

The Idea of Diversity in Mexico And the United States

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Lewis W. Hine

Waiting at Ellis Island.

On August 19, 2000, the statue of Abraham Lincoln located in Mexico City's Abraham Lincoln Park was knocked off its pedestal.¹ Across the street, Martin Luther King witnessed the strange disappearance. The almost four-meter-high bronze statue was found lying not far away. The top part had been separated from the rest of the body. Uneasy policemen took the head to a district attorney's office and it was kept there. Later, municipal employees took Lincoln's body to a

warehouse. After a few consultations, the authorities decided that Lincoln's head and body could not be reunited because no one knew who the statue belonged to since it had been a gift from the U.S. government. The assistant ward director for legal affairs stated to the press, "It has not been put back because we don't know who should ask for the head, the federal or the local government."² According to witnesses, a group of young revelers knocked down the statue in the heat of a pre-dawn spree. More than a month later, Lincoln was finally returned to his pedestal. One reporter wrote, "Abraham

Lincoln returned to the corner of Julio Verne and Emilio Castelar completely restored, to represent the American people who donated him to the Mexicans in 1982."³

The entire episode is an almost perfect metaphor for the national condition of our two countries: a past that wavers between the upsets of contingency, a determination to remember—if not to commemorate—a patriotic story under fire, the appropriation of memory fractured by strangers and its often unpredictable migration across national borders. Our past is not our own. It also reveals the fights to adju-

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dicade symbolic property; some solicit the head, others the body of history. Everyone asks whom the nation and its history belongs to. Lincoln's predicament also reminds us that there is a will to reintegrate, to restore what has been broken. Our national identities anxiously look for their lost head. And that search for integrity, like Lincoln's sudden reversal of fortunes in Mexico, is crisscrossed by chance in the extreme. Perhaps, at the end of the day, we will be able to reunite our scattered parts. However, in contrast with Lincoln's effigy, the face of the past has been lost forever. There is no solder or sheen that can restore its original condition.

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The idea of writing about Mexico and the U.S. national experiences came about in the United States in the mid-1990s during the climax of that country's cultural wars.⁴ These conflicts coincided with the 1994 Zapatista rebellion, which evidenced the breakdown of the national imaginary in Mexico. It seemed to me that both countries went through like symbolic upsets and that their predicament had many similarities that were by no means recent. The comparison of these experiences could help Mexicans and Americans understand their circumstances better. This is not, of course, a new road. Other observers have noted that the debates about multiculturalism in the United States have broader implications.⁵ In a speech given in Washington nearly a quarter of a century ago, Octavio Paz surprised his American audience saying, "To conquer its enemies, the United States must first conquer itself: return to its origins, not to repeat them but to rectify them.

The other and the others —the minorities inside, as well as the marginal countries and nations outside— do exist."⁶ Paz was repeating a commonplace: our countries were separated by "very profound social, economic and psychic differences." Mexico and the United States were two different versions of Western civilization. The history of our relations was that of a mutual, persistent and usually —although not always— involuntary deception.

Perhaps Paz was right, although these kinds of civilizing explanations are less and less persuasive. However, here, I am interested in pointing to the commonalities —not the differences— between the Mexican and American national experiences. Both countries are in a simultaneous process of introspection and redefining their identities. In both Mexico and the United States, multiculturalism has become a central issue for public debate. Does the term mean the same thing in both countries? In principle, there would seem to be semantic differences. The word "multiculturalism" is more used in Britain, Canada and the United States, although in Mexico it is beginning to replace the term "cultural pluralism" that was used for a good part of the twentieth century. However, the word "continues to have different applications. Americans use it to designate the separate co-existence of ethnic groups. Despite having preached the cultural mix and consecrating it with the expression 'melting pot,' identities tend to be essentialist and belonging to a community has become the main guarantee of individual rights."⁷ In accordance with this idea, in Latin America, "Modern nations were not formed with the model of belonging to ethnicities or communities because in many

countries large groups of foreign migrants intermingled.

