

A Paradox

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One of the most foreseeable reactions and consequences of Trump's discourse throughout the last year and a half would have been a rapid growth of anti-American sentiments in Mexico. And, without doubt, that has occurred, but with nuances that are significant. To being with, however much the new American President has referred to all Mexicans, the principal reaction of those living in the U.S. illegally is simple and natural: fear, if not terror. Those in the crosshairs have no time to hate.

A few days ago, I heard a California legislator describe the new reality: empty schools and children keeping silence at home while their parents go to work, typically leaving very early and returning late, not because their work demands it, but rather because obscurity offers them a greater hope of being able to avoid the manhunts. The Trump discourse and the emboldened police charged with migratory affairs have changed the world for the Mexican communities, creating a new reality in their daily life.

In Mexico the intellectual and political protest is active, emotive and decided, but very distinct from that of the man in the street. Particularly revealing is the fact that Anti-American or anti-Trump sentiments are concentrated in the world of discussion but not so much in real life. Those with families in the U.S. are afraid as much as for the risks that their relatives run at present as for the uncertainty regarding their sustenance. The remittances can be understood as an item in the balance of payments or as an income that sustains millions of families in the country. Those families depend on the earnings of their relatives, who left in order to provide a better life for those that they left behind. For them the matter is one of basic subsistence, not of politics or emotions.

It is in this sense that the manner in which distinct nuclei of Mexicans here and there have reacted is paradoxical. For those for whom the relationship with the U.S. is an everyday affair, the basis of their bread and butter –the same for those who emigrate as for those who depend on exports- the reaction is fear or worry, not hate: visceral anti-Americanism has not arisen there. Perhaps those who have emigrated do not have a thorough understanding of the history or of the deep-rooted causes of the circumstances that obliged them to leave, but they do know well that something here in Mexico does not work. The same is true for those working in the industry linked with NAFTA and exports; everyone knows that Trump is a problem, but the regime from which they fled is much worse than the one under which they live: in the U.S., there are rules and here everything is uncertain, from the safety of their lives to the continuity of public policy. It is not black and white.

The average Mexican is infinitely wiser than the politicians (or the intellectuals), who believe that they represent them. For them it is about life or death; for the others it is a matter of positioning, ultimately ethereal. Minimizing the causes of leaving or, in the case of NAFTA, of the sources of certainty that the treaty generates, is to lose sight of the fact that reality at the ground level is clairvoyant. People emigrate because there are no opportunities here and those who have jobs in NAFTA-associated companies (or ones related with its “philosophy”) put up with it because they know that the alternative is infinitely worse. These are inexorable manifestations of the quality of the Mexican government, the government of today and that of the last century. Few dare to ask: Why don’t things work here?

It is paradoxical that even the most affected individuals do not blame Trump or the country that gave them shelter, because they well know that the alternative is much worse: more of the same. Trump, a personage who lives from exploiting his brand (in hotels, clothes, condos and every sort of product of mass consumption), has undermined the trademark of his country in a manner that would have been inconceivable only a few months ago. Many hated George W. Bush for his warmongering, but they drew a line between the person and his country. Today this is impossible. Trump won thanks to a divisive discourse and one founded on hate. Despite that, those who work for a living, independently of their legal status in the U.S., pray, not hate. They know (or trust) that, in contrast with the Mexican Government, this is something transitory; that which in Mexico has been going on for two hundred years and will last for a good while longer. In one of his famous paintings, Roy Lichtenstein sketches Donald Duck fishing and telling Mickey Mouse "Look, Mickey, I've just hooked a BIG one", when he in truth had hooked himself... Something like that has happened in Mexico: it has hooked itself and this could not have come about at a worse possible time.

The outgoing government appears to have decamped, leaving the field open for a potential successor who represents its worst nightmare. Instead of taking advantage of this time to erect the scaffolding of a viable nation and one sure of itself, it has opted for passivity and acquiescence. That may not be its objective –as its obsessions prove-, but that is what it is in fact doing. In comparison with Mexicans linked to the U.S. in diverse ways and who are attempting to find a way out of the predicament, the government has entrenched itself. A gallant way to govern.

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