

New Worlds, New Jerusalems: Reflections on North American Identities

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ABSTRACT

Does North America in the deeper cultural, historical, metaphysical, or political sense exist? And if it does –in more than its trade-driven NAFTA form– in what might this North American identity consist? The article proceeds to explore two key themes the notion of a new world, and how this has shaped the three North American states; and the notion of new Jerusalems, in other words, the early religious underpinnings of Mexico, the United States, and Canada. The article does not foresee the emergence of a single North American identity, but points to congruent experiences and unifying links in the three countries' historical development.

Key words: New World, religion, political culture, North American identity

RESUMEN

¿Existe América del Norte en un profundo sentido cultural, histórico, metafísico o político? Si es así –en una forma más allá del acuerdo que llevó al TLCAN–, ¿en qué consiste? Este artículo explora dos temas claves: la noción de nuevo mundo y cómo ha conformado a estos tres Estados de América del Norte, y la idea de nuevos Jerusaléns, es decir, las tempranas bases religiosas de México, Estados Unidos y Canadá. Este trabajo no prevé el surgimiento de una única identidad norteamericana, sino que señala las experiencias congruentes y los vínculos unificadores en el desarrollo histórico de los tres países.

Palabras clave: Nuevo mundo, religión, cultura política, identidad norteamericana

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In recent decades, reflections on North America have been largely driven by the signing of NAFTA and by the economic and political fallout it generated. A minor body of literature has sprung up to examine various aspects of inter-state relations in North America, with some seeing NAFTA setting the stage for an eventual North American political union and others, less sweepingly, mapping trade relations, security arrangements, labor practices, or the environmental implications of North American integration.

The focus of this article is quite different. I see the study of North America as somewhat analogous to the analysis of other continental ensembles, most tellingly Europe, and perhaps with time, South America, Africa, and diverse parts of Asia as well. In some ways, the European Union is the most familiar, but also the most dangerous example when it comes to comparative models. For the idea of Europe goes back at least to Greek antiquity, reinforced by Roman law, the common religious experiences of the Middle Ages, the scientific and technological breakthroughs of the modern period, the extraordinary overseas expansion of such states as Spain, Portugal, France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, and the checkered history of warfare and peacemaking of the past four centuries.

By comparison, does North America in the deeper cultural, historical, metaphysical, or political sense even exist? And if it does –in more than its trade-driven NAFTA form– what might this North American identity consist of? What follow are a set of reflections –partly historical, partly more contemporary– that may help open the door to a somewhat different type of debate about North America than the one familiar to us. Not necessarily to an imagined North American community in the way in which Benedict Anderson (1983) has described the emergence of national communities in the modern era. But to a greater sense of overlap and parallelism in national experiences that speak to possible commonalities in the North American experience. My focus in this article will be on three themes: i) the concept of a new world; ii) the notion of chosen peoples; and iii) the secular underpinnings of national identity in the three North American states.

NEW WORLDS

The most compelling element in addressing North American identity is rooted in the notion of a new world. This may seem extremely unfair to civilizations that had developed in the Americas long before European contact –the Olmecs, the Toltecs, the Aztecs, the Mayas, the Incas come to mind, civilizations that left behind monuments, astronomical calculations, and art work that continue to dazzle the imagi-

nation down to today. I shall have more to say later about the legacy of pre-Columbian civilizations for contemporary Mexican national identity. But the moment of discovery, and the ideas that those who discovered the world of the Americas were to make of it, were to powerfully shape the three nation-states that constitute the North America of our day.

What was new about the “new world”? The “discovery” of America permanently changed the conception of the known world in Europe and beyond. For Amerigo Vespucci, in his 1504 letter called *Mondus Novus*, it was permissible to call the lands a “new World, because nobody before knew of their existence and because it had been commonly believed that the southern hemisphere had been wholly taken up by the ocean.” For Francisco López de Gómara, a sixteenth century chronicler of the Spanish Conquest, “The greatest event since the creation of the world (if we except the incarnation as death of Him who created it) is the discovery of the Indies: that is why they are called the New World” (Lafaye, 1976: 36).

