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A Mexican-American Looks At Turkey and Sees Mexico

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No matter where they go, Mexican travelers report moments of insight: “All of a sudden I felt we could have been in Mexico!” If not a reference to the countryside—Mexico’s is almost as varied in miniature as the world’s—it is usually to the bustle of an open-air market, indeed universally human. Taking Turkey as an example, and far beyond the visuals mentioned, it seems like Mexico’s geo-political twin. This has to do with globalization. Comparisons between Mexico and Turkey bring up prospects for and dangers in the grand strategies of enlarged regions—North America and the European Union—as well as the determining role of minority autonomy movements in the geo-political project dominating the world at the beginning of this century.

In the nineteenth century, Turkey was irreverently deemed “the sick man of Europe” in much the same way that Mexico in the same period was said to be part of the United States’

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“backyard.” This kind of quip is currently out of fashion. What are the reigning metaphors today for this particular relationship, recurring on different continents: the relationship between highly incomparable but inevitably linked neighbors?

On the Mexican side of the comparison, we have lost our taste for imagery, appealing to the metaphysical (“so close to the U.S., and so far from God”) or resorting to make-believe geography. That is, the “North American” Free Trade Agreement is not only geologically dubious (I learned that the north-south continental divide is drawn along the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.) but socio-culturally nonsensical: what Mexican thinks she is (or wants to be) part of North America?

Turning to Europe, the ruling metaphor—self-chosen—is “the club”. Will Turkey be invited to join it? The decision by the members of the European Union after a chilling public debate was a time-qualified “yes.” Turkey’s membership in the Club is on track, but, as France, Germany and the rest determined in October 2004, it is on the “slow track,” estimated at 15 years.

NAFTA was accepted in the U.S. only because its Congress approved the presidential request for “fast track,” foregoing deep-consensus debate, limiting themselves to a yes-or-no vote. The contrast in the velocity of these blocs is logical: one dashes to a near goal and the other moves more slowly to a far-

ther one. While NAFTA is restricted to trade, the European Union is a far more complex alliance. Final membership in the latter is pending determination of whether Europe accepts not just trade, but forging a far more common identity with Turkey (in a “Europe” already rapidly expanding toward the East). One wants to be sure there are sufficient socio-political compatibilities minimally required to be part of the same club.

Again, there is the problem of a lack of a customary name for the new geographic division. Though it is the “European Union,” that continent ends very cleanly at the Bosphorus, leaving a very large Anatolia (Asia Minor, to be specific), just kind of not recognized.

But if the Amerindians can call themselves Indians, Mexicans can call themselves North Americans and Turks can learn to call themselves European. Geographic semantics aside, the debate, raging during last year’s E.U. vote and continuing today, is formulated as the question, “Is Turkey part of Europe?” with “Europe” understood as a socio-political entity. When answered in the affirmative, the arguments marshaled are based on economic dependence/inter-dependence and defense alliance.

The fundamentals of Mexico’s membership in “North America” are the same. Of course, on this continent it was economics that dominated the debate when it raged 11 years ago, though the defense alliance—in fear

of Central American immigrants before, and now, of course, even more of international terrorists—was always an implicit goal of the U.S. The immigration debate was postponed for later; it still is. Increasing political linkages could imaginably be pursued in the context of the Organization of American States but the fate of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) will determine whether the U.S. pursues a more complex regionalization with Mexico, or an economy-based drive into the rest of the South American continent.

It is lost on no one that there are alternative paradigms for interpreting these re-regionalization projects: 1) Are they (one or both) “colonial” in nature, or 2) “post-modern internationalist” in nature? Surprising as it is for analysts trained in Smith/Marxian economism, the cultural component appears to be of determining importance in opting for one or the other interpretation of the moment.

Though notable for being downplayed, the cluster of cultural factors differentiating Mexico from the North and Turkey from the West make it obvious that these southern additions to the integrated powerhouses are—unless you squint—“other.” Linguistically, of course, they differ from the rest; the linguistic challenge is as daunting for monolingual U.S. residents (and bilingual Canadians) as for polyglot Europeans, few of whom study Turkish. Needless to say, Turkey and Mexico both have “poverty” profiles very different from those of the capitalist heartlands in North America or the European Union; not only is the proportion of poor much higher; the population is far more rural than that of their prospective bloc partners (25 per-

cent in Turkey and Mexico). Mexico and Turkey are youth population time bombs, the strategy for which is presumably defusing without much more immigration-diffusion, and hopefully no explosion. Education, then, should prepare youth to live wherever the economy drives them, and should be secular-liberal, especially to help mature the fledgling formal democracies of Turkey and Mexico. No longer is it quite logical to play the long-used, now-played trump card of nationalism, nor—God forbid—promote the conservative religious currents growing in the world.

