a country

where a heterogeneous range of cultures, traditions, and communal identities has thrived around the common axis of Anglo-American culture. This mixture, far from becoming faded and diluted, has always benefitted from a certain interaction among different people and races.

At the same time, however, this plurality has created a network of mixtures, combinations, varied coexistence, and cross-breeding that comes to the fore most significantly in language itself, where words from all over the world are woven together by a syntax and grammar that are essentially English.

This, to some extent, follows the pattern of American society itself, where a wide range of national idiosyncrasies and peculiarities fit together and moderate each other through a political system based on democracy, reason, dignity and respect for the human being.

Without a doubt, this process of mixture, miscegenation and hybridity does have its dangers. The very idea of an American cultural identity demands legal, cultural and even scholarly recognition of minorities—ethnic, racial, sexual, religious, and cultural. It also favors the specter of national disintegration, the outward manifestations of which—racism and exclusion—are undesirable, and yet are unavoidable moments in the difficult dialectic of the immigrant's adaptation to a foreign milieu.

Nevertheless, and perhaps because of this process, the fear of a possible loss of identity—e.g. the Anglo-Saxon confronted by the qualitative and quantitative forces arising from a growing number of Hispanics—is unfounded; because, as we were reminded by scholars such as Mexico's Jorge Bustamante, the border between Mexico and the United States is unique, in the sense that outward signs of identity, that is, the respective life-styles and cultures

in the two countries, have developed great vitality and persistency.

In this brief discussion of the national identities that make up the culture of each of the North American countries, Mexico is also a distinctive case.

From its origins in remote pre-Columbian times, Mexico has followed a policy of integration and coexistence; that is, an exclusive assimilation of the diversity of the periphery around its center, which is represented geographically by Mexico City, the country's most important political and commercial axis.

Of the nearly two hundred languages spoken here when the conquerors and missionaries arrived from Spain under the captainship of Hernán Cortés, only just over sixty are still in use today. Yet neither Mexicans nor foreigners are aware of this fact, which eloquently speaks for itself of the vastness and variety of that sometimes vanquished, at other times unbeaten Mexican indigenous legacy.

Nor is it often remembered that the so-called Aztec civilization was just one of a long chain of refined cultures and civilizations that flourished in Mesoamerica for more than a millennium, up to the year 1521, when Tenochtitlan—the famous political, religious, and commercial metropolis of the Aztec empire or confederation—fell to Cortés and thus to Spain and Charles V.

The Spaniards, in turn, were neither racially nor culturally a model of purity; their identity—motley, many-colored and diverse—was more complex than that of other medieval European knights whose values they shared.

As Carlos Fuentes points out in his book *The Buried Mirror*, their heritage included remote Iberian vestiges, Liguric and Roman strains, which were later permeated with and tinted by Arab and Islamic influences, Jewish ancestries, and African legacies.

Not only architecture, cuisine and language but forms of leadership and family, and community organization bear witness to the rich diversity of these intricate Spanish roots. The very emblem of Spanish religious identity, the symbol of Spanish Catholicism and, in a way, the seat of purity and Christianity of old, the famous cathedral of Toledo, contains and summarizes, in its aisles, arches and vaults, a variety of stylistic elements and architectural solutions that are proof of an eclectic profusion of builders and styles.

The monks, in turn, brought to New Spain not only the Christian religion, born in the Middle East and popularized and institutionalized by Rome, but also a set of skills, material abilities, aptitudes, technical and industrial progress which had evolved throughout the Middle Ages.

In addition, the religious orders—Franciscans, Carmelites, Dominicans, and Augustinians—brought with them their rules, mysticism, and religious and psychological knowledge.

Fortunately, they managed to implant these skills and ideas in the territories and settlements of the newly discovered continent, thus preparing it for the adoption of future technological revolutions.

Likewise, the military and civil authorities sent by the Habsburg kings brought with them traditions and knowledge of varied origins. The art of metallurgy, to mention one of many examples, came from the heart of Germany; thanks to it, it was possible to extract and process the enormous wealth found in the Mexican subsoil using the native labor force.

The conquerors also brought a sense of pomp. The practice of turning festivities into public performances was nurtured at the Burgundian court, where Charles V was educated. This is one of the pillars of what Mexican historian Luis Weckman has called "Mexico's medieval heritage."

Early on, from the time of the conquest and the colonial period, our identity, first pre-Hispanic, then neo-Hispanic, and later Mexican, was defined as pluralistic and open. Our history is one in which many epochs come to life simultaneously, as in those poems by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in which Spanish words alternate with Indian expressions, and stanzas of indigenous form combine with Italian meter.

