Focusing on Differences: The Historical Structure of U.S.–Mexican Relations

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Point of Departure

Political analysis is not particularly interesting where things function properly and power relationships flow smoothly. It's in contradictions, differences and conflicts that such exercise becomes intellectually stimulating and politically informative. In this presentation I intend to focus on the main contradictions or conflicts in the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico in the last two centuries, and to elaborate a periodization of U.S.–Mexican relations through the dominant controversy at each point in time.

The United States and Mexico were two colonial societies, sharing the northern part of the Western Hemisphere, that became sovereign nations after a war with their respective European colonizers at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century respectively. They were neighbors but very distant, separated not only by a vast and scarcely populated space but also by major differences in their racial composition, legal and political institutions, religious practices and the nature of their economies and political alignment, among other things.

Beginning in the 17th century, notwithstanding the significant presence of African slaves and some indigenous groups, the British colonies of North American developed as an extension of Europe. British America was not a democracy but it was not far from being one. Virtually independent from England, the Puritans were a community of freemen able to establish their own body of laws and hold periodic elections of a governor and his assistants. A European enclave, a relative autonomous polity, an economy largely based on agriculture, fishing and trade, and a religious practice hostile and scornful of the Catholic Church, made the New England experience very different from that of New Spain.

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Spanish found in Mesoamerica a civilization that was completely original, socially complex and demographically dense – calculations vary from 5 to 15 million people or more – with huge urban centers bigger even that those of Europe at the time. The Aztec empire was taken completely by surprise by the arrival of Europeans, and its defeat in 1521 was absolute – military, cultural and spiritual. It amounted to a total collapse of the pre-Hispanic universe from which the vanquished never recovered. After that, a handful of self-confident Spaniards were able to create and impose two sets of laws in what was called New Spain, one for Europeans and creoles and another for Indians. After a bitter theological debate, the Indians were accepted as sons of God but they were declared permanent minors, unable to reach the intellectual and moral level of Europeans.

Permanent inequality – legal, social and moral – was the central rule of the game in New Spain, where a tiny minority of whites, effectively dominated by the king's bureaucracy,

ruled autocratically over a majority of Indians, mestizos and blacks. The Indian majority was directly controlled by the Catholic Church and indirectly by civil authorities through their own leaders or *caciques*. Indians, mestizos and blacks provided the necessary labor for an economy devoted mainly to satisfy the needs of the Spanish Crown and of the incipient global capitalist economy through the production of silver.

In New Spain the Catholic Church was the cultural institution that gave some unity to a population speaking many languages – probably Spanish was not the dominant language in rural society until the 18th century – and with no sense of belonging outside their village world. With no need to read the Bible as the Protestants in the north, illiteracy was dominant among Indians and mestizos who represented more than 80% of the population by the beginning of the 19th century.

At the end of the 18th century the emergence of a sense of nationhood was possible among New Englanders but a similar development among the subjects of His Catholic Majesty in New Spain was almost impossible. When the United States and Mexico confronted each other at the beginning of the 19th century, one was truly a new nation but the other was in no position to be, especially after a war of independence that was also a brutal race war.

Manifest Destiny or the Territorial Conflict

The initial conflict between the U.S. and Mexico was territorial. From the very beginning the U.S. began to push west and south while Spain first, and Mexico later, tried to resist. At the end of the process Mexico's losses were heavy: half its original territory.

In 1819, just two years before Mexico's independence, Washington and Madrid reached an agreement over the limits between the U.S. and New Spain. The border was drawn starting at the 42° parallel in Alta, California, along the Arkansas River to the south, and further south to the Red and Sabine rivers in Texas until reaching the Gulf on Mexico. In 1821, after its separation from Spain, Mexico was a large country indeed – from that northern border to Central America – but scarcely populated and with hardly any or no communication among its several geographical regions. Its little more than six million inhabitants were concentrated in the central and southern regions with very little presence in the north, where nomadic tribes made life miserable for the settlers and vice versa. For three centuries Mexico had been a society closed to migration outside Spain, and even Spaniards found restrictions. With independence, bringing settlers from Europe – as the U.S. was doing – became a possibility enthusiastically embraced by the new political elite. However, lack of resources and the constant internal turmoil insured the failure of the project except in Texas, where the Mexican government admitted American settlers, supposedly Catholics but in fact Protestants and slave owners that very soon began thinking of secession.

