

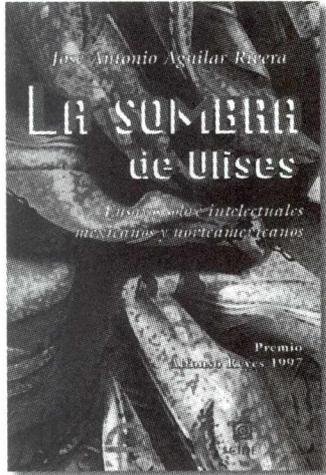
Reviews

La sombra de Ulises

(The Shadow of Ulysses)

José Antonio Aguilar Rivera

Grupo Editorial Miguel Angel Porrúa and
Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas
Mexico City, 1998, 197 pp.



*Differences —sincere and profound—
are what have made it possible
for the human soul to make all its conquests.*

José Vasconcelos

Very few serious, profound studies about the history of ideas have been produced in Mexico. Even fewer have managed to reflect comparatively on the forging of mentalities in two countries linked by history like Mexico and the United States.

For this reason, one of the main merits of *La sombra de Ulises* (The Shadow of Ulysses) is that it deals with an issue fundamental to the mutual understanding of bilateral relations, the bridges that have been built between the intellectual milieus of both countries.

Although quite a bit has been written about the concrete problems of Mexico-U.S. relations, only very rarely do the focuses go beyond a functionalist or positivist view of the social sciences. Very seldom do we encounter contributions that attempt to deal with the world view and mentalities underlying policies and concrete positions.

Aguilar Rivera seeks points of contact and lines of thinking which include an attempt to understand oneself, the Other and the inter-relationship in both countries' intellectual history.

What he discovers is not the most encouraging. After an exhaustive analysis, Aguilar concludes that the exercise of the public functions of intellectuals in both countries is going through a profound crisis. In the United States, intellectuals have withdrawn to university campuses to play increasingly specialized roles, divorced from society, disregarded, isolated and without the influence that they once had, for example, in the 1960s. In Mexico, even though a segment of them have maintained their participation in society and their work as opinion makers, most are immersed in an environment of diatribe, destructive criticism, partisan politics and personal invective alien to an objective search for truth.

In no case can it be said that intellectuals preserve the function and interest in having an impact on society that they did, for example, during the first half of the centu-

ry when John Dewey and José Vasconcelos contributed their respective educational models, both with the conviction that education would redeem their societies.

This has meant not only the de-articulation of the social function of intellectuals in their own countries, but also the dismantling of the intellectual bridges that once existed and had a decisive influence in the search for mutual understanding. The bridges built by Vasconcelos, Aarón Sáenz, Manuel Gamio, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Daniel Cosío Villegas or Miguel Othón de Mendíbal with John Dewey, Frank Tannenbaum, Carleton Beals and Katherine Anne Porter were firmly cemented in their mutual interest in "the public function, beyond academia." They were intellectuals who sought to build institutions and have an influence on public policy making around common problems and social and political processes, such as education or indigenous peoples; intellectuals who, in a word, built bridges with the explicit aim of linking culture with society. We only have to recall Vasconcelos' ambitious project of taking the "great books" of Western culture to the most remote corners of Mexico's countryside, and Dewey's no less ambitious project of formulating a practical, democratic educational model. Regardless of their results, the important thing is that the debate was situated as part of "the war for the soul of culture, that was the educational crusade simultaneously carried out by reformers in Mexico and the United States." (p. 54)

La sombra de Ulises holds that both countries' intellectual traditions have lost their way. The representatives of each country's thinking live in the shadow of their predecessors, immersed in marginal debates, or without any debate whatsoever.

According to Aguilar, in the United States, Mexicanists have practically disappeared, at least from policy and decision-making spheres, today dominated by politicians.

Holed up in university cubicles, they produce hyper-specialized papers ignored by the designers of U.S. foreign policy. This judgment is polemical since it disregards the work of authors like Wayne Cornelius, Friedrich Katz, Jonh Bailey and John Coatsworth, among others, whom Aguilar does not even mention.

The book makes an important contribution in its acute dissection of Mexico's cultural life, at the same time attempting and achieving a dispassionate examination that stays out of the corner of any of the closed, tight-knit, hegemonic groups. In this context the author describes the polemic—left behind long ago, it could be added—between the nationalists who sought to define the meaning of "Mexicanness" and the cosmopolitans, who tried to be part of the broad currents of universal thought.