The integration of American and European ethnic groups took place within the French model of the republic, adapting it more or less to Latin American historical processes."⁸ According to García Canclini, in Latin American countries there was

greater social willingness and more of a variety of political-cultural strategies to make it possible for heterogeneity to be resolved with mestization. While in the United States, blacks were first kept as slaves and later segregated in neighborhoods, schools and other public spaces, and the indigenous were marginalized on reservations, in the Latin American countries, the extermination and marginalization of blacks and indigenous co-existed with policies for mestization from the nineteenth century on and with an (unequal) recognition of their citizenship, which went as far as the symbolic exaltation of their patrimony in Mexican *indigenismo*. Racism was everywhere, but the alternatives to racism must be differentiated.... While in the United States mestization and hybridization have predominantly been seen as scandalous, in Latin American and Caribbean countries, together with discriminatory policies and day-to-day attitudes, broad sectors of society put a positive value on mixing as something which fosters modernization and cultural creativity.⁹

[And] although the "American black" and the "Mexican Indian" were the other in the civic normativity in their respective countries, the Indian in Mexico was situated as the very subject of the nationality, a subject who was to be transformed through education and racial mixing.¹⁰

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This history, which summarizes the dominant view, must be reviewed because it is unsatisfactory. The comparison between Mexico and the United States illuminates its insufficiencies. For a start, it is inconsistent: if the paradigm of integration in Mexico was the secular idea of the republic, how can we explain the racial ideology of mestization at the center of the discourse about national identity? Far from being a matter of informal understandings, mestization was an out-and-out racialist theory, with theoreticians to systematize it. This is not a minor variation of the French model. The identity axis was the mestizo, not the citizen. Although many of the differences noted are very real, others are a matter of degree. After everything is said and done, in the colonial period, as in many states of the United States, there was also a complex system of racial classification that sought to codify the different possibilities and degrees of mixture. The colonial censors wanted to know who was what and in what proportion to determine the step on the social ladder that he or she should occupy. The nineteenth century, which attempted to eliminate this hateful legacy, was in many respects just a brief interlude in our racist past. A short time later, by the end of the *Porfiriato* (the 30-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz), the notion of race was back, and ended up by strengthening itself during the post-revolutionary period. Mestization, which as a social

phenomenon is beneficial since it presumes that there are no unbreachable ethnic or religious barriers to people uniting, is pernicious as a national ideology. In other respects, the emphasis on “the cosmic race” has blacked out important phenomena such as the continued existence of minorities who do not mix in: indigenous, Mennonites, Jews, etc. This has influenced how we think about and analyze processes of integration.

Perhaps the underlying similarities, neither explicit nor recognized, between both societies are what explain the success of the multicultural discourse in broad intellectual and political circles in Mexico.¹¹ And while in Latin America solving multicultural conflicts through affirmative action policies is not very popular, indigenous rights, based on an essentialist conception of identity, are increasingly accepted. Similarly, gender quotas have already made their appearance in Mexican politics. Are we moving in both countries toward a common discourse on multiculturalism?¹²

Multiculturalism is a persuasion, an attempt to lead us to believe in the basic suppositions that support an interpretation of history and culture. In effect, “The export of U.S. multiculturalism has been echoed in Europe and Latin American at a moment in which the decline of the socialist critique of capitalism contributed to devaluing distributive demands.”¹³ García

Canclini, for example, states that the dissemination of the U.S. and Canadian debates in France and other European countries has led to reflect “about the insufficiency of the principle of equal rights and the inability of institutions to really supply equal access to goods and services and avert racism.”¹⁴ In addition, multiculturalism seeks to persuade about the explicit need of symbolic recognition for minorities. The specific forms of this recognition are the subject of lively debate in both countries. The debate turns around several crosscutting themes. For example, writing and re-writing national history, education, the inclusion or the right to difference for minorities and the search for cultural common denominators. How the debates on these issues have evolved in the United States and Mexico is explored in a comparative fashion and divided into three parts.

1) First, there is the debate about national history and its teachings in both countries during the 1990s. In the United States, the concern is that the version of history of that nation does not appropriately reflect the participation of minorities in nation-building efforts. The adjudication of history—who did what, how much and how—has led many specialists to question the role of history and its teaching in a diverse society. Is rewriting the historic narrative in an attempt to incorporate the excluded limited by “objectivity”? The past and its image mold not only our understanding of the present but also future possibilities. In the same way, in Mexico, controversies about the country’s history have been frequent. The writing of official schoolbooks led to a huge polemic in 1992. A group of historians aimed to

demythologize the official history and reinterpret some of the most stereotyped episodes in Mexico history. This attempt was met with numerous objections.

