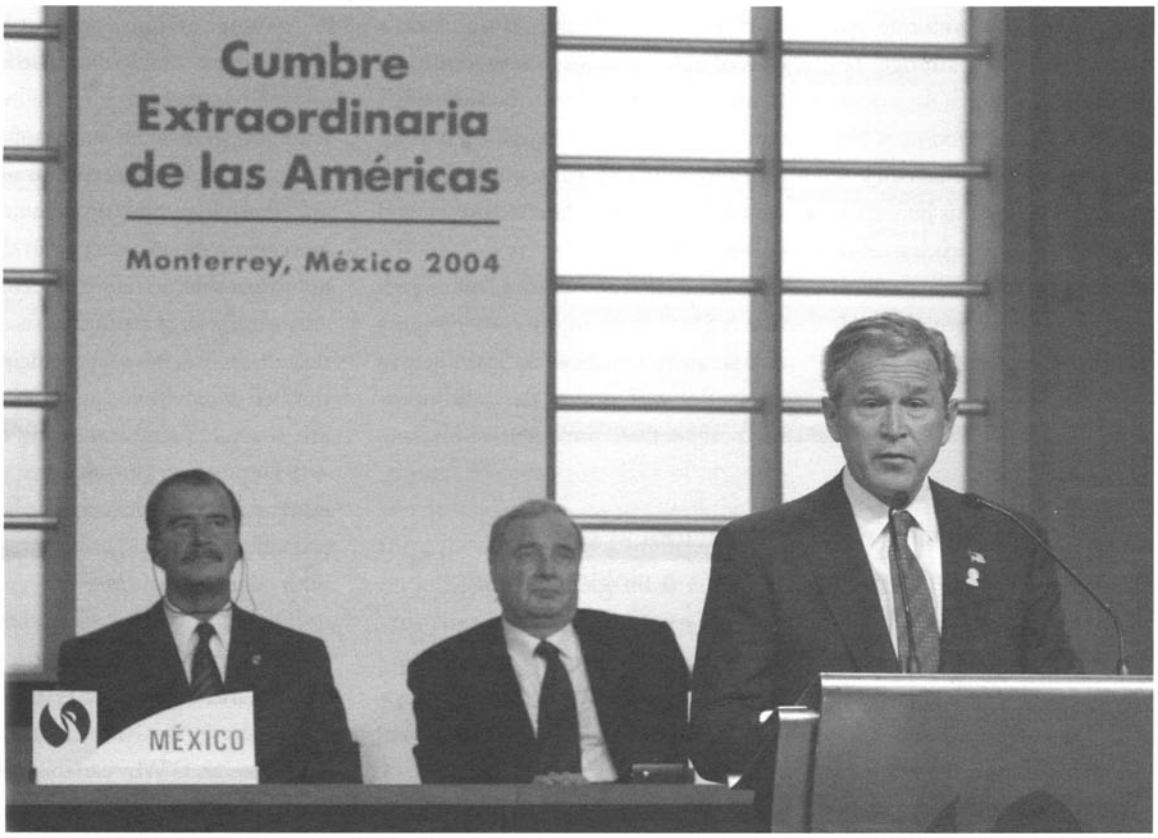

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The North American Community How Much a Matter of Attitude?

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Recognizing the undeniable interdependence among Mexico, Canada and the United States since NAFTA, we can trace increasing awareness among many actors about the need to move forward harmoniously in the process. From federal, state and local levels of government to diplomats, from businessmen, scholars, labor communities to nongovernmental organizations, the three countries face the common challenge of upgrading security in North America.

To do so, one of the very first tasks would be to defeat an important number of skeptics about the steps to be taken, with an eye to preserving perhaps an old or démodé concept of sovereignty.

Examples of this can be seen in the Mexican domestic debate over the state-owned oil industry's loss of autonomy, while in the United States influential voices have reemerged fearing a new *conquest* of the Southwest by Mexican immigrants, thus neglecting the evolution of an English-Spanish bilingual America.[1]

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In a scenario where economic opportunity expresses itself strongly regionally, rethinking a North American Community (NAC) has become a necessity; it is not something that can just be disregarded. My emphasis here aims to be provocative about two issues of the current integration process which I consider have not been greatly studied, and perhaps purposely avoided in the main debate: the social and the cultural dimensions.

If we accept Francis Fukuyama's idea of culture as an inherited ethical habit,[3] it is therefore not a rational choice. Embedded with values, culture gives meaning to the codes through which societies regulate individual and collective behavior.

