

Chapter 13

A Critique of Mexico–US Relations: Beyond the Contemporary Impasse

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Introduction

The North–South Frontier: Beyond Official Discourses

Though the preceding two articles on intergovernmental relations provide instructive insights, they share a crucial limitation that reflects a widespread tendency: the assumption that Mexico can be treated comparatively – without strong qualifications – as a ‘consolidated’ liberal democratic state in the sense that is valid for the US and Canada. Tom Keating does not need to deal with this question because of his focus on a comparison of Canada and the US. The discussion of Mexican–Canadian relations, on the other hand, for rather different reasons does not adequately address the profound significance of the fact that as a form of society or social formation Mexico is qualitatively different, with profound implications for the nature of its politics. Nevertheless, in focusing on security issues, Athanasios Hristoulas can justifiably focus on intergovernmental relations relatively independently of the question of deeper differences. The precariousness of the assumption that Mexico is just another ‘formal democracy’ was implied by Obama’s appointment of Carlos Pascual – an expert on ‘failed states’ – as the new ambassador to Mexico. As all concerned hastened to clarify, this appointment did not mean that Mexico was actually considered to be a failed state, a term more applicable to some post-Communist regimes.

To be sure, defenders of the current regime in Mexico have been particularly disturbed by questioning Mexico’s status as an ‘equal’ partner in NAFTA and a legitimate modern democratic state. For example, writing in a *New York Times* article, the noted historian and commentator Enrique Krauze made the case against the increasing perception in the US that Mexico might ‘fall apart’:

But since 2000, when the opposition National Action Party won the presidency, power has been decentralized. There is much greater independence in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. An autonomous Federal Electoral Institute oversees elections and a transparency law has been passed to combat corruption. We have freedom of expression, and electoral struggles between parties of the right, center and left. Our national institutions

function. The army is (and long has been) subject to the civilian control of the president; the church continues to be a cohesive force; a powerful business class shows no desire to move to Miami. We have strong labor unions, good universities, important public enterprises and social programs that provide reasonable results. Thanks to all this, Mexico has demonstrated an impressive capacity to overcome crises, of which we've had our fair share.¹

The superficiality of each of Krauze's assertions as half-truths would be readily apparent to less ideologically apologetic experts who might make counter points such as the following: A small degree of political decentralization has been followed by re-centralization in the name of a war against organized crime and other crises. The Federal Electoral Institute has been increasingly called into question because of blatantly partisan and inconsistent decisions. Formal increases in electoral and press freedom have been accompanied by waves of political assassinations, including the murder of 57 journalists from 2000 through to 2009 (DPA 2009). To the extent that major institutions function, they do so in a crippled and often problematic form. The president's control of the military saw federal power used to undermine human rights in zones marked by drug conflicts, and criminalize social protest in the name of anti-terrorism. The Church has played an increasingly reactionary role, suppressing its critical wing (for example, the former Bishop Ruiz in Chiapas). The business classes are surrounded by private security forces and significant numbers have fled the country for fear of kidnapping. Labour unions have become progressively weakened and remain extensively corrupt and subjected to increasing abuses by business, as a number of recent court cases have shown. Aside from a few 'good universities' with research capabilities (most notably UNAM, rated in the top 100 in the world, and the rather small Colegio de México) and several others with respectable programs, the overall system of higher education has abysmally low standards and rates of participation, starvation wages for the vast majority of professors, and virtually no research. Moreover, all of the indices for inequality, health and education compete with Turkey for the bottom rankings of the OECD. None of Mexico's economic, social, or political 'crises' has been 'overcome' – aside from a formal 'democratic transition' with the election of non-PRI presidents – beyond the fact of the sheer survival of the Mexican nation-state. Many of these assertions will be documented in the pages that follow.

This chapter will not argue that Mexico is a failed state in the technical sense, but that it is a chronically failing, unconsolidated democratic state that has not managed to create a substantively adequate rule of law – or level of public standards in areas such as health and education – that satisfies even the minimal requirements

1 Krauze 2009. All citations from *La Jornada* can be obtained by date under the heading of "Servicios" under "Ediciones anteriores" at <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/>.

for a modern democratic society.² Though the State retains overall control, it does so from a position of increasing weakness and declining legitimacy. Nor does the Mexican state have any reasonable prospect of fundamentally overcoming these problems in the near future, given the bottleneck of contradictions that plague it from effectively linking a process of democratic consolidation with economic and social transformation. It will be argued that a candid recognition of this situation is the necessary foundation for understanding the larger context of Mexico–US relations, a theme that will be later used to identify some possible strategies to break the current impasse.

For those who may not be fully aware of the current situation, it is instructive to begin with several recent examples to illustrate the current tense relations between Mexico and the US that date from the Bush administration but will not disappear magically with Obama. The following kinds of tensions should not be surprising, given that the 3,000-km frontier between these two countries not only represents the greatest income differences across borders in the world (a ratio of around 8:1, enhanced by the extremity of the inequality), but also provides a dramatic example of the North–South divide in an increasingly gated world (Cunningham 2004):

- Approximately 2 million Mexicans illegally migrated to the US during the Fox administration from 2000 to 2006, bringing the total of undocumented Mexicans to more than 10 million with many estimates running much higher – nearly 60 per cent of illegal 'aliens' (Brooks 2005). Of the Mexicans, 38 per cent are now estimated to be from marginal indigenous areas (*La Jornada de Oriente* 2003). In the process, more than 2,000 Mexicans have died (more than 437 in 2007), and the cumulative total is now more than 10 times the tally of the infamous Berlin Wall (Brooks 2007, Román 2007). Though economic crisis in the US and stricter border vigilance has reduced the rate of flow, the basic situation remains the same in the Calderón administration.
- In February 2004, 1,500 soccer fans in Zapopan, Jalisco booed the *Star-Spangled Banner* and US players in a soccer match and repeatedly chanted, 'Osama! Osama! Osama!' The surprising part was that the game was against Canada. A later Mexico–US Olympic trial game in Guadalajara produced (less surprisingly) similar results. The tone of the resulting blogging frenzy on the US side is expressed by one single comment: 'Seal the borders with shoot to kill orders' (Little Green Footballs 2006).
- Beginning in July 2005, a small but vocal network of groups calling themselves the Minutemen began unofficial, vigilante border patrols in Arizona and California in search of undocumented migrants. Even though largely outnumbered by the anti-Minutemen groups who have confronted

2 With respect to law, see Rios and Shirk 2007. The weaknesses of other public institutions are discussed and often documented throughout this chapter.

them, the Minutemen have gained wide publicity and stirred up potentially violent and racist anti-Mexican sentiments.

