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Remember the Alamo.

Francisco Peredo Castro*

Cultural Relations Imbalances Due to Disparity In Sociopolitical Realities

Cultural relations between countries are undoubtedly determined by their political, diplomatic, and economic links. It is also undeniable that we must not understand cultural relations solely as exchanges or collaboration in science, education, technology, high culture, the fine arts, etc., but rather also the interactions in popular culture and media/communications processes. The latter are now included in the study of cultural diplomacy and generally involve the forms of constructing representations, creating signifiers, as well as their dis-

tribution and dissemination and the impacts that all of them generate.

In this field, relations between Mexico and the United States have always been very complex. And, in some stages, they have been outright conflictive. We should remember this now, not to keep wounds open but to move on to a necessary, healthy healing of differences.

The disparity of cultural relations between the two countries began precisely due to divergences in their sociopolitical and cultural make-up. Mexico was born as an independent country almost a half century after the United States, and its birth gave rise to a brutally poor, weak nation, in almost continuous domestic crisis for more than half a century due to the insoluble division among

*Francisco is a researcher at the Center for Communication Sciences Studies (CECC) at the National Autonomous University of Mexico School of Political and Social Sciences; you can contact him at peredofm@unam.mx.

Constructing the other as “inferior,” “uncivilized,” “threatening,” etc., is always useful for justifying intervention against that “other.” This is particularly the case when the perpetrator sees itself not only as being at the apex of civilization, culture, democracy, etc., but also as the herald in charge of disseminating these qualities to the rest of the world.

those in charge of building and consolidating Mexico as a country. This turned it into an object ripe for dispute between Europe and the United States.

After the interference of the York (U.S.) and Scots (European) Masonic lodges in our domestic politics, the process began of gradually creating an image of Mexico that favored the political, diplomatic, and cultural U.S. elites’ justification of what was to come shortly. Constructing the other as “inferior,” “uncivilized,” “threatening,” etc., utilizing diverse mechanisms is always useful for justifying intervention against that “other.” This is particularly the case when the perpetrator is a party that sees itself not only as being at the apex of civilization, culture, democracy, etc., but also as the herald in charge of disseminating these qualities to the rest of the world, starting with its own hemisphere. This was done with the Monroe Doctrine at the ready, as an instrument, or Manifest Destiny, as a justification for carrying out successive “civilizing” offensives in Mexico and the rest of Latin America, including the Caribbean.

Perhaps it all started at the moment that someone decided to obliterate from the collective U.S. cultural memory the stratagems used to separate Texas from Mexico. The idea was to imprint in the mind of Texans first, and later of the entire country, the idea of “Remember the Alamo,” and to turn the site into a place for pilgrimages and civic, patriotic worship at the cost of constantly reviling Mexico, as demonstrated in recent times by Donald Trump’s electoral campaign. That operation in the field of ideas laid the cornerstone for characterizing Mexico and Mexicans from then on as violent, murderers, brutal, savage, inhuman, and lacking in the slightest degree of pity for the weak or unprotected.

From that moment in history on, in the press, in literature, in the field of iconography, and, above all, in political and diplomatic practice, that imaginary was consolidated in U.S. society. This not only did not change, but was reinforced and added to, above all with the help of innova-

tions in technology and communications, like film, which contributed to keeping these constructions alive in the field of ideas.

For starters, let’s remember the “greasers,” the name given to poor Mexicans after the so-called “Mexican-American War” of 1847, who woke up on February 3, 1848 to discover that their country no longer belonged to them and that they were now pariahs under the tutelage of their new master: the Apollonian, rubicund Anglo-Saxon, blue- or green-eyed man, sharply contrasting with Mexicans, seen and described as short, dark, big-bellied, and dirty. They were called “greasers” because the trade of greasing their new masters’ wagon wheels as they made their way to their new possessions did not allow for maintaining a tidy appearance.

