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Is There a North American History and Culture?

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*See our web site <http://www.udlap.mx/~rich>. At the fifth Congress of the Americas, to be held
at UDLA next October, there will be several panels on this topic.*

We live in a time when completely contrary movements seem to simultaneously gather strength, including globalization and nationalism. So, to speak about a common history and culture of North America, is immediately to bring to mind such disturbing and valid challenges to historical ecumenicism as the demands for recognition of those struggling for autonomy in Quebec and Chiapas, of native peoples throughout the continent, and of strong but still frustrated movements for the overdue revision of the historical record to include women, gays, and ethnic groups. In those areas we are still, to

paraphrase Winston Churchill on World War II, not at the end but perhaps at the end of the beginning.

Proponents of world history have to take very seriously the concerns of those who feel that history has ignored their identity, fearing that our enthusiasm for a new world history inadvertently will leave them out. Perhaps it would in this respect be appropriate to mention specifically Chiapas and Quebec. In the Chiapas case, while it is the most widely known of Mexican internal problems,ⁱ the demands of minority cultures are growing elsewhere in Mexico.ⁱⁱ

In an era that has seen the revival of the Scottish parliament, the excesses of Basque insurgents, and the revival of Hawaiian nationalism, not to mention casinos on Indian reservations, it would be the brave observer who would see anything but eclecticism on the horizon. Tom Nairn enjoins: Critics love fulminating about the distortions and phoniness which so frequently blight such transpositions, forgetting the hopeless or totally daft mythologies which held all previous *mentalities* down into status clamps...the cankered, one-off, lop-sided, ham-fisted, half-baked, one-eyed trajectory of actual modernisation led to rough justice. That was still better than what preceded it -- no justice whatever, and forever. it also led to an ascriptive equality of pasts: the Irish, the Serbs, the Tibetans, the Inuit and the Micronesians will not be left out, and stake their claims like everyone else...having been startled into memoriality, they are damn well not going to subside again. Before industrialization, this happened all the time: cultures, peoples, traditions would just 'go under', leaving a few puzzling bricks or stones behind if they were lucky. Even at the very end of the twentieth century, metropolitan blueprinters come out every other week with new plans for improved or graceful subsidence in the best interests of 'everyone'.ⁱⁱⁱ

People cross boundaries with more ease sometimes than scholarship does.^{iv} The number of American and Canadian academic books and articles, for example, regardless of subject, which reveal a familiarity with Mexican

scholarship in the same field is limited.^v The construction of a North American history and of a North American identity is going to require several generations of energetic bridge building and revisionism.^{vi} If there is a North American community or culture already it is spelled with a small "c" and not a large "C" as in the European Community.^{vii} Many of you are aware of the semantic sensitivities which surround use of words like *American* and even *North American*. In fact, since the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the feeling about the appropriation of the word *American* by those of us living in the 50 states whose capital is at Washington has become even more irritating to our neighbors than before. Some of us have taken temporary shelter in the term *North American*, but clearly Mexico is part of North America, and Mexicans are North Americans. Moreover, Mexico is officially the *United States* of Mexico.

That semantic problem may resolve itself, if there emerges a North American community. The growth of a European identity, symbolized by common passports and the flag with its bright blue background and yellow stars, does make one wonder about the North American situation, despite the obvious luggage we have inherited from past historical nationalistic binges. There is already a North American symbol, the Monarch butterfly -- a suitable symbol since its life span is spent in all three countries. However, the butterfly is a fragile creature.

If there is ever to be some sort of North American federalism,^{viii} a still-to-be-written North American history will be the soil from which it springs, and people like the group assembled here will play an important role. There are some encouraging signs. An example are courses such as what Professor Suzanne Shanahan at Duke University has developed on North American identity. It includes on the reading list Benedict Anderson's

Imagined Communities, Manuel Castells' *The Power of Identity*, Robert Earl and John Wirth's *Identities in North America*, and Michael Keating's *Nations Against the State*.^{ix}

The creation of organizations such as the North American Institute, the Center for North American Studies, and the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, are good examples of how non-governmental organizations of scholars are becoming involved in tri-national affairs.^x Another sign of spring is the emergence of what is being called the *Nexus Generation*, the bridge generation who are now coming of age and who have common experiences that cut across the boundaries of the three North American nations. They increasingly share an Internet culture and a common interest in Nike, Calvin Klein, Swatch watches, and taco chips.^{xi} The nearest restaurant to our office at the Library of Congress, always packed with young Capital Hill interns and pages, is Mexican. A couple blocks away, the Canadian Embassy is notable for its sponsorship of cultural events.

