

Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica

Number 42
Mexico Fin de Siglo

Article 13

1995

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Ojeda, Mario (Otoño 1995) "The North American Region: Academic Cooperation Among Equal Trade Partners," *Inti: Revista de literatura hispánica*: No. 42, Article 13.

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THE NORTH AMERICAN REGION: ACADEMIC COOPERATION AMONG UNEQUAL TRADE PARTNERS

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1. Introduction

According to different accounts, globalization, a relatively recent phenomenon, will be the trade mark of the next century and will shape the future relationships among nations. In contrast to previous international practices, where one-way transfers and center-periphery flows had prevailed due to the universal scope of individual nation-states, globalization consists of multidirectional processes.

The phenomenon rests on the notion of a new world economy and is responsive to global issues such as environmental awareness and interdependence. It is nurtured by impressive flows of people (tourists, immigrants, guestworkers, etc.), technological products, services and production plants (manufacturing and business corporations, government and private agencies), money (in the currency market and stock exchanges), goods and telecommunications (voices, images and data).

The nature, speed and quantity of such flows are producing an integrational effect on our contemporary culture, which reflects itself as a common trend to global lifestyle and expectations. At the same time, however, the phenomenon is generating identity-reinforcing reactions and, as a consequence, tends also to strengthen national and regional differentiation.

The globalization process faces the end of the Cold War, an event which on the one hand arises expectations for greater international harmony. On the other, however, we face a different reality: industrialized nations find themselves with insufficient resources to assume leadership. In addition, the world is fractured by a growing gap between rich and poor nations. Nationalisms of various kinds are substituting communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the big powers are trying to impose their own criteria in the new international

agenda.

Another important phenomenon of our days is the so called second scientific and technological revolution. Indeed, scientific innovation and technological change are taking place today at an unprecedented pace. Changes are imposing to universities an extraordinary effort to adapt to the new trends. They have no other choice: either they catch up with the rate of innovation or they will lose their leadership in technological change in favor of industry.

In face of this ambivalent reality, characterized by the clash between forces that favor harmony and integration and trends that act against it, and in the middle of a technological revolution, the countries of North America are trying to overcome the danger of isolation and increase their competitiveness through the means of a free trade agreement (NAFTA). The project seems audacious because of the wide gaps in economic development and the deep cultural differences among the three neighbors. On the other hand, the three of them are proud of their cultural heritage and they are anxious to preserve it, at whatever cost, for the benefit of future generations.

2. Similarities and Differences among Canada, Mexico and the United States

Basic differences exist among the three countries of the North American region. This is particularly true in matters such as the size of territory, population and the economy. In the first place we have a country that is a superpower and the largest economy in the world. In the second place we have a middle power, small in population but rich in per capita income. Finally we have a developing nation, big in population, but poor in per capita income. Indeed, as the following table shows, these differences are profound.

	Population (millions)	Area (Thousand Km ²)	GDP (billions USA 1988 dollars)	GDP Per capita (thousand dollars)
North America	356.0	21,307	5,459	
United States	246.3	9,373	4,847	22,000
Canada	26.0	9,976	435	20,000
Mexico	83.7	1,958	176	3,000

Source: Rogelio Ramírez de la O., "A Mexican vision of North American Integration", in Steven Gliberman, *Continental Accord: North American Economic Integration*. Vancouver, The Fraser Institute, 1991, Table 1, p. 4.

Moreover, United States participation in world trade in 1988 amounted to 321 billion dollars in exports and 459 billion in imports, while Canada's participation amounted to 116 and 111 billion respectively. Mexico's participation amounted to only 20 and 19 billion respectively.¹

On the other hand, the participation of each of the three countries in the total trade of the North American Region, in 1987, was as follows: United States exports to Canada, 57 billion dollars and to Mexico 14. Canadian exports to the United States, 70 billion dollars and to Mexico 0.4. Mexican exports to the United States, 18 billion dollars and to Canada 0.9.²

The three countries share the experience of a colonial past. The specific forms of colonialism were however so different, that they produced extremely contrasting social structures, economic systems, political institutions and cultures. It also should be noticed, the distinctive mark of the predominant religion.

