Canada's view of Mexico

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I have been asked to speak on the Canadian view of contemporary Mexico.

I became curious not so much about how we view Mexico now as how that might be different from our vision in the past. So I did a computer search through *The Globe and Mail* and other Canadian newspapers, looking at opinion articles and letters to the editor over the past 15 years.

Several things impressed me. First was the range of interest and knowledge about Mexico. Letters came in correcting errors that had appeared in print on Mexican history, giving surprisingly extensive information on Mexico's oil and gas industry, on its voting record at the International Whaling Commission, on the country's flora and fauna and so on.

Some of these were from academic experts, of course, but by no means all of them were. Some were from interested Canadians who I assumed, reading the letters, had been bitten by a passion for Mexico —a romantic attachment I can well understand— and had simply learned all they could about the country.

What gave these passionate letter writers away was the degree of their irritation at unwarranted assumptions about Mexico or —even greater insult— assumptions that ignored the country altogether.

One writer was deeply annoyed by a journalist who referred to North America as "an Anglo continent." That will "come as a surprise to Mexico," he pointed out. (I can share his outrage with this kind of error, having once had a copy editor in Toronto write into one of my stories from Mexico City that Mexico is a Central American country.)

A common theme in the letters was Mexico's enlightened foreign policy in the 1980s toward countries such as Nicaragua and Cuba —usually unfavorably compared to the foreign policy of the United States and sometimes even of Canada.

Mexico was also lauded for what was then perceived as its integrity in limiting foreign investment in favor of Mexican government participation in a number of industries, including oil and gas.

But the strongest theme in the letters of the past is one that survives to this day: the notion of Mexico as an economic threat.

In the past, letter writers, editorialists and other opinion writers emphasized the competition that imported Mexican fruits and vegetables create for Canadian producers, the danger of Mexico undercutting the Canadian price of oil, or the destabilizing effect of Mexico´s foreign debt.

I didn't find anything about the destabilizing effect of the lending practices of Canadian banks. I guess we're not prepared to take our awareness of Mexican history to that extreme.

To move on to the present, the current Canadian vision of contemporary Mexico incorporates many of these attitudes and ideas of the past but with a twist, which I will get into later.

To start, I think that the Canadian attitude toward Mexico is a complicated one and not easily deciphered. So, apparently, do a number of the political scientists I consulted, most of whom, when asked about the Canadian view of Mexico, said more or less the same thing: "Uh, er, hmmm."

Fortunately, I'm a journalist and the lack of meaningful data on a subject never stops us from having an opinion. So I will jump in fearlessly where some of the best Canadian minds are left stuttering and stammering in confusion.

Just as there is no one Mexico, there is no one Canadian view of it. Someone who has been on a holiday package tour to Cancún is going to have a vastly different attitude toward Mexico than an autoworker in southern Ontario or a politically active member of the Mohawk Nation.

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On April 13 and 19, UNAM's *Center for Research on North America* (CISAN) *hosted the "Commemorative Colloquium on 50 Years of Mexico-Canada Relations." Given the topic's importance, we present this interesting paper from the colloquium.*

And any attitude that any Canadian has toward Mexico right now must be undergoing a revolution. It is a revolution that started with the North American Free Trade Agreement, a development that changed Mexico in the Canadian mind, however subtly, from "one of them" to "one of us."

Suddenly it is of utmost importance to many Canadians to know minute details of Mexican life, such as the hourly rate a Mexican worker is paid. This might have come up occasionally a decade ago —in fact Mexico's low wage rates were mentioned in a 1984 letter to the editor —but for the most part no one in Canada gave it a thought.

Suddenly many of us are thinking about it, we are thinking about pollution, about Mexico's need for water, about its human-rights record. These have become common topics of press coverage and political conversation outside of the foreign-policy community and the non-governmental organizations that might have discussed such matters before NAFTA.

