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Topics and Challenges in 30 Years Of North American Studies A Three-way Conversation

For 30 years, the CISAN has had a central objective: generating original, cutting-edge knowledge that explains the political, economic, social, and cultural dynamics of the North American Region. Its mission and object of study have become important because phenomena like globalization and the creation of regional blocs of countries have strengthened and become hegemonic. The center has also transitioned through different visions about what research should be, and more particularly, what research about North America should be. Its four women directors and one male director have each

contributed her/his own style and contributed to enriching the pluralist, multi-diverse vocation that has characterized it since its foundation.

Pluralism and diversity may well be the values that are the common thread running through the scientific work of a center that took on the task of using an interdisciplinary approach to studying a concrete reality, countering to a certain extent the paradigms that existed three decades ago in the social sciences and international relations: the creation of North America as a regional, supra-national unit, which even then already displayed high levels of interdependence among its three countries.

Pluralism and diversity were the research horizons. This has led to creating a very heterogeneous academic community, whose members come from very different

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disciplines and training backgrounds and also defend very different theoretical and epistemological positions, using considerably dissimilar methodologies and approaches. “We know about the commitment we have to the country, which encourages us not only to cultivate ideological pluralism, but also pluralism in the methodologies that can be used at the center. And, of course, all its members enjoy freedom of research, of selecting the epistemological approaches that best fit their topics and aims,” says Dr. Juan Carlos Barrón, a researcher at CISAN since 2012 and today its academic secretary.

In this context, *Voices of Mexico* began a conversation with some of the researchers who most recently joined the CISAN, or, in other words, with some of the representatives of the new generation of specialists who have come in to bring a breath of fresh air and consolidate with their contributions the trajectory of an academic institution that posed very complex challenges for itself from the very beginning. One of these researchers is Dr. Barrón, a specialist in the media in North America and promotor of what has been called critical theory as a theoretical-methodological tool for analyzing social phenomena. The second participant in the conversation is Oliver Santín Peña, the coordinator of the Strategic Studies Area, already a renowned expert on Canada, particularly its political and party systems, one of whose most recent contributions has been the study of the specific form that the Westminster system adopted in the Canadian Parliament. The third voice in this conversation is Roberto Zepeda Martínez, who inaugurated the line of inquiry about diplomacy at the center, and who today is one of the most outstanding Mexican scholars studying the role played by subnational actors in world and North American governance. Zepeda’s most recent book analyzes precisely the multiple relationships—above all economic, but also political, social, and cultural—that Canadian provinces undertake with their counterparts, the states in the United States and Mexico, and with equivalent sociopolitical actors in other parts of the world. We exchanged views with all three of them about the CISAN’s achievements in the last 30 years, as well as about the expectations, pending tasks, and relevance of continuing to promote this strategic area of study.

VM (Voices of Mexico): The celebrations and festivities surrounding the CISAN’s 30-year anniversary lead us to retrospectively analyze the research that has been

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done here. You joined the center relatively recently and are collaborating with new voices, innovative topics, and different points of view about the research. In that sense, could you please tell us how you perceive the center’s past, current, and future research from the viewpoint of your topics?

RZ (Roberto Zepeda): I would start by underlining that in the last 30 years, from 1989 to 2019, there have also been huge changes globally. I would emphasize the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, the rise of globalization, and the creation of regional blocs, which is the case of North America, which in this three-decade period negotiated, signed, and put into operation NAFTA. This allowed certain actors who previously had not been part of international relations to play a more outstanding role; this is very clear, for example, for Canada’s provinces. I think that these big transformations in the region allow us as researchers to identify and analyze these kinds of dynamics, and, in my particular case, subnational dynamics, as an important part in relations among Mexico, the United States, and Canada. We didn’t have this kind of approach 30 years ago, and now we do. Now, we stress these subnational relations more.

JCB (Juan Carlos Barrón): These actors are also present in my line of investigation. Roberto and I both participate in a seminar about emerging actors. We call them that because, when North America, NAFTA, etc., were born, people often supposed—above all the public—that the region was made up of three monolithic countries. However, Mexico has a huge diversity of cultures and actors, whether they be political, shall we say, state or public, and private or business. And the same is true for Canada and the United States. In that sense, Roberto’s work and mine complement each other in that seminar, where we can observe how certain interactions, for example between Arizona and Sonora or between California and

Baja California, and others, with a certain logic —let’s say, a twentieth-century logic— would have been considered actions by local actors. Actually, today, they have an impact on the international sphere, and emerge forcefully as the integration of the region deepens. And this isn’t just economic integration, but also cultural integration. Recently, someone asked me if we could make suggestions about Mexico’s northern border. I responded by asking where we would situate that: in Tijuana, in Illinois, in East Los Angeles, or in the territory where agricultural day-laborers work in Canada. That is, we’re increasingly aware that this idea of the three monolithic states that interact with each other doesn’t really correspond to the region’s complexity; and that other actors, like the Canadian provinces, or U.S. and Mexican state governments, but also, for example, media corporations that have promoted telecommunications, the social networks, the Internet, television channels, etc., also participate in this regional governance.

VM: The same thing happens in art, for example, the collective of painters and graphic artists from Tijuana with San Diego. They are much closer to each other than to New York, which is where the galleries, the exhibitions are, and they’re both very far away from Mexico City. This is very interesting because it touches on all spheres of activity, and I imagine that it will also promote new research epistemologies.