Indeed, if we pursue a "more perfect region" to strengthen sovereignty and security, our three nations have to take sides with one of the two opposing perspectives prevalent in international politics about the interaction of different cultures:

a) The optimistic view considers that cultural differences may provide a solid foundation for deepening international cooperation, since it is imbued with a high degree of cultural self-confidence. The core of this hypothesis is equivalent to the idea that *opposites attract*.
b) The pessimistic view believes that societies sharing cultural affinities co-operate with each other and that efforts to shift societies from one civilization to another are unsuccessful.[4]

An increasing number of actors in our three nations are already speaking in a single language: one of concern about a common future.

Although it is still true, as Charles Doran said almost a decade ago, that "no one...identifies himself or herself as a North American,"[2] migration, the media, the entertainment industry, the internet and even culinary habits bind North Americans together today in an unprecedented way.

Considering that in a subtle but consistent manner, social and cultural forces interact among Mexico, the United States and Canada to give birth to the idea of North America, the trilateral community is approaching a point where key questions need to be properly discussed in order to explore the feasibility of building a common regional identity.

By understanding most international political thinkers' mistrust of culture —which can be understood as an effect of the dominant paradigm of realism, reinforced by the 9/11 events— we are in a very privileged position to start reinterpreting the essential elements for new definitions of both national and regional interest.

In order to decide which way to go, we have to understand that the North American Community is still trapped and separated regarding the search for a social imagery of its own. Although this exists through each society's expression of the social and cultural interaction among its members, as Charles Taylor has stated, the challenge for the emergence of a NAC rests upon "cooperation and coherence without a forced convergence."[5]

Aside from what has happened to NAFTA in the formal sphere of power and the policy making arena, there is an ongoing social reservoir in the three countries that demands decentralizing and reinforcing attention toward the definition of a North American Community as a whole, as there already are several *"North American communities"* in action (in business, politics, education, churches, etc.), but most probably in isolation or in contradiction with each other.

Therefore, undeniably, we must analyze this reality by exploring answers to some of these questions: Is there a point where these North American communities intersect? Why can this take place? In the aftermath of 9/11, how can dominant or traditional values like freedom, democracy or patriotism in Mexico, the United States and Canada be explained? Which of them is being challenged, transformed or reinforced as a result of regional interaction?

The promotion of an enduring NAC requires recognizing that alternative values such as tolerance, diversity and inclusion must be cornerstones of a regional common trust. If we embrace the optimistic paradigm that stands for the preservation of cultural differences as a window of opportunity for the NAC, cultural identity could be recognized as the alpha and omega of a new approach to sovereignty.

Beyond the complexity of the integration process of North America, an increasing number of actors in our three nations are already speaking in a single language: one of concern about a common future. This irrefutable fact demonstrates the need to include more

voices from civil society, in order to rebuild the capacities for the best possible outcome for the NAC.

The North American Community is faced with the task of preparing for a constantly changing, interconnected society. As the feeling of insecurity not only comes from terrorist threats but from uncertainty about job loss, health, etc., breaking new ground implies identifying the paradoxical need for permanent transformation.

Trade and security are only instrumental for the construction of the North American Community; trust is the glue necessary for establishing a broader scheme of values and social norms committed to the overall quality of life in North America. Still squabbling, "North Americans" resist accepting John Lennon's rule that "Life is what happens to us while we are busy making other plans."

We still are in the stage of building sympathy for each other. Reaching a "more perfect region" will only be possible by creating regional institutions committed to empathy for one another. Only through them shall we find new principles of thinking and creative ways of problem solving.

To conclude, I maintain some of the general recommendations of an organization called Communities of the Future, projecting them to envision the notion of a North American Community. Mexican, U.S. and Canadian societies need to begin to change how we think, how we relate to each other and how we educate and learn. VM

NOTES

[1] See Samuel P. Huntington, "The Hispanic Challenge", *Foreign Policy* (March-April 2004), p. 30-39.

[2] Charles F. Doran, "Building a North American Community," *Current History* vol. 94, no. 590 (March 1995).

[3] Francis Fukuyama, *Trust. The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

[4] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* no. 72 (1994), pp. 22-49.

[5] Rod Dobell published a brilliant essay on the characteristics of and the challenges to be faced by a NAC, "A Social Charter for a North American Community", *ISUMA-Canadian Journal of Policy Research* (spring 2000), pp. 52-56.