The newly discovered “continent” –soon to become two continents– was to alter the geographical contours of what until then had been a single hemisphere with three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe. The maps produced in the century that followed Columbus’s voyages bear witness to this (Dilke and Dilke, 1994: 117-134).

The physical extension of space was to be accompanied by the discovery of hitherto unknown fauna and flora; and, more tellingly still, of peoples and cultures significantly different from those of the old world. There is awe and amazement in the observations of some of the conquistadors who accompanied Cortés in his conquest of Mexico:

It is like the enchantments that are told of in the books of Amadís!...And some said: “are not the things we see a dream?” And he recalled the palaces in which they had been lodged, “spacious and well built, the walls paneled with cedar and other scented woods,” with great rooms and courts covered with awnings of cotton cloth surrounded by gardens, lily ponds, bathing pools, and sculptured terraces. “Today,” grieved the veteran conquistador, “All is overthrown and lost, nothing remains.”(Díaz del Castillo, as quoted in Keen, 1971: 14)

And there were projections onto the newly discovered “continent” of classical and biblical myths like those of the Amazons, the Golden Fleece, or the Garden of Eden (Sánchez, 1994: 339-378).

Among other evocations of the new world was the very term Utopia –“no place”– conceived by Thomas More in his famous 1516 essay by that name. America could become the repository for transmuted European hopes for an equality and harmony

of existence quite unknown in their hierarchically-divided and poverty-stricken societies back home.

In America the values and relationships of the Old Continent were inverted: what was bad in the one would be good in the other and vice versa. In this manner, the New World came to be seen as the world of the future, of abundance and fertility; while the Old World was one of the past, of poverty, scarcity, and sterility. (Translation by the author) (J. L. Abellán, *La Edad de Oro*, Madrid, 1979, quoted in Fernández Herrero, 1992: 93-94)

It could also become the terrain for new beginnings –political, social, and religious. For the Mexican writer, Alfonso Reyes,

after having been foreshadowed by a thousand inklings in mythology and poetry as though it were an inescapable mental concept, America emerged as a geographical reality. And from that moment its role was to enrich the utopian dream of the world, the faith in a better, happier, freer society....America is essentially a greater possibility for the choice of the good. (1971: 54)

RELIGIOUS UNDERPINNINGS

The religious strand was of particular importance in legitimizing the concept of a new world and of the Christian-rooted societies –both Catholic and Protestant– that were to emerge there. The Spaniards were to see themselves as God’s chosen people.

That Columbus assumed the Second Coming of Christ is indicated in *The Book of the Prophecies* which he wrote shortly before his last voyage to America....It amplified a statement which he had made to the former nurse of Prince John: “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth.” In his book he wrote that the blessed event was to be preceded by the opening of the New World, the conversion of the heathen, and the destruction of Antichrist, or Satan....The Spanish were to be the chosen people, successors to the children of Israel. (Sanford, 1961: 40)

For some, Mexico would become a New Jerusalem, with Catholicism a crucial component of the consolidation of the Spanish empire and of the governance of New Spain (i.e. Mexico).

The conquest of America was like a new departure of the youthful forces of Europe on a new crusade, this time to the West. It was as if, having failed to reconquer and retain the historical Jerusalem, the nephews of the Crusaders had departed to build a New Jerusalem at the antipodes of the Old. (Lafaye, 1976: 304)

Equally important in the Mexican context would be a fusion of earlier beliefs with Christian ones, as in the powerful vision of the Virgin of Guadalupe. First sighted, according to legend, by an indigenous herdsman, Juan Diego, in 1531, shortly after the Spanish Conquest, it was destined to play a recurrent role in the subsequent history of Mexico, from the Independence struggle of the 1810s, to the Zapatistas of the 1910s, to the anti-revolutionary *Cristeros* movement of the 1920s. Father Florencia, a seventeenth-century Mexican cleric, cited Psalm 147 in support of the emerging cult of Guadalupe, saying, "He has not done the like for any other nation" (Lafaye, 1976: 258). A sermon by the Jesuit preacher Juan de Goicoechea in 1709 at Tepeyac, the site of the Virgin's sanctuary just north of Mexico City, stated that "the Virgin wished to be an *Indiana* to take up residence in this 'New Jerusalem, New Spain'" (Brading, 2001: 146). For Ignacio Manuel Altamirano, a late nineteenth-century liberal novelist and journalist, "The day in which the Virgin of Tepeyac is not adored in this land, it is certain that there shall have disappeared, not only Mexican nationality, but also the very meaning of the dwellers of Mexico of today" (Brading, 2001: 257).