This is going to be an incremental process and it is one which only a limited number of historians as yet have thought much about. The major problem of North American identity is not in the long run a question of economics but of culture. As Professor Rod Dobell of the University of Victoria warns, "If the goal for a North American community is to achieve cooperation and coherence without a forced convergence, we have to see the machinery of trade and commercial relationships as only one part of the broader formal and informal community structures that construct the context for the integrated economy, and set the ground rules for its functioning. Judgements about social purpose must constrain market functions, not the other way round."^{xii}

The idea is not new of a North America comprised of Canada, the United States, and Mexico, sharing a history that would be a foundation of an integrated political life. This should not be confused with the hopes of early American patriots that Canada and Mexico would be annexed. In fact, the idea of North America is at odds with that of imperialism and has been for a long time. As long ago as 1885, Alonzo Van Deusen deplored the continent's divisions in his neglected utopian study *Rational Communism: The Present and Future Republic of North America*.^{xiii} One feels that perhaps social and environmental historians have been quicker to use a North American lenses than have more traditional political historians.^{xiv}

The number of courses devoted to the history of North America as opposed to its three components seems limited and there is to our knowledge no widely used one volume modern history of North America *per se*, but a one volume history of North America, indeed of the entire hemisphere, already exists, -- although if you have the chance to examine it you may agree that it needs, like a Hollywood script, a little "tightening". In 1878, the Library of Congress catalogued a volume which certainly set something of a record even in the verbose Victorian era as far as eclectic titles are concerned: *The Two Americas, Their Complete History From the Earliest Discoveries to the Present Day by the "Fathers of American History", Containing, Without Abridgement, Belknap's Biographies of the Early Discoverers; Grahame's History of North America; Dr. Robertson's History of South America; and Ramsay's History of the United States, and an Appendix by Prof. H.L. Williams, Bringing the History of Both North and South America Down to the Present Day, to Which are Added Hubbard's History of the Indian Wars in New England, and "A General Summary of the Development of the United States in National Wealth, in Domestic and Foreign Commerce, Manufactures, Agriculture, and Mining,*

Together with Details Relating to Their Social Progress, Their System of Public Education, and the Moral Advancement of the people" with an introduction by P.C.Headley, Also, a Full Chronology, -- Historical, Biographical, and General -- Dating From the year 458 to the Present Time, and Aa Copious General Index, the Whole Forming a History of the Two American Continents, Unsurpassed for Fulness and Unequaled as a Book of Reference".

The historian who -- how shall one put it? -- produced or directed or edited this heavy work, Phineas Camp Headley (1819-1903) was what today we would describe as an independent scholar, one who also gave the world *Reaper and the Harvest, or Scenes and Incidents in Connection with the Work of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Labors of Rev. Edward Paysen Harrod, M.A.*, as well as *God and Home and Native Land: A Crown of the World's Choicest Gems in Prose and Verse*, and *Patriot Boy, or the Life and Career of Major-General Orasby M. Mitchel*, as well as more than twenty other, we regret to say, forgotten titles. The *Dictionary of American Biography* gamely notes in the face of this mammoth bibliography that Phineas was a "wide reader" with a "sometimes picturesque style".

Headley had a vision of a continental, even a hemispheric history. . He saw, to quote, "Columbus, Americus Vesputius, Cabot, Cartier, De Soto, Gilbert, Raleigh, Gosnold, Smith, Chaplain, Gorges, Hudson, and the Puritans" in the same frame as the "dashing Cortez and Pizzaro [who] lead the adventurous colonists of the warmer latitudes into the sunny plains of Mexico". "AMERICA", he wrote excitedly, "is a hemisphere". "It, then," he emphasized, "becomes a duty pressing upon parents, teachers, and all who have any responsibility to the young, to encourage in all possible ways the circulation and study of so great a work upon our majestic continent"^{xv}

The ethno-centric view he had of what this history would be is indicated by the engravings he chose for illustrations. The frontispiece is Christopher Columbus and there is inevitably the stock view of Columbus discovering America. Alonzo rescues Cora from the palace of the Sun. Cortez captures Mexico City. Major Ringold dies at the Battle of Palo Alto. The Mexicans are defeated at Churubusco. The Indians rampage at Fort Mimms. Pictures do speak louder than words on occasion, and one realizes in looking at these shards of past misconceptions just what some of the prejudices are that face us in constructing a viable world history.

