

Reflections on Transculturation

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I think that the West —and perhaps the planet— will be bilingual. Spanish and English, which complement each other, will be the common language of humanity.

*Jorge Luis Borges
Buenos Aires, 1985*

The border between Mexico and the United States —established politically, drawn geographically and represented physically by walls and wire fences— is not as stable as it might seem, at least culturally and socially. It is a constant point of struggle and negotiation between unequal parties.

Some philosophers and historians have described the history of the world as the victory or imposition of the point of view of the strongest, describing this as the triumph of the West.¹ They also say that —culturally speaking— dominant countries tend to absorb the weaker ones, more or less painfully. This is not necessarily a law of history: it is even possible that in some cases, the victor has adapted its own culture to that of the vanquished.

The United States, our powerful neighbor, exerts very real economic and political pressure on Mexico, with the intention of expanding its domination of the market and the countries of the Americas.

Here, I will not go into the question of military invasions or the annexation of territory. Rather, I will examine something much more dangerous to our sovereignty and what can be called our homeland from the human point of view: the imposition of the cultural models of the so-called “American way of life.”

Our neighbor is also pressured by the Latino population that has flowed north and has made Spanish a second language

in the United States (although not officially and in some cases almost clandestinely). More than 20 million Spanish-speakers are bringing with them their “foreign” customs and values, despite the resistance of suspicious cowboys.

Things are not so simple nowadays. The world’s economic changes and the rapid access to information has complicated them, blurring the border.

The globalized economy not only makes us dependent on other countries, but also questions the very notion of sovereignty and eats away at the identity of nations as we know them today, as it imposes bodies and relationships that transcend borders and challenge domestic legislation, like multinational corporations, financial consortia, free trade areas, the worldwide information network, drug cartels and the contraband of goods, documents and people.

Of these phenomena, the para-national groups —some more clearly defined than others, but all with different interests and viewpoints— exert pressure on the fate of nations, without regard for their

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inhabitants' desires, laws or plans for the future. These groups impose values according to their own interests, confronting them with the traditional values of entire peoples. A particularly serious example can be found in towns and cities of the states of Sinaloa and Sonora, where drug traffickers are admired and imitated by a good part of the population, a feeling that is spreading to the rest of the country through expressions of folk culture and art like fashion and songs or through official or clandestine political groups, like the Drug Trafficking Federation.

made an attempt to stay away from the word "folklore"), this has translated into the dissolution of the "extended family" and the advent of the nuclear family, more portable and adaptable to market conditions, made up only of parents and children; a loss of interest in neighbors as people with human histories; rampant individualism as opposed to community values; sanctification of private property; work and the attainment of material wealth as the goal and meaning of life instead of the quest for happiness; and the triumph of the episodic conception

given Mexican nationality, and the foreign observers and journalists who live in La Realidad, Chiapas, whom the media were quick to vilify.

There are those who say that borders will dissolve and that, just as the small kingdoms of the Middle Ages joined to create the great nation states of today, in the future the super-states that potentially exist in the European Union and the regional free trade agreements will replace the nations of today. The trend of human history will be to give way to a global government coordinated with the aid of the new media, or, perhaps it would be better to say, controlled by Big Brother's technological apparatus.

This dream à la Billy Gates is far from being a utopia; on the contrary, it is coming into being, despite the fact that it means the total loss of many peoples' cultures, and even the total disappearance of entire peoples. As Alejandro Piscitelli says, "It is not the same to belong to the virtual communities of the North—that unplug themselves out of ennui—as to belong to those of the South, that are unplugged by privation,"² since our Latin American peoples continue to live in extreme poverty, marginalization and even conditions where traditional technologies still prevail.

The fact is that we Mexicans, as a nation, face enormous pressures on our traditional, historic values: the extended family, neighborhood solidarity, our attachment to the land, happiness as the aim of life, the respect for other people's rights, tolerance, hospitality, a taste for food, domestic rituals and the traditional, cyclical perception of time, among other things, not to mention religious values that are succumbing to lay academic ideas.

