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Cultural Aspects of NAFTA in Mexico

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Mexico shares with Canada one of the world's most complex and difficult neighbors: the United States. The Canadian people have three legacies: the English majority; the French, with its old separatist yearnings; and the indigenous peoples spread throughout its territory.

For more than 200 years, creating good relations with the United States without being absorbed by it has been a permanent dilemma that has made for an unpredictable, torturous game of attraction-rejection for Canada, including periods of armed clashes with the U.S.'s orig-

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inal 13 colonies. The Canadians have always fought for their identity and for being distinguished from the Americans.¹

Alan Riding, former head of the *New York Times* bureau in Mexico, says in the prologue of his book *Distant Neighbors* that probably nowhere else in the world do two countries as different as Mexico and the United States and that understand each other so little co-exist side by side. More than just by levels of development, these countries are separated by language, religion, race, philosophy and history. In addition, the United States, which has existed for a shorter time, has already entered the twenty-first century, while ancient Mexico continues subject to its past.

For the last 150 years, Mexico has felt the might of its neighbor: in the nineteenth century, half its territory fell into U.S. hands, and in the twentieth century, its economic dependence on the U.S. was consolidated, with enormous U.S. industrial, financial and commercial interests in Mexico.²

More than 500 years after the Spanish conquest, we Mexicans continue to be trapped by the contradictions that gave birth to us. It is important to recognize that the nation-state develops as it seeks a cultural identity and with the creation of its own signifiers that peoples transform and recreate throughout their history. As Montoya Martín del Campo says, “Mexicans define themselves clearly *vis-à-vis* for-

eigners and only with great difficulty *vis-à-vis* themselves.”³ As a country, Mexico has an extraordinarily rich identity, in which the ancient and the modern, the traditional and the avant garde, the indigenous and the Spanish, the Eastern and the Western all co-exist. Its complexity may reside in both the clash and the merger of these opposites.

To supplement this not-so-loving triangle among the countries of North America, J.J. Fonseca points out that the United States is the richest, most powerful, bellicose, capricious and mixed-race country in the world, since the migration of people without hope, in need and persecuted from Europe was the basis for its productive strength and wealth; but also, every immigrant brought with him or her the age-old customs of his/her place of origin, including the language. So, the Poles, Russians, English, Italians, Chinese, French and Jews, among others, contributed to making up today’s *gringo* in just two generations.

Traditions in the United States are of relatively recent making. Among its cultural icons we find very few liberators and more gunmen (Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Dillinger, Al Capone), and some empty spaces are filled with sports stars or entertainers. Advertising has created and standardized a mass media culture in which actors are successful candidates for public office. Everyone has seen them on television and at the movies and nothing more is needed.

It is very common for U.S. advertisers to take events, values or symbols from other cultures and distort them to make them funny, convincing or pleasant for the people their publicity is aimed at.⁴

All of this is watched over by the Judeo-Christian god of the majority and by laws and precepts that do not always manage to impose loyalty and obedience. When all else fails, the system has the electric chair.

There are relatively few studies about Mexico’s trade partners in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), that, compared to Europe, although they have not existed very long, place value on their history: “Euro Disney offers a summary of the U.S. utopia by depicting the four myths of its historic rise: in the nineteenth century, conquest and adventure; in the twentieth century, fantasy and discovery. From East to West Coast, the four have the same root and speak to us of the same desire; travel in time and space, the ever-retreating border that responds to the contemporary challenge of astronauts, rockets and satellites; both broaden out space, a new history that brings together candor, innocence and violence.”⁵

Recently we have seen the unification of national states into confederations to deal with global problems surpassing their individual capabilities; one example is the creation of supranational bodies like the European Union. Equally, we see that free trade

agreements are also forged to deal with economic globalization. NAFTA is a treaty set up to facilitate the purchase and sale of industrial and agricultural products among the three countries of North America, gradually eliminating tariffs or duties paid on products that enter another country and establishing the norms to be respected by producers as well as mechanisms for solving differences that may arise.⁶ It also included rules for the purchase and sale of services: land transport, telecommunications, professional services and those of banks and insurance companies. Today, this exchange, which is unequal for Mexico *vis-à-vis* its trade partners, comes to millions of dollars and 11 years after its coming into effect, there is talk of the need to reformulate some chapters.