Whatever may come, the growing discussion between the political scientists and historians of the three nations of North America is profoundly stimulating in the classroom. It has given new life to comparative studies in many areas. If one wishes to enliven student discussion, the comparison of the United States, Canada and Mexico has enormous potential. The University of the Americas-Puebla has been something of a laboratory in this area, having started as Mexico City College during World War II when Americans living in Mexico wanted to keep their children close to home and moving eventually to a remarkably historic and scenic location at Puebla. A rather overly theatrical view of its post war ethos appears in James Michener's novel *Mexico*; one must admit that it does have a romantic history, having sheltered both academics who fled Franco's Spain and McCarthyism. Long a fully accredited member of the Southern Association, with exchanges with Stanford, Yale, Brown, McGill, British Columbia and other North American institutions, its multi national heritage has resulted in interesting curriculum development. Its introductory course on American State and Society has gradually changed to include Canadian and Mexican themes, and its master's program in North American

studies has similarly evolved: there is a sort of gravitational force that gives syllabi in such circumstances a cross national flavor that prompted this paper.

Be assured that there is a common history for North America waiting to be developed. Modern Canadian history of course dates from and rests squarely on Confederation, in 1867, which was partly a reaction to the growing muscle of the United States in the aftermath of the Civil War. Modern Mexican history is permanently influenced by the Mexican-American War of 1848.

These threads of a common history alert us to the negative aspects of a shared past, echoing the famous remark of the Mexican president Porfirio Diaz: "Poor Mexico. So far from God and so close to the United States!" The Canadian journalist Thomas Walkom recently wrote in the *Toronto Star*: We are in danger of becoming a nation whose time has gone...Already, almost all Canadian institutions designed to express national sensibilities are under attack as impediments to world trade -- by the WTO or the North American Free Trade Agreement or just by the Americans. We cannot protect our magazines or books; we cannot demand distribution of Canadian films. We have been a nation for 132 years. Unless we wake up, we will not keep going for another 50. Death will come slowly -- a privatization here, a trade agreement there. Maybe there will be a currency agreement with Washington. For reasons of efficiency, we will put our cash-starved armed forces under American command. And finally, to give all Canadians a crack at the big apple, will come a common North American citizenship. The withering of Parliament will take longer, for politicians are adept at holding on to their jobs. In the new North America, Parliament might even survive intact, as a quaint, powerless regional body charged with matters that are not deemed too important. You want to know Canada's situation as the last embers of the 20th century flicker and die? This is it: We are not exactly being murdered. Call it, rather, assisted suicide.^{xvi}

Canadians are often their own severest critics, and not all of them see an emerging North America as a threat. The Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, has pressed for further integration, including the so-called

Murmansk to Monterrey corridor that would dramatically integrate transportation. He writes, "This interaction may also point the way to a wider sense of community and help shape a shared sense of 'North American-ness'. Mexicans, Americans and Canadians already have a strong sense of their own identity. The challenge will be to develop a North American 'footprint' that treads lightly enough that it does not crush the existing landscape formed by distinctive histories and cultures." He then adds, "Our aim should be to construct a community that serves north Americans but that is also open to the world -- a community, for example, that is open southward to the rest of the Americas or northward to the Arctic region."^{xvii}

In our judgement, the key to the writing of a successful North American history is the same as the key to a successful North America, a heightened appreciation of pluralism and, one should add, of its close cousin, federalism. (There is not enough time to comment on how closely these two ideas are connected, but events this november have surely made everyone aware of the need to think about federal structures.) In any event, America certainly stands or falls by its acceptance of pluralism.

Notwithstanding the Quebec problem, Canada pluralism has been successful In what has become the classic study of early Canadian federalism, *Ex Uno Plures: Federal Provincial Relations in Canada, 1867-1896*, Garth Stevenson writes how in the first thirty years of the Canadian state, Canada was able to absorb "...a vast northern and western hinterland, adding three new provinces to the original four, and building railways from the Atlantic to the Pacific."^{xviii} Writes Stevenson, "For most Canadians, provincial government was just as important and influential as federal government, and the power of one level counterbalanced the power of the other...By 1878 it was obvious that Canadian provinces, unlike their counterparts in [for example] New Zealand,

would survive as functioning entities for as long as Canada itself lasted."

