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Research about Two Moments In U.S. History

Voices of Mexico: Nattie Golubov and Ignacio Díaz de la Serna both joined the CISAN in 2004. Although their research differs in the time period (the U.S. today and the country's origins) and epistemologies, they share a single meaning: the moments and conditions in which transformations in U.S. historic and cultural processes take place.

Nattie Golubov: I joined the CISAN in 2004 and started out with a project about higher education in the United States. I had total freedom to pick how I wanted to approach the topic, and I did historic research into how the U.S. educational system has been transformed. While I was doing that, I received financing to carry out a short project about migrant communities in the United States. I wanted to explore the concept of diaspora, which is very useful in dealing with the different kinds of migration.

At that time, the concept of diaspora wasn't being used to think about the Mexican community in the United States. One of the products of my project was an anthology of translated classic essays about the concept to open up the conceptual and methodological discussion for studying diasporas.

I found something interesting in the course of the research about higher education: in a certain way, universities are microcosms of U.S. society. They are marked by region, by class, etc. So, I began to lean away from institutions and orient my thinking in terms of cultural conflict in the United States and its manifestations of all kinds: social, racial, gender, and a very long etc. Starting with that research, my next project was very specifically about cultural wars in the United States, because in the 1980s a discussion emerged about affirmative action and political correctness. That discussion was widespread in universities, and great strides were made in policies in favor of different kinds of equality.

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Another project came out of that, one that was more methodological, oriented to cultural studies, because, at that time, no introductory book existed in Spanish for the field of cultural studies. When I realized that my students were increasingly interested in them, I decided to write a book about it. That book can be downloaded on the CISAN web site, by the way.

The book was oriented toward understanding different dimensions of U.S. culture using the theoretical tools offered by cultural studies. That also opened up a vein of research I'm following now about romantic novels. This literary genre is the biggest seller in the United States. I think that more romantic novels are sold than detective and fantasy novels put together. In fact, romantic novels are the mainstay of publishing conglomerates and are what allows them to publish books that almost nobody reads. It's not that this project diverted my line of research; rather, what happened is that the research branched out. The study of the romantic novel involves a project about popular literary genres that I was invited to participate in and headquartered in the UNAM School of Philosophy and Letters.

With a more contemporary reflection, I have linked this up to my more recent research into literary geography in U.S. literature. This project is in its initial stages; I'm still in the process of selecting the literary corpus and identifying certain recurring themes in the literature published in the twenty-first century. For example, for the theme of the romantic novel, I'm writing something about mercenaries, because there's an entire sub-genre of romantic novels in which the heroes are mercenaries. It turns out that mercenaries are veterans who the U.S. government uses in overseas wars, and some predict that in the not-too-distant future they will fight practically all the wars. We could say that, starting with romantic novels, I reflect on other kinds of problems, because these novels deal with themes like the fate of war veterans when they come home, the impossibility of reintegrating into daily life, the lack of a home, the horrendous experiences they've had in the war, among other things. These novels also express women's concern when they see when their husbands or their sons come home from the war and aren't able to reincorporate themselves into daily life in the United States. And that's how I approach literature, establishing a relationship in keeping with the context, the concerns that certain sectors of the population have and the literatures

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they create, because reading and writing feed off each other.

VM: From a gender perspective, how have you seen the United States evolve in your research, as a country or as more specific communities?

NG: The feminist interpretation of U.S. culture is that since September 11 it has undergone a process of "remasculinization." That had already happened after Vietnam, since it seems there's a more or less direct relationship between war and the effects it has afterwards. And what that implies is that a metonymical relationship exists between family and nation, in which women and children are vulnerable citizens who have to be defended by these men, usually highly specialized members of the armed forces, the army, and mercenaries. There are images of Bush that are very striking and iconic where he's wearing a helmet on an aircraft carrier next to a U.S. flag; that was how a connection of images that exalted everything military began. But, of course, there's also the other side of the coin: the failed masculinities that don't protect their women. That's where Bush's discourse about freeing Muslim women who are subjugated by men and taking democracy to those countries comes from. Also, they exalt the failed masculinity of the external enemy who's failed because they can't protect their own women, but also because they're labeled cowards because they don't show their faces; what you get then is a kind of feminization of men.