To this cultural construction of the “greasers” was soon added the profile of a pitiless criminal; this made the physical appearance seem to jibe with a particular kind of behavior. The mental association between the “savage, brutal, murderers” of the Alamo in 1836 and the disagreeable, dirty “greasers,” which resulted above all from the 1848 “Treaty of Peace, Friendship, Limits and Settlement,” reconfigured the stereotype, giving it a form to justify the plunder by the new white colonizers of Mexicans and their possessions. The image of the Sonora-born hero Joaquín Murrieta, his nephew Procopio Murrieta, and all others like them from that time would oscillate between being local Robin Hoods, precursors of the El Zorro legend, for Mexicans, and simple “Mexican bandoleros” for the white colonizers. The fact that these Mexican activists were seen and promoted as “murderers,” “a threat to whites,” and “kidnappers” and “rapists” of settlers’ wives explains a new intellectual transaction and a new practical manifestation of it.

Given the desire to erase the collective memory as soon as possible and the plunder committed during the 1847 war, which continued daily in the recently occupied territories, the whites decided that it was necessary to emphasize the supposed “criminal” aspect of Mexicans

and even their “Negroid [sic] tendencies.” This was used as the pillar of the rationale needed to pass legislation such as the Greaser Act of Sacramento (California, 1850), and the Greaser Act of 1855 in the same state during the Gold Rush, laws that allowed Mexicans to be lynched on charges of vagrancy or “being a threat to whites.”

After the debate between Mexico’s “Frenchification” under the Porfirio Díaz regime and the economic pro-Europeanism promoted to balance the U.S. presence in Mexico, the advent of cinema and the Mexican Revolution opened up a whole new stage in the construction of U.S. representations of what is Mexican, generating sharp differences. U.S. society’s anxiety, sparked by the Mexican conflict, caused by Mexican “bandoleros”, apparently “revolutionaries without a cause,” turned the border between the two countries into the dividing line between “civilization” and “barbarism” (the latter being represented by Mexico and its revolution). The nineteenth-century myth of the “greaser” was reinforced by cinema used as a propaganda tool in films like D. W. Griffith’s 1908 *The Greaser’s Gauntlet*.

Given the degrading representations of Mexico and Mexicans in the press, caricatures, literature, and cinema, among other media and processes of cultural construction, in 1919, the Venustiano Carranza government (1917-1920) issued a norm to censor the budding Hollywood film industry, which from 1906 to 1919 constantly reviled our country. In addition to the insults hurled against Mexicans for simply being Mexicans and the denigration of the revolution, during World War I, the film industry promoted a peculiar form of paranoia about supposed risks of hypothetical alliances of Mexicans with the Japanese, the Germans, and all the countries of Latin America and the Latino countries of Europe to attack, destabilize, and subjugate the United States.

It would be illusory to think that all of this was just something in the popular imaginary and that it originated exclusively in the media, which, like the press in the

first quarter of the twentieth century, promoted the idea that the United States should intervene in Mexico to annex it completely and “civilize” it through “benevolent assimilation.” On the contrary, this insanity prevailed as well in the upper echelons of U.S. politics and diplomacy.

Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) and Woodrow Wilson’s (1913-1921) Darwinist views, for example, had permeated all aspects of U.S. cultural production, as well as all currents of its foreign policy. This makes it perfectly understandable that a despicable pamphlet against Mexico, Justin Harvey Smith’s *The War with Mexico* (1919), would be awarded very important honors: the Pulitzer Prize in 1920 and the Loubat Prize in 1923, respectively as the “best work” in history and in social sciences about the United States.

That confirmation of the flood of prejudices bandied about daily in all spheres against the repugnant Mexican “greasers” was similar to the denigrating references to the Latin “dagoes” of Europe and Latin America—that is, all people of Latin American, Spanish, or Italian descent—, the “darkies” of the Caribbean, the “yellow dogs” from Asia, etc., and would spark a new confrontation with Mexico. In that context, the Álvaro Obregón government (1920-1924) banned Hollywood cinema in 1922 due to its degrading vision of Mexicans. In response to this and other possible similar measures, on March 10, 1922, the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) association was created practically as a public relations and lobbying agency to dissuade the governments of the world to confront Hollywood as Mexico was doing. The Obregón government’s ban brought with it the considerable danger that its “bad example” could spread to other nations affected, like Panama, which followed suit in 1923, while others warned that they would take measures in this regard. Finally, President Obregón signed an agreement that sought Hollywood’s commitment to stop insulting Mexicans and other Latin Americans.