"Furthermore," Stevenson emphasizes, "provincial governments were almost always at least partially successful in their conflicts with the federal government or in the demands they made upon it. Policies that provinces were determined to pursue, like Ontario's Rivers and Steams acts and regulation of liquor or Manitoba's railway projects, were delayed but not really prevented by the federal government. Demands for financial concessions, or 'better terms' were almost invariably successful, sooner or later."^{xix}

Mexico is in a somewhat different position. One difference between a discussion of history in Mexico and in Canada is that whereas there are problems for Canadians in constructing a pluralistic society, diversity is regarded by many Canadians as a plus rather than as destructive.^{xx} In contrast, the Mexican situation is full of anomalies.^{xxi} While certainly pluralism is an issue in all three countries, the nature of the debate has been vastly different. The political temper of Canada has, with a few exceptions such as Quebec in the 1960's, been temperate. The provinces are strong and federal-provincial diplomacy is the order of the day.^{xxii} In contrast, attempts at Mexican pluralism have encountered considerable difficulty. President Francisco I. Madero was one of the few Mexican presidents to take it seriously, but he was murdered in 1913 before he could achieve his goal of returning "political personality" to local institutions.

The emerging North America will be a major issue for the new Mexican president, and the Canadian experience takes on new importance for Mexico. A sign of the times is that Mexico is not permitting Mexicans in the United States who hold American citizenship to also vote in Mexican elections. Professor Manuel Gonzales writes provocatively in an important new book *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*:

Most Mexicans...have opted for pluralistic solutions, attempting to preserve elements of both Mexican and American culture, though the inevitable pull will be toward the latter. Indeed, even Mexicans in Mexico are becoming more *agringados* (Gringo-ized).^{xxiii}

Meanwhile, Mexico is becoming more and more important to the United States: "...by the year 2048 the plurality of people in California will be of Mexicano Latin descent...people of European descent are no longer the majority of the people living in California. The issue of demographic change, particularly in California, will become the driving force of what will be the world's first multi-cultural and multi-racial advanced capitalist society. Whether that results in a regime of full North American citizenship, or an open labor arrangement such as in today's Europe, is still a question that obviously will be very much fought over."^{xxiv}

We should keep in mind therefore that part of speculation about the prospects for a North American history is that a new North America will cause frightened minorities to opt out, encouraging political fragmentation.^{xxv} Religious and ethnic pride rouses fears of "heading down the road to another Bosnia".^{xxvi} As North Americans, we share a need for political and cultural pluralism, a fact sometimes ignored or neglected. but important as we enter the uncharted waters of the twenty-first century. The Canadian political theorist Reg Whitaker remarks in his eminently useful book *A Sovereign Idea: Essays on Canada as a Democratic Community*, "Is one acting as an Albertan or as a Canadian? If the answer is 'both', as it usually will be in a functioning federal society, the question of community has, in effect, been opened up again...That may be very untidy and the bane of rationalists, it may make federations difficult to operate, but it demonstrates that federalism isn't merely compatible

with (representative) democracy, but may offer one of the better institutional frameworks for coping with some of the inherent problems of democracy."^{xxvii}

He might well have added that citizens in a democracy need an education which makes them aware of the pluralism inherent in the world, and of the practical necessity of respecting that pluralism. John Raulston Saul cautions: An educational or social system that defines progress as the total of a myriad of more or less water-tight compartments denies the possibility of a citizen-based society. It therefore denies the individual as the source of legitimacy. However fine the abstract intentions of professionalism and expertise may be, the net result of this approach is a mechanistic view of men and women. Knowledge and understanding in their real sense -- as the foundations of consciousness -- become impossible. Society conceived in this way is viewed through corporatist eyes and denies both the complexity of the human and the complexity of human society.^{xxviii}

Having had some fun at the expense of Phineas Headley, it only just to end with a more positive mention of his work. At the end of his mammoth assault on North American history, Headley has some surprisingly contemporary remarks to make. He speculates as to why the Canada and the United States have shown more development than Mexico and the rest of Hispanic America and puts it down to an acceptance of divergence.

"Persecution," he writes about the United States, "didn't pay". He was right in his Yankee storekeeper way, and as scholars it is our job to document the pluralities of North American *history* so that someday there will be a truly pluralistic North American *culture*.

Thank you.

