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You and Us: The Dynamics of Mexico-U.S. Relations

Enrique Krauze

It happened in another age, on September 6, 2001. Relations between Mexico and the United States saw their finest hour. In the first state visit of his presidency, George Bush received Vicente Fox, and proclaimed that Mexico was not only the United States partner and friend but the government's top foreign policy priority. As I watched the fireworks displays over the Potomac, it seemed to me that I was witnessing a rare show of historic prudence and wisdom. Old quarrels aside, a solid relationship with the United States made sense for Mexico, because 90% of its trade and 70% of its investment came from the U.S., and 24 million Mexicans (9 million of them born in Mexico) now lived scattered far and wide across the country, sending more than 10 billion dollars annually to their families in Mexico. Conversely, it was in the United States' interest to help its neighbor prosper because Mexico's growth would create more demand for U.S. exports, stabilize immigration, reinforce stability and democracy, and turn Mexico into an example for the turbulent countries of Latin America. Five days later, that dream and many others dissipated.

On September 11, from the banks of the Hudson, I witnessed another blaze, not pyrotechnic but historic: a human pyre. I realized, as did so many others, that the attack on the twin towers meant the end of one era and the beginning of another, completely unexpected and plagued with uncertainties, but I trusted that the Mexican government would take a stance in keeping with the harmonious spirit of the preceding week. Days passed, and nothing

happened. Why did Fox not travel immediately to the site of the tragedy, where, after all, many Mexicans had died? Once back in Mexico, I noted the near total lack of solidarity with the victims: a few candles on the sidewalk in front of the American embassy; a sympathetic but reticent attitude in the press; and that was all. When the war in Afghanistan began, there were only a few anti-American demonstrations in the streets, but in the press angry voices began to be heard denouncing Washington's "genocidal policy," voices that became almost unanimous before and during the war on Iraq. Those of us writers who publicly recommended voting with the United States on the Security Council—not because we shared Bush's sense of timing and unilateral procedures, but in an act of basic realism—were the object of sharp criticism. In the end, of course, the vote was never held, but the damage to the bilateral relationship had been done. Meanwhile, heedless of these circumstances, Bush blindly proclaimed that all countries were "either with us or against us" and unequivocally signaled that the bilateral agenda with Mexico had been moved to last place on his list of priorities. What had happened to the mutual declarations of friendship? Why didn't both governments seek diplomatic ways of disagreeing? Then I began to think that my enthusiasm had been premature, and perhaps illusory, and I asked myself what the historic reasons might be for our new rift. Are we condemned to be distanced neighbors? Will we ever be free of our resentments, prejudices, stereotypes, and ghosts? Can we ever truly understand each other?



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We should not be surprised by the weight the past exerts on human affairs. After all, the twenty-first century has begun with a reenactment of the disputes of the eleventh. In the early days of our two nations, there was, as everybody knows, a war that Ulysses S. Grant himself—who, like Lee and Jackson, took part in it—described in his memoirs as “the most unjust.” Not only was Mexico defeated, but it also lost (as the standard textbook read each year by millions of Mexican children recalls) more than half its territory. This war was experienced by victor and vanquished alike as a new conquest of Mexico, a fall of the “halls of

Montezuma” that foreshadowed other defeats to come in the twentieth century. In the United States, the war (criticized by Lincoln and Thoreau, applauded by Whitman) has been so thoroughly forgotten in the United States that it has not

even received much mention now that a number of writers have recreated the “savage wars of peace” in the Philippines, Central America, and the Caribbean. In Mexico, as a result of this war, the national anthem (first performed in 1854) was written in specific defiance of the United States, as symbolic and belated compensation for its defeat: “and if a foreign enemy should dare / to profane your soil with his step / consider oh beloved fatherland that heaven / gave you a soldier in every son.” Every September 13th there is a commemoration of the sacrifice of the “child heroes” of Chapultepec, who, in a somewhat airbrushed episode, died defending their “fatherland’s soil.” Mexico’s civic liturgy, then, is still freighted with resentment of its neighbor to the north, but it is only that—an official liturgy that is mechanically performed—not an open wound. How to explain, then, the persistence of anti-American sentiment in Mexico?