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The situation on the Mexican-U.S. border is even more chaotic because of the complexity of the make-up of the population of both countries. Pressure exerted on both sides of the border creates an area wherein values are undefined, where some use their power to make their ways of thinking and living prevail while others resist. The result is a mixture and syncretism—often very odd—that substitute old values and customs and give birth to such bizarre phenomena as "Spanglish," Thanksgiving dinners of turkey in *mole* sauce, pumpkins on altars erected for the Day of the Dead and fast food with chili peppers. Going on to less trivial matters (I have

of time over the traditional, cyclical understanding. These are to a great degree the result of substituting (more or less painfully, depending on the case) the values of the "American way of life" for traditional Mexican values.

This is reflected even in international policy, in which the tradition of hospitality, humanism and the respect for the self-determination of peoples have been lost in our foreign policy. Now, instead of receiving foreign refugees, our officials have headed up the hunt for "inconvenient" outsiders to oust them from the country. Among others, examples of this are the cases of the Mexican-born children of Guatemalan parents who were never

These pressures are exerted by all the nations immersed in the play of the global market, as well as by para-national power groups; but the strongest push comes from the North and produces particularly noticeable clashes there.

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Resistance could contribute to keeping our traditions alive, or at least to keeping a museological record of what we are losing. It could keep Mexicans together as a self-defense unit, particularly those who live on the other side of the border. However, resistance tends to isolate groups of people and separate them from the possible benefits—which do indeed exist—of change. Let us remember the example of the Apaches in the United States, segregated on reservations, or the Tuxtla indigenous community in Chiapas. What good did it do the Tuxtlas when in their pride they dashed themselves against the bottom of Sumidero Canyon?³ Nevertheless, cultural resistance is the bastion of love for the homeland. It is the immediate, natural reaction against aggression, and, therefore, the banner of many artists and cultural groups within any borders.

Integration, which seems to be the way of the Mexican government, is the opposite of resistance; it means forgetting your roots and denying your own values. It is the way of the Mexican who feels ashamed of what he or she calls “the country’s cultural backwardness” and aspires to integrate into “modern” life, “globalization,” “productive optimization,” the 600 TOEFL points, the magic of the white man. He

cannot be happy while the creators of his models do not certify his actions. He has replaced his *compadres*⁴ with business partners, reduced his family in order to better control his property; he does aerobics and has gone on a diet; he has renounced being happy to try to be a millionaire; he uses creams to lighten his skin and has decided to do absolutely anything to further his ends. This way of looking at things is less painful than resistance, but it creates a need that those who resist do not have: being accepted in a world that does not belong to you and where you do not belong.

One example of adaptation is the efforts of Chicano and Latino communities to guarantee their children bilingual and bicultural education. This has had good results in some cities, and has even won the support of U.S. authorities in places where they cannot ignore that among their constituents are 23 million Spanish speakers.

Apparently, the adage, “Know everything and pick the best,” continues to be good advice, at least for making sure that, as Borges hoped, the most valuable things of our people prevail in the future of the

The dissolution of the “extended family,” a loss of interest in neighbors as people with human histories and rampant individualism are some of the results of substituting the values of the “American way of life” for traditional Mexican values.

Lastly, adaptation implies understanding the changes in order to take advantage of them, and your own traditions and values to be able to preserve them. It goes beyond the naiveté of mere protests and shutting yourself off culturally, but it also resists giving in completely to the onslaught by the other culture.

Adaptation implies a constant evaluation and permanent negotiations with your counterpart in order to make sure the most valuable aspects of your culture prevail. Therefore, it requires an important effort of cultural dissemination of your own values, accompanied by constant research, both of which back up the fight on a societal level.

West, surviving the pressure of a dominant culture which is always—culturally speaking, of course—a threat. ■■■

NOTES

¹ For example, this is how Edmundo O’Gorman describes the way in which the “New World” was incorporated into the West in *La invención de América*. Borges has called it the victory of the barbarians.

² Alejandro Piscitelli, *Cibercultura en la era de las máquinas inteligentes* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1995).

³ The Tuxtla people threw themselves into the river at the bottom of Sumidero Canyon in Chiapas, sacrificing their lives instead of accepting defeat and Spanish domination. [Editor’s Note.]

⁴ A *compadre* is, literally, the godfather of one’s child. In Mexico, this link brings with it a series of obligations and rights similar to family ties, and, in fact, extend the family even more. [Translator’s Note.]