Detail of a Banksy mural about Great Britain leaving the European Union.
(Photo by Ian Clark.)

MEXICO

Mexit: The Return of Distant Neighbors

By Lorenzo Meyer

Exit or Expulsion?

In 2016, and following a referendum, Great Britain voted to leave the European Union in what has been called the "Brexit." On November 8 of that same year, the United States' presidential elections were won by the candidate of the Republican Party, Donald Trump, and at that moment, we saw the beginning of what we could call the "Mexit," the departure of Mexico not so much from the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta), but rather from the long-term political project for our country, which had decided to change its spots in 1992. Twenty-five years ago, Mexico seemed to cease being a Latin American nation and began to transform itself, obeying geographic and economic imperatives in addition to the political will of its elites and with the acceptance of Washington, D.C., and Ottawa (in the third North American country). Today, everything indicates that Mexico has begun to reclaim its identity as a Latin American country.

Brexit was a sovereign decision by the British electorate to leave the European Union and one that immediately led to the fall of David Cameron's government. His successor, Theresa May, has yet to conclude the long and difficult negotiation of the exit process begun with the EU. Conversely, Mexit is not the willing departure of Mexico, but the country's de facto expulsion from the political, economic, and social space of North America as the result of a decision by the Trump administration. In contrast, the United States reaffirmed the bonds of good political relations with its neighbor to the north, during the February visit of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. And Mexit did not result in the fall of President Enrique Peña Nieto's government, but rather an even greater weakening than what had already been experienced in 2014.

It is true that North America is not a formal institution like the EU; it's just an idea that was consolidated with the signing of Nafta in 1992. It is also true that this treaty is still in force, although it will be renegotiated by mid-2017, and its end is a very real possibility. On the eve of his first 100 days as president, April 26, President Trump announced that he would proceed with the U.S. withdrawal from Nafta. A few hours later, he reversed his stance and agreed to renegotiate, but warned that if the terms were unfavorable, he would indeed withdraw the United States from the treaty. But while the departure of Mexico from an economic and political North America does not have the formality of Brexit, it does have a similar weight. Trump's repeated attacks on Nafta since 2015, his decision to create a large artificial barrier between Mexico and the United States by building a 3,142-kilometer (1,952-mile) wall, and the steps he has taken to accelerate the deportation of some 5 million undocumented Mexicans from the United States — most of whom are seasonal workers with low salaries who have been characterized by the U.S. president as a group that includes "a lot of bad hombres" — imply a stark rejection of the notion that Mexico is part of North America, which is quite welcome in the eyes of a brutal, aggressive nationalism that has recently taken hold in Washington.

The "Mexico bashing" that was part of Trump's speech from the beginning of his presidential campaign sought to leverage an anti-Mexican sentiment deeply rooted in broad sectors of the U.S. public that had not been invoked by recent U.S. governments. Since 2015, however, Trump's speeches have blamed Mexicans on both sides of the Río Bravo/Rio Grande for "stealing" jobs that historically belonged to the working class in the United States and for increased insecurity and crime in that country.

While the facts do not support Trump's anti-Mexican notions, in practice they provided him with a political backing reminiscent of the support that encouraged James Polk to accuse the Mexican government of a supposed "aggression" against the undefined border with Texas in 1846. Polk's bellicose stance and his "alt facts" — "American blood spilled on American soil" — helped boost domestic support for his government, which had begun with a mere 1.4-percent margin of victory over his rival in the 1844 election. In addition, Polk believed that the growing internal tension between the northern and southern states that threatened the unity of his country could be overcome if the political energy of the whole nation were directed against a perfect common enemy: an extremely weak Mexico, which was not yet a nation-state in the strict sense

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Image by N. Currier of painting by Walker/Photo from Library of Congress.

The 1847 storming of Chapultepec during the U.S. invasion of Mexico.

of the term. Polk's move played out to his advantage: it doubled the total territory of his country and successfully postponed the rupture between the North and South for another 13 years.

If the invasion of Mexico (1846–1848) was not a real solution to the conflict in the United States at that time, then something similar might happen now. Neither Nafta nor undocumented migration appear to be the true underlying cause of the deindustrialization of the U.S. Rust Belt nor of the growing social division in the United States, although there are those who raise economic arguments that this is indeed the case.

Two Crises in One

Mexit is just one of two political crises in which Mexico is trapped today. In fact, this experience is not new, there's a history behind it. Mexico was born as an independent state from a simultaneous internal and external crisis. At the beginning of the 19th century, New Spain first received the shocking news of the French invasion of Spain, which led to an internal political crisis that turned into a bloody civil war that led to independence. When the United States declared war on Mexico in 1846, the internal struggle (Federalists vs. Centralists, Monarchists vs. Republicans, etc.) was already of such magnitude that from mid-1833 to 1848, there were 34 changes of president. Government institutions were likewise extremely fragile: in that same period, the Secretaría de Hacienda (Ministry of Finance) changed leadership 66 times. This internal strife is one of the reasons why Mexico lost. The later "French adventure" that led to the ephemeral Second Empire (1864–1867) cannot be explained without noting the fierce division and internal struggle between liberals and conservatives. There have been other times when internal and external crises have converged, but none of such magnitude.