First of all, by defining its limits. It is necessary to dispel the false idea that Mexicans in general harbor a hatred of North Americans. This simply is not true. If Fox had led a tribute to the victims of September 11, the public would have supported him. The average Mexican thinks that “gringos” are arrogant, and, if asked, would say that they “want to take over the world,” but in daily dealings their attitude is neutral and non-ideological. Mexican culture, which grew out of the mingling of Indians and Spaniards, has

always been open, inclusive, and tolerant. That is why Mexicans take what is useful to them from American culture (they wear jeans, listen to CDs, drink Coca Cola, buy “Chevolitos,” watch Hollywood movies, play good beisbol, and in some places speak “Spanglish”) but reject what is not useful (fast food, religions with no images and extreme individualism). The proof of this collective attitude—an attitude only shaken by the shameful and unchanging demonstrations of discrimination and racism that Mexicans are subjected to upon crossing the border—may be seen in the millions of migrants whose opinion need not be solicited in surveys because they express it every day, voting with their feet. But there is a sector of the middle class, with spokespeople in political and intellectual circles, the academy, and the media, who remain anchored in a defensive, resentful nationalism, manifested not as pride or faith or even love for their country, nor as a desire for conquest of the outside world (economic markets, artistic creations, diplomatic triumphs) but by a generic rejection of foreign enemies, “gringos” in particular.

Anti-Americanism in Mexico is rooted in the history of ideas; this is true all over Latin America and is associated with the disappointment suffered by nineteenth century democratic liberals with regard to the United States. It is enough to recall one fact: despite the war of 1847, Mexican democrats not only continued to admire the U.S. but also traveled and even lived here to study your institutions, travel by rail, admire the skyscrapers, elevators, and industries, take refuge from tyrants or conspire against them, and write magnificent books about it all (books totally unknown here, but for a few academics). Then suddenly, in 1898, the god of freedom failed them. This key moment, a kind of “collective consciousness-raising,” was the war with Spain over Cuba, that “splendid little war” (John Hay). The defeat of Spain was also *their* defeat, the defeat of *their* cultural universe. Betrayed by the model nation of democracy and freedom—now become an imperialist power—the liberals of Latin America felt like the Marxists of our time after the fall of the Berlin Wall: they were ideological orphans. At this juncture, they began to develop a continent-wide nationalism of a new stripe, formulated in explicitly anti-North American terms. An example: when, in 1904, the Mexican ambassador in Washington—Federico Gamboa—received a memo instructing all North American embassies, legations,

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and consulates to use the term “America,” he wrote in his diary: “The beginning of the end! Now comes the plundering of a name that belongs to all of us equally! Tomorrow it will be our lands!” This continent-wide insult was compounded with each island-hopping war undertaken by the Marines in the first two decades of the century.

In the specific case of Mexico, another distant but decisive event—tragically set in motion by the United States—would seal the fate of liberal democracy: the coup of 1913 against President Francisco I. Madero, perhaps the purest liberal democrat in Latin American history, known in his time as “the apostle of democracy.” The man who plotted Madero’s assassination—you saw that coming—was an ambassador whose name (Henry Lane Wilson) has been forgotten even in his hometown, but not in Mexican textbooks. Wilson ushered General Victoriano Huerta (a Mexican Pinochet) into power. One week after the

event, Woodrow Wilson entered the White House declaring that he would not “recognize a government of butchers,” but his good intentions came to nothing. Actually, Wilson was patient and prudent in his dealings with Mexico. If he had listened to the oil companies, he would have invaded us. He refused to do so, except in two brief instances: the landing of Marines in

Veracruz in 1914 and the “punitive expedition” commanded by Pershing in 1916. The object of the first excursion was to force the exit of Huerta, the dictator, and the second to capture Villa, who months before had attacked the border town of Columbus. But by this time, the Mexicans were unable to differentiate between good Wilson and bad Wilson. Zapata might detest Carranza, but in matters concerning the “gringos,” all were in agreement: “it doesn’t matter whether they send millions of soldiers,” said Eufemio, Zapata’s brother. “We will fight one against two hundred... We don’t have arms or ammunition, but we have breasts to receive bullets.” With all of this in the past, it was understandable that the Constitution of 1917 (still in force) should adopt nationalism as a state ideology, a secular faith.

The liberal democratic alternative had been blocked for Mexico. (Like a comet, it would be 90 years before it appeared again.) Now nationalism reigned, in the form of legislation reclaiming lands, industries, and national resources. This legislation nearly caused President Coolidge to declare war on “Soviet Mexico” in 1927, and President Calles threatened to blow up the country’s oil wells. That same year, Walter Lippman wrote: “the thing that ignorant people call bolshevism in these countries is nothing but nationalism ... and it is a world-wide fever... Nothing would anger Latin Americans more and pose more of a danger to North American security than for Latin America to believe that the United States had adopted a Metternich-like policy intended to consolidate vested interests that threaten its social progress, as they understand it.”