RZ: That’s right. That’s why I think that what this shows is that the current context is very different from the one that existed 30 years ago, and that necessarily has to affect research agendas from different approaches. It seems to me that the CISAN is fulfilling that objective in a very diverse, interdisciplinary way. This identifies us as a center that enriches the publications about North America and, above all shows that our researchers contribute to a better understanding of that reality. I’d also

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add to what Juan Carlos said that this new group of actors contributes to a new form of governance, another of the fundamental issues in my project, and that today there’s also a more complex international system, different from the one we had: we have gone from the bipolar Cold War world to a unipolar world commanded by the United States in the 1990s, and in the last two decades, to a multipolar world. That’s why this complex, heterogeneous international system, as Dr. Barrón pointed out, allows other actors to intervene in international relations. Today, they go beyond the foreign policies designed by central governments; that’s what I have called governance. This model is replicated on other levels, even at the UNAM: today, our university is part of an intense interaction with other universities abroad through agreements that allow us to also interact with professors from the United States and Canada. With them, we have common research agendas and also generate publications from Mexico, which are obviously complemented by the projects originating in Canada and the United States. Because of all of this, the CISAN has become one of the regional leaders in studies of North America.

JCB: In my opinion, most of the researchers (both men and women) at CISAN have sought to apply the most cutting-edge innovative methodologies, and epistemologies in general. In my case, the first challenge I faced was to realize that, even though my research dealt with a very important issue, the communications media, the methodologies available were in different disciplines individually, like communications, politics, geopolitics, etc. But, that comprehensive, interdisciplinary vision that the CISAN requires for understanding regional space in a complex way did not exist. In that sense, my first challenge was to design a new theoretical framework. It was very important to develop it because I was faced with a practical problem: I did not have a clear methodology for studying the media. This new theoretical and methodological proposal, which I continue to work with and I have called “critical socio-cybernetics,” is basically the fusion of two epistemologies that usually operate separately and which I am now attempting to merge. On the one hand there’s socio-cybernetics, the application of systems theory to the understanding of how social systems are led. This is because, for me, it was important to prove that the system of communications media functions with a leadership; it is run; that certain factors weigh more for things

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to go in one direction or another. On the other hand, I also based myself on some of the axioms and postulates of “critical theory,” a series of diverse, heterogeneous authors who attempt to understand how power relations operate in different contexts. In this way, I use variations of the dialectic method, of psychoanalysis, or schizoanalysis, and this helps us get the idea that the communications media are, on the one hand, an immense communications network, as systems theory postulates, but that we cannot view as a non-political system. Rather, they have broad influence, an agenda, a will that they impose on us and, at the same time, that integrates us little by little as a region, precisely because of the weight of the U.S. actors. This is because, more and more, both Canada and Mexico are huge consumer markets for U.S. cultural products, but also, things become more complex, since, increasingly, Mexican actors emerge who want to participate in that market, such as the film industry, photography, or art galleries. Paradoxically, if we look at this from a purely economic perspective, we could get things wrong by thinking that we’re dealing with the domination of the region. But, when we observe carefully, we realize that there’s a dialectical interaction in which, of course, the relationships of power are not even. But processes of Latinization and Mexicanization definitely exist, not only in territorial terms, but also in terms of cultural products or of how the Internet is used (web pages, memes, movies, etc.). What we have in the last analysis is a huge diversity of issues that make up the media system, thus creating a series of theoretical and methodological problems. In my case, this has served to collaborate with other colleagues in our center who have already ventured into trying to apply some of the methodological hypotheses that I work with; and so, we get a look at how they function and we adjust them as we move forward. The important thing regarding our research at CISAN is that a wide range of approaches exists. This means that next to very orthodox

work and more stable or well-known research methods, we also find research projects that try to create new routes to not only understand phenomena as such, but also to propose specific ways of understanding the region’s concrete issues.

VM: Roberto, we know you have highlighted and would agree with two very important points about the evolution of research at the CISAN: one is the interrelation of regional actors as an object of study, their transversal nature; and the other is interdisciplinarity as a methodological approach. These two aspects were most certainly difficult to conceive of and implement in the early days of the center, perhaps because the paradigms of the era did not require them as much since these issues were not on the table for discussion.

RZ: Yes, I think that a great deal of freedom exists to do research at the center, to recombine diverse quantitative research methods from an interdisciplinary framework that enriches the publications, to understand social phenomena, which are very complex, in the framework of Mexico, U.S., Canadian relations. I think that, in this sense, the center fulfills its function of producing knowledge for understanding these dynamics that characterize the different regional relationships: Mexico-United States, United States-Canada, Canada-Mexico. North America is a varied mosaic in which an analysis from a national perspective would leave us with many doubts. That’s why it’s important to look at what’s happening in the regions, the cities, the states, with a magnifying glass. California isn’t the same as Texas, even though both are border states and two of the United States’ biggest economies. But, they have very different characteristics from other equally important state or regional economies like New York, Illinois, or Florida, or the Great Lakes economic region. That’s why I’ve opted for using an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond the theories and tools available in the disciplines of international relations, which can sometimes become a straitjacket for understanding those processes. I also use an eclectic perspective that combines different disciplines with the aim of answering the main questions put forward in my research project.

