

U.S. studies in Mexico¹

*Mónica Vereá Campos**

The United States, one of the decisive forces in shaping the present day world, is a nation that has created very distinctive interests and values, and transmitted them to different parts of the world. Many times these have run counter to those of other nations. However, it is undeniable that in spite of the attempt of many countries to defend themselves through ideological barriers intended to minimize the contamination of their culture, a great number of nations have been affected or influenced by the United States, and have been obliged to assume definite positions vis-à-vis American political and cultural pressure.

Although this is true in the case of a great number of nations, it is particularly so for Mexico, a country with a different culture and level of development that shares a common border of over 3,000 kilometers with the United States.

It is important to stress the fact that Mexico forms part of what has been called the area of U.S. influence and national security. It is, therefore, obvious that a good many U.S. interests in Mexico will continue to be of significance for our society. Suffice it to recall that during the process of nation-building in both countries, U.S. domestic problems had a decisive effect in shaping our national territory, and the Mexicans' sense of nationality.

Our common border is an inevitable geo-political reality and makes for an enormous number of areas of interaction, interdependence and real and potential conflict. The growing importance of such interactions has made it essential to promote scientific, systematic and up-to-date studies on the international dynamics of the United States.

If we add that, during the last few years, more actors have come onto the scene in this increasingly difficult and complex relationship, producing an even greater interaction and interrelationship and, consequently, more integration between the two nations, this study becomes even more urgent. The ever-increasing complexity in the relationship has given rise to completely unprecedented situations and

has made the differences in perceptions and points of view even more accentuated. Often our points of view are in contradiction with each other.

I am convinced that the systematization of U.S. studies will gradually help to do away with the mistaken ideas which, in many cases, arise from our lack of knowledge so that we will be able to see our neighbors objectively and without bias.

Knowing and studying the United States in depth and detail will be instrumental in providing us with the knowledge to create a framework for orienting our bilateral relations. That is to say, to know what position to adopt vis-à-vis our neighbor, how to respond properly to his initiatives and the best way of negotiating without harming our national interests. However, there is a widespread lack of understanding about the internal dynamics of the United States, and only a handful of people who have an objective and systematic knowledge of what the USA is really like.

In spite of the fact that, since the 1960's, several academic institutions aware of this need have set up research centers devoted to studying the USA from different standpoints, there are still not enough of them, nor are they in proportion to the magnitude of the problem.

It is only fair to mention that in various universities, institutes and centers, projects have been developed -in most cases uni-disciplinary- to analyze aspects of U.S. life or the bilateral relationship. Programs such as The Working Group on Border Studies at the University of Baja California's Institute for Social Research; the Permanent Seminar on Chicano and Border Studies at the National Institute of Anthropology and History. In the Science and Humanities Division of the Autonomous Metropolitan University-Azcapotzalco there is a small research group dedicated to the study of migration and border problems; in 1979 *El Colegio de México* set up its Mexican-U.S. Border Studies Program, which was later decentralized and gave rise to the Northern Mexico Center for Border Studies in Tijuana. Furthermore, in 1984 The Center for Research and Teaching of Economics (CIDE) established its Regional Studies Program, some of its members devoting themselves to an interdisciplinary analysis of the northern border area. In Cuernavaca, the Interamerican Research Center studies U.S. history and the impact of the *bracero* system. On top of this there are many other programs, most of all uni-disciplinary or regional, at several other academic institutions.

¹ This article contains updated information from the previously published *Estados Unidos: Sociedad, Cultura y Educación*, Centro de Investigaciones sobre Estados Unidos de América (CISEUA), UNAM, 1ª edición, Mexico 1991, pp. 169-177.

* Director of The Center for Research on the United States, UNAM.

The case of the National University of Mexico is unique because in addition to its centers and master's degree project formally set up for studying the United States, to which I shall refer later on, there are still other far-reaching efforts that have been made in several of its sections.

There are regional studies on socio-cultural issues in The Center for Studies on National Identity in the Border Area; The Center for Foreign Students has disseminated knowledge about the Chicano community.

The Faculty of Political and Social Sciences has courses on U.S. foreign and domestic policy and others on the bilateral relationship; the American Studies department in The Center for Political Studies, part of the same Faculty, has done studies of U.S. domestic policy.

In the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, there are courses on United States History and, in the Institute for Historical Research there are numerous researchers well known for their work on different periods of U.S. history.

Finally, there are the Institute for Economic Research and the Faculty of Economics dedicated to the study of and research on U.S. economic issues.

There are also other academic efforts in other sections of the UNAM on this particular subject, but I have mentioned only these few because they are the ones which have formally established permanent study and research projects.

The centers and institutes with research and teaching programs that have been institutionalized in Mexico thus far with the object of studying the United States can be summed up as follows.

The first such effort was made by the UNAM itself, when the Faculty of Philosophy and Literature set up its Center for Anglo-American Studies. The teachers and researchers in this center work academically and took part in publishing its magazine, *Anglia*.

For various political and ideological reasons, this center was disbanded in 1974, after eight years of existence. It is notable that ten years later the UNAM once again attempted to establish a center dedicated to the study of the United States under the Justo Sierra Program, although it was cancelled after only sixteen weeks.

At about the same time, an Institute for U.S. Studies was set up in The Center for Research and Teaching of Economics (CIDE), the main objective being to study U.S. domestic and foreign policy and the American economy from a Latin American standpoint. CIDE has published a large number of books and periodicals, principally on Latin American perceptions of the different aspects of the United States.