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- i. Free market initiatives, privatization schemes, and NAFTA-sponsored lowering of trade barriers have meant that the poor states Mexico, those that are largely rural and made up of the campesinos face direct competition with Canadian and American industry and agrobusiness.
- ii. "In Chiapas, an entire farming culture feels abandoned by Mexico City.
- iii Tom Nairn, *Faces of Nationalism: Janus Revisited*, Verso, London and New York, 1997, 5.
- iv See Noel F. McGinn, *Towards International Cooperation in Education for the Integration of the Americas*, Inter-American Council for Integral Development, Washington, 199, 23.
- v The reverse is equally true. See John Reid, *Spanish American Images of the United States, 1790-1960*, The University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1977.
- vi Allen Hammond, *Which World? Scenarios for the 21st Century*, Island Press, Washington, D.C., 1998, 255 ff.
- vii See John D. Wirth, "Advancing the North American Community", *The American Review of Canadian Studies*, Summer 1996, 261-273, available at http://www.northamericaninstitute.org/na_community/advancing.html. A mainstay of the North American Institute, Professor Wirth has been one of the early pioneers in post NAFTA North American integration studies.
- viii One assumes that almost nobody anticipates that there will be a unitary North American state.
- ix Suzanne Shanahan, Syllabus: North American Collective Identity", Duke University, available at <http://www.soc.duke.edu/courses/soc283/283syllf99.htm>

x See <http://www.northamericaninstitute.org/>

xi Jennifer M. Welsh, "Is a North American Generation Emerging?", *Isuma*, Vol.1 No.1, Spring 2000, available at <http://www.isuma.net/v01no01/welsh/welsh.htm>

xii Rod Dobell, "A Social Charter for a North American Community", *Isuma*, Vol.1 No.1, Spring 2000, available at <http://www.isuma.net/v01n01/dobell1/dobell1.htm>

xiii . Alonzo Van Deusen, *Rational Communism: The Present and the Future Republic of North America*, Social Science Publishing, New York 1885.

See e.g. George Eisen and David K. Wiggins eds., *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture*, Greenwood Press, Westport (Connecticut) and London, 1994. Also Martha Henderson, "Syllabus: Environmental History of North America" at

<http://192.211.16.13/users1/mhenderson/winter/syllabus.htm>

xv Headley, xiii-xv. The book was co-published by Henry S. Allen (New York) and A.L. Coburn (Chicago).

xvi Thomas Walkom, "A Canadian Call to Arms," *Toronto Star*, 24 December 1999, available at <http://www.flipside.org/vol3/jan00/00ja29b.htm>

xvii Lloyd Axworthy, "Notes for an Address", Canadian Institute of International Affairs 1998 Foreign Policy Conference, 16 October 1998, available at http://www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/engli...ws/statements/98_067e.htm

xviii . Garth Stevenson, *Ex U Plures: Federal-Provincial Relations in Canada, 1867-1896*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 1993, 342-342.

xix . *Ibid.*, 346-347.

XX. See Thomas Ellwein, "Federalism and Self-Government: External Unity and Internal Diversity, A German Success Story," *Deutschland*, No.2, April 1996, 44-49.

XXI. Vincent Ostrom, "Where to Begin?,"

Publius: The Journal of Federalism Vol.25 No.2, Spring 1995, 51.

xxii . Robert J. Drummond, "A Political Perspective: Institutions and the Canadian Federal System", William Metcalfe ed., *Understanding Canada: A Multidisciplinary Introduction to Canadian Studies*, New York University Press, New York and London, 1982, 215.

xxiii Manuel G. Gonzales, *Mexicanos: A History of Mexicans in the United States*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1999, 260. But see Pablo Vila, *Crossing Borders: Reinforcing Borders: Social Categories, Metaphors, and Narrative Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Frontier*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2000.

xxiv Raul Hinojosa-Ojeda, "North American Integration and Concepts of Human Rights", Paper presented at Conference on "Understanding the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on Its 150th Anniversary", Southwestern University School of Law, 6 February 1998, available at <http://www.sscnedt.ucla.edu/chavez/hinojosa/chicano125/treaty~2.html>

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. See Alan Freeman and Patrick Grady, *Dividing the House: Planning for a Canada Without Quebec*, HarperCollins, Toronto, 1995.

xxvi . Larry Rohter, "Maya Renaissance in Guatemala Turns Political," *New York Times* (12 August 1996), A5.

xxvii . Reg Whitaker, *A Sovereign Idea: Essays on Canada as a Democratic Community*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 1992, 199.

xxviii John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization*, The Free Press, New York, 1995, 164.