VM: Undoubtedly the issue of emerging actors in the North American regional dynamic is one of the innovations that the CISAN can boast of. This is an issue that contributes new ways of understanding phenomena and even new terms that didn’t exist 30 years ago. In this con-

ceptual evolution, Oliver Santín, it seems that you have strengthened and made important contributions to the study of Canada. How would you describe this evolution of Canadian studies at the CISAN? How did you become part of it, with what project?

OS (Oliver Santín): I first came into contact with the CISAN in 1994 and 1995, when NAFTA had only recently come into effect. It was then that the center decided to take Canada more into consideration, which coincided with my interest in doing a bachelor's thesis about Canada and its relations with Central America. Since then, I've observed how the center has dealt with more specific topics in different fields about Canada. Since I joined the CISAN in 2011, we have sought to institutionally diversify studies about Canada, so that they aren't dealt with solely from a political perspective or as a regional actor. Some colleagues who recently joined CISAN, whose objects of study are not mainly focused on Canada, do touch on Canadian studies from different viewpoints. I myself have focused particularly on the study of the Canadian political system, since I'm convinced that to understand how that country's political operators function, beyond what we see in the media or from a non-specialized academic viewpoint, we must of necessity know the origins of how they carry out that political operation. That's why, recognizing that for some time now studies have been done on the issue, my efforts have concentrated above all in trying to analyze Canada's parliamentary structure, which is very complicated. Parliamentarism is a very old system, but it's also very complex. That's why understanding its customs and traditions is important, but above all, what's noteworthy about that system is that, despite its being very old, it is still relevant, and it even modernizes constantly, adapting with certain facility to change. It's very important to know about Canada's parliamentarism, since all Westminster parliamentary systems basically operate in the same way; and that's the interesting thing, because, by studying the Canadian system, you also learn how the British, Australian, New Zealand, and all Commonwealth systems work in general. That's one of my objectives: fully understanding and disseminating the background about Canada's political system so researchers who follow can concentrate on interpreting their current realities. It seems to me that it's a complicated task because it demands that you have a command of topics like the Commonwealth

system or British common law, and you have to study them in their original sources.

For these and other reasons, I think we're pioneers in Canadian studies in Mexico. For example, we generated a conceptual framework; we created concepts like the "Canadianologist," that even Canadians were somewhat surprised at. They're concepts that we handle quite naturally because we've worked on the issue for more than 25 years. In short, the work I've done in the Canada area is, above all, creating conceptual and theoretical frameworks. That is to say, we're just setting out on a road that includes many opportunity areas and possibilities for study, which would require the effort of many colleagues. And we'll move along it little by little. I'm sure that in the future, the center will not only remain in the avant-garde of Canadian studies, but will grow significantly, because these are part of what the country needs, and, in addition, they are very linked to studies about the United States.

VM: How has the research you do—in many senses pioneering research—had an impact on our relations with the Canadian government, with the embassy, with colleagues from other universities?

OS: The value added we have at CISAN is that we deal with domestic U.S. and Canadian issues from a Hispanic—and especially a Mexican—perspective, and that definitely helps us look at things from another point of view. From the conversations I've had with government officials or other scholars of Canadian politics, I have seen that my ideas are very revealing to them. The concepts we've developed, the positions I hold, my visions of the future, are usually very well accepted. But that's not because I'm some kind of magician, but because it's a very traditionalist system, it leaves very little room for improvisation. That is, Canada and the United States are politically very predictable.

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Making statements about the U.S. or Canadian political system from Mexico surprises academics and other social actors in those countries very much. This is, first, because they have a tendency to be egocentric; they think, “We study ourselves; nobody knows about our political systems like we do.” I argue that, of course, this has a certain degree of validity, since we could say, for example, that nobody knows the Mexican Revolution better than Mexican historians. But the fact is that there are also U.S. and European historians who are very good at their jobs, perhaps precisely because they have that different viewpoint that distances them from the national researchers. That characteristic is value added that our center, our university, contributes to U.S. and Canadian studies. The proof is that many academic bodies invite us to participate in projects; and more and more media outlets and other actors see us as a reference point precisely because, since its origins, the CISAN has been an innovative, unique academic institution that has always been open to different branches of study. Others here have already pointed out the multidisciplinary activity as the center’s methodological vocation. I also think that something that has helped a great deal in its evolution is that it doesn’t stay bogged down in the same issues and the same approaches. In fact, I’ve seen that it reinvents itself with each change in direction, and this opens up new opportunities. This isn’t a weakness. On the contrary, I think this characteristic is an added value because when you have colleagues from different disciplines, the new academic authority who comes on the scene has assorted elements available to her/him that he or she can use to move her/his project forward. In that sense, the center is reinventing itself constantly, and, even though it’s small, it has big, big potential. Personally, I think it has a spectacular future.