There would also be room in the religious/mythic mindscape of Mexico for the re-appropriation of pre-Christian divinities. The most important of these was undoubtedly Quetzalcóatl, the vanished (and vanquished) figure of Olmec and Aztec lore, who would help to root the Mexican search for identity in the sub-soil of a mythic native past. One need but evoke the mural paintings of Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco or the recurring legend of the plumed serpent (Baldwin, 1998). And in a more critical vein, the views of José Vasconcelos, minister of education in the early 1920s, and defeated presidential candidate in the stolen election of 1929, come to mind:

There still remains in the Mexican character a subconscious abjectness that makes it impossible to speak in the press of a public official without use of the Señor: Señor Presidente...Señor Gobernador...Señor General....Over our character hangs the great weight of an *Aztequismo* which we have not been able to dispel....Whenever a Mexican Quetzalcóatl emerged, he was destroyed politically or physically. (Keen, 1971: 48)

For the Puritans coming to New England, America was the New Jerusalem and for its early settlers the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Religious ideals

that had been suppressed in the old world would come to prosper in the new. John Winthrop, on the voyage of the *Arabella* in 1630, hailed New England as the “Citty upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” Increase Mather, in a sermon in 1674, *The Day of Trouble is Near*, thundered, “Here the Lord have caused as it were New Jerusalem to come down from Heaven. He dwells in this place therefore we may conclude he will scourge us for our backslidings” (quoted in Bercovitch, 1978: 60). Jonathan Edwards, the figure associated with the eighteenth-century Great Awakening, prophesized in a sermon entitled *The Latter-Day Glory is Probably to Begin in America*,

There are several things that seem to me to argue that the sun of righteousness, the sun of the new heavens and the new earth, when he rises...shall rise in the west, contrary to the course of things in the old heavens and earth....The sun of righteousness has long been going down from east to west; and probably when the time comes of the church’s deliverance from her enemies, the light will shine in the west, till it shines through the world like the sun in its meridian brightness. (Cherry, 1998: 57)

The implications of religious faith for the United States have been legion. There is the idea of a covenant, rooted in Calvinism, and opening the door to the notion of consent of the governed (Miller, 1956: 147). Competition among religious sects may well have sown the seeds for the pluralist nature of American democracy (Hatch, 2007: 93-94). The veneration for American nature could itself become a projection of religious sentiment.¹ American nationalism has often taken on a chiliastic or eschatological hue, embodying a Christian interpretation of the sacred (Bercovitch, 1978: 86). American Christianity has tended to take the notion of God’s kingdom on earth fairly literally (Niebuhr, quoted in Sanford, 1961: 88). As Mark Noll puts it, “Borrowing liberally from Old Testament precedents, many early Americans and not a few in more recent days have regarded the United States as God’s New Israel, a nation established in this New World Canaan as a land flowing with wealth and freedom” (1992: 405-406).

