

Mexican Nationalism in Times Of Globalization and Multiculturalism¹

Fernando Vizcaíno Guerra*



Pedro Valterra/Cuartoscuro

I will deal mainly with state nationalism, not the nationalisms of cultural minorities, often constituted as movements against the central government and, therefore, against state nationalism. This emphasis does not mean that non-state nationalisms are not important; quite to the contrary, they must be recognized in Catalonia's cultural and linguistic policies; in the fight for the autonomy of Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland; in Chechenia or Kosovo; in Taiwan, Quebec, Mosquitia (Nicaragua); and, in general among the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

In recent years, the development of these nationalisms has been favored by the universal wave in favor of minorities, central governments' dwindling capabilities and sovereignty, and the blurring of the frontier between what belongs to a nation and what does not, between the indigenous and the universal. Also, in the social sciences, people have lost academic interest in historical nationalism and turned their attention, in contrast, to nationalism linked to ethnicity and movements for autonomy or secession. I do not follow the most traveled, fashionable road; rather, I will focus on the recent history of state nationalism, which dawned in Mexico at independence and the 1848 defeat at the hands of the United States, to see its

* Researcher at the UNAM Institute for Social Research. vizcaino@servidor.unam.mx

long day with the Reform, the Revolution and Cardenism, to the hardly defensible point when in 1982, then-President José López Portillo made his celebrated nationalist speeches, denouncing the “de-nationalists.”²

Several things justify this choice. The state, despite its transformations, is still the seat of the world order, and, therefore, nationalism will continue to be a force for preserving unity and defending what remains of sovereignty. Also, in the end, the nationalism of minorities consolidates in the form of a state. National minorities fight against the central state precisely because they are trying to build an autonomous form of government, and if possible, constitute themselves as a state.

Thus, we are talking about different phases of a single phenomenon: from the nationalism of groups who aspire to constitute themselves in states, to that of consolidated states. This idea presupposes that all communities or nations aspire, in the long or short term, implicitly or explicitly, to constitute themselves as states or as some pre-state form of government. It also implies that one of the state’s functions is nationalism, because it needs to favor solidarity, unity and the symbols of the shared identity among the members of a political community. Nationalism seeks the form of the state, and the state, in turn, that of nationalism.

I should add another—not lesser—point: in many countries, perhaps because of their authoritarian, centralist tradition, or because of the poverty of their provinces and minorities, nationalism was almost always an instrument exclusive to the state.

In Mexico it has not stopped being that, although it has been deformed;

neither has any type of ethnic or regional nationalism emerged that would threaten the integrity of the state. Sociologically or politically, the reference to nationalism implies the central government. By contrast, in Spain or in Canada, for example, nationalism is associated less with the central government and more with the pro-autonomy movements of regions like Quebec, the Basque Country or Catalonia. But the fact that the nationalism of national minorities and an academic outlook focused on it prevail is insufficient reason to supposed that state nationalism (of the Spanish State or the Canadian Federation) has stopped being significant for the preservation

**The state is still the seat
of the world order, and, therefore,
nationalism will continue
to be a force for preserving
unity and defending what
remains of sovereignty.**

of political and cultural unity. On the contrary, this nationalism seems needed when it is necessary to organize diversity, to learn to live in plurality and to preserve some form of shared identity.

For that reason, if we imagined a future scenario for Mexico with the existence of a significant regional nationalism, for example in Yucatán, or an indigenous movement that defended some model of a nation, some form of state nationalism would continue to exist.³ Thus, we are not witnessing its disappearance, but its metamorphosis, which has created new problems of interest to us.

How can we explain it in a time when unity, centralism and sovereignty are faced with the growth of democracy, federalism, diversity and links to the world?

We must recognize that academic studies about minority rights and ethnic nationalism have changed their fundamental concept. Until a few years ago, the idea that the state was an essential condition for nationalism predominated. Gellner and Hobsbawn, among others, disseminated this hypothesis.⁴ Nationalism implied state nationalism.

In the late 1970s, the hypothesis that the fundamental condition of nationalism was the nation, not the state, began to gain credence. This conception changed theory and the existence of innumerable ethnic nationalist movements was accepted. Wherever there is a nation, understood as a people or a culture, nationalism can exist, which implies, in turn, that Europe has stopped being the historic axis of how this phenomenon unfolds. Looked at like this, it is a matter of explaining nationalism once it has become a resource of the state; however, I accept that the basic condition for nationalism is not the state, but rather the nation.

Some problems arise here. The first is anchored in the issue’s recent history: how should nationalism be studied in the contemporary world, let us say from the early 1970s until today?

When I began doing research on this matter, I started from the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, both of which favored the reemergence of ethnicity and the recognition of the former Soviet nations as independent states. These transformations happened while Carlos Salinas de Gortari was presi-

dent of Mexico. This was a foundational stage for Mexico if we take into consideration the changes to Article IV of the Constitution, that recognized the multi-ethnic nature of the country; the establishment of the National Human Rights Commission; the arrival of international electoral observers; the control of elections by the citizenry; and the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Multiculturalism, democracy and globality were condensed in the history of those years, and these three factors, as I will explain, are related to the changes nationalism went through.