Further cultural peculiarities have to do with demographic processes. Canada and the United States can be defined as immigration countries where people of various nationalities sought assimilation by their own will.³ Mexico, on the contrary, has not received any important wave of foreign immigrants apart, of course, from the Spaniards and to a lesser degree from African slaves that came to the country in different stages. Mexico, instead, has suffered a substantial flow of emigration of its citizens to the United States. The Mexican population is a mixed one, as a result of another peculiarity of its colonial past: Spaniards chose to spare Indians, to convert them to Catholicism and to take advantage of them as cheap labor. In this process both races got intermixed. Mexican identity "... is the result of a dynamic process, it is a historical construct that absorbs social changes and experiences". "... on the other hand [it] includes cultural traditions as well as political values."⁴

In the slow blending process the Spanish culture prevailed over the native in such fundamental aspects as language and the way of life. In other fundamental aspects, however, a kind of syncretism prevailed. These are the cases of religion and diet.⁵

Canada, on its part, was the result of a double colonization process: first by the French and later by the British. This factor accounts for the existence, in its territory, of two cultural communities that have not blended. Their peaceful coexistence, rather than their fusion, is the formula proposed by Ottawa to preserve the union of the provinces. Ottawa's assumption rests on the idea that cultural diversity will be permanent and should be interpreted as the very essence of the Canadian national identity.

As for the United States, the quest for assimilation rests on the idea of diversity within unity. That is, the "melting pot". This concept also implies that even if the various communities should retain the peculiarities of their original cultures, strong common values exist that should induce homogenization. The basic assumption is that these common values are shared by all those who

participate in the national experience. As Lipset has put it: "... Being an American [...] is an ideological commitment. It is not a matter of birth."⁶

As we can see, although specific needs and methods vary greatly, the three countries have been committed for long to preserving unity based on diversity.

There are also some other differences and similarities. For example, the United States and Mexico obtained independence by force, while Canada by peaceful means. Mexico has experienced three times the invasion of foreign troops and experienced the loss of more than half of its former territory. Quebec first, and later Canada, suffered the invasion of foreign troops. The United States has never faced a serious menace in its territory from alien troops. However, the Southern States suffered the occupation of the Northern army after the Civil War.

Mexico went through a social revolution at the beginning of the present century and the United States and Canada fought in the two world wars. The United States has fought other foreign wars and during the thirties experienced a very deep economic depression. All these historical experiences have played an important role in the shaping of what the three countries are at present.

Mexico and the United States have a presidential form of government, while Canada has chosen the parliamentary system. Mexico has a strong executive, while the United States a strong Congress. The United States is a two party system democracy, as it has been also the case of Canada. Mexico, on the contrary, has had a preponderant party system, that at times resembled a one party system.

Canada is a very loose type of confederation, the United States a federation with a strong central government. Mexico, on its part, although federal in form, has had in fact a highly centralized type of government.

The United States has always had a market oriented economy. Canada has had the experience of a more important role of government in the regulation of the economy. Mexico was — until very recently — a mixed economy with a clear intervention of government in the economy both as regulator and as direct owner of banks and industries.

Finally, it should be noticed the existence of three different major languages in the North American region: English, French and Spanish. One of the three countries, Canada, has two official languages: English and French.

3. Main Objectives of a Program for Academic Exchange and Cooperation

A program for academic exchange and cooperation in the North American region should be directed first, to promote mutual knowledge and better understanding among the three countries. "Misunderstanding complicates relationships [...] Conversely, mutual awareness can enhance the prospects for cooperation [...] So the point is not to minimize the importance of societal and

cultural differences; it is to understand them".⁷

In the particular case of Mexico and Canada there should be an additional objective: the implementation of a program for direct knowledge, since it is a fact that we know each other through the eyes of the United States.

But in order to understand cultural differences it is necessary first to learn about the other cultures. The best way to begin to penetrate cultural barriers of foreign countries is by learning their own languages. Moreover, it is not possible even to conceive, for example, a solid program of exchange of students, without solving first the language barrier. Consequently, a major effort should be done in the field of the teaching of foreign languages, as the first step of a program of academic exchange among the three countries.

The learning of foreign languages, however, tends to generate a contamination process of mother's tongues which seems to be almost inevitable. This is produced by the learning of new concepts or words that have a similar but not exact connotation. Another reason is the case of similar words with different meanings.⁸

In Mexico there is a growing concern among certain sectors of the public about the effect that NAFTA may produce in the already intense phenomenon of penetration of the English language over the Spanish spoken in the country. French Canadians seem to have the same preoccupation but since many years ago.