This sounds like a perfect project of “Washington Consensus” liberalism, which is, Rubicon style, expanding beyond and into qualitatively less liberal societies, at a moment in history in which “culture wars” are identified as the likely result of a post-nation-state global reordering. But cultural complexity is precisely a characteristic shared by Mexico and Turkey that can be read in favor of the re-regionalization projects at hand.

In both Turkey and Mexico (known by other names) extraordinary civilizations flourished within a similar timeframe: the Byzantine Empire (450 to 1453) and the Amerindian civilizations (300 to 1492). The Ottomans, originally from Asia, took over Anatolia (and jumped the Bosphorus and headed for Vienna) at the same time that the Spanish conquered more of the “New World.” Islam defeated Orthodox Christianity; Catholic Christianity defeated Amerindian culture. With or after these cataclysms of the late fifteenth century, the ethnic majority secured political power. With the Ottoman Empire, the non-Turks either died, left or assumed minority ethnic-

ity positions. In Mexico, after the depletion of the Indian population in the sixteenth century, the new mestizo majority ethnic group eventually secured power.

In short, culture wars are not new to either Turkey or Mexico. The outcome of these states forged by the cataclysmic imposition of one empire over another is the creation of complex, layered societies, prone to caste-like social organization and ethnic groups with long memories.

A secular, liberal, capitalist revolution might be expected when the secular, liberal, capitalist model had shown its potency. Mexico’s and Turkey’s were within a decade of one another, at the beginning of the twentieth century. One still finds founding father Atatürk’s portrait, or often a bust, in every room of every public building in the Turkish Democratic Republic; one thinks, here, of Benito Juárez, blending into Zapata, in the public spaces of our equally foundationally secular (Mexican) United States. Then there is a closed-but-to-kin Turkish bourgeoisie, mistakable for the Mexican Revolutionary Family, both of which, in the 1990s, were shaken up by—but finally shook down—neo-liberalization programs, *à la* Salinas. In Turkey the stabilizing hand applied to quell political unrest at that time took the form of their army’s “Soft Coup.” In

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Mexico—softened by the strategically applied para-military repression decades before—it was only necessary to rearrange an election after the fact. (That typifies a difference in intensity between the two social processes.)

Since then both countries have had significant achievements in the functioning of their systems of electoral democracy, helped unquestionably by processes very linked to the re-regionalization phenomena, whereby the need to look better to the powerhouse leads to acting better. The abuse of human rights continues to plague both countries; it is probably worse in Turkey than in Mexico, though both populations are inured to it, making it hard to tell. Bureaucratic corruption continues to be discussed in exactly the same terms in the conversations of the political class of one country or the other.

Social strain always comes with economic transformations, which in the Mexican and Turkish cases are notably internationalizing in their nature. Tourism (as well as its cousins, retired persons and other long-term transplants) is in the top three foreign-currency strategies of each country, and though the kind known as “sun, sand and sex” occurs in Club Med-like relative seclusion, the influx of foreigners with higher incomes, as well as differing socio-cultural norms reinforces the hegemonic consumer-society cultural messages we have wept about for many a decade. Below the airplanes heading south are roads and trains on which immigrants from each country head to the powerhouses’ heartland. Who knows whether the remittances from poor, rural Turks, gone to Germany, produce a greater or lesser pro-

portion of GDP than those of poor, rural Mexicans, gone to the U.S.?

A progressive observer (an identity as easy to feel as it is hard to summarize) is at first shocked, then, by one enormous inconsistency between these two great social shifts. Mexico's left, including the human rights and pro-democracy community, did not rally to, nor does it now support the North American Free Trade Agreement. They do not trust the intentions of the wooing party. All the Turks with whom I spoke favored—and wanted nothing short of—full membership in the European Union, expressly looking for the benefits in terms of increased rule-of-law and democratic practice (not to mention economic prosperity, about which they were less sanguine).

Waiting for a desired proposal does not build self-esteem. Finally, in October of last year, a slightly begrudging, certainly conditioned invitation to join the E.U. came out of a highly deliberative public debate (“Is Turkey part of Europe?”), subject to critical review of Turkey's political attractiveness, during the 15-year engagement period—uncomfortable for those desiring consummation—that was thus set in motion.

The French government (which had just forbidden the use of the veil in schools, affecting the 15 percent of its population who are Moslem) had been particularly reticent. Neither sophisticated multiculturalism nor old-fashioned liberalism is as dominant in their political culture as many Europeans frequently portray both to be. But the dominant position of the Turkish human rights movement, in any case, is clear: Turkey's inclusion in greater Europe is seen as the key to progress and so this extended engagement peri-

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od is the large window of opportunity for advancing its agenda.

