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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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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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