The case of the English language seems to be different. According to Brian Foster, English speaking people are not afraid of the influence that foreign languages may have over their own tongue.

Throughout its history the English language has always been hospitable to words from other tongues and while it is doubtless true to say that all forms of human speech have to some extent borrowed from outside models there are grounds for thinking that English is more than usually open to foreign influence as compared with other great languages. The French, indeed, have set up an organization whereby they hope to stem or at all events regulate the influx of foreign words into their vocabulary, but this would probably seem a strange idea to most English speakers, who seem to believe in a species of linguistic free trade and argue that if a term of foreign origin is useful it should be put to work forthwith regardless of its parentage.⁹

In any case, a practical way to counteract the contaminating process among languages could be the reinforcement of the knowledge of their own language to students that are going to participate in exchange programs.

There are many other ways to promote mutual understanding and better relations among the countries of North America. One thing must be clear: the very success of the North American Free Trade Agreement, could on its part, be the best way to contribute to more cordial relations among its three partners. But only if it proves to be useful in practice to foster economic growth in all of them,

and also under conditions perceived as fair by them all. Otherwise, the Agreement could be used by each country to blame its economic problems on its neighbors. Therefore relations, far from improving, would be strained, and cultural differences among Canada, Mexico and the United States would become more acute and apparent.

A second object of a program for academic cooperation should consider the need to promote research in those fields and problems that are of a regional character. The issues that interact among the three countries should also be included. A note of warning should be introduced, however, in this respect. Projects for parallel research should prevail over the ones of a collaborative character. Otherwise, Mexican and Canadian universities could run the danger of being in great disadvantage. The disproportion in the number of qualified human resources vis a vis the United States is so wide, that they would face the danger of having to reduce their role to the "dirty job" part of the project. An extra reason for the convenience of research projects in parallel rather than in collaboration, at least in the field of the social sciences, is the problem of the different perception of common issues and consequently the differences in the construction of hypotheses.

A third objective of the program should be to expand the number of institutions that take advantage from present academic interaction among the three countries. For example, a study done in the recent past shows that out of a total of 71 agreements for academic cooperation, subscribed by 26 United States universities with their Mexican counterparts, the 33% were done with only two Mexican institutions, the two of them with location in Mexico City. In turn, 57% of these agreements were signed by universities of only three states of the American Union: Arizona, California and New Mexico.¹⁰

This high degree of concentration of the academic interaction could be explained, for the United States side, by the obvious special interest that bordering States may have in knowing more about their southern neighbor. For the Mexican side, concentration could be explained, perhaps, by the higher relative strength that these Mexico City institutions have over the rest in matters of research. In any case, the point to emphasize here is the need to open up the opportunities for academic exchange to other regions and institutions.

It should also be clear that all these objectives should be pursued within a scheme that tends to protect the cultural heritage and the cultural enterprises of the three countries, as well as the existing academic institutions.

It should be noticed that Canada, for example, has had in matters of cultural protection a very clear and solid position. Canada was able to preserve its position almost entirely during the bilateral negotiations with the United States for their own free trade agreement. Canada was able to preserve its system of variable postal rates for magazines according to their origin, its rules for controlling the contents of radio and television programs, so as to favor local production, and its prerogative to oversee all foreign investments in the cultural

industries. Few concessions were made by Canadian negotiators, such as the elimination of duties on imported cultural products, and the adoption of measures to protect the rights of owners of television programs.

A different thing seems to be popular culture, at least in the case of Mexico. For example, the liking of the Mexican people for United States television programs, movies and music, among other things, is so ingrained, that the free trade agreement will have certainly little effect on it. On the other hand, it can be argued that the Mexican market for certain cultural products from the United States and Canada, such as books, records and videotapes, is limited by the extremely low purchasing power of the average Mexican. Even with duties and other restrictions removed by NAFTA, such products will still be very expensive for most people in Mexico. However, it should be noticed that Mexicans are mainly exposed to the influence of United States popular culture through the Mexican media, which currently face virtually no restrictions to broadcast foreign materials.

An additional protection for the case of Mexico and perhaps Quebec, with respect to transculturalization, is the language barrier. However, this might be true in the short run, but nobody knows with certainty what would be the result in the long run.