If in this foreign policy matter the Turkish human rights movement is in a tactical alliance with the country's leading political-economic powers, nevertheless, there is a deep (*México bronco*-like) opposition to the foreign policy-constructed project, perceived as the re-founding of Turkish state-hood through de-nationalizing, semi-incorporation into Europe's liberal, advanced-capitalist regional bloc. This opposition, subject to control and even repression, is ill formed in political terms. It takes the form of reasserting Muslim identity.

The potential force of this movement comes from its religious-cultural predominance (over 90 percent of Turks are at least nominally Moslem). That force is enormously strengthened by the internationalist Moslem revitalization movement (today an obsession in the world) arguably dominant in the (counter-) region to which Turkey also—secondarily, at present—belongs: the Middle East. What is more, the Kurds, 15 percent of Turkey's 70 million citizens, opt for significant autonomy of their territory on Turkey's eastern border. (Since their armed independence movement has lost steam, the tactical benefits of E.U. re-regionalization now appear to be more salient than the pan-Kurdish na-

tionalist current, which is always an historic claim.)

In the case of Mexico, the nationalist revitalization movement, not incomparable to Turkey's, opposes the presently prevailing political-economic project grounded in cultural terms (extending to economic and geo-political ones); rejecting “North Americanism,” Mexican nationalists would strengthen the country's unique identity, as well as reclaim significant membership in the (counter-) region of Latin America.

More than just an interesting similarity exists between Amerindian and Kurdish claims for territorial, cultural and political autonomy.¹ Their autonomy projects are likely to strategically define the future of the grand re-regionalization projects in which each is embedded.

Seen from the perspective of the national capitals, the Amerindian and Kurdish autonomy movements have Mexico City and Ankara about evenly offended, defensive, perplexed and negating. The Indians, of course, are protectively enshrined as one of the two source-folks of the Mexican nation, while the Kurds are far more vulnerable to being cast as the subject-people on territory the Turkish state is not about to relinquish. But, seen from the perspective of the capitals of the re-regionalizing blocs, neither Washington nor Brussels shows signs of confusion regarding their respective priority: achieving the political stability on the border necessary for the grand re-regionalization project. The complex configuration approximately balances: Mexico's greater national commitment to the Amerindians combines with Washington's hardened realpolitik regarding rebellious minorities with a

result similar to Ankara's hardened realpolitik regarding rebellious minorities combined with Brussels' commitment to patchwork multiculturalism with strains of human rights language regarding the self-determination of peoples.

Could ethnic autonomy really be the crucial shoal that the project of North American re-regionalization either clears or on which it runs aground? If the comparably important Kurds did not feel re-regionalization beneficial for achieving their individual and national aspirations of economic development and autonomy, respectively, they might well look east rather than west. Since the Amerindians can perfectly see the poverty and isolation in which North America cordons off their brethren, and note Washington's ideological inclination to rather favor a canceling centralist federalism (like in Iraq) as its contribution to the lively and urgent world debate on the *right of self-determination* of minority peoples, and since there is little hope in the villages regarding the NAFTA-promised economic transformation (even with the large migration of their industrious youth, insultingly deemed "illegal" due to U.S. self-interested confusion), clearly there is a strong tendency among the Amerindian peoples to look toward alternative projects to North American re-regionalization.

It is reasonable to project that the phase of secular economic restructuring and socio-political harmonization will take roughly 15 years in both re-regionalization projects. In the meantime, Mexico and Turkey are conditionally identified partner-allies. It is difficult to imagine that 15-year phase without crises. Given the United States' (coincidentally Marxian) predilection for economism-based interpretation

and subsequent economy-based solutions to everything, the lack of concern, much less sympathy, for Amerindian peoples' self-determination may indeed prove to be a surprisingly important crisis in this would-be expanded region.

Let's suppose it is not. The question of minority peoples' self-determination, expressed in various forms of autonomy, will nevertheless be an issue to deal with in the North American context, precisely because it is certainly profiled to be one on the still grander stage of international affairs. What is "writ small" (Kurdish or Amerindian claims to autonomy in Turkish and Mexican politics) is "writ large" in this age of a Muslim-dominant challenge to the nation-state system, coinciding interestingly with a universal (capitalist secular liberal powers included) rethinking of the nation-state dominated and dominant system.

Even if the autonomy movements in the border zones of the North American and European re-regionalization strategies do not destabilize the conditional allies in which they are embedded, they will still be relevant for some time as secondary reference points in the new East-West conflict and the hot/cold "culture wars" in which that conflict is already finding its expression.

