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Federalism and nationhood in North America

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It seems to me, when it comes to discussing those elements of political culture and institutions that are fundamentally formative in the process of nationhood in Canada, Mexico and the United States, and that knit the independence period together with our own day, that the historian should recall that our countries are, above all:

1. The products of a European colonialism imposed on top of existing indigenous cultures and states (and I emphasize that American aboriginal societies were usually organized in the form of states);
2. Characterized by immense territorial size (an attribute that influences all our historical choices);
3. Nations which chose federalism as the base political institution for organizing the nation-state following independence.

Of these three, federalism seems the most instrumental in the formation of conscious nationhood. It is a form of government in which separate, self-governing territorial entities join together to create a greater whole, and in which power is distributed between the central authority and the constituent units.

The Brazilian scholar Aspásia Camargo gives a suitably Latin American definition: "We can define federalism as an extra-European model of state organization marked by the coexistence of two sovereignties: that of the union, which retains the control and the execution of some common functions, and that of the federated units, which occupy themselves with the rest."[1]

I say this is a Latin American perspective because in neither the United States nor, at least until recent times, in Canada, would the scholar incorporate in the definition of federalism such an untroubled reference to the existence of dual sovereignties. (More's the pity.) The issue of whether federalism possesses such a thing as dual sovereignty, and if so, what it comprises, is currently under hot debate in Canada, at the insistence of Quebec.

In Mexican federalism, at least in the federalist revolt of 1823, the leading states such as Jalisco, Zacatecas, Oaxaca and the Yucatan believed in the idea that the nation can be sovereign and that each state/province can also be internally sovereign.

While the United States was the first country to develop federalism, Mexico in 1824 and Canada in 1867 —following the traditions of their own history and for realistic geographical and political reasons of their own— also formed federal unions. Neither Mexico nor Canada "copied" the United States. Despite whatever surface similarities may exist in form, in the process of nationhood there is nc copyright on good ideas.

Federalism is such a fundamental part of our political structures that when it comes to articulating who and what we are as nations, we sometimes forget to mention it. As Marcello Carmagnani comments, federalism is not just a base for the institutional organization of certain countries, "it is also a political culture capable of regulating through concrete political practices the rights and duties of the different actors," as it involves their political participation, citizenship and social interaction.[2]

As a system of national organization and as a form of government in large countries of complex linguistic, ethnic and regional makeup, federalism fulfills

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1 Aspásia Camargo, "La federación sometida. Nacionalismo desarrollista e inestabilidad democrática," in Marcello Carmagnani, editor, *Federalismos latinoamericanos: México/Brasil/Argentina*. Mexico City, El Colegio de México/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993, pp. 300-362.

2 Carmagnani, *Federalismos latinoamericanos*, p.10.

many purposes. It combines the contradictory impulses of unity and diversity, of nationhood and regionalism, of oneness and pluralism, and it fulfills real political and ideological needs. At the same time, it places priority on the rights of the constituent parts to their own self-determination, which is, of course, the key element. It seems a self-evident principle that nationhood is meaningless unless it is a voluntary association.

In a setting where there are pre-existing political and juridical entities, federalism allows many voices to be heard in the difficult process of the development of nationhood. One of the most frequent mistakes many observers make is to assume that independence and nationhood are one and the same thing. The act of political separation from the colonial mother country, though an immense achievement in its own right, is not the same thing as the achievement of nationhood. When nationhood takes place, it is the fulfillment of a process of institutional construction, not the initiation of this process. In all three countries, federalism was the route, the process, to nationhood.

In Mexico, the creation of a federal republic that recognized the states of the union as "free and sovereign" was not an inevitable consequence of independence but the result of a genuine revolution which occurred two years after independence, in 1823, and which could not have happened until independence itself laid the essential foundation, which was the right to self-definition or self-determination.

Federalism has always been a very difficult form of national organization because it is complex and requires that many voices participate in the formulation of identity and policy. In essence, it requires power-sharing. Mexico is a country defined by its regions, as are Canada and the United States. The issue of a "national project" at independence automatically raised the issue of the regions, and it was not possible for it to be otherwise because the regions demanded to be heard. That was perhaps the most revolutionary consequence of independence.

The essence of Mexican history, therefore, needs to be approached from a multiple, evolving, national/provincial/regional perspective. Provincialism —the aspiration for provincial equality and home rule, the desire for political devolution, the demand for juridical equality, opposition to the absolute power exercised by Mexico City over the rest of the country— became the foremost driving force of the early period after independence, and one that historiography rarely reflects.