On the positive side of the ledger, we are suddenly awake to business opportunities in telecommunications, in the cattle business and so on. Many of these opportunities existed before NAFTA, but the trade agreement focused our minds on them, gave us an impetus to pursue them. We find ourselves in a community of shared interests with Mexico now and the psychology of our relationship is altered.

This sense of opportunity is particularly strong in the west, I'm told, where Canada's range land and livestock industry give the region a direct connection with a Mexican industry and lifestyle. The sense of threat comes more from Canada's manufacturing heartland, Ontario.

One academic in Canada —Herman Konrad of the University of Calgary— is a particularly knowledgeable student of Mexico and of Canada's relationship with it. He has been keeping track of the amount and the type of Canadian media coverage of Mexico over the years, and he reports that since NAFTA there has been a revolutionary change.

Before the trade deal, he says, news reports focused on Mexico as an exotic holiday destination or they provided coverage of Mexico by way of an American wire service: Mexico distorted by the American political prism.

The most significant change since NAFTA, Konrad says, is that Canadians now have "direct access" coverage —reports from Canadian journalists who go to Mexico and look at the country with Canadian eyes.

There is a parallel development in the academic community, according to Konrad. In the past, Mexicanists in Canada were either transplanted Americans, as Konrad is, or they were Canadians who had to go to the United States to get an education about Mexico. Nothing was offered in Canada that could provide the training these academics needed.

Now, Konrad says, there are at least a couple of hundred Mexicanists in Canada and about 30 masters level and Ph.D. theses being written on Mexican topics. There are courses on Mexico in every major university, he says. Judy Hellman, an academic at York University in Toronto who specializes in Mexico, offers a slightly more jaded view. She says York never even considered offering a course on Mexico until this year. And York is, without question, a major Canadian university.

Stephen Clarkson from the University of Toronto is a political scientist who has long given a course on Canadian-U.S. relations. He says he managed to ease a bit of material on Mexico into his course this year. Not exactly a revolution in consciousness, but a beginning.

Judy Hellman attributes some of the change to students who have become interested in Mexico for the first time since the NAFTA debate started. "They think there may be a job in it," she said. "Of course if they thought there was a job in pine trees they'd be interested in pine trees."

Personally, I still count that as a gain. I suppose a more altruistic and starry-eyed motivation might be nice, but whatever causes a growing awareness of Mexico must ultimately lead to better relations between us.

But to come abruptly to a larger point: these communities that I am talking about —journalists, academics, business people and so on— are an elite. I hesitate to guess at what percentage of the population they might represent but it's certainly not enough to swing an election, for instance.

The broader population of Canada remains woefully ignorant of Mexico, I believe, and resistant to the country because of the stereotypes associated with it. By those stereotypes I mean bandits, Moctezuma's revenge, a *mañana* [tomorrow] philosophy about getting things done, political instability and so on.

Those stereotypes, I might add, are reinforced by the Mexican tourism authorities who create ads showing Mexicans dozing in the sun of a central plaza under fabulously oversized sombreros. You can live in Mexico a long time before meeting anyone who has the time to doze anywhere at any time while the sun is still up. Many of the Mexicans I know keep a couple of jobs going at once in an effort to support their families and educate their children.

I have yet to see an ad that promotes Mexican art —the murals of Diego Rivera, the sculptures and weavings of Oaxaca, the ceramics from around the country. And yet when you spend any amount of time in Mexico, that is the thing that leaps out at you —the extraordinary cultural vitality of the country.

(We indulge in stereotypes, too, of course, plastering Mounties in red tunics all over our ads for Canada as a tourist destination, even though Mounties in tunics are notably absent from the national scene these days.)

Even some sectors of Canada's elite community, in the aftermath of the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, began talking in stereotypes about Mexico being inherently unstable, wondering aloud whether investment might fall off. David Pendergast, who is organizing a large Mexican exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum this summer, asked what seems the obvious question about that attitude. He wondered if those issues came up after the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield or John F. Kennedy.