2) At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we only have a few indications to imagine the possible physiognomies of future national identities in Mexico and the United States. In brief, we do not know what comes after the cosmic race and the melting pot. Is the United States really moving toward a “mosaic” composition in the Canadian style? What will unite Mexicans amidst enormous ethnic, regional and economic inequality? This part is an exercise in imagination and memory. Neither Mexico nor the United States is facing for the first time the challenges of the definition of its nationhood. At other times (when independence was won, at the end of the revolution, during the waves of immigration and in the years that saw the rise of the civil rights movement) both countries managed to recreate their identities. The question we want to answer is: What are their possible future forms?

3) Finally, I analyze the existing cultural diversity (or uniformity) in both societies. In Mexico, the idea of a homogeneously mestizo country—an idea long dominant—has fallen into disrepute and now we seek to establish an image of a multicultural nation that recognizes difference. In what I call the “End of the Cosmic Race” I attempt to go beyond the myth of mestization to recognize the different national groups which throughout history have participated in Mexico’s national construction. Underneath the mask of mestizo uniformity, this country has been much more multicultural than has been thought. The imaginary

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of mestization has been a barrier to the recognition of the role played not only by indigenous groups, but also by Jews, Germans, Chinese, Koreans, Mennonites, etc. Many of these groups have enjoyed de facto or legal autonomy to carry on their affairs. As a result, they have managed to maintain themselves to a greater degree. As opposed to the official understanding that proposes a homogeneous nation, I contend that in Mexico there is an important degree of unrecognized cultural diversity. The reality is the inverted image of the myth.

Then I look into the “Myth of Diversity”, a mirror discussion of this. The United States is a culturally uniform country that thinks of itself as diverse, while Mexico is a multicultural country that thinks of itself as uniform. Despite the sound and the fury of the polemics in the United States, the fact is that it is a very homogeneous nation. The rhetoric once again covers up reality. Diversity is examined in light of indicators such as the percentage of the native population who does not speak English, exogamy and the degree of freedom given to religious and ethnic minorities. In order to compare, I analyze the role played in both countries by specific groups, such as Chinese immigrants, the Amish and Mennonites, Mormon colonies and the Jewish communities. I also dig into the most recent demographic information to illustrate long-term cultural patterns in Mexico and the United

States. While the census and other sources describe in great detail the racial composition of U.S. society, in Mexico that information is practically non-existent. This, of course, is not fortuitous. The lack of useful census information to measure ethnic diversity is due to Mexico’s national self-image as a uniformly mestizo country. In recent years, as revolutionary nationalism eroded, the censuses little by little began to register characteristics that had previously been ignored, such as the population’s ethnic self-identification. This is part of a broader process of symbolic change.

I ultimately seek to show many commonalities between the two countries that are not evident. But among all of them, I emphasize one in particular. The societies of Mexico and the United States live in the shadow of historic guilt. The memory of the many injustices committed against Negroes and indigenous people indelibly mark the public debates and policies of both nations. Neither of them has known how to exorcise the specter of guilt. I examine the cultural, social and political effects of guilt. Undoubtedly, a certain kind of regret can turn into an inducement to forge a better society. However, guilt can also be an obstacle to achieving true social justice. A guilty conscience obscures possible remedies in different ways. This is what has happened in Mexico and the United States. Is it possible to exorcise the phantom of guilt?

What are the similarities between the multicultural debates in Mexico and the United States? The answer is by no means obvious because, as I have mentioned, the starting point of each nation is different. The national ideas that seem to have gone out of date are different in each case. However, the complaints and demands for recognition seem to have notable similarities. Are these similarities real or only apparent? The comparison of the two national debates illuminates aspects which are not glaringly obvious in each country. This exercise results in the questioning of comfortable beliefs about ourselves. The comparison directs our attention to unexplored places that take on importance when observed under a new light. The roads of diversity are many: Will Mexicans and Americans take similar routes or will we travel separate roads? What factors can or should influence this decision? This is an open debate.