4. Basic Obstacles for an Intensive Program for Academic Cooperation and Cultural Exchange

The United States Academic Community is by far the largest of the three (and very rich as compared with the Mexican one). The Canadian university system is not big in quantity, but it has a high degree of academic quality. Therefore one would expect that the biggest share of a regional academic exchange process, supported by the three governments, will take place between the United States and Canada and only in the second place between the United States and Mexico. At the end of the line will be the one between Canada and Mexico.

There are, however, important obstacles for an intensive academic cooperation and cultural exchanges in the North American region. The main one is that of the great asymmetries between United States universities on the one hand, and Canadian and Mexican institutions on the other. These asymmetries are of a quantitative as well as of a qualitative nature.

The United States has a clear quantitative superiority in relation to Canada and Mexico. This is true in matters such as number of universities, number of faculty members, number of students enrolled in higher education, number of academic books produced annually, and number of academic journals.

For example, in Mexico there are only 6,000 scholars engaged in scientific research on a full time basis, while in the United States there are more than

500,000.¹¹ This is a ratio of almost 1 to 100. On the other hand, the total number of undergraduate students enrolled in Mexican universities in 1991, amounted to 1,091,324.¹² In contrast, the sole University of California has 102,000 students enrolled.

With respect to libraries the gap is even wider. The California University System accumulates a total of over 22 million volumes in its different libraries; Harvard University over 11 million; Yale over 9 million; Illinois University over 7; and Columbia over 6.¹³ On their part, Mexican universities are as following: National University of Mexico (Biblioteca Nacional and Biblioteca Central) 1.5 million volumes; El Colegio de México over 500,000; Iberoamericana and Las Américas, over 250,000 each; Monterrey Technological Institute at the Monterrey Campus, over 180,000; ITAM, over 150,000.¹⁴

It should be noticed that three of the five Mexican institutions mentioned above are located in Mexico City. Indeed, the gap is wider if the comparison between Mexico and the United States is made with universities outside the Mexican Capital City. In a recent effort to create a network of 22 Mexican State university libraries, interconnected through satellite communication, the total amount of volumes accumulated by them reached the figure of only 55,000. Additionally, 47% of the so called *Investigadores Nacionales* — considered to be *la creme de la creme* of the Mexican Scholars — are concentrated in only eight institutions, all of them located in Mexico City.¹⁵

As for Canadian universities here are some examples. The University of Toronto, the largest in the country, has 3,600 faculty members, 51,000 students and the library counts with 7 million volumes. Montreal, the largest in the French speaking part of the country, counts with 1,800 faculty members, 48,000 students and 2.8 million volumes. Laval, the second largest French speaking university, 1,500 faculty members, 23,000 students and 2.5 million volumes. McGill and Alberta two of the biggest English speaking universities have, respectively, 2,500 and 1,600 professors, 30,000 and 25,000 students and 2.5 and 3 million library volumes.

This great difference between Mexican, on the one hand and United States and Canadian academic communities on the other, was less acute before 1983. That year the fall of oil prices in the world market, combined with the suspension to Mexico of international credits, provoked an economic crisis in the country that lasted, at least, until 1988. The economic crisis, in turn, provoked among other things an important brain drain from Mexican universities to the private enterprise and to foreign academic institutions. Things have been changing ever since for the Mexican academic community. Funds devoted by the Mexican government to education have increased substantially and recently the World Bank approved a credit to Mexico for 300 million dollars for the development of science and technology. This loan is to be spent in a three-year lapse.

All this is good news, of course. However, it still is far from what is needed to cover the gap generated by the crisis, and it is even farther from what is needed

to reduce the gap between the United States and Canada with respect to Mexico.

The United States has in addition a clear comparative advantage in qualitative terms. It is worthy to notice in this regard a very interesting phenomenon. It is a well known fact that the United States has lost competitiveness in industrial as well as commercial and financial matters in favor of Germany and Japan. This is not the case, however, with respect to higher education. In this field the United States prevails over the rest of the world. Moreover, according to some observers it has even gained some points over the European universities in the recent years.¹⁶

Consequently, it is only natural to think that the United States academic community can prevail over the Mexican and even over the Canadian one, and overcome or displace them very easily.

For example, a process of growing internationalization of Mexican historiography has been taking place since 30 years ago. It has been during the last 6 to 7 years, however, that the process has gained momentum to a point in which nowadays it is possible to speak of a parallel Mexican historiography in English language. This parallel historiography has been mainly developed in the United States. It includes a good number of very valuable works. It reflects, however, a growing trend of ignoring in the consulted bibliography — without a critical assessment — the works of Mexican historians and is imposing — within the United States at least — their own perceptions and hypothesis with regard to Mexican history. Therefore, soon the average United States university student — and perhaps also Canadians — are going to be studying Mexican history on the basis of a United States bibliography.¹⁷ That is to say, an American history of Mexico.

