

ASYMMETRIES IN THE AMERICAS AND THE QUEST FOR UNITY

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Introduction

Let me begin by referring to the short but brilliant book by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, published in 2003 under the title **The Americas: the History of a Hemisphere** which was considered by its editorial house, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, as “the first history to be written of the Americas as a whole.”

In his text the author contends that in spite of the fact that the whole hemisphere or the Americas, as I will refer to it in my lecture, was once “the new world” pure and simple, it is like Europe today “a Humpty Dumpty” hemisphere that has to be reconstructed. The question is, I believe, how we go about it, considering that as important as the knowledge of history is, the examination of the present is vital if we are going to be able to plan any future at all.

That is the scope of what I intend to do in the time that I have at my disposal: to go from the American singularity of the past, to its present multiplicity and diversity, in order to begin exploring if there is any chance of passing to the new generations at least a hint of a “united Americas.”

1. From the past

As Fernandez-Armesto so well states in his book, “America possessed unity and integrity of a sort long before it was well delineated.” The origin of its name goes to Amerigo Vespucci wrongly reporting as “America” the coastlands of what are now Venezuela, Guiana and Brazil. The name stuck regardless of the fact that it was Columbus who actually discovered the territory that could rightly be called America. In fact, the lands now politically delineated as Mexico and the Central American and Andean countries had seen the rise of very important civilizations such as the Olmec, Mayan, Incan, and Aztec to mention the more relevant. Curiously enough, the northern region of the Americas was either deserted or populated by nomad tribes that left almost no traces.

The discovery of America by Spain and Portugal, two countries that were in many ways less developed or at least less sophisticated than the civilizations they took over but did not appreciate, meant a very harsh conquest. Such a conquest brought exploitation and destruction, together with five centuries of colonization and domination. It nourished, however, a moment of glory: independence.

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By having gone to Europe and by being in touch with revolutionary ideas in the Old World, heroes such as Bolivar, San Martin, Hidalgo, Morelos and many more, were able to dream about freedom and began fighting for it by the early 1800s. By mid century however, an independent Latin America was still struggling to define its fate as much as to protect its sovereignty.

In the northern part of the hemisphere, independence had come earlier, and from that moment on, the tendency to expand either through war or commercial transactions became the way to construct a new empire in the Americas. Therefore, if what Fernandez-Armesto calls “gringo privilege” is clearly a product of history and not of fate, it can be either reverted or cancelled. It can also be put to work constructively in favor of a greater community. But that is talking about the future too early in my presentation.

Independence in the Americas meant freedom but also the destruction of its singularity through multiplication, fragmentation and confrontation of all sorts. Not only had the cosmographers drawn a map separating North from Central and South America, but also a very significant division was established on the basis of cultural roots and faith. The idea of a Latin America stemmed from its Ibero origin as well as the Catholic religion. The United States on its part, took the name of America for itself and, as a consequence, a bad feeling began to develop: in time Latinos would hate gringos; in time as well gringos would fear Latinos.

By that, I do not mean to say that Americans and Latin Americans hate or fear each other all of the time, but even public opinion polls such as the ones put forward by the Chilean organization *Latinobarómetro* show a growing anti-American feeling among Latin Americans, reflecting mainly their dislike *vis-à-vis* certain aspects of US foreign policy. No one better describes the conflicting feelings of love and hate that Latinos have for gringos than the Mexican Nobel Prize winner Octavio Paz, when he says that we love the American way of life but hate the imperial behavior of its government.

Probably what Latinos resent the most from Americans is what they consider their abandonment. In fact, somehow they feel orphans of a father that even though as early as 1823 through the so-called Monroe Doctrine claimed “America for the Americans,” was not only unable to protect them from invasion from extra-regional powers, but eventually became the invader itself. Frustration was even greater as history showed, in many occasions, the unwillingness of an already powerful United States to come to the rescue of the Latin American countries.

Some examples of the eternal postponement of Latin American expectations for assistance in the agenda of US foreign policy are the following. Immediately after the conclusion of the Second World War, Latin American countries anticipated financial aid from the United States to support development efforts, as a way of recognizing their siding with the Allies during the conflict. It did not happen.

Instead, all financial assistance was channeled to Europe through the Marshall Plan in order to secure its reconstruction. Even when the Old World was back on its feet, Latin America did not appear on the US radar. Development support was addressed mostly to Asia in fear of the spread of international communism. When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, Latin America still stood waiting. The transit from centrally planned economies to market-oriented ones absorbed all the financial resources available for developmental purposes.