- In early February of 2006, a business delegation of 16 Cubans was expelled from the Sheraton María Isabel hotel as part of an extra-territorial demand by the US to conform to the Helms-Burton sanctions against Cuba – without any official Mexican government protest.
- Finally, in the fall of 2007 the US passed legislation calling for the criminalization and expelling of illegal immigrants and the construction of an 1,100-km-long wall to keep out Mexican immigrants.

Though having a much longer history (Meyer 2001), such recent incidents point to the deeper conflicts between Mexico and the US that are obscured in official reports and mainstream journalism. Though political polarization makes such issues more visible in the US (even if the protagonists talk past one another), in Canada there is limited awareness of the realities of Mexico. To be sure, such issues have drawn some attention since several recent high-profile cases of Canadians confronted with the inadequacies of the Mexican justice system and the failure of the federal government to intervene effectively.

The first visit to the US of the new Mexican president Felipe Calderón, in early 2007, illustrates the fragile underpinnings of his claim that, following in the footsteps of his PAN predecessor Vicente Fox, he is making Mexico ‘the best place in the world’ to invest. His upbeat talk at Harvard University provides a standard list of ostensible accomplishments and goals that wither under closer examination (Walker 2008).

For example, he takes personal pride in having initiated the planting of 250 million trees – one quarter of the UN world goal for the year. However, closer examination reveals that though official estimates assumed a 50 per cent survival rate, even the environment minister has belatedly admitted that the survival rate would be closer to 10 per cent (Greenpeace México 2008). Not surprisingly, the program has been rejected on scientific and sociological grounds by both Greenpeace and forestry experts who argue that the money is misallocated because it does not provide support to communities for sustainable forestry, primarily serves local partisan interests, and distracts attention from failures across the environmental spectrum, such as making significant headway against deforestation that is fifth highest in the world, and given the fact that half of lumber production is illegal (Enciso 2008).

Calderón also claimed (at least before the economic crisis in the fall of 2008) there had been a significant reduction of extreme poverty, a suggestion based in part on dubious government statistical procedures that have been highly criticized.³

3 Criticism of official poverty statistics has been extensively developed in the writings of Julio Boltvinik at the Colegio de México; for a good summary, see Julio Boltvinik and Araceli Damián, “Derechos humanos y medición oficial de la pobreza en México,” *Papeles de Población* enero-marzo, número 35 (2003).

Furthermore, such assertions gloss over the fact that more than half the population lives in ‘ultra’ poverty and that Mexican gains have been among the lowest in Latin America (Amador and Brooks 2007). Indeed, as one government-sponsored study has suggested, only 18 per cent of Mexicans have the means for fully adequate living standards, relegating the other 82 per cent to various categories of poverty (Enciso 2009).

Listeners were also presented with the absurd future projection of achieving universal health care within the five years left in his regime. What Calderón failed to point out was that the public system is in chronic economic crisis and disorganization linked with spending the lowest per cent of GNP in Latin America, and that more than half the employed are in the informal economy (58.7 per cent) and only about a third of workers are enrolled in the national system of social security (Cardoso 2010). Calderón’s dubious claim about universal medical coverage is based on the expansion of a relatively new program, *Seguro Popular*, aimed at the very poor. Yet the untrustworthy official statistics suggest that even including the expansion of *Seguro Popular*, 18 per cent of the population remains completely outside the public health system.⁴ But this figure is not only contested; it also ignores that this plan does not cover many major and chronic illnesses and is crippled by a lack of staff and resources. Since only 3 per cent have private insurance and the public system is avoided by those who can, at all levels of society people borrow large sums of money to pay for private care in emergencies, with the result that 55 per cent of health costs are covered out of the pockets of private individuals (Gómez Mena 2004). Symptomatically, the numerous perks for highest-level government officials include comprehensive private health insurance, thus bypassing the government health plan for public employees.

Mexico falls at the bottom of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reports in virtually all areas, including education. While Calderón admits (by omission) that the quality of education remains a major problem, he fails to note that the middle classes who can afford it have abandoned the public system, thereby reinforcing the process of deterioration, and that his election was due in part to the support of the corrupt, autocratic leader of the national teacher’s union.

Though viewed as a ‘right-wing’ president with conservative Catholic affiliations in the Latin American context, Calderón explicitly denies being a ‘neoliberal’. Perhaps he has a semantic point, in part because in Mexico the exercise of ritualistic, cosmetic state-symbolic action is necessary for legitimation, a manipulative process that works in a nation of non-readers and a media system where newspaper and TV news production is dominated by the traditional elites. As part of a statistical pseudo-consensus based on an informal PAN and PRI alliance, Calderón perhaps stands in ‘the middle of the road’, *but one leading nowhere*, given the context of the constraints of NAFTA, his weakness in a disputed election

4 Such government claims have been seriously challenged by critics, e.g., Laurell 2010, Velasco 2009.

marred by corruption, the deterioration of domestic middle- and small-scale production, declining manufacturing employment, flat and more recent declining, per-capita growth, and the very limited degree to which tax and pension reforms will confront the looming intensification of the fiscal crisis of the Mexican state.⁵ The war against organized crime has served as a classic diversion tactic.