Fruitful and balanced academic cooperation among unequal partners requires the explicit recognition of all these asymmetries. Under these circumstances one cannot expect that the principle of strict reciprocity would be a realistic basis for a true cooperative effort. Unless a new formula or special mechanism of compensatory reciprocity is found, academic cooperation and cultural exchange among the three commercial partners cannot go very far.

5. The Creation of a Regional Fund

Human resources and also money are central for the success of any cultural or academic program. An additional problem therefore is who is going to put the capital. It is our belief that some kind of special funds should be contemplated that would help in the long run to reduce asymmetries among the three countries. These funds would help to put the academic and cultural communities of the three countries on a less unequal footing. Otherwise, a real substantive and intensive trilateral cultural exchange program would be almost

impossible.

It is our belief also that a special North American Regional Fund should be contemplated for this purpose. One way to begin with is through the creation of a seed Regional Fund that could attract future additional donations from private sources. Contributions from the three governments to this Regional original Fund could be proportional to the share that each of them has in the composition of the Regional Economic Product of North America.

NOTES

1 Mexico. Secretaría de Comercio y Fomento Industrial, *Las relaciones comerciales de México con el mundo: desafíos y oportunidades*. México, 1990, Cuadro 10, p. 35.

2 Leonard Waverman, "A Canadian View of North American Economic Integration", in Steven Gliberman, *Continental Accord...*, Table 1, p. 39.

3 The exception to this is the United States Black Community. Blacks were brought to America against their will.

4 Soledad Loaeza, "The Changing Face of Mexican Nationalism", Unpublished paper. Mexico, El Colegio de México, 1992, p. 10.

5 Mercedes Pedrero, *Discurso de inauguración de la Conferencia Internacional El Poblamiento de las Américas*. Veracruz, México, 11 de mayo de 1992, p. 3.

6 Seymour Martin Lipset, *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*. New York and London, Routledge, 1990, p. 19. Quoted by Soledad Loaeza, "The Changing Face of Mexican...", p. 9.

7 The Bilateral Commission on the Future of United States-Mexican Relations, *The Challenge of Interdependence: Mexico and the United States*. University Press of America, Lanham, New York, London, 1989, p. 173.

8 For example, there is a tendency of Mexicans who have studied in English speaking universities to fall in the vice of literal translation. These are the cases of the words **aplicación**, a literal translation of application, used instead of **solicitud**, or **casual** from casual, used instead of **informal**. Mexican migrants to the United States use the word **luces** to translate traffic lights, because they do not know the Spanish word for it (**semáforo**) since they come mainly from rural areas where this instrument does not exist.

9 Brian Foster, *The Changing English Language*, Middlesex, Pelican, 1970, p. 76. Quoted by Raul Avila, "El español es nuestro... y el inglés también", en Aralia López González, Amelia Malagamba y Elena Urrutia (Eds.), *Mujer y Literatura Mexicana y Chicana*. El Colegio de México y El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, México, 1990, p. 165.

10 Quoted by José Luis Reyna, "La educación superior en México; tendencias y perspectivas dentro de los marcos internacionales existentes", Unpublished paper. Mexico, El Colegio de México, 1989. (Texas was not included in the study).

11 Source: Mexican Council of Science and Technology.

12 ANUIES, *Anuario Estadístico*, Licenciaturas en Universidades e Institutos Tecnológicos. México, D.F., 1991, p. 5.

13 Source: *World of Learning* 1992.

14 Estimated figures. Daniel Cosic Villegas Library, El Colegio de Mexico. Mexico, 1992.

15 They are, The National University of Mexico, CINVESTAV, The Metropolitan University, El Colegio de Posgraduados, The National Politechnical Institute, El Colegio de México, CIESAS and CIDE.

16 See Henry Rosousky, "Highest Education; Our Universities are the world's best." *The New Republic*, July 13 and 20, 1987. See also "Universities Compared; Cambridge versus Cambridge." *The Economist*, December 21, 1991 - January 3, 1992.

17 Elias Trabulse, Oral Presentation in a Seminar of El Colegio de México, Mexico, April 7, 1992.