On the other hand, the political right wing is hammering away at all the achievements that had been made, like the decriminalization of abortion. This has always been a very hot topic in the United States, and it's ideologically important because people vote—or don't—for a candidate based on his or her position on this issue. The U.S. imaginary is also seeing an escalation of militarization and of white supremacist ideology, which promotes white maternity. Women as mothers fulfill a very important function in these movements because they're the ones that are going to strengthen the white race; they're the ones who are responsible for raising and educating future white citizens. We could say that conservatism isn't

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a plot, but different political conflicts take place on different levels that tend to look to or want to reinstate the gender identities of the 1950s.

All of this permeates knowledge, the universities, and cultural imaginary. But the universities have always been in the vanguard; from the origins of the feminist movement in the United States, they were always present. I don't know about now, though, if women's studies or gender studies departments are being closed because of the cuts in higher education. But I suspect that they are. It's not just those departments, though; the same thing is happening with ethnic studies, which were achievements in the 1980s and now, for economic—and obviously ideological—reasons, if they're not being dismantled, they're at least being reshuffled. That's the impression I have, but I'm not certain.

VM: What do you think the future of research looks like?

NG: I don't like making predictions because they often turn out to be wrong. I prefer to look to the past for my reference points.

Ignacio Díaz de la Serna: I joined the CISAN in 2004; I've been here for 16 years and when I came on board, I already had an academic career behind me. Not only had I finished my doctorate, but I had broad teaching experience in both public and private universities; I had published articles, books, etc. Before coming to the CISAN, I worked in contemporary French philosophy and French Enlightenment philosophy. All my studies were in philosophy. Later I specialized in political philosophy, which is a vast field covering many topics and authors. I confess that when I came here it was very exciting because for the first years, I literally became a student again, because I had to study the United States. What I knew about it was what anyone who reads the newspapers knows, but the topic that I came to work on was the origins of the U.S. federation. As I said, this was not my specialty. So, I literally had to hunker down

and study, not only their authors, who were several of the founding fathers, but also the history of the eighteenth century, that is, all the historic conditions that made it possible for the U.S. to be born constitutionally and politically. Everything I do here at the CISAN is permeated by my discipline, philosophy; that's why I essentially work on a conceptual level.

The methodological orientation that has allowed me to work on my previous projects and what I'm working on now is the genealogical perspective. What is genealogy? It's not only going back into the past, like for example, with a family tree; the genealogical perspective is something that Nietzsche inaugurated in his *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*. It's a look into the past, and he's always interested essentially in certain historic conditions because every historic phenomenon, as Nietzsche says, is produced through certain circumstances that point toward a meaning, toward a goal; and there are very concrete conditions that not only make its occurrence but its development possible.

So, my previous research project was the analysis of the historic conditions in which not only the U.S. federal political system emerged, but also the importance of U.S. constitutionalism as a whole. You have to remember that this was the first Constitution written in the world through the genealogical vision and analysis. That is, historiographically speaking, the meaning of that historic moment was affirmed, in which exceptional, just, virtuous men constructed that political reality absolutely unprecedented in the history of the West. That is the image that lives in the U.S. American imaginary.

It's not a matter of questioning here whether they were, in effect, as virtuous as that image has been constructed in U.S. history. But one thing has clearly been covered up in U.S. historiography: that in that world there are social groups—I won't say social classes—, but there's a social group of property owners, landowners, that is very powerful economically and politically. And if you scratch the Constitution a little, it's not all that favorable for the population in general. The political project, the institutions designed starting at that moment do not only favor that great majority; rather, it was a political project designed essentially for that class of landowners. So, genealogically, we can understand that process in a different way: the ultimate objectives of that historic experience did not exactly point to that glorious, fair goal.

I worked on this issue for a long time: I wrote several book chapters, articles, and two complete books. So, it's an issue that I've exhausted. Well, maybe I haven't completely exhausted it, because I would be interested sometime in writing precisely about that U.S. historiographic tradition, because having familiarized myself with the different groups of historians in the different eras up until now has allowed me to understand how the United States as a nation has seen itself in a pretty virgin territory, because the first U.S. historians were Europeans who had not been born in the Americas. Those historians, as a group, did not see themselves that way. For example, after the War of Secession, a group of historians constructed an idealized image of the nation, trying to put a lid on what had been precisely the secession, a nation absolutely divided and torn apart. This is something that cannot be left out of the history of the United States. For me, looking at historiography or the historiographic tradition of any nation or country is the way to understand how its inhabitants see themselves throughout their history.