JCB: I’d like to address just how very deep-rooted stereotypes can be. For example, in other university spaces, it’s still common to hear people talk about U.S. citizens as “North Americans.” Well, aren’t Canadians North Americans? I think that this helps us to show that at this center

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we’ve built our distinctions. We know when we’re referring to Canada it’s not the same to talk about Quebec as it is to talk about Toronto, about Ontario, Vancouver, Alberta, or Saskatchewan. This is the case, for example, of Oliver Santín, who is leading a project that allows us to deal with these different visions about orthodox and conservative political functioning in Canada. In my case, I joined this project through the study of how the Canadian media system functions, as a system that is completely different from the U.S. system. Perhaps it resembles the British system a little, but it also has its particularities because they have television, radio, a publishing industry that works for them and they’re supported from the provinces. They’re not just one more element inside a corporation with capitalist interest, like what happens in the United States. Rather, they try to be similar to certain cultural projects that exist elsewhere, like in France or the United Kingdom. And that’s why it’s noteworthy that I can join a project of this kind through the construction of a frame of reference that allows us to deal with problems not only from the political sphere, but also from the spheres of the environment, elections, the media, and cultural products and industries. This puts us on the cutting edge in practical terms of this kind of studies. The other aspect that differentiates us from others is the CISAN’s identity as an innovative space. It makes us different from other regional research studies centers even in the UNAM itself, that focus their attention on things that have already happened—we do this, of course, when necessary—, a focus that means that they concentrate on issues from the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries as a priority. The CISAN has managed to take advantage of this avant-garde vocation in its very issues, and, for that reason, its members continually appear in newspapers, on news programs, and at press conferences. Journalists call them for analyses, for example, of what is happening regarding the U.S. presidency in real time, or what’s going on in U.S. and Canadian elections. So, not only do we recognize the importance of work like Oliver Santín’s, which allows us to create a historic precedent and understand how certain dynamics have operated from their beginnings, but at the same time we respond to the challenge of analyzing what’s going on, for example, this very week. This media participation of the CISAN also distinguishes us as an innovative center. We’re not a center looking only backward, which is undoubtedly

necessary for research, but we're also responding to the challenge of taking the risk of contemporary analysis, a prospective analysis. This interaction with journalists and with the events as they happen pressures us to come up with other ways of doing research. It poses new questions about our own work that force us to maintain a lively dialogue with today's society. On the other hand, our connection to other schools at the university, with the students, also allows us to dialogue with young people who were born just 18 years ago, before events like the fall of the Berlin Wall, or even before the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York, and for whom, then, these events seem remote. That's why at the CISAN, we have also decided to innovate with new communication strategies. How do you explain the historic changes taking place in the United States or Canada to someone who doesn't know that Justin Trudeau comes from a long family line of politicians or who doesn't know that Donald Trump made his money in real estate, but began his television career in U.S. wrestling? These kinds of questions help us to keep our capacity for dialogue fresh, because these young people question us with their freshness, their criticisms.

RZ: I'd like to add that the presence of CISAN in the media speaks to its fulfilling a leadership role, not just in the scientific, teaching community, but also in the

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mass media, and now, also in the electronic media. Clearly, this also speaks to the quality of our research and that we have the ability to transmit it to radio listeners and TV viewers, who are a heterogeneous audience. In that sense, the pertinent question is how do we get that knowledge out there to all audiences, because we don't just give an opinion: we generate public opinion through knowledge obtained through scientific research. This guarantees the validity of CISAN members' comments during elections or international crises. The fact that we're sought out already indicates the high level we've achieved.

Our activities and publications are also complemented with teaching. For example, I give classes on North America and international relations, and I use my publications based on my work at the center for my courses. This way, the center contributes on a daily basis to the university's main substantive activities (research, teaching, dissemination, and training of human resources). Our university, the UNAM, is the most important in Latin America. This helps position the CISAN as a leading center, for example, in the acquisition of bibliography. This is fundamental because it generates an academic debate that the CISAN is part of, because not only do we disseminate our research, but we also actively participate in international journals because we publish in English. In fact, our academic journal *Norteamérica* includes articles in English, which facilitates that you're read by other researchers in different parts of the world, who then cite your work.

OS: I think that we should take into account that belonging to a public university implies that there's a very important social commitment. So, the fact that the immense majority of the material we consult is in English speaks precisely to the result of a public investment to the benefit of society, because most young people don't read English, but might be interested in this content, and we can facilitate it for them through our books and articles published in Spanish, analyzing and, above all, interpreting this knowledge generated in other languages, but from our own perspective. It's a commitment that

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the university itself has to its potential readers, who first must be its own students and then the general public.

JCB: One thing that should be underlined is that the CISAN supports students in its social service programs;¹ there, they can acquire professional skills related to research and publications. When they work with specialists in the different issues involved in North America, they're motivated to learn English and French. As part of one of the most important universities in Latin America, we must publish in English; in addition, a large part of the informational inputs we use are in that language. But at the same time, it's true that we have a commitment to Mexico's Spanish-speaking community. We almost always think of North America as English-speaking, but it also has an important Spanish-speaking component. In fact, the United States is the country with the second-largest Spanish-speaking population, after Mexico. In a certain way, this discussion connects to the question: Why is it important to study the United States and Canada in Mexico? Why not put more resources into researching other topics apparently more linked to Mexican interests? I would argue that we cannot situate ourselves in the world separately, outside what happens in the United States. What happens to us as a country is to a large extent linked to what happens in the United States and in other parts of the world. That's why situating and understanding the multiple facets of our position in the world is a matter of national interest.

On the other hand, freedom in research allows us, for example, to ensure that at our institutional seminar we see the very diverse forms of posing a single topic. There are those, of course, who present tables, frequencies, variations, and modes inherent to their objects of study, but there are also those of us who focus more on the symbols, the narratives, the representations; and, amidst all of this, we get the unbeatable opportunity of doing plural and interdisciplinary work about the region.