However, it was clear that none of these processes began in the late 1980s. Going back in time, I found, for example, that the number of international conventions signed by Mexico grew significantly as of the mid-1970s, so the 1990s international integration is the ratification of a trend. For example, in 1974, the then-minister of finance, José López Portillo, began negotiations for Mexico's joining the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT), today the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The advance of democracy in Mexico also reached a fundamental turning point in the 1977 political and electoral reform. I even agree that the democratization of Mexico is part of the world trend begun in Portugal and Spain in the middle of that decade, as Samuel Huntington suggested. And there would be a great deal to add about ethnic nationalism and the multinational state if we reviewed the history of minorities' rights since World War II.

One of the most significant facts for Latin America —a foundational fact for the reappearance of ethnicity worldwide— was the rebirth of the

ethnic movement in Nicaragua in the 1970s in the middle of the Cold War when the disintegration of the central government and the advance of the Sandinista movement gave way to the reconstitution of Mosquitia and the recognition of its autonomy. These facts led me to think in terms of a longer time, with the additional advantage that the length of the interval had allowed me to explain the changes in nationalism considering the growing presence of multiculturalism, democracy and globality.

The second problem is how we can explain the change in the characterization of the concept of nationalism. And the third problem emerges

There is a relationship between nationalism and three factors that define today's world: globality, democracy and multiculturalism. As these factors advance, state nationalism loses weight in political life.

from Mexico's specificity: how has Mexican nationalism changed in recent history?

These three problems must be examined, and I believe that Mexican nationalism should serve to illustrate the theory and to build ideas with a certain degree of abstraction, in any case, shifting between general elucidations and historic examples, in which Mexico is the most outstanding case.

Actually, there is no single factor that explains nationalism in Mexico or anywhere else in the world: neither the weakening of the state; nor the advance of democracy, which in one

of its liberal variants recognizes cultural diversity; nor the rediscovery of races or languages, which are at the root of nationalities; nor the often ephemeral intellectual utopias; nor the flow of globality, whose force has overflowed the old circles of the sovereign state.

"There is no unilateral history," wrote Braudel in the 1970s.⁵ Neither is there any homogeneous or linear history. The question, however, is whether, even if we recognize that we are facing a variable phenomenon, we can find a dominant factor that helps order the problems in time and according to a significant relationship.

In my opinion, there is a relationship between nationalism and the three factors that define today's world: globality, democracy and multiculturalism. I think that as these three factors advance, state nationalism loses weight in political life and, in turn, transforms much of its content.

The argument can begin to be developed if we return to the three problems. With regard to the first one, how to study nationalism today, I maintain that we must do so with reference to the multinational, global state and not, as some authors insist, in relation to the homogeneous, sovereign nation-state, as if it were still a closed entity or a body that moves to a single beat. Here, we touch on the arguments with regard to two other questions: how to explain the change and how it has manifested itself in Mexico. The transformations of nationalism are due to a great extent to the growing, extensive links among countries through culture and law, technology and the economy, and also, to the growing democratization and recognition of minorities.

State nationalism, specifically in Mexico, has lost many references of a

closed, self-contained, homogeneous society. In contrast, it has developed others linked to diversity, an international vocation and democracy. This does not imply the total elimination of the old reference points, as though in three decades the material or symbolic protectionist aspects of “what is Mexican,” which are the basis for mistrust of international powers, had disappeared. These processes are simultaneously contradictory and complementary. The decreasing weight of nationalism and the negation or reiteration of its contents is explained, then, by the growing dynamic that links the country to modernization (globality, democracy, diversity) and by the weakening of tradition in the form of being closed off, corporatism and uniformity. ■■

NOTES

¹ For more information about the issue, see Fernando Vizcaíno Guerra, *El nacionalismo mexicano en los tiempos de la globalización y el multiculturalismo* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2004).

² In February 1982, the president spoke of defending the Mexican peso “like a tiger,” and on September 1, during his last report to the nation, decreed the nationalization of the banking system as part of that defense. The ideas upon which he based his decision constitute a discourse representing the failed restoration of the nationalism spawned by the Mexican Revolution.

³ The question of Yucatán will be one of Mexico’s great issues in the twenty-first century. In recent years, much has been said about the self-determination of indigenous peoples due to the indigenous movement in Chiapas. But many of us had forgotten Yucatán. For a long time, Yucatán leaders considered it a region apart from the rest of Mexico. Although in 1843 federal troops put an end to the secession movement, tensions continued in the nineteenth century and up until the 1910 Revolution. Both the caste

wars and the struggles between provincial leaders and Mexico City led to instability and the natural will to secession of indigenous, mestizos and criollos alike never diminished until the first third of the twentieth century. In 1916, Carrillo Puerto called Yucatán a “Socialist Republic,” and in 1924, a movement of Mayas and mestizos once again declared independence, making Mayan the official language. In response, the federal government sent troops and re-created the territory of Quintana Roo since the separation of Campeche had not been sufficient to fragment the region. Then, many highways and schools were built in an attempt to definitively integrate the state into the federation. This was another of Lázaro Cárdenas’s great nationalist projects. However, I think the matter is not completely resolved, as was clear during the 2001 political crisis when the local Congress disobeyed the decisions of federal institutions.

⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Naciones y nacionalismo* (Mexico City: Alianza Editorial, 1991); Eric Hobsbawm, *Naciones y nacionalismo desde 1780* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1991).

⁵ Fernand Braudel, *Écrits sur l’histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1969).