Thus, over time and from its very inception, Mexico has been a pluralistic society. This is mainly due, as in Canada and the United States, to the existence of a geographical area that is isolated in the northern deserts and thus takes root in the south, and is assimilated in the domains of the Indian communities, our living past. On the Pacific coast it opens up to the cultures of the Orient and Africa; along the Gulf and Caribbean coasts, it is transformed, and becomes extroverted and permeable. Finally, in the Creole cities of the central plateau it finds an equilibrium and establishes a network of institutional centers.

Another surprising fact about the Mexican cultural process is that the multiplicity of traits, traditions, legacies, and peculiarities was recognized at an early stage as a veritable treasure, representative of a true community of language and culture.

This cleared the way for the emergence of a state which, as opposed to other so-called Third World countries, did not find it necessary to invent itself as a nation; the values and distinctive features which endowed it with life had long existed and, in a way, already defined its vision.

The birth of the Mexican nation after the struggle for independence, a birth resulting from a vast social and cultural process of alliances, interbreeding and ad hoc adaptations, represents an advantage that has not always been properly and sufficiently recognized as regards the history of its culture.

Let us keep in mind the elements that made the formation of this state possible: medieval and Renaissance Spanish law; the *Leyes de Indias* (Laws of the Indies), *Jus Gentium*, and medieval jurisprudence; ancient communal procedures and traditions inherited from the indigenous peoples; the vestiges of Castilian community organization, and municipal sovereignty as a basic form of political organization; knowledge (dating from colonial times) of the management of metal foundries and mints; functions of oversight and superintendency exercised by *audiencias* (tribunals); the teachings and administrative knowledge of the Catholic Church, the enlightened body of the so-called Bourbon reforms, and, last but not least, the decisive influence of the thirteen American colonies and their emancipation, as well as of the French revolution, with its bureaucratic inventiveness, civil law and secular doctrine.

These features of the Mexican state, which make it one of the richest creations of Mexican culture in particular, and of Hispanic culture in Latin America in general, were reaffirmed and renewed during the nineteenth century thanks to the Reform Laws of 1859. Two constitutional conventions, held in 1824 and 1857, were to culminate in the Mexican Constitution of 1917, offspring of the revolution that shook the country in 1910 and which revealed new facets of the national character.

The affirmation of national sovereignty and of the principles of respect and non-intervention, tolerance and respect for religious freedom, as well as the affirmation and defense of a body of social rights, and the doctrine of municipal autonomy all spring from a vast national and historic process characterized by tolerance and practice in the art of coexistence, guided by mutual respect and recognition of the right to differ.

However, although the state is one of the most important creations of our Mexican culture, it is not the only one; art, religion, painting, poetry, popular traditions, family life and its values, all of these make up a pattern, a framework of references, memories and precedents.

Within this model, as is natural and understandable, we Mexicans wish to carry on our own way of existence. However, this tenacity should not cause us to retreat, or diminish our participation in the new global culture, since any event, occurring in the most distant part of the planet, instantly affects us. This new global culture is mainly rooted in North America's powerful civilization, and includes many of the distinctive elements of that civilization.

To the extent that Canadian, American, and Mexican identities have, in spite of their many differences, a great deal in common—sharing not only their borders, but

also part of their history (at the very least, the history of those borders)—, one of the most urgent tasks on the agenda of the Americas is to study and examine those histories.

Histories which at times are shared or run parallel, at times symmetrical or violent, yet always converging towards a new centrality in which North America is seen as more than the juxtaposition of three countries, as a vast zone of peace, a continental geography of human dignity capable—to quote Karl Deutsch— of sheltering a “secure community,” where the rights of the lawful majorities and those of their stateless, under-represented minorities will be equally respected.

In the future, as at present, Mexico will surely be the recipient of cultural influences originating in other countries, especially the United States and Canada, but also from other parts of the world; certainly from the rest of Latin America,

Mexico's most familiar geo-cultural sphere, where it has historical, yet permanently enduring, commitments. But we, the Mexican people, want to benefit from cultural contributions from all over the world.

In general, such is the destiny of cultures throughout the world. It is difficult to conceive of isolationism or barriers of any kind. The world will become ever more closely intertwined, and rigid standardization and globalization will surely continue to exist.

Humanity is inherently diverse and plural; thus, national cultures and identities will prevail, each with its own more or less distinctive traits according to the country in question. Culture and national identity are not static, nor frozen in time. They are, rather, in constant evolution. It is certain that Mexico will preserve a national culture and identity, with its own peculiar features, all blended together with creativity ✕