However, when the European Union stepped in to take over much of the responsibility for the transformation of Eastern Europe, hopes for Latin American development efforts being assisted by US financial resources took force again. Furthermore, there had already been a statement by the then US President George Bush Sr. entitled "Initiative for the Americas," which called for a strong policy of cooperation with Latin America. Unfortunately, the Gulf War postponed the project and Bush lost his re-election. The new president, the democrat Bill Clinton, liked the idea of a *rapprochement* between the US and Latin America, so the Summit of the Americas was born in Miami in 1994. The commitment was to establish by the year 2005 a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) comprising the 800 million people living between Alaska and Tierra del Fuego, a proposal unanimously adopted by the 34 participating countries (all of the Americas except for Cuba). Although progress was slow, when six years later George Bush Jr. took over the US presidency, he joyfully received the Miami legacy: he could fulfill his father's dream, and therefore, he presented himself as "an American president with a Latin American agenda." The possibility for the region to finally become a US priority was never more feasible. Bush would even receive from the Congress the authority to negotiate trade agreements *à la* "fast track." Once more, however, fate stepped in. The terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001 changed the scenario. From then on, fighting terrorism became the only priority of US foreign policy and Latin America was again put on hold.

But besides this lack of constancy and achievement of southern hopes by the northern neighbor, there is still another matter of deep resentment in the hearts of many Latin Americans with respect to the United States. It has to do not only with the frequent insensitive ways American authorities, as well as civilians, deal with undocumented migrant workers coming from our countries in search of better opportunities in the United States, but also with the fact that there is even a trend of thought among some intellectuals such as Samuel Huntington that advertises that Latino is a synonym for danger. This is particularly serious not only because Huntington is a professor who influences the minds of those young persons who eventually will lead the country, but also because the horror that happened on September 11th seems to have given him certain authority. After all, when he published his work **The Clash of Civilizations (Foreign Affairs, Summer 1993)**, he claimed that in the new phase world politics had entered after the end of the Cold War, "the great division among human kind and the dominating source of conflict would be cultural." And when he went on to say that "the next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations," agreeing

with Indian author Akbar that such a confrontation was definitely going to come from the Muslim world, he became the obliged reference when discussing September 11th. Later on, Huntington became a name that Latin Americans do not wish to be linked to.

In his article **The Hispanic Challenge (Foreign Policy, March/April 2004)**, Samuel Huntington contends that the US confronts a new peril: its division into two peoples, two cultures and two languages through the constant penetration of Hispanic immigrants. He warns that the Latinos who are legally or illegally in the United States, with the exceptions of Cubans who fled the island to build an international Miami, by refusing to speak English all the time, by not subscribing to the protestant faith and by reproducing at a higher rate than Americans from a European or an African origin, would eventually erode the foundations of the US society, and even its credo. They have, therefore, to be feared.

Huntington worries mostly about what he calls the new Mexican immigration, which according to him “differs from past immigration and most other contemporary immigration due to a combination of six factors”:

- Contiguity: Mexicans have only to cross the border.
- Scale: In the nineties Mexicans composed more than half of the Latin American immigrants to the USA.
- Illegality: In the year 2000 almost five million undocumented Mexicans entered the United States, accounting for nearly 70% percent of illegal immigration.
- Regional Concentration: In that same year, nearly two thirds of Mexican immigrants lived in the West and virtually half of them in California.
- Persistence: Mexican immigration will not subside unless the country grows at a rate greatly exceeding that of the United States.
- Historical Presence: Almost all of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada and Utah were part of Mexico until 1848.

2. The present

Unfortunately, divisions in the Americas are not only those already described between the United States and Latin American countries. We have also our own history of conflict and asymmetries. Even in Central America, composed of five nations of similar size that at one point had joined together in a federation, the efforts beginning in 1960 in order to build a common market were seriously damaged nine years later by the so-called football war between Honduras and El Salvador. Presently, despite the conflict being solved, relations between those two countries are fragile, as fragile is the peace reached in the latter as well as in Guatemala.

In the Andean region the situation is not so different. In spite of the similarities among the countries that constitute the Community of Andean Nations, the conflict between Chile and Bolivia regarding sea access for the latter resulted in

the first abandoning the economic integration scheme. There are still no diplomatic relations between the two countries. Furthermore, although the border difficulties between Peru and Ecuador were solved by the Rio Treaty, a couple of years ago new disputes arose showing the frailty of the balance in that area.

For their part, the four countries that in 1991 decided to begin constructing a common market of the south (MERCOSUR), have been so far unable to take the necessary steps conducive to the establishment of a custom union, and the permanent controversies between its two most important members, Argentina and Brazil, threaten to slow down their economic integration process even more.