Heeding Lippman’s advice, the United States attempted a “good neighbor” diplomacy in Mexico based on prudence, collaboration, and understanding. It sent ambassador Dwight Morrow, who worked to put the public finances of Mexico in order, and who went so far as to buy a house in Cuernavaca. His successor, Josephus Daniels, had been Secretary of the Navy at the time of the occupation of Veracruz (the Assistant Secretary was Franklin D. Roosevelt) and perhaps that was why he understood the Mexican sensibility. Immersed like Morrow in the culture of Mexico, even going so far as to dress like a Mexican “charro”, this “ambassador in shirtsleeves” implemented the “good neighbor” policy which withstood difficult tests like the oil expropriation of 1938. Thanks to this new diplomacy (and despite the wishes of a large sector of the Mexican middle class, whose sympathies were clearly with Hitler), the Mexican government decreed the country’s entry into the Second World War on the side of the Allies. The whole region (with the exception of Argentina) was enjoying an interlude of Pan-American solidarity, which was fruitful in terms of economic growth and cultural creativity (the Mexican film industry flourished, for example).

But with the arrival of the Cold War, the Latin American governments (including Mexico’s) again came to feel—as Lippman had warned—that the United States was subordinating its diplomacy to the commercial interests of big business. And although these governments aligned themselves diplomatically

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with the United States, a new and more radical wave of anti-Yankeeism—clothed now in revolutionary doctrine—began to rise in the region. Rather than conversion to Marxism, what it fostered was the exacerbation of nationalism, which was further

heightened by Washington's increasing support of Latin American dictators (its "sons of bitches"). In 1947, a disillusioned Mexican liberal, Daniel Cosío Villegas, foretold what would happen in the second half of the twentieth century, first in Cuba, and then all over the region: "Latin America will boil with discontent

and dare all. Carried away by absolute despair and blazing hatred, its nations, seemingly abject in their submission, will be capable of anything: of sheltering and encouraging the adversaries of the United States, of themselves becoming the fiercest enemies imaginable. And then there will be no way to subdue them, or even frighten them."

Now that Communism belongs to prehistory and Castro is a museum piece, the United States has forgotten the problems it once grappled within Latin America, from Chile to Nicaragua and El Salvador. It should study them and study its relationship with Mexico, because it might glean lessons from its Latin American experiences for the much more serious predicaments it faces today.

The memory of past affronts weighs heavily in our history. It is what the Hindus would call *karma*. But it is an ideological weight, a weight that only affects the political and intellectual middle classes, and—most

importantly—it is only half of the story. The other part of the story, which many professional anti-Americans keep always fail to mention, has to do with our own responsibility for our daunting problems: our authoritarian, demagogic, and corrupt political systems; our closed and inefficient economy; our expensive, bureaucratic, self-satisfied, and fanaticized educational apparatus. Blaming the big bad wolf gringo for these ills is to throw up a smokescreen over reality. And there is yet another part of the story (deliberately never mentioned), which involves contemplating the tangible economic benefits (investments, industry, credits, imports, jobs) that Mexico and Latin America have obtained and continue to obtain thanks to their proximity to the United States. But average Mexicans (peasants, workmen, businessmen), are not moved by ideological passions, nor do they fool themselves in such matters. That is why there was no revolution when the Free Trade Agreement was signed (the person who wanted to start one was a university-educated, post-modern guerrilla, Subcomandante Marcos). On the contrary, the average Mexican took advantage of NAFTA by modernizing the country's economy (in various sectors) and using it as a catalyst for democratic change.

"Maybe I am sick with hatred of the United States. I am Mexican, after all," says one of Carlos Fuentes's characters in *Where the Air Is Clear*. Fuentes should have revised this statement, making it refer not to all Mexicans but to the sector of the middle class (with its many politicians, ideologues, writers and intellectuals) that has long since turned into myth the conviction that nothing good may be expected of its neighbor to the north. By the same token, the character is correct in speaking of "sickness"—and the sickness in question is schizophrenia. Only a schizo-