Interpretive Perspectives: The Agenda

The present analysis stands outside the stand-off between the US and Mexico, taking a neutral position on a complex set of disputes that, it will argued, cannot be dealt with or resolved within the presuppositions and policies of the existing political elites. The Obama administration implicitly acknowledges the depth of the problem (now exacerbated by high unemployment) by not yet taking action on migration reform – to the dismay of Latino groups. The rest of this chapter will be developed around a longer-term diagnosis of the current standoff. Theoretically, a reflexive conception of critical social theory will inform the empirical analysis of social and political contradictions (Morrow 1994). Descriptively, the central theme of the resulting discussion can be conveyed in the melodramatic language of a Western B-movie. US–Mexican relations could be described in terms of the evocative metaphors of the ‘spaghetti Westerns’ portraying a southwest frontier where the stark distinction between good and evil, the good guys and the bad guys, dissolves into the murky distinction between ‘the good, the bad, and the ugly’. On both sides of the border, defensive nationalisms, political contradictions, and self-serving platitudes have fuelled hatred and anxieties that only reinforce the difficulties of the current situation.

The first section will argue that classical ‘realist’ theories of international relations and neoliberal theories of globalization have helped create the current situation and provide little prospect for meaningful alternatives, especially from the perspective of those who bear the burden of its tragic consequences. In the process, the discussion will introduce a critical social theory of international relations and globalization as an alternative framework for analyzing these border disputes and the underlying social and cultural transformations they involve.

The second section, in applying this framework, will argue that the origins and persistence of the bad and the ugly can be identified with two intersecting systems of hegemony: US dominance at the inter-nation level, and within Mexico an internal system of hegemonic classes that largely complements this relation of dependency, even as the State publicly claims autonomy in the name of national interests. Further, it will be concluded that these relations will tend to reproduce their inhumane and unjust consequences over time without fundamental changes, even with the change of governing parties in the US. The resulting ‘impasse

⁵ For extensive documentation of the failure of economic and social policy, see Cordera and Cabrera Adame 2008.

thesis’ will argue that the existing crisis will persist indefinitely despite efforts at resolution within the logic of the present structural situation.

The final section will turn to potential alternatives to the bad and the ugly: to *the potential good* – to the longer-term emergent possibilities and transformative outcomes. Beyond its analysis of the structural contradictions of the current impasse, a critical social theory perspective attempts to shed new light on ways of thinking beyond the current deadlock of Mexico–US relations and its consequences for the millions who suffer from its effects on both sides of the border. Such considerations will require a shift of focus from the effects of the current structure of relations to the possibilities of agency, both actual and potential, especially on the part of non-state actors, as well as of normative considerations relating to justifications of the values of what ‘ought’ to be in ‘the good (global) society’.

International Relations Theory and Globalization: Foundations for Rethinking Mexico–US Relations

Introduction: Debates in International Relations Theory

The preceding descriptive analysis has already begun to introduce some theoretical arguments that now need to be made more explicit. How can we reflect in more theoretical terms on making sense of the origins and future transformations of the border and immigration question and the on-going failure of the neoliberal Mexican model of development? The topic of Mexico–US relations can be analyzed at the intersection of two diffuse theoretical traditions that dominate current discussions. The oldest is that of international relations, a field dominated by political scientists and historians. The other, which emerged during the last three decades, is associated with the problematic of globalization and has been defined by several disciplines. A position on these issues will be briefly developed in this section to justify the perspective that will be used in the more analytical and constructive part of this chapter.

The classic polarization in international relations theory has been between so-called realism and its opposites, which have taken diverse forms characterized as idealistic and humanitarian. The point of departure of realism is that unlike the hierarchical, organized relations within societies, the relations among societies take the form of anarchic international relations with a focus on the capacities of states. Accordingly, states must exercise their sovereignty to make their basic interests and security the most fundamental goal of foreign policy, even if this runs against high-minded but unrealistic goals of international community and universal rights. Similarly, related neoliberal forms of globalization theory (or the ideology of ‘globalism’) offer another form of determinism based on the status quo that defines itself as the ‘objective reality’ to which we simply have to passively adapt. In the case of Mexico, this supposed imperative takes the form of accepting the necessity of accommodating to the official US vision of

hemispheric 'solidarity' based on free trade, truncated forms of democracy, and the US hegemonic economic model. Such theoretical perspectives underpin the official policy discourse that defines relations between the US and Mexico.

In contrast, anti-realists – in the classical form of an idealistic liberalism – have contended that through education and the establishment of global institutions based on universal principles of solidarity, the anarchy of international relations can be overcome. The chronic failure of classical humanitarian internationalism and related forms of liberalism is that they do not adequately take into account the socioeconomic and structural conditions that make possible the extension of international co-operation and integration. In this respect, the realists have an important point in labelling such policies as idealistic and unworkable. At the same time, however, realists can also be criticized for simply taking the existing relations of power and interest as 'given' without any concern for longer-term fundamental re-structuring of relations within and between states.

As has often been pointed out, the future of the integration of the Americas of the north is confined to three options: First, a move toward closer relations going beyond free trade, of the type suggested by the European Union, championed by the early Fox administration, and cautiously explored by a wide variety of academics (Earle and Wirth 1995, Vargas Suárez, Gómez Arnau and Castro Rea 2001). The events of 9/11, the escalation of reaction against Mexican migrants, and now the domestic economic crisis make the US increasingly resistant to this option. Furthermore, there is little support or motivation for Canada to seek closer US ties. The second option is a retreat of the US to a 'fortress America' that includes a wall on the Mexico/US border and the further escalation of cross-border controls and economic protectionism. The most likely future option, even with the election of Obama, is an unstable status quo driven by the cycles of US domestic politics, and calls for reform that will remain cosmetic. At best, something resembling the earlier McCain–Kennedy bi-partisan migration proposal may eventually help relieve the hardship of many of the current undocumented immigrants, without really touching on larger issues. The biggest danger is the US tendency to identify Mexican reform with a simplistic process of 'Americanization', thus reinforcing a limited (polyarchal) elitist process of democratization that has little prospect of confronting the contradictions of Mexican development (Robinson 1996).⁶ Instead, it will be argued that the contradictions within Mexico can only be confronted with a deeper process of democratization that in the longer run would create a new, more stable, and mutually rewarding foundation for Mexico–US relations.