When last year all the South American countries gathered in Cusco, Peru, determined to launch a Community of Southern Nations, several aspects were seriously overlooked: the territorial conflicts I have referred to, the asymmetries among its member states, and their very different positions with respect to two extremely relevant issues: the FTAA and the bilateral trade agreements with the United States. Another aspect was also unaccounted for: purposely or not, Mexico had been excluded from such a community, and so had Central America. Experts have offered different explanations. In the case of Central America, they agree that its absence was probably due to a lack of interest of both parties. In the case of Mexico, it's another story. Some argue that the absence of Mexico has to do with a position commonly attributed to Brazil that says that Mexico is no longer part of Latin America having chosen to associate itself with the north. Others are kinder and justify such exclusion referring either to distance or to the fact that Mexico never conducted much trade with the south. Whatever the case, two things are clear: on the one hand, there will be no FTAA in the year 2005 as originally planned. On the other hand, it would indeed be much better for Latin America to overcome rivalries, jealousies, conflicts and confrontations in order to join forces to help the region conquer its asymmetries and stand stronger in its negotiations not only with the United States, but with the rest of the world as well.

3. Toward the future

A Free Trade Area for the Americas is not a bad idea, but the way it has been presented is certainly insufficient. A NAFTA plus, meaning a mere extension of the North American Free Trade Agreement among Mexico, the United States and Canada to the rest of the Americas, not only is not enough, but also is totally unfeasible. Unless asymmetries among its components are tackled, rhetoric about a "united Americas" will prevail over real actions towards its construction.

Right after the conclusion of the second World War, an old European aspiration, possibly linked to what the 13 colonies had done in North America as early as 1776 and which led to the formation of the United States of America, took new impetus as a way to prevent Europe from ever again falling victim to the scourge of war. In September 19, 1946, Winston Churchill delivered a speech at the University of Zürich calling for a "united States of Europe," but the real creation of

what today constitutes the European Union began in 1951 with the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), composed of six countries: the three in Benelux plus Germany, France and Italy. Its purpose was to pool the steel and coal resources of the member states, but deep down such a move meant both reconciliation and commitment to prevent another European war by those who had been enemies for a very long time. The idea of an ECSC, which has always been attributed, and justly so, to a French civil servant Jean Monnet although it was publicly presented by the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, became the best example of what the will of sovereign states can achieve not only for peace but also for development.

This is not the occasion to delve into a long analysis of the European struggle to integrate, both economically and politically, but it is indeed a great opportunity to put forward a wish, a hope, that the Americas will some day be able to create the American Community, maybe not following step by step what the Europeans did, but learning from some of their experiences.

After trying first some defense and political union efforts that failed, Europeans decided to concentrate for a while on economics. Through the Treaty of Rome (1957), the six founding members established the European Economic Community (EEC) in order to set a customs union pursuing the “four freedoms,” meaning the elimination of restrictions to movement of goods, services, capital and people among its participants.

The success of those efforts brought the European Community (EC), formerly known as the EEC, to enlarge itself for the first time in 1973 adding the UK, Ireland, and Denmark, giving birth to the “Europe of the nine.” This gathering would become the “Europe of the twelve” in the eighties with its second enlargement and the addition of Greece, Spain and Portugal. At that time a very important decision was also adopted. If uncontrolled migration to the richer nations from the poorer ones was to be avoided, development had to be encouraged in the latter. The “cohesion and structure funds” were designed to help the least developed regions within the European Community to achieve progress and close the gaps, so those three new members found it easier to merge.

In 1992 the Maastricht Treaty changed the name of the EC to that of European Union (EU), and three years later its fourth enlargement brought Austria, Finland and Sweden into its realm, creating the “Europe of the fifteen,” which last year went through its fifth enlargement, incorporating 10 new members from Eastern Europe and therefore becoming the most important economic block of countries on Earth.

Along the more than half a century in which the European integration process has been taking shape, many institutions have been built, making this exercise one that is not only economic but also political, as initially intended. The

European Union is a common market, but it is as well and has been so since the beginning, a European Atomic Energy Community. It contains also a European Parliament, a European Court, a European Commission of Human Rights, a common foreign and security policy, a quasi-common currency, and even a Constitution that is being discussed and adopted at the national level of its member states.

But what I would like to stress, however, it is not so much what the Europeans have accomplished, but rather the long road that the Americas would have to tread if the goal is not a “soft NAFTA” as it has already been stated, but a true block of countries, united by common interests and capable of competing in a world where such formations would be common or where countries as big as China would be fully participating.

