

Trade and cultural *mestizaje*

Mariano Alberto Fernández Real*

Today, as never before, we have in our hands objects from around the world, objects which come to us from distant and unknown peoples who join together with us in this way, introducing us to their way of life and consciousness.

Trade has been one of the most powerful vehicles in the process of cultural diffusion and has even contributed to population flows. Evidence exists that the dissemination of cultures is based on the development of commercial roads or trade routes linking together different populations.

Yet this expansion occurs in more than one direction, since original social forms go through periods of growth in which groups and regions adopt the customs of others as well as contributing their own, giving rise to historical shifts in culture.

The original social forms undergo modifications together with the adopted ones, favoring overall changes. One should avoid archaic terms like “decadence” or “splendor,” the subjectivity of which denatures the essence of social processes.

Before a civilization is “eclipsed,” it changes, maintaining its customs and traditions, albeit

In its literal sense the Spanish word *mestizaje* refers to the process of ethnic and cultural intermixture, giving rise to *mestizos*—people of mixed ancestry. (Editor’s note.)

* Economist.

unconsciously. The exception is when “decadence” consists of the physical, material or psychological eradication of men and women.

These changes are generally inevitable, since society is a dynamic entity where tradition and adaptation, native and foreign traditions, coexist as antagonistic forces. The attempt to avoid change therefore “goes against nature”—unless this attempt is made through isolation. This sort of retrograde effort invents archetypes and folklore which in the majority of cases prove to be alien or even offensive to their supposed bearers, removed from their real roots and alienated from society, principally because they are taken out of context.

There is an infinity of examples which support the argument that cultural dissemination is not “univocal” and that no area can be viewed as an exclusive crucible of culture. On the contrary, every social group produces original social forms; there is a process of adopting traditions from, and contributing traditions to, other groups. This depends on the links that permit this exchange, be it by neighborhood, common activities, population movements or—in economies that have gone beyond self-sufficient production—through commerce.

In this process some cultural forms or traditions are able to maintain themselves while passing

through diverse social contexts. Others are seemingly lost or profoundly transformed, so much so that they become unrecognizable to their own society. At the same time they remain part of the cultural baggage each individual reproduces daily. In the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe one finds the Indian deity Tonantzin; in the barrios of Xochimilco, *mestizos* offer incense and zoomorphic clay figures to Saint Francis.

Thus social forms move between traditions and myths. As is the case with language, society constantly modifies its culture, permanently adopting elements from other social groups according to their usefulness and viability.

The history of Mesoamerica provides us with these types of experiences. The northernmost regions show the influence of the central highlands and vice versa, including in zones where cultural phenomena of distant origin have coexisted, such as the Quechua area of the Incas.

Let us take only two examples. The myth of Quetzalcóatl was presumably born in the center of Mexico. It was taken up by the Quichés under the name of Cuculcán, while at Lake Cocibolga (the Great Lake of Nicaragua) there are monoliths which, without a doubt, represent the feathered serpent from Toltec mythology. The misnamed “Chacmol” is rooted in



Ever more strident voices are raised to demand punishment for those who, from their perverse viewpoint, supposedly contribute to unemployment, criminality, the recession or social decay. The pretext is to find out who is guilty of economic and social situations which can in no way be attributed to groups or individuals, since they are the result of the fast-moving changes which surround us. Through tactics recalling despicable periods of world history, the leaders of these campaigns use falsehoods or half-truths to agitate public opinion and call for a "solution."

Out of this breeding ground there has arisen an initiative called SOS (Save Our State). Through this measure, in November the California electorate is to vote on a series of steps aimed at stripping even more protection from those who have come to this country, with or without documents, to contribute to its wealth and prosperity. This is based on the premise that the state of California can "save itself" if it denies public education, health or basic support services to a group of immigrants, most of whom come from Mexico. I ask: save itself from what? Save itself how?

Approval of SOS or any other set of measures that seek to attack the phenomenon of migration between the United States and Mexico through punitive actions or assaults against defenseless women or children will not only, in my modest opinion, be unable to solve the supposed problem being addressed, but will in fact tend to aggravate it.

And here, so as to leave no doubt on this subject, I would like to stress that Mexico's policy on undocumented migration is very clear. We have no interest in continuing to export people. We want to trade in goods and services, and to create the necessary conditions so that each Mexican has the education, well-being and opportunities he or she needs to develop in their own country. Mexico needs all her sons and daughters to build the nation to which we aspire.

In addition, we recognize that every country has the right to take the measures it considers suitable for establishing its policy on migration and to control its borders in order to see that its laws are obeyed. For this reason we have been working closely with the federal authorities in Washington so they will consult us and design new strategies allowing for a better administration of this phenomenon, starting out not from myths or stereotypes but rather from facts and realities.