Implications of Critical Social Theory

At the beginning of the 1980s, various alternatives to the opposition between realism (along with its neoliberal siblings) and classical humanitarian liberalism

⁶ In neo-Gramscian terms these adjustments reflect a "passive revolution" that restructures the mode of accumulation and its relation to the state; see Morton 2003.

began to emerge in international relations theory, a tendency reinforced by discussions of globalization in terms of theories of 'cosmopolitan democracy'. More recently, these more sociological alternatives to traditional liberalism have been grouped together under the heading of 'constructivist' theories of international relations. Though this term has been used rather inconsistently, it refers broadly to social theories of international relations that attempt to view the social construction of the international system much as one would analyze the construction of societies. In rejecting the classic realist assumption of international anarchy, it is argued that depending on the context, many forms of international society and community are already in existence. Such social forms have been widely discussed in relation to globalization research under the heading of such terms as global community, regional blocs, and transnational civil society. The confusing aspect of constructivism in international relations theory is that social theory itself has become defined by inter-paradigmatic differences, so there are bewildering variations among constructivist perspectives with respect to the dimensions of social inquiry.

The focus here will be on forms of constructivism associated with the often confusing label of 'critical theory'. Though largely marginalized in the elite international relations programs in the US, such discussions have been extensively developed elsewhere. Critical theory in this international relations literature has had three main associations: (1) the 'neo-Gramscian theory' of hegemony initiated in the work of Robert W. Cox; (2) the 'critical theory' initially associated with the Frankfurt School tradition but later transformed by the German theorist Jürgen Habermas and many others; and (3) the diverse 'critical' perspectives of various strands of feminist, poststructuralist, and postmodernist thinking. For the purpose at hand, the term 'critical social theory' will be used to designate an implicit alliance of approaches that is broader than the Frankfurt tradition, but not so inclusive as to directly incorporate poststructuralist and postmodern tendencies with often rather different deconstructive concerns. As social theory, such critical social theory has an empirical and explanatory dimension concerned with the historical origins of contemporary realities in the contradictions of contemporary capitalism and its relation to democracy. And it is 'critical' in the double sense of methodological (post-positivist) reflexivity in social science and addressing normative questions about values and social justice.

From the perspective of such a critical social theory, the neo-Gramscian approach to international relations and globalization can be viewed as generally complementary to the more normative and metatheoretical approaches associated with Habermas and others.⁷ The discussion will follow in the path of those who have argued that the form of critical social theory proposed by Habermas provides the most helpful general framework for incorporating the issues of agency and ethics with empirical themes of political economy and cultural hegemony introduced by the neo-Gramscians such as Robert W. Cox, as well as potentially

⁷ For an example this form of hybrid critical social theory, see Neufeld (2001).

responding to issues relating to gender, difference and Eurocentrism raised by the third position.⁸ The task of the rest of this essay will be to suggest how a critical theory of international relations and globalization might be used to inform thinking about the longer-term transformation of Mexico–US relations.

The US–Mexican Case: Two Theses on Structure and Agency

To simplify discussion, the analysis will be conceived in terms of two inter-related arguments about structure and agency. The structural argument will draw indirectly on neo-Gramscian theory and take the form of what will be called the ‘impasse thesis based on the reproduction of US/Mexican border relations’: given the current constellations of economic interests, dominant political discourses, and political regimes, there is an ongoing social reproduction of the status quo. This process will not only reinforce the internal hegemony of the dominant political classes in Mexico, it will also continue to sustain American hegemony and the suffering of those impacted by globalization from below represented by undocumented migration.

The agency argument will draw primarily upon the forms of critical social theory associated with Habermas, David Held, and others, and give particular attention to the construction of normative dialogues and forms of transnational civil-society networking that are distinct from state-centred forms of analysis. This agency argument will be referred to as ‘the transformative thesis based on envisioning some of the conditions of possibility of longer-term possibilities’ that might push the current border impasse based on American hegemony in new directions. A key aspect of this argument is that while it is grounded in awareness of the structural realities that characterize the current situation, it also attempts to take into account the possibilities that are already implicit or latent – immanent – within the existing paradigm as part of facilitating and nurturing them through social research and communicative practices.

Intersecting Hegemonies and the Impasse Thesis

Historical Introduction

The rhetoric of the NAFTA agreement has created the widespread illusion of the collaboration of three equal partners who, as modern democratic nation-states, have embarked on an immensely successful project of economic co-operation based on free trade. In this context, the Fox and Calderón administrations have embraced a policy of proactive, bi-lateral negotiation with the US that has been viewed as

⁸ For a defense of Habermasian critical social theory against Marxist critics, see Linklater (1990). Critical theory can also be adapted to include questions relating to poststructuralism, postmodernism and gender as suggested by Fuat Keyman (1997).

part of a new era of co-operation oriented toward mutual benefits (Bondi 2004). In contrast to such up-beat views, the evidence after more than a decade (to be discussed later) reveals that Mexico has in fact lost ground, especially relative to other Latin American countries. The initial argument here will be that one simply cannot understand the nature of current Mexico–US relations without taking into account the following two complicating factors beyond the divisive effects of competing nationalisms, despite a significant erosion of Mexican nationalism in its traditional forms: (1) the overwhelming bi-lateral dominance of the US within a hegemonic relation, hence the difficult negotiating position of Mexico confronted with the post-9/11 ‘homeland’ crisis of the US; and (2) how Mexican hegemonic elites have maintained political power through two sustaining two myths: an ideological interpretation of the theory of ‘democratic transition’ that concludes that the regime change defined by the end of PRI domination marks the beginning authentic democracy (as embodied in the Fox and Calderón regimes), and that NAFTA has catapulted Mexico into a new era of modernization, sustained growth, and poverty reduction, even though certain limited taxation and legal reforms are necessary (and sufficient) for consolidating this process.

US Hegemony: Irresponsible versus Visionary Power

In the case of Latin America, the historical record casts some doubt on the capacity of the US to engage in the responsible use of power, given its hegemonic aspirations (Slater 2004). Many social scientists avoid the term hegemony because of its provocative connotations and its association with the Marxist tradition, even though it is now employed by a variety of social theories. In political science, the cosmetic term ‘asymmetric interdependence’ is now often used, often evasively, instead of hegemony to describe such relations. Nevertheless, some authors may be more candid – to cite one example:

[T]his structural asymmetry has given Washington significant policy leverage over its immediate neighbours, leaving them with limited space to manoeuvre. Here the United States largely sets the policy agenda and narrows the room for autonomous policy choices. In this precarious context, Canada and Mexico are like two scared mice next to a neurotic elephant. (Andreas 2003)

From the point of view of the mice, of course, this indeed sounds a lot like an abusive hegemonic relation.

