

This essay by the late Guillermo Bonfil Batalla is a fitting closure to a life-time's concern for the everyday cultural life of ordinary Mexicans, and the threat posed to that life by economic transformation.

The increasingly lively discussion about the NAFTA has concentrated on what's in it for the nation's economy as a whole, or its principal sectors (energy products, the maquiladora industry). Hence, the discussion is predominantly political, concentrating on the risk of losing national sovereignty. Culture, on the other hand, has hardly received any attention at all. When it has the treatment has generally been rhetorical; oft repeated and vague references to national identity and the strength of our thousand year old culture. Such comments shy away from what is really at stake. Jaime Serra Puche, the head of the Mexican negotiating team, clarified what the Mexican government thinks is at stake when he declared at the start of talks in Canada that "Culture is not such a relevant matter for Mexico²".

Mexico and the NAFTA

GATT Article 20, incorporated into the NAFTA, represents Mexico's best chance to strengthen national legislation protecting its archeological, historical, and artistic heritage from two markets (particularly the American) with an unsettling habit of acquiring, by any means, unique and invaluable artifacts. It allows signatories to take any measures necessary to protect "public morals" and "national treasures of artistic, historic or

The FTA's cultural dimension

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla¹

archeological value³." The NAFTA would only make sense for Mexico if it were possible to extend and specify protective measures and stimulate government commitment to enforce them. The elements adopted from the GATT also foresee the possibility of controlling an invasion of cultural products undesirable from the point of view of public morals and social health. We ought to look at this closely because, like all such measures, it is a double-edged weapon. If we don't have the internal resilience to valorize such defensive zeal we run the risk of inadvertently strengthening the most obsolete and prudish facets of today's equally threatening neo-puritanical wave.

Culturally speaking, one of the most positive effects of the NAFTA might be a freer flow of ideas and the alternative values that they offer to both communities. In other words, a greater and more diverse pool of ideas and values with which we might try to make sense out of our lives.

Records, cassettes and videos have already gone transnational; at any rate it seems that Mexican tariffs have no limiting effect on their presence in Mexico. If one goes to the movies, or watches TV, one could hardly imagine that including such products in the NAFTA would in any way worsen the situation. From the purely commercial point of view then, the NAFTA appears to open up new opportunities for cultural industries in Mexico.

However, this matter goes beyond the purely commercial dimension. Cultural industries cannot be analyzed with the same criteria one uses when considering shoe-making or the sale of lingerie.

That the cultural industry's products transmit messages, uninspired though they may be, is the central question here. These messages correspond to precise systems of meaning, and reflect clearly established hierarchies of values. They arise from and point toward ways of living in and conceiving of the world that express a particular culture. This makes the cultural industry's products singularly important in the relations between societies with different cultures.

¹ Synopsis of Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's last essay published in *México Indígena*, No. 24, September 1991.

² Press conference, 12th June 1991, reported by various national newspapers.

³ "Mexico-U.S. Cooperation Agreement on the recovery and return of stolen archaeological, historical and cultural goods," signed the 17th of July, 1970, in force as of the 24th of March, 1971.

The NAFTA could have two possible consequences. One is the potential for increased cultural penetration, and the other the imposition of the American Way of Life as a model for Mexican society. I fear that the gravity of this problem goes well beyond the NAFTA. The mechanisms for broadcasting American life styles are already in place. We might hope that the NAFTA will provide us with an opportunity to accommodate the cultural messages of American products within our own chosen cultural context. This may be the best we can do, because the presence of these foreign influences in Mexico is inevitable⁴.

Opening the way for the wider dissemination of Mexican culture among Spanish-speaking Americans, particularly Mexican-Americans, represents a possibility upon which we should focus our attention. Direct communication with this segment of the U.S. population could pay off in the long run if Mexican-Americans become an active lobby for Mexican interests. It is therefore much more than a potential market.

Is it in Mexico's interest to introduce items not already included in the NAFTA, but which are culturally important? It is certain, for example, that in the U.S. and Canadian economies handicraft production is relatively insignificant, but in Mexico it is huge, above all because of the millions of Mexicans

⁴ It is worth while recalling the words of Jack Lang at the World Conference of Cultural Ministers organized by UNESCO in Mexico in July, 1982. Lang criticized "the financial domination of the multinationals" which flood countries with images and music made abroad. He also criticized T.V. programs in which the "standardized, stereotyped productions smooth away national cultures and introduce a uniform way of living that becomes the norm for the whole world." See *La politique culturelle de la France (French Cultural Policy)*, *La Documentation Française*. Paris, 1988, pp. 44-45.