Mexico rejected several attempts by Washington to buy Texas but in no time American settlers in that Northern Province outnumbered Mexicans, and in 1835 they were willing and able to declare and sustain their independence. An extremely weak and divided Mexican government could not dare to accept the new situation and was unable to encourage an independent Texas as a way to create a buffer state between Mexico and the U.S. When finally Texas became incorporated into the United States in 1845, the result was the Mexican–American War (1846–1848). Mexican total defeat in that conflict surprised very few because Mexico was not only weaker in terms of human and economic resources, but the Mexican State was an empty shell. The central government was bankrupt almost from the beginning, the sense of nationhood was present only among a very small elite, but it was deeply divided among republicans and monarchists, centralists and federalists, Church and Jacobins, conservative and liberals. Regional and local bosses were the real power holders and central authority was almost non-existent.

In 1848 half of Mexico was incorporated by force into the U.S. and six years later the defeated country was forced to sell another significant portion of its northern territories (Gadsden Purchase). In 1858, in the midst of a civil war, an offer to purchase California was rejected but not before the almost defeated liberal party signed the so-called McLane-Ocampo treaty with Washington. This treaty divided Mexico into several sections, giving the U.S. perpetual right of transit over the Tehuantepec Isthmus as well as from some unspecified locations on the border to ports in the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico. Fortunately for Mexico, northerners in the U.S. Senate rejected the treaty and Mexican liberals overcame their enemies and rejected the concession they had given in a moment of extreme weakness. After the U.S. civil war ended, American desire for further territorial expansion became less intense and began to disappear from the screen of Mexican-American relations.

Intervention in the Internal Affairs of an Extremely Fragmented Society

The first U.S. diplomatic envoy to Mexico became so immersed in the internal struggles of the Mexican elite that he had to be asked to leave the country by 1829. However, during the bitter civil war between liberals and conservatives in the 1850s the U.S. openly sided with one of the two factions – the liberal one. Immediately afterward, the U.S. had to confront a civil war of its own, prompting Mexican conservatives to ask for Europe's support. France promoted the creation of an ephemeral Mexican Empire headed by Maximilian of Hapsburg but after the defeat of the Confederacy in 1865, Washington was able to exert real pressure upon France to withdraw its expeditionary force from Mexico. France's retreat helped Mexican liberals to achieve unconditional victory in 1867. It was precisely at that moment, surrounded by the ruins accumulated through more than half a century of civil and international wars, that Mexico was able to start the construction of a more or less effective central authority. Something like a sense of nationhood finally began to emerge in Mexico but within the framework of an oligarchic and paternal dictatorship.

The Border as a Source of Tensions

Little by little political stability began to appear in Mexico's horizon. As conflict over land between Mexico and its northern neighbor began to appear less and less likely, another element of discord between the two countries began to emerge: the border.

The States' authority on both sides of the border was weaker than at the center of each country, and a significant amount of lawlessness became an integral part of border life. Indian raids and cattle rustlers working quite freely on both sides of the border, plus contraband of European goods from the Mexico duty-free border zone into Texas, created a series of claims and counterclaims between Washington and Mexico City as well as raids by the U.S. army and incursions by Texans into Mexico. An atmosphere of bitterness around border issues began to create a dangerous situation. At some point, the U.S. War Department laid down plans for a temporary occupation of Mexico's northern states to establish a protectorate as the only way to introduce order and stability in the region. On July 17, 1877 the *New York Herald* published a map including those Mexican states that its editor felt the U.S. should not only occupy but annex: Baja, California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila and part of Nuevo Leon, Sinaloa and Durango. At the end it was the reluctance of the U.S. military to expose troops to a long period of interaction with Mexicans, as well as an increase in control of the region by Mexico's central authority, that put an end to border tensions. In the 1880s Mexican stability opened the door for a period of more or less harmonious coexistence between the two neighbors.

Economic Penetration and Mexican Nationalism From Above

By the end of the 19th century the U.S was an international power – the Spanish-American War was an indicator of its new status. By that time U.S. per capita income was nine times that of Mexico, its population 5.6 times and well ahead in its industrial revolution. It was only natural that Mexico, a poor agrarian society starting its own delayed industrial revolution, was viewed by some American entrepreneurs as a good place to invest. U.S. capital went to Mexican government bonds, mining, railroads, plantations and oil. By 1910, when the Mexican Revolution put an end to thirty years of political stability, American capital in Mexico amounted to $646 million or 38% of total foreign investment in the country.