In the present context, one could point to a number of issues that are ongoing topics of official debate in Mexico–US relations in the agenda set primarily on the US side: border water rights disputes; the Plan Puebla–Panamá that would open the door to transnational capital in southern Mexico and Central America through infrastructure construction; policies toward the supposed security threats represented by Castro in Cuba and Chávez in Venezuela; and issues relating to NAFTA, border security, drug trafficking, and undocumented migration to the US.

But it is these last three – security, drugs, and migration – that are actually widely recognized as dominating the current agenda. In the post-9/11 era there has been an increasing tendency to conflate all three of these under the heading of security, raising questions about the coherence of US policy. A symptomatic result in the fall of 2007 was a Bush proposal for a US\$1.4 billion ‘Mexican Plan’ directed against drug trafficking along lines pioneered in Columbia, but delayed until the Obama administration.

South of the Border: Myths of Modernization and the Persistence of Internal Hegemony

The dilemma is that the more recent Mexican policy of co-operation and economic integration has not borne the expected results, and thus Mexico’s capacity to respond to the US agenda has been drastically reduced. Though generally denied in official circles, it is clear from its negative effects that the neoliberal model for the economic development of Mexico based on NAFTA is largely bankrupt in its current form, as has been documented by recent research. This economic failure is part of a broader vulnerability that afflicts the capacity of Mexico to deal with its dependency or – to put it more politely – ‘asymmetrical interdependence’. Three key “myths” underlie official policy and are repeated in much international journalism: (1) the myth of NAFTA as the foundation of a new economic miracle; (2) the myth of being a fully “modern” state in the sense implied by its participation in NAFTA and membership in the OECD; and (3) the myth that the election of Fox, reinforced by the subsequent election of Calderón, essentially completes or consolidates the process of democratic transition.

First, the current ‘myth of NAFTA’ obscures how the expansion of exports has been accompanied by the failure of the sustained expansion of domestic production and investment as reflected in slow expansion of employment (and actual declines in manufacturing), low and declining real wages, low R & D expenditures, extremely low technical innovation, and relatively unchanged per capita income (Nadal, Aguayo and Chávez 2003).⁹ Increases in productivity have been concentrated in the export sector and have not been associated with any general wage gains. In short, a variety of economic and social indicators give little substance to the assumption that NAFTA has contributed to sustaining high levels of growth, let alone reduced poverty and increased economic equality. Whereas the Mexican economic ‘miracle’ based on an import-substitution model generated rates of growth averaging 6.2 per cent from 1933 to 1982, during the last five years of the Fox administration growth declined to an average of around 2 per cent. In 2005 even a 3 per cent growth rate placed Mexico 14th out of 19 in Latin America (Fernández-Vega 2005). Moreover, over the past 20 years real income has declined sharply, per capita income has not increased significantly (despite a demographic revolution and the flight of millions), and income inequality has

9 For a less polemical but largely convergent assessment, see Polaski 2004.

increased with the top 10 per cent of the population receiving nearly 40 per cent of all income. Consequently, more than 61–82 per cent of the population has been declared poor by a wide variety of researchers, with 15–39 per cent widely held to be in ‘extreme poverty’ (Boltvinik 2001). Or, to put it in more concrete terms, only 11.7 per cent of wage earners earn more than 5,600 pesos per month (or about US\$430 – five times the minimum salary) (Zúñiga 2000).¹⁰ In short, the ‘middle class’ is for all practical economic purposes confined to the top 18 per cent who can usually, with combined family incomes, satisfy their basic needs as defined in terms of international standards.

Further, even more ominously, these relatively poor results are linked with an unsustainable government reliance, both directly and indirectly, on artificial and vulnerable sources of income and foreign exchange. Using figures from 2005, the economy is sustained by an unstable combination of the following:

- oil revenue (US\$32 billion, around 37 per cent of the federal budget that moved higher with the peaking of oil prices) based on reserves that are now declining rapidly;
- remittances from those working in the USA (more than 20 billion);
- tourism (11.795 billion);
- profits from drug trafficking (estimated at 13.8 billion); and
- direct foreign investment (17.8 billion) (Castellanos 2006, Castillo García 2006, González Amador, Rodríguez and González 2005).

Moreover, much of that foreign direct investment has little to do with actual expansion of production since it has been linked with the entry of American franchises in goods distribution (Walmart now controls 50 per cent of self-service business), fast food, and services (including the sale of the banking system to foreign investors at fire-sale prices and the public funding of previous massive bank debts). Similarly, the more than 20 billion in remittances (at its peak) was used primarily for direct consumption rather than investment.

In short, not only does the Mexican state already lack the capacity to tax at levels necessary for a modern state, it is confronted with a failed economic strategy and an emerging, explosive fiscal crisis that was fully revealed by the after-effect of the US economic crisis of late 2008, as well as a depreciation of the peso around 30 per cent and a recent lowering of international credit ratings. The decline of production in 2009 was 6.9 per cent – the worst in Latin America three times the average – which erased the meagre gains of the past four years (González Amador 2010). Foreign investment fell by 41 per cent and tourism by a projected 15 per cent (AFP and Reuters 2010, González 2009). Due to the decline of oil reserves and the drop in prices, there was a 40.7 per cent decline in petroleum exports,

10 This calculation was based on the assumption of a minimum wage of 56 pesos (regions vary from 54.47 to 57.46) per day in 2010, a 13 to 1 US exchange rate, and no significant change since 2000.

whereas remittances fell 16 per cent because of migrant unemployment in the US (Cardoso 2010a, Rodríguez 2010). To the extent that the war against organized crime is successful, that will also reduce foreign exchange and the stimulus of laundered money. The recent passage of the most important tax reform in 20 years – whose passage despite past divisions and business opposition reflects the urgency of the crisis – will postpone but not resolve the double crisis: falling oil reserves and revenues and the lack of a tax base necessary for a modern state. The introduction of a minimal flat tax will reduce loopholes, but not the exemptions granted to many large corporations, and it is estimated that the final version will increase government taxes by 2.3 per cent of GNP by 2012. But Mexico begins with one of the lowest rates of overall taxation (less than 11 per cent, compared to the South American average of 16 per cent and 25 per cent in advanced societies) (Malkin 2007, Méndez and Garduño 2007, OECD 2007). A tragic response to this most recent crisis, and the neoliberal orientation of the Calderón administration, has been the raising of taxes and reducing budgets in 2010, hence enhancing the cyclic downturn.