As Luis González asks, in what way does recognition of the legitimacy of the thousands of *matrias* that make up the *patria* threaten the whole?[3] Does recognition of heterogeneity endanger the survival of the nation? I believe not. I believe it constitutes, on the one hand, simple fairness and, on the other, a necessary awareness of the multiplicity of the mosaic without which the whole is weakened rather than strengthened. If modern Mexico faces a crisis of definition, perhaps some of its definitions have been false. And as Roger Bartra suggests, the only way to make systems conform to the reality of Mexican existence is to recognize clearly the actuality of the past.[4] That is the job of the historian.

The articulation of a "national project" in Mexico, that is, the creation of the nation-state and of its forms and institutions, was not possible until the regions played their fair share in defining it. Centralism that ignores the regions' right to autonomy in a country of great size and ethno-cultural complexity becomes a dead-end street.

The unique strength of federalism is that it allows —to use the Canadian terminology for a moment— the creation of nationhood through voluntary association amid the continuation of a regional mosaic, the joining into one nation of all the disparate cultural, ethnic, linguistic and geographical identities, a structure in which individual and provincial self-definition does not automatically have to surrender to the demands of national security or political union. There is nothing mystical, much less genetic, about the formation of the nation-state. It is a programmatic political construction, made by human hands. Self-definition and voluntary association are the two essential elements for a federal system.

This segment of Mexican history —the creation of the federal republic— is critical, I contend, because it offers historically based options that Mexicans in the 21st century can call upon in their task of renewing and redefining a national identity which, in our own day, is in rapid transition. We need to remember that the Mexican republic, when first created, was based on the dual foundations of provincehood and

[3] Luis González, "Patriotismo y matriotismo, cara y cruz de México," in Cecilia Noriega Elio, editor, *El nacionalismo en México*. Zamora, El Colegio de Michoacán, 1992, pp. 477-495.

[4] Roger Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy: Identity and Metamorphosis in the Mexican Character*, translated by Christopher J. Hale. New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1992, p. 175.

nationhood, which were not opposed but rather two sides of the same coin.[5]

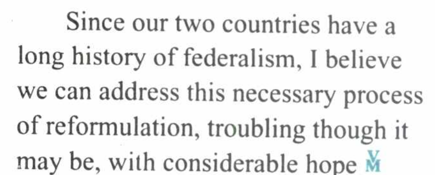
A peculiar linkage thus ties Canada and Mexico together. In the late 20th century —and, one might almost say, against all normal expectations— the hoary old problem of federalism versus centralism is still not dead. Issues of regionalism, power-sharing, regional economic disparities, ideological and ethnic differences between certain states or provinces, and regional demands for greater influence are still a part of both Canadian and Mexican life, precisely because they are issues relating to the control and use of power, and they are issues which we have not fully solved.

What is happening today in Mexico is that the great discourse between region and center has once again broken out, after many years of quiescence, "a discourse whose intent," as Jorge Zepeda Patterson puts it, "is to recognize the need for identity in a population that without ceasing to be Mexican... rejects the official version of Mexicanness."[6] The crisis of the 1990s suggests, as Carmagnani says for Mexico, that centralizing federalism is in crisis, but the federal pact itself may not be. The federal principle may simply be undergoing another of the reformulations that it has experienced since 1824.[7]

In Canada, there is no doubt that the existing form of federalism may soon be in crisis again, despite the existence of a constitution that is only twelve years old. Although the current federal government has declared it will not renegotiate the constitution, it is constantly renegotiating the terms of federalism when it comes to revenue-sharing with the provinces. When the new Quebec referendum takes place in 1995, the rest of Canada will have to consider genuinely innovative responses.

Thus, the primary point of conjuncture between Canada and Mexico is that in the last years of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st both will face the reformulation of federalism, which automatically will be a revision of the terms of nationhood.

Since our two countries have a long history of federalism, I believe we can address this necessary process of reformulation, troubling though it may be, with considerable hope



[5] Sergio Ortega Noriega, "Hacia la regionalización de la historia de México," *Estudios de historia moderna y contemporánea de México*, 1980, pp. 9-21.

[6] Jorge Zepeda Patterson, "La nación vs. las regiones," in Noriega Elío, editor, *El nacionalismo en México*, pp. 497-518.

[7] Carmagnani, "Conclusión: El federalismo, historia de una forma de gobierno," in Carmagnani, ed., *Federalismos latinoamericanos*, pp. 397-416.

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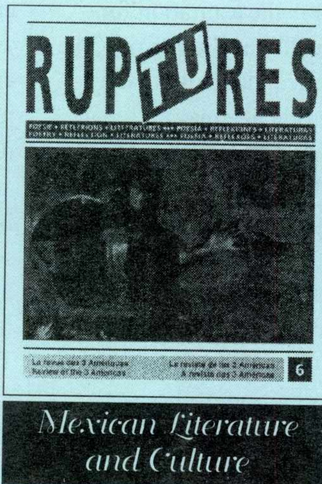

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