However, Mexico's asymmetry with its NAFTA partners has forced it into a necessarily subordinate role *vis-à-vis* the United States' economic, political and military strength and Canada's economic development and relatively greater wealth. In contrast with the European process, in NAFTA these asymmetries are very important with regard to production, technology, per capita output and wage levels. In addition, the scope of the two integration projects is qualitatively different, as are the motivations of the nations. While the European countries seek to accelerate their integration to constitute a mega-nation in this century, the United States conceives of itself as a self-sufficient pole



Iván Stephens/Cuartoscuro

that is pulling in its wake the rest of the hemisphere with its cultural "backwardness," its histories, its religions, its educational, production and political deficits; and it considers Canada part of its own European and American legacy.⁷

In his article "Duración de la eternidad" (The Duration of Eternity), Carlos Monsiváis writes, "Culture is what firms up links, keeps barbarism away and distributes goods."⁸ Without denying the validity of this statement, we would add that culture is broad enough to include everything produced by Man, the sum of all knowledge, ways of life and, according to anthropology, the repertoire of each specialized area of knowledge; what is particular to groups, individual behavior, artistic tendencies, the national wealth, in which we would

include master works, creators, programs and educational projects.

Mexico forcibly and completely opening itself up for the first time implied changes on all levels, including the cultural. The awareness that we have entered a new century has had an impact on the psyche of the entire world's population, including Mexicans, and worldwide today, practices and customs, conventions and treaties are being questioned. With the end of the Cold War, continues Monsiváis, "Pluralism flourished, with, however, two facets: a pride in our own identity and another facet, resentful of old humiliations that certain ethnic groups, nations or cultures have perpetrated against minorities or those weaker than they."⁹

The disappearance of the bi-polar world is clear in the twenty-first cen-

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tury's international order, which is diverse, a sign of the post-modern perspective that is visible above all in the political and economic side of cultural industries, which generate products that, in addition to being commodities, are forgers of identities and models of behavior (I am referring here to film, the publishing and recording businesses, radio and television).

In matters of culture, the European, Asian and American continents will have to more effectively abide by the Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice. This human rights instrument states that culture, a product and patrimony of all of humanity, and education in its broadest sense, provide more effective means for adaptation, which

not only let people know that they are born equal in terms of their human dignity and rights, but that the right of all groups to having and developing a cultural identity and life must be respected.¹⁰

The constitution of a culture and system of values for all peoples and nations, including Mexicans, is the result of a historic struggle for the right to freely express their way of being, maintain their idiosyncracies and particularities. With globalization and the advance of technology, will we preserve our place and identity? **MM**

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NOTES

¹ Antonio Ávila Díaz, "Carta de Montreal, Canadá. La difícil vecindad," *Nexos* (Mexico City), April 1992.

² Alan Riding, *Vecinos distantes. Un retrato de los mexicanos* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1985).

³ Alberto Montoya Martín del Campo, "Apuntes para entender el posicionamiento de México ante la actual circunstancia histórica mundial," *Globalización y sociedad civil* vol. 2, no. 2, 1996, p. 43.

⁴ J.J. Fonseca, "Réquiem para B.F. Skinner. Los conductistas también mueren," *Ovaciones* (Mexico City), August 22, 1990.

⁵ Jean Claude Masson, "De Miguel Ángel a Mickey Mouse. La vuelta de los días," *Vuelta* (Mexico City), March 1993, p. 61.

⁶ *¿Qué es el TLC?* (Mexico City: Secofi, 1992), p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸ Carlos Monsiváis, "Duración de la eternidad. Cultura: todo lo que usted quiso saber sin apagar la tele," *Nexos*, no. 172, p. 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ <http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/race.html> consulted February 17, 2005. [Editor's Note.]