Second, despite the forms of a modern social democratic state and economy and considerable progress in institutional reform over the past two decades, Mexico is at or near the bottom of the OECD in terms of virtually every major indicator of modernization: educational achievement and participation rates; research and development; quality and distribution of medical and social services; income inequality and rates of poverty; environmental protection; corruption; freedom of the press; and crime rates and the effectiveness of the rule of law. And despite per capital production that is immensely greater than Cuba, the outcome is a ‘human development’ level that is roughly the same.

Third, the fragility of democratic consolidation is strongly reinforced by both the relative economic stagnation and the incomplete modernization just described. A series of factors reinforces the spectre of ungovernability, even if not a failed state in the strong sense: chronic rural and regional violence, including political assassinations; the infiltration of police forces by drug mafias; less powerful presidents without a legislative majority; inexperienced legislators who can only be elected for a single term; and a grossly overpaid supreme court with a dubious track record. Perhaps the most notable illustration of this fragility was the effort to use legalistic tricks in an a failed attempt to eliminate the mayor of Mexico City, López Obrador, as a PRD presidential candidate by a form of impeachment (a *desafuero*) by putting him in jail. Only international pressures and one of the largest demonstrations in the history of Mexico City forced the suspension of the trumped-up charges relating to the courts having overturned a city land expropriation measure for a hospital. Journalists are targets of rates of violence (57 murdered from 2000 through 2009) that are among the highest in the world. The state of affairs in Chiapas remains unchanged and the state of Oaxaca was brought to a standstill in the fall of 2007 by teacher strikes and occupation of the capital for months as part of demands for the resignation of the state governor. Police violence contributed to a number of deaths, culminating in federal military

intervention to quell the violence. Confrontations among drug traffickers – closely related to military intervention – have caused more than 14,000 deaths by the fall of 2009, along with a massive escalation of human rights violations that have been documented by the Human Rights Watch (Ballinas 2010). The economist and well-known commentator Rolando Cordera Campos, has summed up the current mood on the democratic left: ‘But the gravest and most ominous thing is not the lamentable state of the economy, but the ideological and moral collapse in politics and the media. Not even the most pessimistic of our political observers could have imagined the symptoms of decomposition that we have been living these days’ (Cordera Campos 2006, *my translation*).

Structural Reproduction and the Contradictions of the Status Quo: The Impasse Thesis

The current basic structure of the migration pattern – if not all of its details – is closely linked to its structural relation to the interests of the dominant economic and political elites of both the US and Mexico, which can be defined in terms of the intersection and mutual reinforcement of two structures of hegemony: the external dominance of the US over Mexico (which has not altered fundamentally with a change of administrations) and the internal hegemony within Mexico of the social classes now represented by the informal alliance between the PRI and PAN.

Bush’s shifting stance on immigration reflected a balancing effort to deflect nativist and local pressures from below, as well as respond to the elite interests that recognize the need for a flexible supply of cheap labour. At the same time, while the Mexican administrations have officially promoted open borders with respect to labour in addition to trade, this stance is not only domestically popular, but consistent with using the export of workers as a safety valve that distracts attention away from the stagnation of the domestic economy. Given these structural constraints of supply and demand, it is unlikely that a further heightening of controls, even the construction of a wall, would fundamentally alter the current situation.

Two key consequences of these relations of interdependence as a process of social trans-border social reproduction – the border impasse – need to be singled out. These consequences can be summarized as the incoherence of US policy and the impotence of Mexican responses:

First, the conflicting pressures upon US policy have created a contradictory set of policies, despite the widespread suggestion that security and migration control policies are complementary or can be paired. The neoliberal globalization agenda is problematic in the sense that the advocacy of unlimited expansion of markets and free trade is applied inconsistently by rejecting labour mobility and has disruptive social and economic effects that cannot be contained in the long run. Although the primary thrust of US policy is toward a de-bordering of the world in the name of free trade and liberalization, it is increasingly driven by security, drug, and immigration issues toward a re-bordering. Hence, there is ‘a

constitutive tension between a rebordering national security territoriality and a debordering geography of participation in open markets and trade networks', which suggests that this practice is not 'the coherent product of a properly sovereign center of policy power capable of balancing and managing diverse security and trade agendas' (Coleman 2005).¹¹ In other words, these contradictions suggest that US policies may not even reflect a realistic assessment of national interests.

Second, the currently dominant US policies are brewing a recipe for chronic crisis, given Mexican weaknesses and the impotence and contradictory effects of the resulting policy responses. For example, some more informed observers in the US, largely on the right, routinely denounce what is called the hypocrisy of the Mexican government in exporting its problems by encouraging illegal migration and in fact depending on it for political stability. From this perspective, the solution would be for Mexico to have the discipline to reform itself along lines necessary for domestic job creation through the full implementation of structural adjustment policies: for example, more flexible labour laws, the further reduction of state controls, and the privatization of the energy and electricity sectors. What these suggestions ignore is that (1) the demand for labour on the US side would not be reduced in the longer run (despite the current slowdown); (2) supply on the Mexican side would likely remain relatively unchanged, given immense levels of underemployment and the low quality of new jobs even if substantial numbers were created; and (3) that such doctrinaire neoliberal policies could not in fact be implemented democratically without major political instabilities that would be very worrisome from the perspective of official US policy. In other words, it can be argued that this militant neoliberal version of the US-sponsored prescription for a cure would likely make the patient sicker and more unstable. Though the reform of the Mexican economy and other institutions is clearly necessary, much of what would be required would involve strategies of social democratic reform that would often be perceived – often wrongly, if viewed as a longer term process – as against American interests.