In the case of New France, some of the same missionary zeal deployed by the Spanish (and Portuguese) in Latin America would be shown toward the native people. The Jesuit Missions are a vital part of the history of the French settlement, with

¹ “God has promised us a renowned existence, if we will but deserve it. He speaks this promise in the sublimity of Nature....It is uttered in the thunder of Niagara. It is heard in the roar of two oceans....His finger has written it in the broad expanse of our inland seas” (James Brook, *The Knickerbocker* 1835, quoted in Miller, 1956: 210).

figures like Father Brébeuf martyred by the Iroquois a testament to the power of the faith. In the post-conquest period, the Church would become a dominant institution, coming in its more intransigent, ultramontane forms to mold the educational and social institutions of French Canadian society between 1840 and 1960. Claims of a special divine mission were not lacking:

When you have reflected upon the history of the Canadian people, it is impossible not to recognize the great designs of Providence that presided over its formation....The mission of the American France upon this continent...[is to be] the sole apostle of the true faith in North America...to lead back under the aegis of Catholicism the errant peoples of the New World. (Casgrain, quoted in Siegfried, 1966: 175)

The Church was successful in restricting freedom of speech, the press, education, and even conscience during its long period of ascendancy in French Canada (Siegfried, 1966: 42). Comparisons with Mexico come to mind –domination of the Church in New Spain, its key part in defining Mexican identity into the early twentieth century. The Church in Quebec was to lose a good deal of its sway only in the aftermath of the 1960s Quiet Revolution.

In English-speaking Canada, the notion of a chosen people was to find expression from time to time in the vision of Canada's unique destiny as an offshoot of the British Empire. For Bishop Strachan, the leading Anglican cleric of Upper Canada (Ontario) in the 1820s and 1830s, the British were God's second chosen people, with Canadians as their offspring (Wise, 1968: 53). Egerton Ryerson, writing about the War of 1812, argued, "The Gideon hordes of loyal Canadians repelled and scattered, for more than two years, the Midian and Amalekite thousands of democratic invaders" (as quoted in Noll, 1992: 407). The Fathers of Confederation in the 1860s, casting about for a name to describe the new Canadian federation, hit upon the term "dominion," derived from the Book of Psalms (72.8). If not quite a New Jerusalem, Canada would be the manifestation of the dominion from sea onto sea that God would give to its inhabitants. "The Methodist church sought to make Canada the natural home for the kingdom of God on earth. It therefore sought to Christianize and civilize all its subjects, including new immigrants and the native population, and thereby make the nation a proper dominion for the Lord" (Semple, 1996: 442). Subsequently, Canadian Methodists in their missionary activities both in Canada and abroad would see themselves (much like their American counterparts would) as carrying out God's work here on Earth.² So

² "[Methodists] profoundly believed that Christianity was the only true religion and that God demanded its adoption throughout the world" (Semple, 1996: 442; Brouwer, 2008).

the historian W. L. Morton may well have been right in highlighting the importance that religion, more than wealth or politics, came to play in the lives of both French and English Canadians in the Victorian era: "God and the Church were very present actors in the World" (quoted in Noll, 1992: 546).

The point of this discussion is not to reduce the concept of new world societies to versions of a chosen people or visions of the New Jerusalem. It is only to underline the leading role that religion played in all three North American countries in cementing a sense of collective identity. Yet the very pluralism of religious denominations in both the United States and Canada, the constitutionalized separation of church and state in the U.S. context, and the strong anti-clericalism that surfaced in Mexico, especially in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, remind us that religion alone could not suffice as a source of identity in new world societies.

SECULAR UNDERPINNINGS

This brings me back to the more secular foundations of North American societies. In the Mexican case, struggles between creoles and Spanish-born were often overridden by a deeper rift between European-derived and indigenous peoples.³ Although the indigenous population played an important role in the events of the 1810s and 1910s, and at least one President of Mexico, Benito Juárez, was of indigenous background, "The Indians have always been Mexico's vanquished; as such they have been permanent victims of a system that exploits their labor" (Lafaye, 1976: 14). Mexico's has been an ongoing search for identity. The plaque in the Plaza of the Three Cultures in the heart of Mexico City captures some of the complexities: "On 13 Aug. 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtemoc, Tlatelolco fell into the hands of Hernán Cortés. It was neither a victory nor a defeat; it was the painful birth of the mestizo nation that is Mexico today" (Riding, 1989: 3).

The Mexican Revolution helped cement Mexico's sense of identity as a new world society.