In July 2001, the U.S. Postal Service put out a stamp showing a self-portrait of Frida Khalo. The slogan used to publicize the stamp was, "Frida Khalo: the first Hispanic woman honored with a postage stamp." When it was unveiled, Postal Service Vice President for Diversity Development, Benjamin P. Ocasio said, "The Frida Kahlo stamp allows us to reach out across communities to let everyone know that this organization has a commitment to diversity that involves both our customers and our employees."¹⁵ Cecilia Alvear, president of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists added, "This stamp, honoring a Mexican artist who has transcended 'la frontera' and has become an icon to Hispanics, feminists and art lovers, will be a further reminder of the continuous cultural contributions of Latinos to the United States."¹⁶ Khalo must

have imagined herself in many ways, but surely not as a "Hispanic." Neither would it have occurred to her that her work could be appropriated collectively to be shown as an "ethnic contribution to the United States."¹⁷ Frida thus became a symbol of inclusion: she stopped being a Mexican artist and was transformed into the representative of a minority. The episode shows up a paradox. Since Mexicans and Americans begin to imagine a shared future, our different pasts begin to coincide in unexpected ways. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Mirtha Hernández, "Desaparece estatua de Lincoln en Polanco," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 22 August 2000.

² Mirtha Hernández, "Llevar a Lincoln al Ministerio Público," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 22 August 2000.

³ Karla Mendoza, "Devuelven a Lincoln a su lugar," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 25 September 2000.

⁴ This article is a shorter version of the preface to the book by the same author titled *El sonido y la furia. Ensayos sobre la persuasión multicultural en México y en Estados Unidos*, to be released by Taurus Editorial at the beginning of next year.

⁵ See, for example, Denis Lacorne, *La crise de l'identité américaine. Du melting-pot au multiculturalism* (Paris: Fayard, 1997).

⁶ Octavio Paz, "Mexico and the United States: positions and counterpositions," Tommie Sue Montgomery, ed., *Mexico Today* (Philadelphia: ISH, 1982), p. 21.

⁷ Néstor García Canclini, "Diccionario de malentendidos," *Letras libres*, vol. 3, no. 28, April 2001, pp. 22-25. "[People] think and act as members of a minority (Afro-American or

Chicano or Puerto Rican) and as such they have the right to affirm the difference in language, in quotas for jobs and services, or to ensure a place in universities or government agencies. This 'affirmative action' has served to correct and compensate institutionalized forms of discrimination that led to chronic inequalities. But through a procedure that makes groups that one belongs to by birth, via the weight of biology and history, predominate over groups of choice and over mixes, that is, over mestization." Néstor García Canclini, *La globalización imaginada* (Mexico City: Paidós, 2000), p. 110.

⁸ Néstor García Canclini, "Diccionario de malentendidos," *Letras libres*, vol. 3, no. 28, April 2001, p. 24.

⁹ Néstor García Canclini, *La globalización imaginada* (Mexico City: Paidós, 2000), p. 113.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 112 and 116.

¹¹ The writings of Canadian political theorist Will Kymlicka were translated very rapidly into Spanish and read by supporters of multiculturalism in Latin America. See Will Kymlicka, *Ciudadanía multicultural: una teoría liberal de los derechos de las minorías* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1996). For a domestic example of the argument, see Luis Villoro, *Estado plural, pluralidad de culturas* (Mexico City: Paidós/UNAM, 1998) and Héctor Díaz-Polanco and Consuelo Sánchez, *México diverso. La lucha por la autonomía* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2002).

¹² See, for example, Bárbara A. Driscoll and Paz Consuelo Márquez-Padilla, comps., *El color de la tierra. Minorías en México y Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2002).

¹³ Néstor García Canclini, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹⁵ Press release, 21 June 2001, www.usps.com

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Apropos of the Miramax film about Frida Khalo's life with Salma Hayek in the title role, one critic wrote in a Mexico City newspaper, "What would Frida, an anti-Yankee by nature, say if she could see how the entire social and political ideal disappeared into a superficial narrative that cushioned the physical pain and the torment of the soul that accompanied her throughout almost her entire existence and that today turns her into the heroine of just another 'love story'?" Perla Ciuk, "Frida en Disneylandia," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 11 November 2002,