In summary: given the nature of the border issues and the fragility of the Mexican economy and democratic institutions, the aggressive pursuit of what is perceived to be national interest on the part of vocal minorities in the US would most likely culminate in a massive de-stabilization that would otherwise be of the highest security priority to avoid. Paradoxically, a dogmatic 'realist' pursuit of US dominance may have the opposite of the intended effects, a result inherent in the contradiction of the project of neoliberal transnational elites.

¹¹ This incoherence is also reinforced by overlapping bureaucratic jurisdictions, as discussed in Wiarda 2000.

The Transformative Thesis: The Conditions of Possibility for Change

Agency, Dialogue and Transformative Change

With this structural contradiction produced by Mexico–US relations in mind, it is now possible to turn to the longer-run sources of agency that might contribute to transformative potentials. As Linklater has suggested, questions of agency in the context of a critical theory of international relations pose three basic considerations: an ethical universalism that extends political community to all; the necessity of post-sovereign forms of relations that can recognize the needs of the excluded; and how to develop reformist strategies for choosing to construct new forms of relations beyond the anarchy of existing international relations (Linklater 1992). Related formulations have pointed to the role of emergent forms of transnational and global civil society and expressions of cosmopolitan democracy that extend beyond the traditional nation state.¹²

In the short run, the prospect of extending principles of cosmopolitan justice to those affected on both sides of the border appear to be limited, given US dominance in what is defined as a purely bi-lateral relationship between two sovereign states. NAFTA, as primarily an economic agreement, does not provide the kind of framework for the development of transitional institutions of the kind emerging in the European Union. And aside from Mexico, the other two members have not officially expressed an interest in moving beyond economic union. In short, it is very difficult to envision exactly what any extension of cosmopolitan democracy would look like or why it would even take place, given the diverse forms of resistance.

The concluding discussion, however, will briefly take up three themes or working points that illustrate some of the possibilities for initiating and facilitating forms of discourse necessary for creating longer term alternatives: (1) recognizing and facilitating the existing bilateral civil society organizations on both sides of the border that have initiated such process of dialogue; (2) the priority that should be given to constructing more trilateral relations including Canada, as well as global dialogue on the social justice issues involved; and (3) the challenge of constructing an alternative vision of democratic transition for Mexico that is based on autonomous choices about modernization that are not merely a reflection of the narrow demands expressed through US hegemony and an obsession with security issues.

¹² On cosmopolitan democracy, see Held 1995, Held and Guibernau 2001; for global civil society, Germain and Kenny 2005.

Agency as Transnational Civil Society Networks: Facilitating Cross-Border Democracy

The first theme is that transformative possibilities already have a partial institutional form in the non-state actors in the US and Mexico that are creating new forms of agency as part of a transnational civil society. A central issue here is asking how the resources and possibilities embodied in cross-border forms of voluntary association and civil society can be mobilized to have significant effects on state actions. The broader question here is thus part of the general issue of whether and how non-state actors may draw upon communicative discourse as a form of capability (Holzscheiter 2005). In the case of the US, matters are further complicated by the mobilization of a right-wing coalition that draws upon misinformation, misguided nationalism, and anxiety – from the late Samuel Huntington in the ivory tower of Harvard to Hanson on the frontlines in California – as part of a virulent attack upon what is taken to be the ‘open border conspiracy’ (Hanson 2003, Huntington 2004).

As recent research has shown, a remarkable combination of bi-national links have emerged in the domains of both state–civil society and civil–civil society in areas such as labour, the environment, trade issue advocacy, democracy and human rights, women’s rights, and issues more specific to Chicano and Latino civil and immigrant rights (Fox 2004). Three basic types of links have been identified as having rather different characteristics: transnational networks, transnational coalitions, and transnational movement organizations. The evidence regarding the impact of such activities, however, remains mixed:

Bi-national networks and coalitions have had significant impact upon official policy discourse, but they have only rarely won tangible increases in public or private accountability ... The NAFTA-origin border environmental institutions are the main exceptions to this generalization, and their impact so far has been quite limited compared to their mandate and such coalitions must be viewed as ‘long-term investments with uncertain payoffs’ (Fox 2004: 509–510).

Nevertheless, beyond the defensive character of such forms of bi-national communications, in the future they will also contribute to unprecedented forms of cross-cultural dialogue that governments cannot ignore.

Injustice and the Social Costs of Globalization from Below: Globalizing Transnational Dialogue

The second theme suggests that priority should be given to the importance of reconstructing a more trilateral and global dialogue on the undocumented migrant question and related issues. This strategy requires going beyond the existing bi-lateral civil society networks. Under conditions of hegemony and asymmetry, a more global space of debate becomes necessary as a check on the dominant

partner, as well as on the governments in power. Otherwise transnational cooperation at the elite level may reflect manipulative skills and access to resources more than broadly-based representation. For example, previous contact between ‘transnational’ Mexican and US intellectuals has, in its more recent phases, been dominated by elites closely linked with official power stemming from the Salinas government’s successful selling of the NAFTA idea to largely conservative intellectuals in the US. In the context of NAFTA, Canada has a potentially constructive mediating role to play as part of a trilateral dialogue.

In some respects, a model for such possibilities already exists in the case of the international attention that was given to the Zapatista movement, thus creating significant constraints upon the options of the Mexican government at crucial turning points (see Johnston 2000). The Zapatista movement is distinctive precisely because of the participation of European civil society networks, including discussions that reached the level of the European Union and Italy in particular. Unlike the Chiapas case, however, the question of undocumented migration does not lend itself to romanticization as a ‘postmodern revolution’ by indigenous peoples – as was especially the case in Europe – even though ironically Indigenous people from Chiapas and other states are increasingly contributing to the migrant stream. Nevertheless, the border issues provide a dramatic focal point for understanding the contradictions of neoliberal globalization and the human costs of escalating surveillance and enforcing the repatriation of migrants. Constructing a more global debate around these issues, hence highlighting the reality of economic refugees who have been abandoned by both their home and host countries, would require the extensive expansion of complementary efforts by a number of international agencies, NGOs, transnational civil society groups, journalists, and academics. Within this process both governmental and non-governmental relations might suggest agendas that go beyond the current NAFTA agreement.