When in 1826 Simon Bolivar convened the Panama Congress, he hoped that given the fact that the United States had achieved independence half a century before and the rest of the Americas was consolidating its own, it was time to begin building the “united Americas” that he had dreamed about. Difficulties of all sorts besides distance proved to be greater than imaginings, and Bolivar had to abandon his thoughts for post-independence unity. He had tried, he confessed before dying, to “plough the sea.” Even if the Latin Americans were independent, intestine wars did not subside until the second part of the eighteenth century. Meanwhile, the United States paid little attention to the world, cultivating isolationism more than participation, engaged as it was in expanding and defining its own borders.

As Fernandez-Armesto says, in Spanish America “the independence wars [and I would add the civil wars that followed] were, in short, the making of the United States and the ruin of much of the rest of the Americas ... To fight the wars, all the affected states had to sacrifice liberties to *caudillismo* and civil values to militarism. In most states the army inherited the only political legitimacy left by the wars; those who had won independence became its guardians. The founding constitutions echoed the enlightened rhetoric and sometimes, indeed copied the very words of the US Declaration of Independence and Constitution. But they had no opportunity to register the same effects. In cauldrons of war the ingredients of successful state making sometimes coagulate, but the longer the wars go on, the less likely the outcome. In most of the Americas in the era of independence, the pacification of society, the demythification of the leader, the submission of government to the constitution and the rule of law simply could not happen. People in the Americas often speak of the chaotic politics, democratic immaturity, and economic torpor of Latin American tradition as if they were an atavistic curse, a genetic defect, a Latin legacy. Really, like everything else in history, they are product of circumstances, and of the circumstances, in particular, in which independence was won.

Almost two centuries later we have to ask ourselves if it is possible to go back to the days when dreams like the Bolivarian one were dreamt. In other words, do the Americas have a feasible common future? Does it depend only on the strongest country in the hemisphere? Would it have to be the result of either yielding or confronting? Can we not agree on a project to which all of us contribute not only with speeches and ideas, but also with financial resources? Is it not a wise popular saying that advises us to put our money where our mouth is? Can we not learn from the European experience the importance of closing gaps between regions while economically integrating? Are we not able to create our structure funds, our cohesion funds? How real is our desire to integrate? How deep is our commitment to economic integration? How difficult is it for the thirty-five countries of the Americas (including Cuba) to understand and defend the idea that “political stability could be a building block of economic prosperity and improved quality of life”? What would it take for all of us to contribute to the implementation of such an idea? I guess the true question is: can the Americas become one?

Conclusions

By putting up front all those issues, we should not beg the very important question of asymmetries. It is a fact that the Americas is profoundly marked from north to south and east to west with deep asymmetries, which are the result not only of huge socioeconomic disparities, but also of the different capacities of its countries and regions participating in economic integration agreements to solve the problems of coherence among the commitments taken on by each nation in its various spheres of foreign policy.

It is also a fact that in spite of all the progress made in regards to economic growth during the nineties, very few countries have indicated even modest progress in the reduction of poverty, and high levels of inequality not only persist, but have tended to worsen, even in the cases of those countries with the highest growth rate in the region, which by the way, has the worst distribution of wealth indicators in the world. It has not been possible either to reduce unemployment or improve the quality of jobs, and the United States and Canada can easily be thrown together with the Latin American countries when discussing this particular issue.

It is also well known that there is very little, if any, macroeconomic coordination among the countries involved in the different integration agreements, and this is even true of NAFTA in general terms. Such a lack of coordination is dangerous because the progress made so far in terms of investments and trade liberalization is leading to a high degree of economic interdependence, and countries are becoming more vulnerable to the problems of other economies. Memories of the so-called “tequila effect” on the Latin American countries are still fresh, as much as the quickness with which the US administration assisted Mexico at the end of 1994, because it was already a partner in NAFTA, but was very slow coming to the rescue of Argentina, for example.

When discussing asymmetries, something must be said also about the enormous deficiencies that Latin America has in terms of infrastructure for communications and transportation. There is some hope, however, involved in two specific projects: one in the northern part of the Latin American region, called the Puebla-Panama Plan, promoted by Mexico and adopted by Central America, seeking to develop infrastructure and production activities in an area where economic instability has always been accompanied by political instability. And the other in the southern part of our region, integrated in the so-called Community of Southern Nations, that seeks the building up of better ways to connect locations and people as well as making natural resources accessible to one another (e.g., roads, railways, ports, dams, pipelines). Two things seem to be lacking, however: the link between the two projects in order to create a true economic space, and the funds to finance both, the projects and the link. That and not a NAFTA plus is what is needed if a “united Americas” is to be born.