Idiosyncracies of the Spanish language

Creating the European Economic Community (EEC) unleashed a linguistic war. The battlefield is computer science, and the opposing factions are the defenders of the Spanish language on one side and multinational corporations on the other.

The EEC agreements that cement the community economically call for products to move freely across borders. However, Spain has issued three separate decrees blocking products that do not include the letter ñ¹ such as printers and keyboards.

The multinational forces have arrayed themselves behind the economic unfeasibility of modifying their hardware, and the EEC accuses Spain of blocking free trade. French accents, and Danish and German peculiarities have been integrated into computer equipment, yet the ñ seems to have been cast aside as an illegitimate child.

The letter ñ, integrated into Spanish from the Arabic and Latin double *n*, is said to be one thousand one hundred years old. Of the eight official EEC languages the ñ is unique to Spanish.

Mario Vargas Llosa, the well known Peruvian writer and former candidate to the presidency, rose to the occasion. "It isn't just an *n* with a squiggle on top. It is a sovereign sound which clearly expresses a nuance. It comes from the very root of one of the primary languages in the world. If there is freedom of speech, above and beyond censorship, it is in language. This is why I believe that the ñ will survive" (*La Jornada*, May 10, 1991).

The press has joined the battle of the ñ: the Spanish daily *El País* published a defense of the letter under an eight column headline. The article stressed that the European Community must respect linguistic plurality and not allow a letter to be dropped from an alphabet for commercial reasons.

An estimated three billion people currently use the letter ñ. Thus far, one important computer manufacturer has integrated the letter into their keyboards marketed in Spain. It was in their own best interest to continue satisfying the needs of the Spanish-speaking market. The idea is to please the customer by providing the appropriate product. And as for us, we support those who daily defend and use the letter ñ.

¹ The letter represents the "nio" sound, as in onion.

who depend solely or partially on the sale of handicrafts.

The international market for Mexican handicrafts is precarious. Ironically, foreign tourists make up the largest part of the market within Mexico itself. The problem of opening up foreign markets for our handicrafts is complex and not

without risks. And of course there are various categories of handicrafts, each one requiring a different strategy to improve its marketability⁵.

⁵ It is impossible to have statistics of foreign trade in handicrafts, because the way products are classified does not enable one to distinguish which are handicrafts and which are industrial products.

Highlights of six years of free trade negotiations

March 1985

U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney meet. They agree to request their respective ministers to explore the possibilities for reducing and eliminating trade barriers.

September 1985

President Reagan and Prime Minister Mulroney exchange letters of resolution to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement(FTA).

October 1987

U.S. and Canadian negotiators sign a draft of the Agreement.

December 1987

The heads of both delegations ratify the text of the Agreement. The final version is sent to the U.S. Congress and the Canadian Parliament.

January 1989

The FTA between the U.S. and Canada goes into effect.

March 1990

The Wall Street Journal publishes an article asserting that Mexico and the United States have agreed to initiate negotiations to develop a Free Trade Agreement.

April 1990

The Mexican Senate sets up a forum for consultations on the FTA.

June 1990

The U.S. Senate opens hearings on a "fast track" bill that would allow President George Bush to negotiate directly with President Carlos

Salinas. Both Presidents issue a joint communiqué announcing their intention to negotiate a FTA, and instructing their respective trade representatives to explore the possibilities.

August 1990

The Mexican Secretary of Commerce and the U.S. Trade Representative meet and issue a joint recommendation to President George Bush, urging that the U.S. and the Mexican President initiate FTA negotiations.

September 1990

President Carlos Salinas appoints an Advisory Committee for FTA negotiations and informs President George Bush that Mexico intends to sign a Free Trade Agreement. President Bush sends a bill to Congress so negotiations can be initiated. Canada expresses its desire to join the largest trade bloc in the world.

February 1991

President Salinas, President Bush and Prime Minister Mulroney Agree to start trilateral negotiations for setting up a North American FTA.

May 1991

The U.S. House of Representatives votes in favor (231 to 192) of approving the "fast track" for negotiating the FTA with Mexico. The U.S. Senate also approves the motion (59 to 36) to give President Bush the authority to negotiate.

June 1991

Trilateral negotiations between Canada, Mexico and the U.S. are

initiated in Toronto, Canada. The issues discussed include access to markets, trade regulations, investment, technology transfer, services and settlement of disputes.