The projection of a glorified pre-Columbian world onto contemporary popular culture generated a true aesthetic revolution in Mexico....There is a remarkable sense of thrill and discovery surrounding Mexican national identity in the 1920s and 1930s. Mexican, U.S.,

³ "The Mexican independence struggle was the first mass rebellion of the nineteenth century to combine, within an incipient nationalist context, elements of ethnic confrontation among colonially dominated indigenous peoples, the descendants of settler colonists, and the colonial regime and its representatives" (Young, 2001: 7).

Latin American, and European artists and intellectuals successfully wrote the savagery of revolutionary violence into a story of national redemption and managed, in the process, to shape Mexico's own brand of modernist aestheticism. (Lomnitz, 2006: 342 and 347)

José Vasconcelos in the 1920s wrote about "the fusion of ethnic stocks" and more grandiloquently yet about "the creation of a new race fashioned out of the treasures of all the previous ones: the final race, the cosmic race" (Vasconcelos, 1997: 19 and 40) – a vision to be compared and contrasted with both the American melting pot and Canadian multiculturalism! Diego Rivera's grand murals with their invocation of the Aztec past contributed their bit to the collective psyche, with the state playing a crucial role in fostering the Mexican sense of identity in the 1920s and beyond (Funes, 2006: 116).

Of course, Mexican sense of identity has many nuances to it. A strongly anti-American streak to Mexican intellectual life can be contrasted with the much more pro-American orientation of both the corporate elite and of political leaders like Presidents Alemán, De la Madrid, or Salinas in the post-World War II period (Camp, 1989). A tragic or melancholic side to Mexican identity, especially where indigenous people and subordinate classes are concerned, co-exists with a more modernist sensibility among the middle class (Bartra, 1992: 60; Lomnitz, 2001). These traits are undoubtedly reinforced by the social and economic inequality that characterizes Mexico to this day, when compared to both Canada and the United States.⁴ In the end, perhaps the most enduring feature of Mexican cultural identity remains its mestizo character: "Mexico alone is truly *mestizo*; it is the only nation in the hemisphere where religious and political – as well as racial – *mestizaje* took place" (Riding, 1989: 4).

On the American Revolution and its deeper implications for American identity, the observations of Bernard Bailyn may be most pertinent for this article:

The details of this new world were not as yet clearly depicted; but faith ran high that a better world than any that had ever been known could be built where authority was distrusted and held in constant scrutiny; where the status of men flowed from their achievements and from their personal qualities, not from distinctions ascribed to them at birth; and where the use of power over the lives of men was jealously guarded and severely restricted. (1967: 319)

⁴ For example, the ratio between the top 10 percent of income earners to the bottom 10 percent was 4.13 for Canada, 5.45 for the U.S. and 11.55 for Mexico, according to OECD data from the early 2000s (Irvin, 2008: 90). The UN Human Development Report for 2008 puts Canada fourth, the U.S. twelfth, and Mexico fifty-second in its ranking of countries around the world (United Nations, 2008: Table 1, p. 229); Mexican public spending on health and education as a percentage of its GDP lags significantly behind comparable figures for Canada and the U.S. (Table 19, p. 294).

Benjamin Franklin, an archetypal figure of the period, saw a secular American state “purified of the corruption of European politics and a social structure based on inherited title” as a model of democratic government for other nations (quoted in Madsen, 1998: 36-37). For Thomas Jefferson, America was “the solitary republic of the world, the only monument of human rights,...the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom and self-government” (Tucker and Henderson, 1990: 7).

European cultural figures could mirror similar sentiments. Goethe penned the following lines about the new continent:

America, you’ve got it better
Than our old continent. Exult!
You have no decaying castles
And no basalt.
Your heart is not troubled,
In lively pursuits,
By useless old resemblance
And empty disputes.

For his contemporary, Hegel, “America is the land of the future....It is a land longed for by those who are weary of the historical museum of old Europe” (as quoted in Zea, 1963: 3).