In a first possible scenario, one or both powerhouses could come under such stress in the East-West grand theater that they could abandon the

project of including their prospective, presently conditional associates, to concentrate on the former. The minority peoples' autonomy movements would find themselves relocated in countries pulled toward their respective counter-regions. Turkey would recast its identity as a Muslim society. Mexico, in this lively scenario, might find itself participating in a Bolivarian paradigm. Looking at this world from the minorities' perspectives, the inter-social Muslim re-regionalization project is unlikely to favor Kurdish empowerment. The native peoples of Latin America have not so far been featured in the still-emerging "Bolivarian" vision of a strong Latin American re-regionalization. They would certainly be hard to ignore, however, considering that various, including the Andean, countries have large, sometimes majority Amerindian populations and that, culturally speaking, some sort of privileged status would be expected for the native "folk" of the continental counter-regionalization.

Even in the scenario that presently seems more likely, in which the European and North American versions of re-regionalization succeed in their objectives, processes redefining post-modern states are implied, in which functions and powers are redistributed among the centralized and decentralized political units, renewed or of new formation, based on having negotiated and appropriated, anew, the terms of

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economic, socio-cultural, environmental and political development. One way or another we are going through a moment of historic transitions. In the re-regionalization projects under consideration, the Indian and Kurdish autonomy movements cannot but be strategic wedges in the processes underway. The reason is, simply, that the predicament of these minority peoples —politically semi-disenfranchised, economically unjustly incorporated, and environmentally/politically well-endowed— is central to the most salient issues of the day, made much more so by virtue of the impressive consolidation of their organized political expression today.

The minority peoples' autonomy movements thus are recast as spearheads in the general thrust for political renovation in our time. Formal (electoral, representative) democracy is widely viewed as having offered what it could and now "participative democracy" is deemed wanting and needed for even basic political stability in many parts particularly of the developing world. Traditional peoples with community constructions of their own are properly identified as a potential vanguard and even replicable models of a sort still to be discovered. This reversal of traditional concepts is still highly hypothetical.

The entrenched view, especially in the home countries, is that of traditional peoples stuck in poverty, socio-politically backward. That view is cracking under pressure, though, even in the home countries. This opens up a set of new challenges: even were there equitable resources and power awarded to these autonomy experiences, the greatest threat would lie in the institutionalization of civil liberties in these imagined entities.

Happily, the autarkic impulse is little evident in the autonomy movements discussed here. Indeed, in the case of the Amerindians, they must fairly fend off any unwanted alliances with forces from outside: religious groups and political parties, human rights and ecology movements, neo-tribal acolytes of various sorts, non-governmental organizations of all stripes. The autonomy-minded movement must constantly calibrate and successfully judge where opportunities exist and limits lie in the complex political environment, internally, nationally and in the ambitious heartland involved. Certainly it is an opportunity that devolution of governmental power and responsibility (in Europe attended by a grounding in international law) is well favored generally today; that is, of course, as long as it is confidently contextualized within the limits of political stability. The centralized states are even eager to rid themselves of responsibility for social policy (though too often preferring privatization to decentralization). Clear limits exist in any direct challenge to the economic model, turning the challenges into lightning rods for strong or overwhelming heartland discouragement; indirect challenges of the sort may be accommodated. (The Chiapanec Zapatistas showed their evaluation of that when the movement passed predominantly from a class-based to an ethnic-based ideology.) Cultural pride is smiled upon, as long as it does not revert to cultural supremacy. All can see the layered nature of respect for rights over natural resources: autonomies' rights over oil, for example are denied, but may still be possible for forests.

Having doubtless been globalized, the world is now going through a dyna-

mic struggle to become differently divided. In the old tit-for-tat, the U.S. toehold in South Korea balanced Moscow's in Cuba (with extreme counterpositions in contiguous North Korea and Miami, respectively). Today Washington and Brussels want regions-plus, boldly eying neighbors, though they be socio-economically "other." If the re-regionalizations are more than neo-colonial projects, they must be part of the effort to fashion a post-modern state of nations in which the cultural dimension prevails—even challenging the dominion of the economic dimension—in a way not seen since the Middle Ages. The Crusades, of course, were a harbinger signaling the dangers of monolithic super-nations defined around religion and culture. Regional autonomies, based on a formulation of the right of self-determination, made possible by complex political realignments, reinforced by a diversity of alliances, constitute a great opportunity/pose a great challenge. The opportunity/challenge is great due to the autonomy movements in question being the form of struggle of historically disadvantaged and unjustly treated minorities. The challenge has to do with the enormity of the task. The opportunity, too: offering both re-regionalizing powerhouses and emerging polities the chance to act creatively toward, not so modestly, contributing to sustainable development and human dignity. ■■■

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¹ They are even roughly equivalent in numbers, with over 10 percent of the 110 million Mexicans being Amerindian.