In the late seventies, The Center for Third World Economic and Social Studies (CEESTEM) set up a small

research center on Mexican-U.S. relations. However, this too was closed several years later.

In *El Colegio de México*, a group of researchers from The Center for International Studies' Mexican-U.S. Studies Program devoted themselves to analyzing certain aspects of the bilateral relationship. This resulted in the publication of its prestigious Mexico-United States Collection. It also maintains a well-endowed Documentation Center in this area.

In the eighties, the National University of Mexico created the Master's Degree Course in Mexican-U.S. Studies in the ENEP Acatlán. Its first students started in January 1984. The main objective of this multidisciplinary program is to train professionals to understand, analyze and evaluate the political, economic, legal, social and cultural aspects of the bilateral relationship.

The José María Luis Mora Research Institute, which was set up in Mexico City to carry out historical studies, has a department devoted to American history. This program recently produced a well-documented compendium on U.S. history.

In mid 1986, the Latin American Institute for Transnational Studies (ILET) established a department known as the U.S. Studies Program. However, this program was discontinued in early 1990.

During the 1980's, some academic institutions in the provinces opened research centers dedicated to American studies. Thus, in Tijuana, the Northern Border College (COLEF) was set up as a decentralization alternative -it should be recalled that it originated at *El Colegio de México* within its Border Studies Program, and, very rightly, devoted itself to studying the Northern Border in the border region itself. In researching different aspects of the area, it offers a master's degree program in Regional Studies and has recently established a Department of U.S. Studies, with the object of analyzing the economic, social and political aspects at the national and regional level.

Likewise, in the University of Guadalajara a Mexican-American studies program was initiated, dedicated principally to the study of migration.

In the late eighties, in Cholula, Puebla, The University of the Americas started a master's degree course in U.S. Studies. This interdisciplinary master's degree aims to prepare professionals trained to analyze the historical, political, social and cultural aspects of the United States and their impact on other countries.

In 1989, the UNAM approved the opening of The Center for Research on the United States (CISEUA), one of the purposes of which is to act as a link for the human resources scattered throughout the schools, institutes, faculties and centers of the University and to bring together

researchers from different disciplines in a common academic project to which I will refer later.

The Autonomous Technological Institute of Monterrey has recently opened, in September 1990, a diploma course on Mexican-U.S. relations. In conjunction with George Bush's visit to Monterrey in February 1991 President Carlos Salinas inaugurated The Center for Strategic Studies on the United States of the TEC. Finally, the University of Colima established in September 1991 a master's degree program in American studies.

In spite of the efforts made by these many programs, neither the number of institutions nor the systematization in the study of the United States and its relationship with Mexico correspond to the increasing importance of the subject.

Our center, The CISEUA, far from duplicating what has been done in other academic institutions, has a particular potential for playing a key role in the institutionalization of American studies, by virtue of its inter- and multidisciplinary nature, and the plurality of the ideologies represented in it. The Center, unlike those mentioned above, has certain characteristics that are worthwhile to stress:

- a) It carries out multidisciplinary research. There are few centers in which historians, economists, political scientists, experts in international relations, sociologists, jurists and anthropologists study the same subject
- b) The level of instruction, particularly the master's degree course in Mexican-U.S. Studies, is greatly enriched by research being done from the point of view of Mexican interests
- c) The capacity to call on an enormous number of professors and students from different undergraduate, master's degree and doctorate programs in practically all the available disciplines of study and to organize any type of academic activity, is an incomparable advantage that, at this moment, other institutions cannot duplicate
- d) Its contribution to making the large university population aware, through its publications and the many academic activities it organizes at The Center, is an important achievement and remains an ongoing challenge

The Center's academic activities are divided into three departments to which the different researchers are assigned, the department on the United States, the

department on the United States in the international context and the important department on Mexican-U.S. relations.

Likewise, our recent commitment to integrate the English language magazine *Voices of Mexico* into The Center represents a challenge and an opportunity to express from our perspective -our North American reality- the different aspects of the relation between the United States and Mexico, including the diverse queries about Mexico and Latin America in general that we consider of interest to foreign readers.

We are now faced with a different Mexico which, although more "open" economically, not only presents various new problems that have to be faced, but also many very advantageous possibilities for its future development. We are well aware that Mexico has suffered disadvantages stemming from its proximity to the United States and has not known sufficiently how to make the best use of the advantages offered by this proximity.

The academic analysis of these new relations springing up requires new research plans, leading perhaps to different answers and solutions that, without discarding the riches of past experience, offer a restatement of strategies, positions and responses that are appropriate to the new reality we share with our neighbor to the north.

Therefore, an essential element in the analyses carried out in The Center is the attempt to overcome the two extreme positions into which the majority of studies on this subject have fallen: on the one hand, the visceral rejection of everything that has to do with the United States and, on the other, the panacea of total Mexican integration with the United States.

I believe that it is very important to overcome partial, subjective and even passionate approaches. There should be objectivity in our analysis of the United States and its relationship with the world, especially with Mexico, without claiming that our bilateral and national problems will automatically be solved. However, in the course of time and with an organized and persistent effort in the direction indicated, we may contribute new approaches and perspectives based on solid analyses of the United States which bring new elements and judgements, and serve as the basis for better relations, in both qualitative and quantitative terms, something that will be of obvious benefit to both our countries. ❧