Emerson beckoned his nineteenth-century contemporaries to “walk on our own feet, work with our own hands, and speak our own minds” (1837), even as Melville saw Americans as “pioneers of the world; the advance-guard sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours” (Herman Melville, *White-Jacket*, 1850, Chap. 36, quoted in Baritz, 1964: 287). New York journalist John O’Sullivan invoked America’s manifest destiny in 1845,⁵ while Frederick Jackson Turner wrote his paean to the western frontier in 1893.⁶

For many, the United States would come to be associated with business enterprise and the capitalist dream. Joyce Appleby highlights the more equal social conditions that made it possible to think of the economists’ description of the market

⁵ “[It is] our manifest destiny to over spread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty,” as New York journalist John O’Sullivan wrote in 1845.

⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in *The Frontier in American History*, “European men, institutions, and ideas were lodged in the American wilderness, and this great American West took them to her bosom, taught them a new way of looking at the common man, trained them in a adaptation to the conditions of the New World....Best of all, the West gave, not only to the American, but to the unhappy and oppressed of all lands, a vision of hope” (Hess, 2003: 23-24).

as a template for society as early as the 1790s (1984: 50). Alfred Chandler notes that businessmen have run the American economy from the beginning (Couvares et al., 2000: 91). Walter Russell Mead notes how the English-speaking world “would not only ride the tiger of capitalist change; it would whip and spur the tiger to ever faster speeds up ever higher slopes” (2007: 239).

American development entailed its own deep contradictions, most strikingly the progressive spoliation and destruction of native peoples and the stains of slavery and racism. Nonetheless, it would come to foster a highly successful democratic set of social arrangements, with a good deal less of the hereditary status distinctions found on the other side of the Atlantic. Its inhabitants, far more than those of neighboring North American societies to its north or south, would be conscious of its newness, of its future orientation, of their striking out on their own. For Louis Hartz,

The New World did not merely offer the Americans a virgin ground for the building of a liberal system; it conspired itself to help that system along. The abundance of land in America, as well as the need to lure new settlers, entered it completely at every point....The point of departure of great revolutionary thought everywhere else in the world has been the effort to build a new society on the ruins of an old one, and this is an experience America has never had. We are reminded again of Tocqueville’s statement that Americans are “born equal.” (2002: 160)

For Theodore H. White, “Americans are not a people like the French, Germans, or Japanese, whose genes have been mixing with kindred genes for thousands of years. Americans are held together only by ideas” (quoted in Lind, 1995: 220). And for a contemporary U.S. writer, William Vollmann, California becomes the epitome of the American dream, “where the future promises continued sunniness,” unlike the “history-stained, grimy old brick towns of the East” (2008: 44).

The most telling metaphor about the United States depicts it in terms of a civilization. Charles and Mary Beard used the term in their 1927 history of the United States, describing its politics, economics, technology, philosophy, science, religion, education, and literature (Beard and Beard, 1927). Harold Laski (1948) talked about Americanism as a principle of civilization, emphasizing the restlessness and non-conformism that characterized the country, and the unmistakably New World character of American culture. Max Lerner argued that America was not a European civilization, and that it, not Europe, had become the center of Western power (1957: 782 and 882). It may make sense to think of the U.S. as a civilization-nation, an argument that Martin Jacques has recently made with respect to China (2009). U.S. influence at the global level has been paramount since 1945. Even more so, the United

States has been the central actor in the molding of what one might call a North American way of life or civilization.

Canada was a more European-influenced state than the United States; it is not an accident that its 1867 founding Constitution bore the name the British North America Act. The Fathers of Confederation were quick to emphasize their desire “to remain in close association with the people of Great Britain” and their “disinclination to be separated in any way whatever from the British Empire or to be connected in any manner with the United States of America” (Charles Tupper, April 10, 1865, in Ajzenstat et al., 2003: 170). Steady westward expansion, coupled with migration from continental Europe and beyond, would with time reduce the “Britishness” of English-speaking Canada; and the displacement of British power and influence in the twentieth century by the United States would give Canada more of a continental, North American orientation.