Today, I'm working on a topic rooted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Starting with [Europeans'] discovery of the Americas, all culture, modern culture since its origins, modern European culture, began to conceptually develop a categorization related to that "other" completely different from European Man found in the American world. This process is understood to reach from the sixteenth century with the "discovery" to the second half of the eighteenth century, with colonization, as the consolidation of the modern world and the spirit of the Enlightenment; not only the French process, but the entire European process. That process doesn't consist of understanding the "other," but in how European Man understands himself. It would have been impossible to construct that identity of modern Man if there had not been that highly contrasting figure. In the sixteenth century and part of the seventeenth, the relationship with that "radically other" was extermination and enslavement. In the eighteenth century, as part of the Enlightenment spirit, European Man decided not to annihilate the other, but to understand it. And to do that, he had to develop a certain categorization to fit it into the field of identity of civilized European Man. In the eighteenth century, part of Enlightened culture is precisely that endeavor of categorizing otherness, which is no longer circumscribed exclusively to the original American peoples. The Europeans had already gone to Asia and

Africa. It is a huge cultural endeavor not only of European Man, but of Western Man. So, I began to be interested in a much-forgotten literature that consists of a series of English and French chronicles narrating the process of colonization of North America. I have concentrated essentially on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French chronicles, although there are fascinating items in the sixteenth-century writings, like the French Huguenot or Protestant attempts to establish a colony in Brazil, which the Portuguese did not allow. And that's where the saga begins that led the Protestants to North America.

The French seventeenth- and eighteenth-century chronicles are very symptomatic, first of all because they're, if not the first, among the first examples of Western ethnographic literature. In contrast with the Spanish colonizers, the French and English were not as interested in conquering territory or the minds of the others, but in opening up trade routes. This implied dealing with the peoples or the human settlements that they encountered along the way. Most of the chronicles are literally an ethnographic recounting of the fascination these Europeans felt at seeing and trying to understand customs, learning the languages, and everything about the beaver fur trade, one of the most important in Europe at that time. As I delved into that literature, I noticed that most of these chronicles have not been published today, except a few about the foundation of Canada. And I will venture the hypothesis that that experience and that literature did not interest either the Canadians (the Quebecois) or the French because Napoleon was not interested in territories in the Americas. And that's why they sold them to Jefferson, who bought them. Napoleon was completely absorbed by his imperial policy in Europe, so the American territories were an expense or a waste; they held no strategic interest. On the one hand, the French don't see that literature as something that is essentially theirs, and on the other hand, with the whole demand for independence for Quebec, it would be quite contradictory to try to base it historically on that colonial past. So, this literature has literally been left between the two conti-

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nents; they're chronicles that are practically forgotten. That's the literature I've been reading, since it seems to me that it's the origin of modern anthropology, because there's an ethnographic viewpoint. And anybody could tell me that that viewpoint is also found in Bernal Díaz del Castillo and in other historians of the chronicles of the Indies, but that viewpoint of the two countries, England and France, debuts essentially through the experience of the colonization of North America.

Every genealogical viewpoint understands historical processes as something symptomatic that remains as a historical process that is shunted to one side, hidden, overlooked. And that is precisely a symptom of something. Actually, my training is as a historian, but I'm not doing history of North America or of anything. But no one here at the center is doing historiography.

NG: Regarding Nacho's mention of imaginaries, I'd like to add that cultural processes are very slow. Cultural transformations take a very long time; culture changes in unpredictable but slow ways. That is, political and economic phenomena are too fast paced, and sometimes they coincide with the culture they're rooted in, but other times they don't. Peoples have imaginaries, but I believe that

now it's very difficult to talk about a single one. Of course, in the eighteenth century it was possible, because the population was smaller. Today, those who have the power to define the situation in any country—we could be talking about Mexico, the United States or Canada, where many social groups have their own cultural expressions—are very active in introducing their own identities and interpreting those of others *vis-à-vis* their own histories and in telling their own narratives. So, I would resist saying that there's a U.S. American imaginary. Rather, I would think there is a multiplicity of them, and I think that generally speaking there's a tendency to simplify U.S. culture and the United States itself. It's a country full of conflicts, very diverse, not only racially, but also culturally. Each region has its history, its literature, its music, its geography, which in a certain way have a direct impact on culture. That's why I think we tend to simplify a country that's very complex, and people always argue that it has no history. But, of course it does; if we compare it with Europe's, it's brief, but not non-existent.

IDS: In that sense, Nattie, it seems to me that all those cultural phenomena like the ones you study are what have created the way that country has developed over time. ■■■