Both governments have decided to confront this issue with good sense and seriousness. That is why, in Mexico, we are so concerned by both the intention and possible consequences of state or local measures like SOS.

We are concerned by the inevitable discriminatory repercussions it will have on all Mexicans and Mexican Americans, be they documented or not. We are concerned by the creation of an underclass of human beings without access to the elementary services of public health and education. We are concerned by the hostile, confrontational and violent climate which may be unleashed. And we are concerned —why not say so?— at the damage that will be done to the image of Mexico and the Mexican people, both here and there, which has cost us so much effort to build.

We recognize the domestic character of the SOS initiative. We scrupulously respect the principle that one should not interfere in other countries' internal affairs. But in this case, we Mexicans feel directly affected, and for this reason my government has no choice but to express clearly its total rejection of SOS and its commitment to working closely with those who oppose it, in order to contribute to its defeat.

Thus my compatriots, of all social and economic classes, of all political ideologies and all corners of Mexico have raised their voices to protest against the anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican climate occurring in California and some other states of the United States. High government officials, legislators, academics and the people in general state their repudiation. We want it to be known that Mexico as a whole feels itself to be affected by this.

**Andrés Rozental, Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs.
Los Angeles, California, August 13, 1994.**

Excerpt from speech at the ceremony awarding Luis Valdez and Baldemar Velazquez the Aztec Eagle —the highest decoration bestowed by the Mexican government on citizens of other countries— in this case for their outstanding work to bring Mexico and the United States closer.

Aztec tradition, originating in the Petén settlements.

Some cultural phenomena entered traditions different from their places of origin, participating in and adapting themselves to a process of acculturation. This is the case with Huehuetéotl—the ball game, which shows a type of ancient Mesoamerican ritual unity—as well as the rite of the jaguar.

Commerce brings not only goods or services, but cultural and psychological forms of ideology as well. It constitutes an accelerating factor in phenomena of cultural exchange, supported by the growing efficiency of technology and the means of communication.

While the world seems to have become smaller, this does not mean that cultures themselves are “lost.” An opposite phenomenon has actually occurred: cultural atomization.

As society grows and changes, increasingly radical social forms appear among the individuals who make up specific groups. While men and women of different groups are superficially more alike, at bottom they are more complex and different, particularly in the forms of their relationships.

Thus it cannot be assumed that commerce is negative *per se*, since the determinants and effects in given societies are not the result of trade alone, but of the particular forms in which societies interact.

If two groups interact on the basis of moral equality, the existence and growth of trade reinforces links between the groups, supporting mutual cultural enrichment. It permits the groups to experiment, adapt and share their cultural forms more rapidly and forcefully.

But if one group considers the other morally inferior, viewing it as the object of domination or some

other type of inequality, trade reflects that social attitude. This would be the case, for example, with any kind of racist judgement.

Thus, in mutual relations the determining element is not trade but the vision of “ourselves” and “the other” (otherness-empathy). In any case the culture of the community continues to reproduce itself, unless one of the groups assumes an attitude of superiority, thus becoming a material threat to the culture of the other group.

Three mechanisms can effectively threaten the existence of a society’s culture:

- The physical extermination or dispersion of its members. The counterweight to this is individuals’ need to reproduce their forms of life outside their original context. Yet in such cases the given culture certainly suffers an abnormal modification, at best allowing marginal or unconscious survival but leading, over time, to the culture’s disappearance.
- “Marginalization” is another mechanism of cultural aggression, especially when it takes the form of dispossession or inequality regarding wealth or the means of production. This is also the case in politics, where the individual is denied access to channels of participation, expression or exercise of citizen rights; as well as in situations where traditions

are suppressed or outside customs are imposed.

- Racism and xenophobia are assaults on the existence of “the other” and his or her culture, and can cause any of the previously-mentioned forms of cultural aggression. Here in particular, psychological perceptions of intercultural reality come into play.

Commerce builds roads through which culture can be spread, or which can be the routes for an exodus or the march of armies. They increase the wealth which can be distributed or extracted. This involves ways of life which can be incorporated into one’s own or imposed on others.

It is difficult to predict what may happen with cultures that increasingly interact, and even more difficult to foresee, in cultural terms, what will happen with the rise in commercial relations between Mexico, Canada and the United States—especially because we are speaking of innumerable distinct societies with their own culture, traditions, and ethnic origins in diverse material conditions.

However, the material objective of the Free Trade Agreement should be that the societies involved achieve absolute, not relative, economic improvements. The moral objective should be cultural enrichment, the starting point for which is necessarily the criterion of equity in light of social diversity, on the basis of a mature historical perspective **X**