There were some hints of this already in the nineteenth century. Thomas McGee, one of the Fathers of Confederation, spoke of Canada as “a new land,” one where “classes and systems have not had time to grow naturally” (Ajzenstat et al., 2003: 17). Robert Grant Haliburton described Canadians in 1869 as “the Northmen of the New World” (Berger, 1970: 53). And one of the founders of the Canada First Movement, William Foster, wrote that “Canadian consciousness will increasingly draw a more natural nourishment from native sources...[from the] social fluidity of a new world and political institutions which combined freedom with restraint and progress with stability” (Berger, 1970: 53). French Canadians –the original *Canadiens*– had also acquired a spirit of independence, rejection of social constraints, and taste for liberty associated with the new world. “It is as if the air that one breathes on this vast continent contributes to it, but the company and example of the natural inhabitants, who place all their happiness in freedom and independence, are more than sufficient to produce this character” (Father Charlevoix, quoted in Christie, 2006: 51).

Increasing national assertiveness between World War I and World War II was reflected in Canadian membership in the League of Nations and by the Statute of Westminster of 1931. Culturally, artistic movements like the Group of Seven, with its paintings of the Canadian landscape, especially the Canadian Shield, bespoke a North American-rooted sense of identity. To quote Lawren Harris, one of the group’s leading figures:

Canada is a long thin strip of civilization on the southern fringe of a vast expanse of immensely varied, virgin land reaching into the remote north....Our whole country is cleansed by the pristine and replenishing air which sweeps out of that great hinterland. (quoted in Berger, 1970: 133)

Canada may well have participated in World War II alongside the United Kingdom, and only later the United States. But this did not stop its prime minister, speaking in war-scarred London, from defining Canada as “a nation of the new world” (William Lyon Mackenzie King, quoted in Brown, 1942: 133). Canadian economic and military integration with the U.S. proceeded at a rapid pace during the Cold War era. By the time of the Suez Crisis in 1956, the British Empire was sufficiently in the Canadian past for the prime minister of the day, Louis St. Laurent, to lambaste the supermen of Europe whose time had passed (Canadian Hansard, 1956: 20). Still, Canada was a much more enthusiastic promoter and participant in NATO –an Atlanticist club– after 1949 than in the Organization of American States, which it only joined belatedly in 1990, two years after the ratification of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. Anti-Americanism as a refrain in Canadian public opinion surfaced at the time of the Vietnam War and over the issue of U.S. ownership in the Canadian economy; yet it was accompanied by the grass-roots embrace of core U.S. economic and cultural values. A number of Quebec writers would come to focus on their own society’s inherent *americanité*, in part as a counter-balance to the Canadian element shaping Quebec’s identity.⁷ English Canadians, sharing a language and so much else with their neighbor to the south, have been more reserved in highlighting their Americanness.

Among the elements that contribute to a distinctive Canadian position in North America, mention might be made of the role of the state in fostering a Canadian sense of identity. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, National Film Board, Canada Council, and social programs like Medicare come to mind. Although Canada’s has been a capitalist economy no less than the United States’, Canadians have been more attuned to a mixed economy than Americans –a combination of defensive expansionism (Aitken, 1967: 183-221), a smaller population-to-land ratio, and a perspective that is less rigidly free enterprise-oriented. Culturally, Canada is a new world society no less than the United States, but with less of the brashness and civilizational path-blazing associated with the latter. A greater degree of ambiguity permeates its national consciousness, reflecting its more imperfect sense of identity as a multinational state. For with Québécois constituting a nation within a united Canada, to cite a November 2006 House of Commons resolution, and with aboriginal Canadians referring to themselves as First Nations, the task of maintaining national unity can at times be formidable. Nonetheless, for some outside observers, Canada is more of a model North American society than the United States itself:

⁷ Gérard Bouchard, for example, writes about “Quebec, in full transition, seeking to construct an American discourse” (2000: 218). For a more critical view of the recent emphasis on Quebec’s *americanité*, see Thériault, 2002.

