

Mexico and Trump

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(English translation of article in Spanish published by *INFOLATUM*, April 3, 2016)

No Mexican can be pleased when facing Donald Trump's interminable diatribes with respect to Mexico and Mexicans with which the likely Republican presidential candidate has captivated part of the U.S. electorate. But that's no reason for Mexico to precipitate its response or react without evaluating the potential consequences of this.

The Mexican component of the Trump discourse is not the product of chance. Rather, it is the result of a strange combination of careless abandon on our part and bad luck. Both factors have coalesced to convert Mexico into the cause of all the woes of our neighbors to the immediate North. Thus, it is imperative to understand the dynamic in which we find ourselves prior to responding.

When negotiations for the North American Free Trade Agreement (FTA) began in 1990, the government mounted a multifaceted public relations strategy in the U.S. On the one hand, it organized an action plan oriented toward that country's legislative branch to generate support for the moment at which the agreement would be presented for approval; on the other hand, a broad strategy was articulated of means designed to attract the attention of U.S. denizens toward things Mexican. For this it presented the extraordinary exhibit entitled "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries" in New York and at many museums in the rest of that country; seminars, conferences and film festivals were organized and events were sponsored in all corners of U.S. geography. In the best tradition of successful countries in Washington, Mexico achieved exceptional presence and recognition. It captivated the American public.

The problem is that, à la Mexicaine, as soon as NAFTA was ratified, the strategy was forsaken and an enormous vacuum was created. That vacuum was rapidly filled by all of the groups that had been opposed to the trade agreement and that, from then on, procured its undermining, if not its annulment. The three most prominent sectors in this ambit were the unions, the environmentalists and the anti-immigrant groups. Some of those sectors (which, except for the unions, are not usually homogeneous) entertain specific motives for opposing it, others trace their anger to ideological factors and yet others are merely ignorant; rightly or wrongly, at least two of the sources of greatest stridence with respect to Mexico –immigration and drugs- are simple economic elements: there is demand, ergo, supply. One thing cannot be explained without the other.

The cost of the withdrawal of a strategy of Mexico's positive presence in the U.S. has been tremendously steep. Still, it is also true that in these twenty years the world changed and it was our bad luck that many of those changes were attributed to Mexico, regardless of whether both things were independent of each other. During those twenty years, globalization transformed the

method of production worldwide; technology (above all that of robotics) drastically reduced the need for manpower in industrial production; and the digital revolution rendered a huge segment of the traditional labor supply irrelevant because it does not have the necessary skills to be successful in that new world.

Our misfortune was that NAFTA entered into operation precisely when all of this was taking place: when the Mexican presence was growing in all ambits (above all in the form of exports and migrants), all of this without there being a protective parapet in the guise of a good public relations campaign that would safeguard the country and engender for it a good name. It is obvious that Mexico is not to blame for all the calamities that Trump and his retinue ascribe to it, but it is indispensable to recognize that we –our absence- contributed to creating the propitious breeding grounds for this to occur.

Other things also happened. An example says more than a thousand words: when I was studying in Boston in the seventies, the Mexican Consulate there dedicated itself essentially to the U.S. community. That is, it was a mini-Embassy devoted to promoting Mexican affairs in that city. The same occurred at the other forty-odd Mexican consulates in the U.S. at that time. Today, the consulates seem like municipal delegations given over to resolving formalities for Mexican migrants. During these forty years, migratory growth changed everything with respect to the presence of Mexico in the U.S. and today's consulates reflect this. The effect of that is that we relinquished a vital presence in U.S. communities.

Trump is harvesting the economic avatars of the past two decades, particularly the loss of manufacturing jobs (product of technological change, not of Mexico) and the growth of migration (product of the demand for jobs above all in agriculture and services). It is possible that, on having maintained an active public presence, some of the negative impact concerning Mexico could have been neutralized, but at this stage nothing can be done in this regard for the purposes of this year's elections.

This said, a colossal risk exists: the boorish attempt to affect the result of the election by means of a rush to compel Mexicans in the US to naturalize as citizens can turn out well if Trump loses or very badly if he wins. Trump is not irrational: his strategy is absolutely logical, clearly reflective of a careful reading of the polls and of what is bothering his fellow Americans. It appears rash -and very dangerous- to me to try to skew the result in such a crass and vulgar manner. Involved here is not any inconsequential enterprise; at stake is the viability of the country, whose economy depends, only a cool 100% of it, on exports to that country and on remittances materializing from there.

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