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It's true that there are many U.S. studies centers in the United States itself and many on Canadian issues in Canada. There are also some U.S.-issues centers in Canada and several centers in Canada and the United States that focus on Mexican studies. But, we're the only one in the entire region that does trilateral research: we study Canada and the United States and their relations with Mexico, and our colleagues from other centers are always surprised by this perspective. It turns out that they focus almost everything bi-directionally. But we make the effort to delimit the specifically trilateral and these phenomena—whatever they are, from how politics works to ratings for a Netflix series—offer us a different, broader view about the North American region.

RZ: I don't want to let the opportunity go by without underlining the atmosphere of freedom that exists at the center to do original, novel research; the atmosphere of respect and tolerance that allows us to generate and participate in an international theoretical and academic debate.

We also have the popular magazine *Voices of Mexico*, published in English, with its international projection, because it's read in other countries and is on line, plus the peer-reviewed journal *Norteamérica*, which includes articles in French, English, and Spanish.

JCB: One of the things I enjoy the most is when I have a chance to shock an audience when they ask me to talk about Latin America and I start by talking about our interaction with Quebec and how to fight this idea that Latin America is only to the south. And then I go on with the statement that there's a Latin America in Canada and another in the United States. This kind of geographic identity is not as clear when we do interdisciplinary studies; in that sense, the case of Canada is quite noteworthy, where, for example, speaking French is an incredibly important element in the Quebec identity, but it's also part of how Canada projects itself to the world. Paradoxically, our interaction with Quebec is so prolific precisely because they're also Latinos. ■■■

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Note

¹ The UNAM requires its students to perform social services for six months in order to graduate with a bachelor's degree; this social service can be done in a variety of places, including the CISAN. (Translator's Note.)



Paz Consuelo Márquez-Padilla*

Thirty Years at the CISAN: An Academic and Personal Journey

This contribution to the commemorative issue of *Voices of Mexico* dedicated to the CISAN's first 30 years will trace an internal journey to discover the roads—at times twisting and turning, but definitely happy ones—that have led me to my current research. I studied my bachelor's in sociology at the UNAM, an exceptional academic space where I had outstanding teachers like Dr. Víctor Flores Olea, Dr. Arnaldo Córdoba, Dr. Luis Salazar, and Dr. Gustavo Sáinz. I later did a master's degree in sociology at the University of Tulane in New Orleans. There I discovered and consolidated my interest in political sociology, which is why I later asked to be admitted to the Political Science Department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where I was

accepted. At that renowned university I also had extraordinary teachers: Joshua Cohen and Charles Sabel, who motivated me to participate in academic discussions of the highest level, and with whom I forged close friendships. Both were central figures in my education because of the passion and dedication they brought to each of their classes, and above all because they were two thinkers who have always been on the cutting edge of the production of knowledge in the social sciences. My gratitude to them is immense. I also took classes with prestigious professors like Walter Dean Burnham, Susanne Berger, and Thomas Ferguson. Peter Smith and John Womack, two distinguished teachers at MIT and Harvard respectively, helped me open up perspectives in research. In addition, I had the incomparable opportunity to take class from Noam Chomsky, who introduced me to the inquisitive attitude needed for finding data. Curiously, certain other professors recom-

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The general distrust of the United States also meant that people had misgivings about those of us interested in deepening our knowledge of that country, but it was fundamental to study the social dynamics and historic processes of our neighbor to the north.

mended that I only take courses about Latin America, but I rebelled and signed up for some courses about politics and U.S. political thought. This awakened in me a whole new area of interest. My experience at MIT was wonderful also because of my schoolmates, with whom I enjoyed long hours of memorable conversations. The final result of this adventure was my becoming a doctoral candidate.

It was in that year, 1982, that I returned to Mexico. Almost immediately, I was presented with the marvelous opportunity of being hired by Dr. Germán Pérez del Castillo, at what was then the Center of Political Studies (CEP) of the School of Political and Social Sciences. This filled me with satisfaction, and I will always be profoundly grateful to him for opening the doors to me of our university, the wonderful UNAM. The seminars he organized and the publications he coordinated were the basis for the CEP's very high academic level.

When I began giving classes at the School of Political and Social Sciences, I centered on political theory courses, a topic that has always fascinated me. I should mention that when I was pregnant with my first child, Juan, I took the exam for the permanent teaching job and won the post. Some of us professional women can't separate our academic work from our family obligation; it's the balance between the two that allows us to deepen our research.

At that time, I realized that the bachelor's program didn't include courses about the United States; so, I decided to give a course with that content. The general distrust of the United States also meant that people had misgivings about those of us interested in deepening our knowledge of that country. In a certain way, they were avoiding an imperious need, regardless of the ideological position they defended, to recognize that it was fundamental to study the social dynamics and historic processes of our neighbor to the north. That's why I firmly insisted, until they accepted, that they open up a space for a course on the United States. They also appointed me the coordinator of the new area of studies about the United States so that I would organize lectures on the topic.

It was in that period that Mónica Vereá contacted me to organize a congress with scholars and people interested in the U.S. The idea was to find in the UNAM's enormous academic diversity researchers who, each from his or her own discipline, would deal with issues linked to the United States. Starting with those first efforts, the authorities proposed that Mónica present a proposal to form a center. She invited Raúl Benítez Manaut, Luis González Souza, Teresina Gutiérrez Haces, and myself to participate in it. We met to design a common project, each contributing from our different visions. That's why the center was a pioneer in fostering an interdisciplinary research perspective.