At the end of the 19th century the Mexican government encouraged foreign investment but it was worried by the increasingly dominant role played by U.S. capital. For that reason it pursued a quiet policy of encouragement of European ventures – especially British – in the same fields that the Americans were operating. The acquisition of railroad control by the government at the beginning of the 20th century (1908) through the creation of Ferrocarriles Nacionales de México (National Railroads of Mexico) was a financial as well as a political maneuver to block the possibility of U.S. railroad companies' domination of such a strategic industry. Competition, Mexican officials thought, could help them avoid total dominance by the "Colossus of the North." Such policy produced no formal complaint by Washington but it was resented by some, notably U.S. oil companies.

Revolution, Intervention and Nationalism From Below

In the U.S. experience nationalism and independence were two simultaneous and interconnected processes. That was not the case in Mexico. It is true that elements of patriotism were present in Mexico since the end of the 18th century but nationalism as such began to emerge much later, when the political elite was able to create an effective State apparatus. It was during the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), and the open confrontation it brought with the U.S. and to some degree with European powers, that the Mexican nationalism of the elites (nationalism from above) met and was supported by popular nationalism.

The total breakdown of law and order in a country that is within the sphere of influence of another almost always produces a reaction from the dominant power. Imperial reaction can unleash a counter reaction from nationalistic forces within the weaker country in the name of sovereignty and self determination. Such was the case between the U.S. and Mexico after 1910. Washington's open intervention in the political affairs of Mexico was systematic from the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 to the 1920s, and frictions between U.S. defense of its material interests in Mexico and Mexican economic nationalism lasted until World War II.

The democratic rebellion of Francisco I. Madero against the long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (33 years) and its victory in May 1911 were viewed with apprehension by Washington. When the newly-elected leadership failed to restore order as fast and thoroughly as the U.S. wanted, the American ambassador did not hesitate in supporting a military coup d'état (1913) and giving his tacit acceptance of Madero's assassination. Such a simplistic – and bloody – "solution" to the Mexican problem almost coincided with the inauguration of the Woodrow Wilson administration in Washington, and one of its consequences was a 180° change in American policy towards Mexico. President Wilson decided almost from the beginning that the best way to insure stability in Mexico and in other countries in similar situations was not to again back military dictatorships but to proceed with the problematic democratization and modernization of their political systems, exactly what Madero had intended. Wilson publicly condemned those who supported the military dic-

Of course, there were many bilateral problems between the U.S. and Mexico during the Cold War period, such as trade and water disputes, migration or drug trafficking, but they seldom reached the level of previous conflicts. On the other hand, several times Mexico's economic problems reached the level of real crisis, such as those of 1976, 1982 or 1995. Direct and indirect support of the U.S. government on those occasions was crucial to avoid a deepening of the crisis and the default of Mexico's international obligations.

NAFTA or a Historical Turning Point

When the Cold War was about to end the Mexican political and economic systems began to show clear signals of exhaustion. Audaciously, the authoritarian regime used its remaining energy to introduce drastic changes in an economic model that after 1982 was unable to produce growth. The changes were very orthodox: fiscal discipline, privatization of some state enterprises, a rapid but painful opening to the global market and linking Mexico even more to the U.S. economy by way of a free trade agreement. Resistance in Mexico to the change was easily neutralized by a still very powerful presidency. Resistance in the U.S was overcome by clever diplomacy, negotiations, public relations campaigns and intensive lobbying. After a complicated set of negotiations, the North American Free Trade Agreement was signed by the U.S., Canada and Mexico in 1993. U.S.–Mexican trade surpassed the $200 billion mark by the end of the century.

In the end, NAFTA and neoliberal economic policies did not save Mexico's corrupt and anachronistic authoritarianism – quite the contrary, they accelerated its dismissal – nor did they reintroduce economic growth. By the beginning of the 21st century Mexico's new government used NAFTA and its new status as a bona fide democracy to openly break with the old tradition of defensive nationalism in order to work out something new in U.S.–Mexican history. However, the dramatic events of September 11, 2001, radically redefined Washington's world agenda and Mexico and Mexican issues lost almost all relevance for U.S. policy makers and public.

What to Do?

More than 90% of Mexico's foreign trade takes place with the U.S. and such trade amounts to $250 billion, border crosses along the U.S.–Mexican border average almost a million a day, around 21 million documented and undocumented Mexicans and their children are living in the U.S., and the largest number of Americans living in a foreign country are in Mexico (600,000). All these exchanges and many more are taking place without any new clear idea in Mexico City or Washington as to how to define and manage the nature of Mexican–American relations in the 21st century. It is about time to be ahead and not just to follow reality.