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phrenic could remain fixated on past affronts and pretend that the border between Mexico and the United States has been the most troubled in history. It is enough to glance at a map of Europe, or of the Middle East, or Asia, to realize how false that is. True, the Río Bravo (or Río Grande) marks the border of two deeply asymmetrical countries, but there are different ways of seeing that inequality. The Mexican who emigrates does not see the border as a scar but as an opportunity (not sought, not desired) for a life that he is unfortunately unable to make for himself in

his own country. This Mexican is not steered (justifiably or otherwise) by the traumas of history, and in his daily life he has no use or time for myths. And many Mexicans, unencumbered by ideology, think the same way: the farmer that exports

avocados, the old peasant who counts on remittances from his children, the working woman from Ciudad Juárez who fears the closing of the *maquiladoras*, or foreign assembly plants, the globalized businessman. All of these people are hurt by the irrational persistence of the anti-Americanism adopted by the sector of the intellectual and political middle class that thunders against the “damn gringos” every chance it gets, equates Islamic fundamentalism and so called “American fundamentalism”, and decrees that Bush is Hitler, but then immediately afterwards is in and out of the universities, cities, and malls of “Gringoland.” And who is their guru? A gringo, no less—an angry gringo: Noam Chomsky.

What can Mexico do? Get over its schizophrenia. Which means many things. Make progress in its convergence with the United States. Fight with intelligence and creativity (not with speeches but with effective information and works of art) the vast ignorance of this country about its neighbor. Refute the harmful stereotypes that (while saving the “pretty señoritas”), depict all Mexicans males as lazy, inher-

ently violent and corrupt. Learn to lobby at the state and federal levels of the American government. And use the growing Hispanic influence in the press and the media. Having made its transition to democracy, Mexico must redefine its old, defensive and demagogic nationalism in positive terms, as many export businesses or companies that compete at a global level (like Cemex, Bimbo, Femsá Panamco, Modelo, and Televisa) have done. There are also many successful Mexicans in the U.S to serve as models for this new brand, not of Nationalism but of Patriotism. This new attitude does not mean sacrificing Mexican culture (which, to judge by its expansion in the United States, is stronger than ever) but rather defending it by making the Mexican economy more efficient and productive. The economy will not be strengthened by clinging to paradigms that allow people to wrap themselves demagogically in the national flag but do not translate into a rational management of the public industries that supposedly “belong to the nation” and which, in reality, have become the private property of the bureaucrats and unions that manage them. A single example will suffice: despite having deposits of natural gas vast enough to satisfy internal demand and to export, Mexico imports two billion dollars of gas a year. The reason: “to protect ourselves from foreign investors, to shore up our nationalism.” Properly regulated under a modern fiscal plan, these investors would not be owners but licensees, and their investments, construction, and technology would stimulate the national economy. But nothing is done. In the name of sacrosanct nationalism, the natural gas sleeps beneath the subsoil. Meanwhile, who pays those two billion dollars? It is time we admitted it—nationalism once gave the country political cohesion, but it now poses a great cost.

What can the United States do? I’ll venture a concrete suggestion. While our relationship in political and diplomatic spheres has been troubled and sometimes tragic, and while some progress is being made in economic convergence (although with obvious and dangerous inequities as is the case of

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American subsidies in the agricultural sector), there is an unexplored area of our relationship in which Americans have been particularly generous, and do not even realize it. I refer to culture. Hundreds of films have been made on Mexican subjects in the

twentieth century. Many fell into grotesque stereotypes, but many others represented a true effort to understand the social reality and history of Mexico. Attracted by the Mexican Revolution, or Mexico's landscape, culture, history, people, or by a sense of its natural freedom, many travelers came to Mexico and genuinely involved themselves in Mexican life (in all

its glory and misery). For long decades, visiting its countryside and its cities and often staying to live, these creators left rich testimonies in films, stories, novels, popular and classical music, journalism, essays, photographs, letters, travel accounts, paintings, poems, local histories, anthropological essays, archae-

ological studies. The list of great American authors who wrote serious works about Mexico is impressive, because if all are not included, almost all are: John Reed, Hart Crane, Jack London, Katherine Ann Porter, John Dos Passos, Bruno Traven, Wallace Stevens, John Steinbeck, Tennessee Williams, Kenneth Rexroth, William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell, Saul Bellow, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Harriet Doer, and many more. In another field, from Prescott on, each period of Mexican history has had a classic historian in the United States. In the annals of literature, the work of women has been especially perceptive and loving. All of these works are forgotten in the United States, and even in Mexico. With all this cultural wealth, it would be wonderful to explore the possibility of promoting documentary and publishing joint projects that would rekindle the great history of cultural love between the United States and Mexico. In short, what we need is a cultural chapter in NAFTA. For Mexico it would be a lesson, and the best antidote to anti-American sentiments. For the United States it would be a revelation, evidence that Americans can—if they put their minds to it—understand the world and make it a better place to live in.

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