

Teresa Jiménez*

Mexico and the United States, a Singular Bond Interview with Marcela Terrazas¹



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The United States delivered 1.75 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Mexico on September 21, 2021.

Teresa Jiménez: Why is the historical perspective important for studying the relationship between Mexico and the United States?

Marcela Terrazas: As a historian, I'm convinced that tracing what we have back to its origins is looking in depth at a circumstance, a problem, a possible solution. To start, I think that what makes the Mexico-U.S. relationship very particular is our proximity, and the other particularity, which is very obvious, is its asymmetry. We're talking about two countries with different kinds of wealth, different power, and a very unequal international presence. From the historical perspective, we can see that many things already existed . . . like, for example, we already had arms trafficking in the nineteenth century, as well as human smuggling. And we can trace the violence back even as far as to the eighteenth century. One of the fundamental questions is to see when the interaction, the conflicts, appeared. But we also have to look at the harmony, because I'm not a partisan of thinking about this relationship as though it's only problems. I think that to have a more well-considered view, we have to see what makes the relationship between these two countries so enormous: the ability to cooperate. So, just as we can see the conflicts, we can also see the ability of the two societies — and also the governments — to have a constructive relationship. We have to see how this edifice that we now have has been built over

the years. And for that to happen, bringing in other disciplines is also very enriching: bringing in law, sociology, the perspective of political analysts. But, it's very important to see it from the point of view of history to fully understand the link.

TJ: The complex Mexico-U.S. relationship has gone through many stages, through historic moments that have spelled eras of both closeness and distancing. There have been moments of cooperation and others of frank “anti-yankeeism.” Where are bilateral relations right now?

MT: First I want to say that there are two levels of the relationship: one can be the position of the governments of the two countries, and the other, that of the different sectors of their societies, business community, farmers and growers, migrants, etc. Down through history, many situations have culminated in armed conflicts, like the war that began in 1846 and ended in 1848. That war is often studied from an acrimonious, and not a more level-headed, point of view. Or the U.S. occupation of Veracruz in 1914; or the punitive expedition against Pancho Villa's incursion a couple of years later. There've been moments of great tension, but next to them are many other, constructive moments, which continue.

Where are we today? I come back to this distinction of the spheres: if we talk about the link between governments, perhaps we can say it's strained. I think that during the Trump administration, this originated more in Washington than in Mexico, and now things seem to be going in the opposite direction. But until today, investments, both

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joint investments or U.S. investment in Mexico, haven't stopped. The percent of trade between the two countries hasn't changed, just to mention things that can be measured. So, saying that right now the link between Mexico and the United States is going through a sensitive moment, a critical moment, is only part of the truth. It is possible — and I do hope that it's the case — that this critical moment will end and that collaboration, trade, cultural relations, and links for cooperation in so many things will be maintained. That doesn't mean that there aren't conflictive issues, like migration, which is much more complicated, because we're no longer just dealing with the migration of Mexicans to the United States. Right now, people from as far away as Africa or from Central America are passing through our country and this is quite a grave matter. Not to mention drug trafficking, people smuggling, arms trafficking, the issue of water. Yes, some issues imply confrontation, but other experiences also speak to collaboration, because many of these problems don't even have their origins exclusively in Mexico, like migration, which is a multinational phenomenon. So that's why we have to look for solutions together.

To get back to the point of where our relations are right now, I think it's not the friendliest moment for our diplomatic relations on a governmental level, but I also believe that the infrastructure that holds up the trade, economic, cultural, etc., relationship is increasingly dense and more solid.

TJ: In addition to the federal governments, links also exist between border state governments on both sides. Do you think that this border area is the basis for a large part of bilateral relations?

MT: The border region is vast, and obviously, the interaction between the societies of both countries is extremely intense. You can't compare the link between Montana and Quintana Roo to that between Nuevo León, Coahuila, Chihuahua, and Tamaulipas and Texas, California, or Arizona. The border region is very large, and, since Mexico became independent — and that's what we're commemorating here, two hundred years of relations — that border area was practically autonomous. That has been for different reasons, but mainly because it's very far from the centers of power, from Mexico City and Washington, and because, it wasn't until the nineteenth century, at least until the administration of Porfirio Díaz, that the railway lines that connected us with the United States

were laid. It was very far from urban government control due to the issue of the indigenous, which was very intense until almost the end of the nineteenth century. People demanded security from governors and local mayors — we could extrapolate this into the twenty-first century —, but the Mexico City government and even Washington were incapable of offering protection, because the Indians also made incursions into Texas and New Mexico and Arizona. What did they do? Very succinctly, the governors, for example, of Chihuahua or Sonora, made agreements with the indigenous chiefs, using a kind of regional diplomacy, sometimes from one governor to another and very frequently between the governors and the indigenous leaders. Sometimes, municipal presidents would pick up shotguns and the few horses they had and hunt the indigenous. That is, these were regional and even local responses. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, intense economic, kinship, friendship, and cultural relations have been forged in the border states. I think this does leave its mark on bilateral relations. For example, the recent closing of the border had an important impact on the economy of the southern U.S. border states.