Despite a paucity of population, Canada has become home to one of the world's biggest economies....In the 20th century Canada developed a reputation second to none in the hallmark virtues of a civil society: adherence to democracy, respect for human rights, accommodation of ethnic minorities, values of pluralism and multiculturalism, generous and efficient promotion of social welfare, and commitment to the pursuit of peace....Its political stability has exceeded even that of the United States....Canada is close to being most people's ideal country. (Fernández-Armesto, 2003: 203-4)

CONCLUSIONS

Where do these reflections take us? In North America, we are still waiting for the artists, writers, and cultural creators at large to begin to envisage a North American cultural space. For this to happen, there need to be histories of North America –and not only of the three distinct countries that make it up; political texts dealing with the three countries in comparative terms;⁸ and philosophers and political theorists grappling with the very idea of North America, in the way that Canadian, U.S., and Mexican thinkers have grappled with each of their three distinct identities. A tall order, but not an impossible one in a continent that, even more than South America, symbolizes a new world.

Another subject that requires attention is cross-border connections. Large-scale migration from Mexico and, to a lesser degree, from Canada to the U.S., since the nineteenth century, and smaller migrations from the U.S. to the two other countries, are one example. Cross-border regions with economic and other ties straddling them, e.g. in the Great Lakes region, in the Pacific Northwest, between California and Baja California, are another. The movement of millions of Canadians and Americans to Mexico during the winter months, recalling similar movements from Northern Europe to the Mediterranean during the summer months, is a third. A more dystopian example is the ongoing war against drug trafficking in Mexico with its high toll in human life, bringing home features of a shared North American predicament to the two countries to the north.

What is missing, however –and this may be the Achilles heel of any would-be framing of a North American cultural ensemble– are what French historian Pierre Nora has called *lieux de memoires* (1996), realms of memory, that are North America-wide in character. Instead, we have *lieux de mémoires* that are exclusively Canadian

⁸ Three books that address the topic of North America in a comparative way are DePalma (2001), Clarkson (2008), and Brescia and Super (2009). But we are still at the beginning stage of such studies.

(the Plains of Abraham, the War Memorial in Ottawa, the Last Spike at Craigellachie, B.C., Vimy Ridge); exclusively American (Bunker Hill, the Statue of Liberty, Gettysburg, Monticello, the Alamo, the Golden Spike in Utah); or exclusively Mexican (the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacan, the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City's Zócalo, Oaxaca's Mount Alban, Yucatán's Mayan ruins).⁹ Perhaps geography provides the loose, unifying link for North America's three states, with its mountain ranges in the west, oceans or seas on both coasts, and overlapping border regions.¹⁰ Economic integration and population exchange have certainly added significant glue. Perhaps ecology can provide footprints for the future. Most pertinent of all has been the congruent experiment in forging new societies in the new world – albeit as a result of conquest and displacement of indigenous peoples. The Americans are the ones who have carried this process furthest, laying the foundations for what one can properly call a new North American civilization. The Mexicans and Canadians have each been influenced by the U.S. model, although going their own distinct and separate ways in nation and state-building – Mexico as a predominantly mestizo society, Canada as a new world, multinational state. It remains to be seen whether the sense of new beginnings that has presided over the forging of each of the three North American states can lead to an enhanced feeling of cultural and political North Americanness in the twenty-first century. And whether a sense of solidarity transcending national boundaries and narrow economic interests can be engendered on the North American continent.¹¹

⁹ For an even deeper cultural critique of the possibility of a common North Americanness, I could cite the views of the Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman, writing in the early 1940s: "How spiritually diverse is the substratum of economic life in the two American worlds; how different their artistic temperament; how broad the religious gulf that extends between them" (1942: 147).

¹⁰ "The continent is 'indissoluble,' wrote Whitman as he ranged through the vast stretch of rivers and lakes, forests, farm lands, and prairies from the Saguenay to the Rockies. Sixty years later the historian cannot but underwrite the essential truth of that poetic judgment" (Brown, 1942, 133).

¹¹ "There is a *pressing moral need for renewed solidarity*, especially in relationships between developing countries and those that are highly industrialized....Technologically advanced societies must not confuse their own technological development with a presumed cultural superiority" (Benedict XVI, 2009, 59).

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