That they come up about Mexico with every ripple and buckle in the political fabric is a clear signal that Canadians, even elite Canadians, maintain what is essentially a paternalistic view toward Mexico. It is a perception of the country that is rooted in the past, yet it persists due to a lack of the genuine knowledge and experience needed to dispell it.

An interesting counterpoint is the case of Germany. Even with all the troubles of unification and the violent and distasteful rise of a small but effective neo-fascist movement, we go on blandly assuming that Germany is a stable and prosperous country and will remain so. The firebombing of hostels, the deaths now of dozens of people distress the world community, but not enough to alter its view of Germany.

I am going to commit a small journalistic sin to illustrate my point and take on an article published in *The Globe and Mail*. The writer made his first trip to Mexico late last year and his article introduced a theme that I think is worth pursuing more frequently, and that is the sophistication of Mexico: its art, its architecture, its writers, its thinkers of various kinds. But he introduced these observations by pandering to the stereotypes of Mexico to which so many of us object. I quote from his article: "There's an awful lot more than tacos, beaches, cheap labor and pueblo poverty."

I don't know whether the writer was referring to the stereotypes he assumed are in the minds of most Canadians (unfortunately a correct assumption, I think), or to his own preconceived ideas about Mexico. Either way, a newspaper that aspires to sophistication —certainly in the international sphere — and which had a bureau in Mexico City for a decade, should have moved a long way beyond this kind of approach.

I am not saying there is no poverty in Mexico, or that wages are not lower: I am saying that to approach all questions through that narrow opening is clumsy and ultimately counter-productive.

Canadians can understand how this might feel by imagining a story in *The New York Times* where the reporter writes in a tone of wonderment about how there really is more than skidoos [Eskimos], Mounties and Indian blockades in Canada.

(Canadians in Quebec are intimate with these kinds of misunderstandings from English Canada, where assumptions are frequently made about corruption in Quebec or about its neglect of individual rights in favour of group rights.)

But I have transformed my writer into a straw man here to make a point. I think almost every journalist who goes to Mexico falls into this trap somewhere along the line. But in the evolution of our relationship, we must reach a place of enlightenment where we stop using clichéd images as our reference point for everything new we learn about Mexico. Only then will we have a hope of beginning to understand the country in all its complexity. And only then will we stop feeding those stereotypes that act as barriers to understanding among our readers as well as ourselves.

Mexicans make assumptions about us, too, I hasten to add. During my years of living in Mexico, I often had people refer to our President Trudeau, when in fact the country was led by our Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney. I had someone ask me if Canada shares a border with Germany —I answered that if you ignore the Atlantic Ocean and France, yes. The classic response from a Mexican when he learns that a visitor is from Canada —so classic that after a while the Canadian can almost recite it in unison with the Mexican— is this: It's cold out there, isn't it? Well, as it happens, not always: as a native Vancouverite, I know that you can often play tennis there, in shorts, in the middle of winter.

The increased academic interest in Mexico will improve our knowledge of each other. But what will improve it more, or at least more broadly, is the growing connection between popular organizations in the two countries. This really began in earnest during the NAFTA debate when trade unions, women's groups and environmentalists from Canada, Mexico and the United States formed a tripartite network and began to swap information, visit back and forth, and strategize about NAFTA.

I have long believed that the nationalistic left in Canada was missing the boat. By frantically defending a protectionist economy, I thought, it failed to understand its joint interest with popular organizations and working people around the world.

The movement to change that is still in its infancy but I predict it will grow, especially as the economies of Canada, Mexico and the United States increasingly interact. And especially now that the indigenous peoples of Canada and Mexico are starting to meet, to share political and

legal strategies and to understand their common interests.

Which brings me to another event of contemporary Mexican life, the Chiapas uprising. Canadians didn't as a whole over-react to the Chiapas uprising. They identified its roots, more or less correctly, as being a lack of democracy in the region, a persistent and unrelieved poverty and continuing abuses of various kinds. They didn't assume the uprising signalled the start of the next Mexican revolution or the undermining of national stability.