Finally, in 1989, the Center for Research on the United States of America (CISEUA) was created, and Mónica invited me to come on board as her academic secretary. Already having had my second daughter, Paz Consuelo, I accepted the challenge. That was how Mónica as the director and myself launched ourselves into the arduous task of consolidating a new academic body in the UNAM. This implied, among other things, establishing national and international contacts and getting funding and other kinds of support from some of the most important existing foundations. It should be mentioned here that some of the new researchers were already familiar with the United States, but others were only armed with the desire and willingness to learn about this important topic. So, Mónica and I took on the by no means simple task of fostering the professional training of the new academics in this area. To do that, we organized seminars and international congresses on the highest level. Later, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect in 1994, the field of study had to be broadened out in order to better understand the region. That was when we became the Center for Research on North America (CISAN).

While I was at MIT, a book by philosopher and Harvard professor John Rawls came out that would have an enormous impact on universal political thinking. Philoso-

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phers no longer dared to talk about the big issues, and Rawls did just that in a foundational, revolutionary way in his *A Theory of Justice*. Joshua Cohen, my professor for an MIT course on political thought, was one of his favorite students, and it was precisely he who introduced me to Rawls's body of work, undoubtedly marking my intellectual development forever. At that time, all the universities in the United States and in many others throughout the world, courses were given about that great work. And, of course, entire academic discussions in the main academic journals of the time hinged on one point, a certain section, or one of the conclusions of that book, which inaugurated the new political philosophy. My husband, Juan Rebolledo, was lucky enough to be Rawls's assistant for a time, so the discussions in our little apartment in Harvard's Peabody building also hinged on this topic. All this was a huge challenge for me.

The classes that I began giving in the Graduate Division of the School of Political and Social Sciences dealt with U.S. political thought, and this became my main academic interest. I am fascinated by another foundational text, *The Federalist Papers*, which contains the keys to understanding the United States. From there also stemmed my later decision to study U.S. federalism and in general spend my career researching U.S. politics and elections. This field always keeps me up to date, since I've always managed to be prepared to offer clear, timely answers to the many demands constantly made upon us by the media.

When I became CISAN director in 1997, my third child, Pablo, was the one who understood the juggling I had to do to be everywhere at once. My project as director was to continue and consolidate researcher training. To do that, we organized international seminars on different issues; they were not only well attended, but they also resulted in products that would have an acknowledged influence on North American studies in our country. The fundamental idea was to achieve better communication among researchers by offering them topics they could

analyze from their specific perspectives, their disciplines, or their areas of interest. That is, to ensure that interdisciplinary work produced more profound knowledge.

One of those seminars focused on the study and discussion of U.S. foreign policy toward different regions and nations. Another zeroed in on the bilateral relations between Mexico and the United States, analyzing in depth the different topics on the agenda. Yet another important topic we dealt with was globalization. We also organized a congress that convened specialists on the United States and Canada from Latin America at which our aim was to bring together the different visions from the South of the two nations. To our surprise, the response by Latin American academics was extensive.

Finally, with regard to my own research at that time, "the new federalism," I convened and brought together several of the main specialists in the federal systems of the United States, Canada, and Mexico for a seminar. It turned out to be fascinating because few academics knew about the federalism in the other two countries. The dynamics of the sessions were very open and critical, facilitating all of us learning a great deal about the realities of the others and deepening our overall understanding about the region and its common dynamics. We had the opportunity of making comparisons and sharing reflections about the contributions of each of the federal systems, as well as the influence of federalism in general on each of the three political systems. I remember another very pleasant, productive event, the course we organized about the U.S. Congress and its fundamental role in that country's politics. To our satisfaction, it was very well received, and to our surprise, even Mexican senators and deputies came, interested in learning about the topic. At that time, Mexico's Congress was gradually beginning to play its role of counterweight, above all because a long period was beginning in which no party or coalition had an absolute majority.

At the end of my period as director of the Center for Research on North America, I decided to take up a task

that I had left pending: getting my doctorate. That is when I joined the Graduate Program at the UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences to take up my doctoral studies with a specialty in international relations. I wrote my thesis in the general area of U.S. political thought; it centered on the presentation of a federalist proposal for international justice based on the ideas of that country's different thinkers, especially John Rawls. That effort would culminate in the publication of my book, *Justicia internacional: ideas y reflexiones* (International Justice: Ideas and Reflections). For several years now, I have organized and coordinated in that same field the module dedicated to the political dynamics of the North American region and also taught its sessions on U.S. political thought, as part of the renowned diploma course on North America conceived and coordinated at the CISAN by its first director, Mónica Vereá Campos.

My vocation and interest in understanding better and better each day the region of North America and contributing to the understanding of Mexico's place in it, as well as participating in the dissemination among specialized audiences, niches of experts, and the general public of all the knowledge generated at the center led me to accept two of the responsibilities that have brought me the most satisfaction and joy in my journey through the history of the CISAN. For about three years, I was the director of the popular magazine *Voices of Mexico*; I must say, this was one of the jobs that I have most enjoyed in my professional career. And, more recently, I also acted as the editor-in-chief of the peer-reviewed journal *Norteamérica*. This was a real challenge since, in the couple of years that I headed it, we established the bases for its being recognized in different ways in the most prestigious academic journal indices like Scopus and Mexico's National Council for Science and Technology (Conacyt) System of Classification of Scientific and Technological Journals. The latter included us in its second quartile, a level that few Mexican journals in the social sciences and the humanities have achieved.