TJ: A relationship is always two-way. In the case of Mexico and the United States, it isn't just about how we see U.S. Americans, but also how they see us. How could the perception, sometimes based on prejudices, that both countries have of each other be changed?

MT: I think the lack of knowledge that we both have of each other is truly mammoth. Instead of knowledge, we have prejudices, many that originated in fourteenth-century England, of how outsiders are seen, or Luther and Calvin's Reform, how the Reformers saw the Catholics; or what's called the Spanish Black Legend, how the English have a series of negative judgements about Spain because Spain had been the winner in the distribution of the world at the moment of the "discovery." Just look how far back I'm going. Of course, things have changed. But those prejudices have largely been inherited by their U.S. descendants.

There are deeply rooted prejudices like racism, but also, both U.S. Americans and Mexicans have contributed to these negative judgements. They're no longer prejudices: they're negative judgments because they're now based on data and concrete facts. If we talk, for example, about nineteenth-century border violence, plus what I already said about the indigenous, we can also talk about

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the incursions of U.S. marauders into Mexico, when they stole cattle, murdered, or extracted vengeance. However, it's also true that Mexicans did the same things in the United States.

So, we can say that negative interaction was intense and a two-way street. A third scenario was what González Quiroga has called “criminal cooperation.” In the nineteenth century, Mexicans and U.S. Americans joined up, even with Apaches or Comanches, to commit crimes, above all to steal cattle. That criminal partnership or collaborative violence can be seen today with drug trafficking: if Mexican drugs enter the United States, somebody is allowing it. If U.S. arms enter Mexico, somebody is letting them through, and those partnerships are very solid.

Now, what should we do so that both Mexicans and U.S. Americans have a judgement that's closer to reality? Well, that can only be done based on study and mutual knowledge. I often tell my students that during their course, I'm not going to change the image they have of the United States, but the only thing I want is that their visions have a solid basis, because the image of the other has to be based on profound knowledge.

And I think that no matter how solid their knowledge and familiarity, that's not the only thing they need. Other factors and actors also have an influence, like our countrymen and women who live in the United States and who, when they return to their communities, talk to their relatives and friends about what they see in the United States. But we shouldn't ignore the fact that they're also the object of racism and inequality. But that effort needs to be very concerted, and the governments alone cannot change. It's the societies that have to make that change. And that's a transformation that has to start with mutual knowledge.

TJ: What is the gaze that we should adopt to approach bilateral relations? What can we expect in the future of a relationship based on new forms and needs?

MT: I have mentioned some of the bases throughout our chat. In the first place, we have to approach the relation-

ship on two levels. Neither diplomacy nor political relations are sufficient to understand the bilateral bond. I think we have to start off from the interaction between the societies. And in the second place, despite the fact that we're talking about a relationship between two countries, a very asymmetrical relationship, with different levels of economic and political power, and a different international presence, that asymmetry is not an inevitable manifest destiny.

What do I mean by this? That that asymmetry doesn't mean that Mexico is always inevitably a victim. I think that, on the one hand, on the diplomatic level, Mexico has been very skillful, with very capable diplomats, diplomats who are concerned with studying the history of the United States and familiarizing themselves with our neighbor. And it is precisely that knowledge that gave them the tools to achieve more equitable negotiations, more favorable to Mexico. This is a contrast with the U.S. ambassadors to our country. Even though there have been first-rate people, there have also been people with no knowledge, and I think that has been a mistake on Washington's part, of not understanding the role of Mexico in its surroundings. Apart from believing that one thing is the relationship between governments and quite another, the relationship between societies, at least we have to approach the two spheres. We have to think that asymmetry does not necessarily lead to Mexico being a country abused by the United States. Mexico knows how to play this game very well. In addition to diplomacy, in the field of trade and business, Mexico is also very clear on this issue.

I would like to invite your readers to get to know the other and to know ourselves. Self-knowledge of Mexico becomes richer if we study other regions, other countries, other societies. It allows us to define ourselves better. That is the only way we'll be able to rid ourselves of these elaborate ideas that the bilateral relationship has always been conflictive. If we shed these pre-fabricated mental frameworks, we'll be able to have a better understanding of the other. **MM**

Notes

1 Marcela Terrazas is a doctor in history, researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico Institute for Historical Research, and a professor of U.S. History. She has her bachelor's degree in Latin American studies. Her area of expertise is U.S. history and its relationship with Mexico, and she has published many articles and books on the subject. She is also a member of different international associations for U.S. American and Latin American studies.