August 1991

The ministers of commerce of the three countries meet for a second time in Seattle, Washington. They agree on a gradual reduction of tariffs, to be carried out in three stages, on all products to be imported and exported between the three countries. They resolve to make an in depth analysis of the restrictions on government purchases in the three nations. In addition, a working group is created to strengthen the Mexican assembly plant program. The governors of the fifty U.S. states express their support for the negotiations.

October 1991

The Ministers of Commerce of the three countries meet for a third time in Zacatecas, Mexico. The meeting was attended by U.S. negotiator Carla Hills, Canadian Minister of Commerce Michael Wilson, and Mexican Secretary of Commerce Jaime Serra Puche, along with their respective negotiating teams. They review the progress of the work groups assigned to each of the nineteen major sections of the agreement and call for the writing of the treaty to begin so a rough draft might be ready by January of 1992. They agree to approach labor and the environment as parallel issues, but not to include them in the text of the agreement.

A well articulated handicraft policy could create favorable conditions for their entry into other markets. Indian handicrafts are of the highest quality and come from a rich creative tradition which stands among the most varied in the world. The problem consists on the one hand of selling these products for what they are really worth, a rare event, and on the other hand assuring a steady flow of production without jeopardizing their traditional character. Whatever happens, these marvels are an irreplaceable part of our cultural heritage that ought not be risked by commercial ambitions.

The other possibility for handicraft production under the shadow of an NAFTA could be producing common household objects with new, non-traditional designs. This would allow Mexican craftspeople to exploit to their own advantage their extraordinary manual ability by manufacturing objects that satisfy the contemporary tastes of medium and higher income consumers. Such an achievement would be similar to what the Scandinavians or the Brazilians achieved, but in Mexico's case with emphasis on hand-craftedness, so highly prized in industrialized countries as a mark of exclusiveness. The first step would be to establish a school for Mexican design of the highest calibre.

Handicrafts must be dealt with wisely to guarantee that the lure of economic advantage does not denature a field of expression that gives our country its cultural profile. Nor must the makers of such handicrafts become even more marginalized than they now are.

Short-term indirect effects

The NAFTA is merely an instrument, albeit an important one, to encourage and make permanent the transformation of Mexican society and economy into forms compatible with the new world's conditions and demands.

To seriously consider the implications of the NAFTA on education goes far beyond the scope of this essay, but it is the central element of our culture. Ever since the 1920's a nationalist ideology reflecting the aims of the Mexican Revolution has been taught in schools. That ideology has not been without changes: there were advances, steps back, and different emphases according to the style of each administration. But certain principles have been maintained, at least in official speeches and on the pages of school text books.

Generations of Mexicans learned that national sovereignty was worth any sacrifice. For example, that the nationalization of the oil industry, the railroads, electricity, and later the banks were historic climaxes that reaffirmed our national sovereignty. We learned that the basic criterion for land distribution was to give it to those who worked it, not to those who exploited in for the highest profit.

We also learned an image of our Northern neighbor summed up by the saying, "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States." In terms of God himself, the educational system wanted us to be non-religious, partisans of the absolute separation between church and state, always vigilant against the dangers of the former interfering in the affairs of the latter -and it happened often.

We learned to consider the Northern border as a line of separation because we were different and wanted to remain different. To what degree are these nationalistic principles compatible with today's aims? What intellectual alchemy must we undergo in order to turn what were known as the "inalienable historic rights" of peasants and workers into "obstacles to modernization", and excrescences of a perverted past?

I find it difficult to accept that the new national project is simply the latest stage in an old project called the Mexican Revolution.

It will probably require two generations for the new principles to replace the old in the consciousness of the majority of Mexicans. There is a vast array of changes in our ideologies and in our collective desires coming from Mexico's entry into an NAFTA with the U.S. and Canada; some of these touch nodal points in how we see our country and its future. These contacts, and their consequences, demand far-reaching evaluation.

Any Mexican who reads the Canada-U.S. FTA has to feel that it is a pact between societies that are very different from ours, not only because of their wealth and level of technological development, but above all because of their culture stemming from different historical experiences. Even though there are obvious differences between Canadians and Americans, there is a common cultural ground in which interests and beliefs are mutually intelligible.

The NAFTA is not merely a matter of doing away with tariff barriers: far beyond that, it plants the seed of a society of the future. Are we Mexicans accepting this plan freely and sovereignly? Is it being imposed on us by the force of circumstance? The inevitable laws of history? By an inevitable destiny to which we can only submit?

Reflection on the cultural implications of the NAFTA must be long-term. One cannot only treat present ills, however urgent they may be. When the patient is our own society we must have a very clear idea about the direction in which the decisions and solutions of today are leading us, because one day we may find that they are irreversible. ■