Later, research and reflection about democracy became my main focus. At first, I concentrated on studying the possible consequences of globalization on democratic systems. I later went on to analyze the different conceptions and positions in democratic thinking in the United States. My main interest was to understand how political practice and theory relate to each other. I studied how the different conceptions of democracy have their own consequences vis-à-vis political practices, which, in turn, have diverse effects on institutions. The central idea of my most recent book was, initially, to explain the differences between the different conceptions of democracy to understand how they have been enriched by and at the same time influenced political practices, which generally speaking have been becoming more democratic. When I was about to conclude the book for publication, a new political phenomenon emerged in the world: the rise of populisms —populisms, plural, because they are diverse and situated both on the right and on the left. This led me to decide that I had to deepen my understanding about this novel and, to a certain extent, unexpected turn of events. I finally titled the book *El populismo: la democracia amenazada* (Populism: Democracy Under Threat), and it now contains a significant part dedicated to an explanation of populism in order to analyze the extent to which it is a threat or not to U.S. democracy. The study of this topic is so innovative that I was recently invited to a renowned, influential seminar about political philosophy in Salzburg to lecture on the new populism in the United States.

The research topics that have been my passion throughout my life have been and continue to be changing. Most require ongoing, detailed knowledge to be able to understand them. It's an endless road. What I am sure of is that the sometimes complex, inexplicable twists and turns of life have brought me to the best possible place for my intellectual, academic, and professional development, which I owe to a great extent to all the colleagues who have been part of the CISAN community for three decades. ■■■

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Jonathan Ernst / REUTERS

José Luis Valdés-Ugalde*

My Research at CISAN-UNAM

I have been a fulltime researcher, professor, and academic since 1983, when I entered the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) Institute of United States Studies (IIEU), where I worked until 1987. I was the then-IIEU-director Luis Maira's research assistant. My experience at the CIDE's IIEU was the spark that ignited my commitment to studying a master's in political sociology and a doctorate in international relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. And it also led me to later fully dedicate myself to an academic career.

I returned from the United Kingdom, a researcher repatriated by the National Council for Science and Technology (Conacyt). Then, I joined the Center for Research on North America (CISAN) thanks to the good offices, generosity, and trust of Mónica Vereá and Silvia Núñez, estimable colleagues and worthy former directors of the center. Since 1994, I have been honored to be a member of the center's faculty as a full-time researcher, committed to the UNAM's three substantive activities: teaching, research, and dissemination.

As a political scientist and internationalist, and both a theoretical and empirical scholar of the international, I have been firmly convinced of the strategic importance of studying the United States. This conviction has been the basis for my teaching and research for the last 25 years of uninterrupted work. I am certain that the study of this country and Canada from a Mexican perspective can help to reach a full understanding of the problems we face in the framework of this three-fold relationship and of the opportunities we have before us, with the idea of meeting Mexico's challenge of well-being, security, and modernization. Carrying out this task from academia and from the CISAN has been a judicious decision by the UNAM, which I believe has had an important impact—sometimes more, sometimes less—on decision makers. But, above all, we have been able to create close working relationships with sister institutions in Mexico and around the world, which have given birth to projects and collaborations on topics of great importance in North America. Building international networks for carrying out regional studies—in this case North America—has been a strategic mission for the CISAN.

Studying the United States has not been a random choice; this is an international actor, a super-power, still

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The dysfunctionality of the Trump administration's foreign policy is evident from Russia to Venezuela, from North Korea to China, and from Europe to Australia: no rationality exists at all.

very competitive and superior in several aspects with regard to others like China or the European Union, and involved in a large part of the world's affairs and events. The United States is the host country of the headquarters of the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, ergo, the most active spaces of the world's politics and economy are based there. After 1945, Washington became the broker of the world system. Like never before, a single country would exercise world hegemony, which it would dispute with its Cold War rival, the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the United States took sole responsibility for supporting the reconstruction of Europe, and for a long period, the total domination of the seven continents (Antarctica, North and South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania). Although that has changed now, since the United States is in relative decline vis-à-vis its counterparts, Washington continues to be a dominant actor in the global system.

My academic mission has been the study of the power of the U.S. hegemon in the context of foreign policy. Thus, based on different theories of international relations, I have drawn up a balance sheet of the U.S. historic presence in Latin America, particularly in the context of the Cold War. This was the basis for my book *Estados Unidos. Intervención y poder mesiánico: la guerra fría en Guatemala, 1954* (The United States, Intervention and Messianic Power: The Cold War in Guatemala, 1954) (2004), which was reprinted in 2005. This study required understanding the globalizing process and its enormous socio-political, economic, and cultural complexity, in order to be able to evaluate the existing relationship of forces that separates or brings closer the international system's most important actors. It also required understanding the functioning of the international bodies created to achieve and preserve the world balance of power. I analyzed the latter in the work *El multilateralismo, la reforma de la onu y los desafíos del siglo XXI* (Multilateralism, UN Reform, and the Challenges of the Twenty-first Century) (2007) and in other

texts on this issue, published in books and peer-reviewed journals.