Despite everything, Aguilar discovers in the work and personalities of two Mexican intellectuals, Carlos Fuentes and Jorge Castañeda, a continued link—weak but consistent—between both intellectual worlds.

According to the author, Fuentes has the merit of having been able to build a bridge with at least a part of the U.S. intelligentsia and to get a hearing on the other side of the Rio Grande. He says the same of Jorge Castañeda. An intellectual of the left, with radical positions on NAFTA and economic globalization, and a severe critic of the Mexican government's positions vis-à-vis the Zapatista National Liberation Army, neoliberal economic policy and the development of democracy, Castañeda has been, together with Fuentes, one of the few intellectuals with a presence north of the border.

Their leftist affiliations, added to their positions in opposition to the Mexican government's and their ability to penetrate and influence U.S. public opinion about Mexico, have provoked a response that unfortunately has been more in the nature of personal attacks and the dispute for the upper hand in the realm of culture than objective critiques of their ideas.

In any case, Aguilar is right in saying, "The comparison between the intellectual worlds of Mexico and the United States is not a useless exercise; it is a way of unveiling a mirror in which Mexicans and Americans can see each other and recognize each other as we take note of both our commonalities and singularities" (p. 181).

The myth of Odysseus, who learns from the wisdom of other cultures during his travels, should become a stimulus and a conviction, particularly as we face a new millennium which everything seems to indicate will inevitably make relations between Mexico and the United States even closer.

The challenge will be making the understanding of this relationship transcend the practical day-to-day difficulties of our long border, go beyond the often unilateral and sometimes insensitive solutions to problems like migration, drug trafficking, regionalization and trade integration, to anchor itself in real mutual comprehension of both cultures and mentalities. Aguilar Rivera's book is a very valuable contribution to carrying out this task. Not only has it found the strands of the dilemma that must be woven into a coherent whole. Not only does it propose alternatives for creating and strengthening communication that go beyond the barriers of language and combat "the isolation and narrow-mindedness that has congealed down through the years" (p. 186). Most of all, it inspires or should inspire researchers, academics and intellectuals from both sides to abandon their ivory towers and understand that it will be possible to build bridges only when "we recognize that the river is both the Rio Grande and the Rio Bravo" (p. 186).

Diego Bugada Bernal
Senior Editor

Nueva agenda bilateral en la relación México-Estados Unidos

(New Bilateral Agenda in Mexico-U.S. Relations)
*Mónica Vereá Campos, Rafael Fernández de Castro
and Sidney Weintraub, comps.*

CISAN/FCE/ITAM

Mexico City, 1998, 484 pp.

Without any doubt, complexity is one of the most important features of today's Mexico-U.S. relations. And that is just what the reader will encounter when he or she explores the almost 500 pages recently published by the Center for Research on North America (CISAN), the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM) and the Fund for Economic Culture (FCE). The publication is the outcome of joint efforts by a group of Mexican and U.S. specialists on the question.

The book offers up every conceivable slant on the issue. Some chapters are dedicated to a theoretical analysis and others deal with an empirical overview of the most important developments in bilateral relations until 1995. Most of the authors emphasize the positive side of Mexico's new relations with the United States, but others take a more critical stance. Almost all the issues on the bilateral agenda are dealt with: national security, migration, drug trafficking, energy, financial relations, NAFTA. There are also studies of the different actors: the NGOs, the U.S. Congress, Canada, multinational corporations, the regions and, obviously, the chief executives.

This abundance of material has been divided into four different sections. The first, "Bases for the New Model of Cooperation," includes two theoretical papers, one by Jorge Domínguez and the other by Rafael Fernández de Castro, dealing with general models and whether they are actually being applied to the bilateral relationship. Domínguez argues that political realism cannot explain the ups and downs in the relations and proposes other interesting models. Fernández prefers neoliberal institutionalism as a framework, pointing to the importance of institutions for stable Mexico-U.S. relations.

This section also includes a chapter by Sidney Weintraub about sovereignty which emphasizes its implications for Mexico, but also, and mainly, for the United States. The author concludes that, with NAFTA, both actors have ceded sovereignty, although, to paraphrase