The reason for that is that Canadians recently had a crash course in indigenous history and politics as a result of our own Mohawk uprising in Oka, Quebec. For several nights running, Canadians saw television footage on the news of armed Mohawk warriors confronting the overpowering military force of the Canadian army.

Even before Oka, the very sophisticated political strategies of native people put their concerns high on the national priority list during our constitutional negotiations. Non-native Canadians are increasingly aware of the appalling living conditions of many Canadian native people, and of white Canada's role in creating them, and they increasingly think native land claims and demands for self-government are fair.

As a result of being so firmly ensconced in our own glass house, then, we are a little more reluctant than we once might have been to throw stones. This, I think, prevents us from having a knee-jerk response to the Chiapas uprising as though it were "another civil war in the banana republics." Very angry, justifiably angry, native people is a shameful reality we now share.

Let me move briefly onto the macro-level of the Canadian view, that is, Canada's foreign policy. During the Tory governments that were in power for almost a decade, and which were bumped only recently by the Liberals, Mexico was not visibly a priority. Cabinet ministers insisted that it was, but for a period of a year, we didn't even have an ambassador in Mexico. While I was a correspondent here, from 1988 to 1990, diplomatic officials at the embassy were not overly encouraging —off the record, at least— about the prospects of investment in Mexico. We negotiated a trade deal with the United States without any reference to Mexico.

That began to change slightly toward the end of Mulroney's tenure. He came to Mexico to sign a range of trade and other agreements and paid Mexico that highest of bilateral compliments: a refusal to get worked up about its human rights record.

That, I think, is directly attributable to the policies of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. He was prepared to tailor Mexico's economy to the western economic fad —open markets and globalization. He was, in short, someone we could work with. And, most crucially, Mexico decided to put itself on the continental agenda by pursuing NAFTA.

Herman Konrad points out that Mexico signalled its interest in Canada much earlier. López Portillo made his first trip abroad, as Mexico's president, to Canada. This is one of the clear signals national leaders can send about their foreign interests, yet there was no sign that the significance of his visit registered with Canada's government of the day, Konrad says.

Very recently, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien made his first state visit to Mexico. I'd be interested to know whether that made any greater impact here.

Canada and Mexico have more in common than is often assumed. It starts with something I mentioned earlier: a non-interventionist approach to world affairs. It includes the obvious fact of our shared and very powerful neighbor.

But it also includes an approach to social and domestic policy that does not rule out a government hand in developing national industries and institutions in such fields as energy, the film industry and publishing.

This approach is changing, of course, and both countries are finding out how painful and controversial it is to go through those changes. But that is something else we share.

Konrad mentions how we like to emphasize that Mexico has been governed by the same party for six decades, to emphasize that we think there's something a little fishy about that. There is something a little fishy about it, of course, but how do we account, then, for Canada having been run by the same party —the Liberals— for the better part of this century?

A little tag end to my observations about Canada's view of Mexico is my delight at seeing in Canada, now, more and more examples of Mexican art. This is the popular consumerism that grows out of increasing Canadian travel to Mexico, but what it achieves is the shifting of our perception about the country away from clichés and toward a new appreciation of Mexico's complexity.

It is no longer the style to bring home felt sombreros the size of satellite dishes. Tourists now search out painted animals from Oaxaca or ceramics from Guanajuato or weavings from Chiapas. Movies such as *Like Water for Chocolate* take us a little further down the path —we learn something about magic realism— the artistic extension of my sworn enemy, the subjunctive tense.

This is a clumsy approach to Mexican culture, but it is at least an approach, and one that rewards the seeker with aesthetic pleasure. For that reason it is bound to grow. I have faith that we are not such philistines in Canada that we can remain oblivious to the richness of Mexico ✕