Since 9/11, we have experienced a process of global securitization, which has subjected the great issues of the multilateral agenda such as migration, trade, borders, labor markets, and human rights, to the strategy of defense at all costs. This involves the United States and its allies as well as its rivals. After the Al Qaeda attacks against the United States, I dedicated my work to trying to explain the problems of conflict and war in the international system. In this research, I highlighted the importance of identifying and differentiating the non-state actors from state actors, and how the former can achieve the destabilization of entire government systems. From that concern emerged the book *Globalidad y conflicto. Estados Unidos y la crisis de septiembre* (Globality and Conflict: The United States and the Crisis of September) (2005), which, like the previous one, was reprinted in 2007.

In my research, I have emphasized the observation of what has been called "The New American Century." This is a process built on noteworthy domestic political stability in order to make it possible to arrive at a position of dominance. The stellar moment in this evolution actually happened in the past century: a generation ago, the United States led the world with confidence in what supposedly would be a millennium of peace, prosperity, freedom, and a profound sense of community. What we are witnessing today, however, is a foreign policy disaster, led by an irrational, completely unpredictable leadership. The dysfunctionality of the Trump administration's foreign policy is evident from Russia to Venezuela, from North Korea to China, and from Europe to Australia: no rationality exists at all. When Trump took office, the quality of democracy collapsed and, together with this systemic phenomenon, the quality of U.S. international policy also plummeted. In the words of Fareed Zakaria, "Under the Trump Administration, the United States seems to have lost interest, indeed lost faith, in the ideas and purpose that animated its international presence for three-quarters of a century."¹

What happened is that with the arrival of Trump's autocratic power, the traditional spaces that the Washington establishment had maintained for decades were twisted out of shape, fracturing the institutional spaces the country had for creating consensus. Trump violently took over the Republican Party and the U.S. state. And no-

body in that party has dared confront the biggest enemy of democracy the United States and the world have ever had. The GOP's behavior during the impeachment process is a sample of the absence of democratic republicanism, previously one of the United States' historic crowning glories.

My commitment at the CISAN has included being its director between 2001 and 2009. Important events took place in U.S. history, and therefore in the North American sub-region, in that period, events that had an impact on the world and the CISAN's agenda. The 9/11 attacks were one, and Barack Obama's election as president is another. On September 11, 2001, the Al Qaeda terrorist organization destroyed the Twin Towers and damaged part of the Pentagon. Time stopped, and the future dissolved in the hands of millions of U.S. Americans. That inevitable, unexpected, brutal, tragic future was brought into the present under the clear skies of that New York morning when American Airlines Flight 11 smashed into the ninety-fourth floor of the north tower of the World Trade Center, only 20 minutes before United Airlines flight 175 did the same between floors 78 and 87 of the south tower, at a speed of more than 600 kilometers an hour with almost full tanks of jet fuel, more than 25 000 liters. Literally two bombs, unique in kind and use: commercial airplanes full of passengers aimed against a civilian population just as innocent as their victims and direct targets, carefully conceived as deadly charges whose objective was to demolish both buildings and fulfill an ambition originally planned—though frustrated—on February 26, 1993 by Ramzi Yousef, an Islamic terrorist of Pakistani origin.

This terrible event was the beginning of a radical change in life in the United States. The perfect society in the perfect nation was penetrated by an external threat: "We have lost our innocence," is perhaps the most representative of the many thoughts expressed on the very day of the attacks that indicate what they meant for U.S. Americans. If we review the huge amount of literature about the attacks, full of testimonies by chroniclers or ordinary citizens, the fact that after September 11, U.S. Americans were more afraid of losing control than of dying is what really stands out. Their stupefaction fundamentally arose out of the idea that they had been submerged in an apocalyptic future, which, though the mass media and literary fiction and the cinema had already masterfully depicted it in the country's iconographic culture, society itself was

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not prepared to face in *such a real world* as the one they were confronted with so decidedly on that day. And, just as this changed the United States, it also changed Mexicans and Canadians. It changed the entire world. And, of course, it had an impact on our research agenda.

Obama's election in 2008 was also a very important change. He took office as what Collin Powell called a transformational president. His was an unprecedented election: the first representative of an ethnic minority would now govern from the White House in a developed country. A mulatto, Obama opted to present himself as an Afro-American candidate and beat by a huge margin the Republican Party and an outgoing president exhausted by their foolish exercise of republican governance. George W. Bush had broken all existing democratic protocols and etiquette in U.S. political life—as we would see from 2016 on, we only needed Trump to confirm that even more vileness was lacking. He used surveillance tactics typical of the worst times of the Cold War and the McCarthy era and invaded Iraq, shattering the regional relationship of forces, mainly in relation to Iran. The Obama presidency promised a return to the golden mean of democratic liberalism—later destroyed by Donald Trump.

These are only some of the events that have marked me as a CISAN researcher. And there are more to come. How can Trump be defeated? In time. In these years, including the time as director, I have witnessed how an institution strategic for both the UNAM and for Mexico like the CISAN has evolved enormously, and how it has been able to respond to the huge challenges that the international and regional situation poses. Long life to the CISAN and congratulations to all its members for being part of this great project! **MM**

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Notes

1 Fareed Zakaria, "The Self-Destruction of American Power. Washington Squandered the Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2019, pp. 10-16.