The origin of Mexico's current internal political crisis is the result of the failure of a transition that began at the end of the last century, when a shift from the longstanding authoritarianism of the Partido Revolucionario Institutional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party) to a democracy that was acceptable and reasonable for the majority seemed possible. And this failure is seen daily in the many elements of the old system that still hold sway, notably, corruption, impunity, and as the result of both, organized crime whose violence only grows and has even wrested control

of certain regions and areas of the country from the state. The result is the citizenry's clear distrust of the entire institutional structure. Other indicators of this crisis are low support for the presidency (12 percent, although some sources give an even lower figure) and high disapproval ratings (86 percent). The substantial increase in gasoline prices since January 2017, the *gasolinazo*, has sparked protests throughout most of Mexico, even in states and cities with no tradition of this kind of civil action. These mobilizations are the most recent example of civil unrest that has not endangered the government, but does indicate widespread and growing discontent.

Based on early 2017 data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI, National Institute of Statistics and Geography), the Consumer Confidence Index is the lowest seen in 15 years. The outlook for Mexico's economy is also dim. According to the Banco de México, GDP growth for 2017 will vary between 1.3 and 2.3 percent.

From the beginning of his presidential campaign in June 2015 until today, Donald Trump chose Mexico as an enemy, characterizing it as a source of important problems for his country: crime and unemployment. Now in power, he has decided to use his neighbor to the south as an example of the rigor with which Trump's Washington intends to deal with "problem countries."

For a long, long time — centuries, in fact — Mexico has been frowned upon by an important sector of U.S. society. For historical, racial, religious, and cultural reasons, this sector eagerly desires the expulsion of the more than 5 million undocumented Mexican immigrants from the United States and an end to the free trade agreement with its southern neighbor. And it is this sector that nurtures the anti-Mexicanism that partly feeds Trumpism, since "Mexico bashing" produces cheap, easy, instant political points.

For now, Mexico's unexpected external crisis is manifested in the United States' harsh, even brutal, discourse: its promise to complete the construction of a border wall that could cost $20 billion or more, the humiliating and absurd demand that Mexico pay directly or indirectly for this enormous work of infrastructure,

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A protest against the gasoline price hikes of the *gasolinazo* in Mexico, January 2017.

Photo by ProtoplasmaKid.

Photo by Quim Gil.

Children play through the U.S.–Mexico border wall near San Diego in 2001.

the threat of undocumented workers' mass repatriation, and cutthroat negotiations to modify and even do away with Nafta, the pillar of Mexico's export economy, since that treaty — "the worst trade deal maybe ever signed by the United States," according to Trump — means an annual trade deficit of $60 billion. Finally, there's that initial threat — one that has not been repeated — which was disguised as an offer: if the Mexican army cannot act efficiently, the United States may use direct force to eliminate those "bad hombres" from Mexico who create and lead the drug cartels that are encouraging addiction and criminal violence in the United States.

It is more than significant that the first two executive orders of the Trump presidency were to call for the wall with Mexico to be built and to add more troops to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), both orders signed with relatives of victims of criminals who were undocumented standing as witnesses of honor. So, since there is no vast ocean, huge mountain range, great valley, or immense river between the two countries, the United States is going to do what nature did not: build an enormous defensive wall, guard it conscientiously, force Mexico to pay for the construction, and send back undocumented Mexicans.

At this moment, it is impossible to predict the evolution of the double crisis Mexico is experiencing, except that the internal one will get worse and the external one will force Mexico to undertake a new national project that no longer depends much on its relationship with the United States, whether it wants to or not. Such a task is incredibly complicated, and the current Mexican government is in no position to lead it. In any case, it has already become clear that the neighboring country's redefinition of its national interest in Mexico allows for no "special" relationship between the two nations.

What No Longer Works

The economic disaster with which Mexico's revolutionary nationalism ended in 1982 required a profound change in both the economic and political systems. However, the government of President Carlos Salinas (1988–1994) pushed to transform the former to preserve the later. He convinced the administration of President George H.W. Bush (1989–1993) of the desirability of revitalizing the Mexican economy by means of its incorporation as an appendage of the U.S. in exchange for giving the old political system a new opportunity. Even though this system was authoritarian and predictable, it had been very helpful to Washington during the Cold War.

In 2000, the PRI had to leave the presidential residence of Los Pinos to take refuge at the level of the states, but the next party in power, the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN, National Action Party), did not live up to expectations and ended up playing by the PRI's old rules. After two exhausting six-year terms, the PRI regained the presidency with new cadres, but with its old culture intact and with a growing illegitimacy. And since "it never rains, but it pours," the unexpected has happened: the sudden and surprising change of Mexico's relationship with the hegemonic power of the United States.

The nature of Mexico's current conjuncture leads us to conclude that to overcome the crisis caused by the redefinition of U.S. policy towards its southern neighbor — since U.S. national interest no longer requires a stable and prosperous Mexico — our country must also face the growing dysfunction of its own political system. Without an in-depth restructuring of its institutions, without the recovery of defensive nationalism, Mexico will not be able to successfully confront an unpredictable United States. Once again, a lesson from Mexico's history is clear: the best foreign policy must be a solid domestic policy, one that legitimizes authority and allows it to overcome the legacy of tremendous corruption and violence on which the supposed democratic transition of the early 21st century was shipwrecked.

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A demonstrator's sign reads, "As long as money changes hands, there will be no democracy."

Photo by Armando Aguayo Rivera.