Nevertheless, the conflicts about cultural representations of the Mexican and the Latino in general continued

The advent of cinema and the Mexican Revolution opened up a whole new stage in the construction of U.S. representations of what is Mexican, and turned the border between the two countries into the dividing line between “civilization” and “barbarism” (the latter being represented by Mexico and its revolution).

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until the early 1930s, when Mexico and Spain signed an agreement of mutual exclusion: Spain would not show any film that offended Mexico and Latinos in general and Mexico would not show films that denigrated Spain.

The same scenario of a possible collective action or action by blocs of nations observed in 1922 was repeated in 1933, and this was enormously dangerous for the United States in the pre-war period. This explains why World War II was the only period in the 200 years of bilateral diplomatic and cultural relations when there has been an acceptably respectful treatment by the United States of its neighbors to the south, starting with Mexico. The White House was forced to implement a measured cultural diplomacy and foreign policy to maintain the necessary temporary equilibrium through bodies like the Office of the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) and the Motion Picture Society for the Americas (MPSA).

The implementation of a “good neighbor film policy” lasted only as long as the war. In all fields of culture, education, and the arts in general, links were established and all manner of initiatives promoted in the framework of strategies whereby the United States certified the existence and value of Latin American artistic and cultural manifestations through exhibitions of Latin American art nationwide. At the same time, it also sought the “de-Europeanization” of the Latin American elites to begin their gradual adherence to the “American way” and the “American Dream,” as well as to the U.S. forms of doing politics and its economic praxis and diplomacy, above all in the context of the Cold War.

That period brought with it once again the abandonment of all tact and restraint observed during the war. U.S. diplomacy would consist of cultural relations that, although they brought some benefits in the fields of science, education, and culture, were characterized by the same neglectful, permissive, and at times extremely tolerant attitude that once again reviled and denigrated, or outright mocked everything related to Latin American societies, their ways of life and social relations in media and cultural production in general.

It is undeniable that a large part of the elites in Latin American scientific, educational, and cultural spheres have had noteworthy opportunities for training and development at U.S. universities through programs promoted through governmental and diplomatic bodies. The same is true of some members of the corrupt, predatory political elites, who later return to their alma maters as teachers without too much regard for the trail of poverty, depredation, violence, and exclusion they left in their wake in the countries they (mis)governed following U.S. dictates.

From the time after World War II until today, during the entire Cold War and its aftermath, the disparity has been evident between the power of a nation of political and economic superiority and what is possible for weaker nations in facing the former. The monopoly of constructing representations, those generated and distributed throughout the world from the great U.S. media conglomerates, has acted as a steamroller in the world of cultural media consumption in Latin America. And the imbalance in cultural relations has been noteworthy at several times in that history. When films like *Espaldas mojadas* (Wetbacks) (Alejandro Galindo, 1953) or *La rosa blanca* (The White Rose) (Roberto Gavaldón, 1961) were produced in Mexico, the United States had the diplomatic power to ban their screening because they considered the image they presented of U.S. Americans to be negative. By contrast, only on very few occasions Mexico has had the power to censor or ban the screening of a U.S. movie considered libelous or insulting to the country or to Mexicans inside or outside the United States.

This has been, then, the tone of bilateral cultural relations. In this sense, it is very positive that the current U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Ken Salazar, remembered that the relationship between our nation and his is indissoluble and forever. Together with that assertion, we would do well to also remember the key moments in the 200 years of our cultural relations, because forgetting the past is the foundation for repeating its mistakes. While it is true that our relationship is indissoluble and eternal, a great deal of rationality is needed to not forget that it must always be based on mutual respect in all fields. ■■■