Canada Watch

Notes on Canada from Mexico

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In Theory of International Relations classes, we were taught that one of the indicators of "national power" pertains to a country's geographical extension. In this regard, Canada appeared as a vast extension on maps, surpassed only by Russia. We imagined that Canada with its immense territorial mass bathed by three oceans (Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic) would have alliances and commercial links in all directions. This huge territory made up of 10 provinces and 3 territories appeared to have perfect territorial outlines. I used to think that only polar bears could see the northern lights, but a more "realistic" vision makes us understand why a threat to its national security could also arise.

A FIRST VISIT TO CANADA

I travelled to Canada for the first time in 2002 when I was invited to participate in the International Summer Seminar of Canadian Studies in Ottawa. Being able to learn about this great northern country excited me. I set myself two additional tasks: to get a totem replica that would fit into my handbag, and to come back with a raccoon souvenir. It was quite a discovery to see the size of the raccoons, wandering at night and frightening visitors.

At that time, the Canadian government provided training to young Mexican researchers, which gave us an up-close perspective on what Canada represented to the world at the start of the new millennium. The Mexican Association of Canadian Studies (AMEC) brought us together annually at working sessions where we discovered the challenges, commonalities, and particular problems of Canada, a country that was close and, at the same time, that felt so far from what we knew. Later, York Professor Edgar Dosman gave the first seminar on Canadian Studies at El Colegio de San Luis, opening communication channels and widening our understanding between our two countries.

In Canada, I found Ottawa, the capital of Canada, which resembled a beautiful English city with its Victorian architecture; a way of guaranteeing liberal ideals; and of course the Queen of England as a symbol of government, portrayed even on Canadian banknotes, just as Benito Juárez and José María Morelos are portrayed on ours. In Mexico, we were moving toward independence from Spain through a monarchy, with a mestizo culture. Meanwhile, in Canada, the French and English, being the two main European colonizers, along with Indigenous populations (First Nations), have written the Canadian multicultural history as we know it.

I had perceived a Canada with policies designed for immigrants to abandon their homeland culture and adopt the dominant culture of the welcoming country, as they do in the United States. However, government policies encouraged the Canadian public to see immigrants as their equals, neighbours, and potential citizens. Cultural and linguistic diversity are added to the ethnic and religious diversity. I thought Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* could not be applied to the Canadian reality.

I was surprised at that first conference to hear about the existence of more than 68 separate Indigenous peoples with different languages and customs in Canada. Both Canada and Mexico have pending issues regarding Indigenous populations. For example, multiculturalism has been recog-

nized in Mexico (ILO Convention No. 169 has been ratified); however, political representation, constitutional changes, and government assistance are insufficient. In politics, Indigenous communities are recognized through "self-identification."

LOOKING AT CANADIAN MIGRATION FROM THE OUTSIDE

In Canada, the three founding nations (Indigenous, French, and English) were subsequently joined by waves of migrants and refugees arriving from Southeast Asia, South America, Somalia, and Cuba, among many others. Undoubtedly, Canada is a country unique for its migration, a symbol of *peace, order, and good government* as we, too, see it from Mexico. This stands in sharp contrast to the *inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness* glorified in the United States.

Recent migration trends among young Mexican professionals show that they want to stay in Canada rather than enter the United States through the Canadian border. They want to stay in Canada because the migration systems are more straightforward here than in other countries. Many feel that a big country such as Canada will need professionals in productive sectors. Yet many Mexicans are also frustrated by having to work "cash jobs" while waiting for work permits.

These exchanges among cultures have led Canada to establish the rights of individuals, to respect gender equality, and to recognize that societies are plural, including the nationwide legal recognition of same-sex marriages in 2005. Canada reflects its numerous cultural pieces, different peoples who live together, becoming closer, or finding places to isolate in this enormous land. Items from ancient civilizations may be viewed in magnificent museums and galleries, such as the Nubia exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum and the Persian contributions at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto.

Like Mexicans, Canadians know the responsibilities of citizenship: obey the law, pay your taxes, participate in election processes. Canada's unique environmental heritage and commitment make us wonder about how it feels to live in a country where salmon fishing can be banned for periods of time to support the care of bears, where the weather contrasts season to season with squirrels as year-round companions and flowers springing out of nowhere after long winters. In the winter there is ice hockey and the Maple Leafs, and in the summer the blue jay is the symbol of the baseball team.

REGIONAL TRADE

The Canadian presence in forums and international entities continues to be recognized. Preferential trade relations have been enforced in North America since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. This was followed by the new Canada–United States–Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) which came into force in 2018, with chapter XIV (Investment) becoming crucial. This allowed us to rediscover "the neighbour's neighbour" in mining, financial services, manufacturing, energy, and transportation. While Mexico tightened diplomatic relations, the Zapatista uprising of 1994 revealed that Mexico had a long way to go to reverse the asymmetries of this regionalized trade zone.

We have learned about Canadian transnational corporations (especially in mining), which undertake open-pit projects against the interests of Mexican local communities, and speculation on the Toronto Stock Exchange, where rising Canadian companies speculate on the capital flows from lithium and gold reserves in Mexico. Discourses on social corporate responsibility have been unconvincing.

Cooperation guidelines have been established. These are reviewed at the North American Leaders Summit amid a complex agenda, which includes discussions on Mexican temporary agricultural workers, migration, and human trafficking; democratic transitions; industrial reconversion from non-polluting companies; and the challenges posed by synthetic drugs. Additionally, there are the *good guys*—Canadian tourists—who enjoy and respect our beaches and are highly preferred by locals, unlike the American *spring breakers*.

From Mexico, Canada is perceived as being about identities and anti-hegemonic discourses, about federal and provincial reinforcements on the matters of education, social security, and health. Health

care under the public health system is seen as a human right and a duty undertaken by the state, notwithstanding the challenges posed by the global pandemic.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), historically, and the International Development Research Centre (IDCR) have supported developing countries. With a foreign policy, sometimes nationalist, and at other times continentalist, the Canadian government adheres to the doctrine of internationalism. Canada not only contributes to peacekeeping with the United Nations; it also helped the Cuban government, as I have witnessed.

FACING CHALLENGES TOGETHER

A few years ago, the political economist Robert Cox spoke to us at the National University (UNAM) about critical theory. We have maintained contact with Canadian researchers, including professors from York University, who have supported research in Mexico that examines the new world order, multilateralism, civilizations, oral traditions, Arctic resources and peoples, and the hegemonic roles of certain countries. Canada is also a reference point for thinking about *paradiplomacy*, the international activity of the provinces, and the presence of non-traditional actors in the global context. This 40th anniversary edition of *Canada Watch* reflects on some of the work conducted at the Robarts Centre that permeates our study optics, our knowledge about Canada in Mexico, and our necessary bond in facing the challenges of the nation-states of North America. ■

NOTE

* Thanks to Hubert Campfens, Mónica Escobar, and Mariana Mesa, Canadians of Dutch, Chilean, and Cuban-Mexican origins, respectively, who undertook the first reading of this draft.