An important question is also whether such a debate could be constructed without falling into the rhetorical pitfalls of what could be perceived to be an essentializing anti-Americanism, as opposed to a well-grounded critique of policies that have been created by diverse groups and ideological perspectives. What is required is recognizing the social costs on both sides of the border and for those communities that unequally bear the burden of dealing with the social upheavals resulting from ‘globalization from below’. As well, such international discussion could force the US to be confronted by the reality of the general effects of its own economic mismanagement and deepening levels of social and economic inequality. In other words, the resentments caused by undocumented migrants are closely linked to these larger problems. The larger interests of the other US of the working poor are ideologically disguised by using internal ethnic and racial divisions as part of the classic divide and rule strategies that deflect attention from the underlying reality: steeply declining rates of mobility, static or declining real incomes for the majority, and the rapid expansion of incomes and accumulation of wealth at the highest levels (Krugman 2004). To be sure, the mortgage debt

crisis and stock market collapse of late 2008 was a wake-up call, but it remains to be seen whether the Obama administration can confront these issues adequately.

Though it is easy to frame the ideological underpinnings of immigration debates in terms of a pro-migrant stance as egalitarian and progressive and the anti-immigration one as racist and xenophobic, the issues are more complicated than that. Much of the support for tightened controls derives from confusion resulting from the right's capacity to define the problem through the media and a sense of lack of alternatives. The US has reasonably well-developed institutions for facilitating social inclusion and a strong tradition of pluralism, but these are overburdened and under attack from the right. Perhaps a good indicator of this complexity is the surprisingly high percentage of Americans of Mexican origin who also support tighter immigration controls, largely out of desperation and fear for their own communities (Vila 2000).

Though Octavio Paz late in his career was plagued by an inadequately differentiated attack on the left that impeded dialogue, his overall vision of the contradictions of US–Mexico relations remains prescient. As he noted some time ago, the greatest threats to the US are not external:

[T] mortal danger comes from within ... from that mixture of arrogance and opportunism, blindness and short-term Machiavellianism, volubility and stubbornness which has characterized its foreign policies during recent years ... To conquer its enemies, the United States must first conquer itself – return to its origins. Not to repeat them but to rectify them: the ‘others’ – the minorities inside as well as the marginal countries and nations outside – do exist ... each marginal society, poor though it may be, represents a unique and previous version of mankind. If the United States is to recover fortitude and lucidity, it must recover itself, and to recover itself it must recover the ‘other’ – the outcasts of the Western World. (Paz 1979)

Agency as Autonomous Empowerment: Mexican Modernization as Democratization

As a third alternative theme, as part of a longer term response, it is also necessary to recognize the strategic importance of democratization and economic reform within Mexico as a crucial component of escaping from the current impasse. Genuine partnership cannot be negotiated from a position of weakness. Here the question of agency shifts to the context of a form of collective empowerment as a process of democratization that might allow Mexico to negotiate its global interdependence on terms consistent with its contradictory past and distinctive needs as a society undergoing a complex process of democratic consolidation. Again, Paz's earlier diagnosis of the Mexican crisis remains cogent, even if he lost sight of the necessary political consequences of his own insights toward the end of his life. As he often re-iterated, the challenge to Mexico is to deal with

modernization on its own terms, consistent with its past: ‘To avoid new disasters, we Mexicans must reconcile ourselves with our past: only in this way shall we succeed in finding a route to modernity’ (Paz 1979, 272).

The issue of Mexican reform is not primarily the superficial economic goal of providing a few more low quality jobs through the further Americanization of the economy as imagined by the right in the US and the Salinas regime and its sequels. The continuing failure of Mexico's NAFTA strategy suggests the need for recognizing the strategic importance of a transformation of Mexico that can retain some autonomy from the hegemonic pressures of US dominance and the uncritical application of US models for reform. What is required is a greater diversification of models for change of the kind signalled by a trade agreement with the European Union involving conditions relating to democracy and human rights,¹³ and alternative Latin American models, such as Lula in Brazil, that embody the opening up of new spaces of democratic participation and economic autonomy (Avritzer 2002).

This challenge is now widely recognized, despite routine denial on the part of the two dominant parties (PAN and PRI). There now exists an extensive Mexican journalistic and academic literature on the challenges of a democratic consolidation that includes a new vision of democracy and economic development despite the immense obstacles. As the writer and public intellectual Carlos Monsiváis has stressed, the first step in this process is coming to terms with the exhaustion of the older ideology of post-revolutionary ‘nationalism’ and the infatuation with neoliberal models of ‘modernization’. As he notes, the Zapatista rebellion signalled the end to such illusions:

Before the rebellion in Chiapas, the key word in Mexico was ‘modernization,’ the illusion of the First World around the corner: ‘Happiness is here again for the first time.’ ‘Modernization’ took the place of nationalism, the old-time ‘act’ that united all sectors through festivity, mythology. And Chiapas, I think was powerful in destroying, first, the mirage of ‘modernity’ and, second, that kind of nationalist mythology ... We had really lived in a world of make-believe. For the first time we asked: How was it possible that we could live in the Noah's ark of the happy few, and that we could overlook the existence of ten million Indians ... If you have an unequal nation – 80% of the Mexican population lives in either poverty or misery – you can't have modernization and can't trust nationalism. And that's what Chiapas helped us discover. (Monsiváis and Thelen 1999)

The construction of an expanded democratic public sphere that might engage *México profundo* (‘deep Mexico’) has tentative beginnings: a notable expansion

13 Significantly, Mexico's recent trade agreement with the European Union includes conditional clauses relating to democracy and human rights. See Syzmanski and Smith 2005. Similarly, the US Senate has made reducing military abuses of human rights in the drug war a condition of security assistance, though there will likely be no serious follow up.

of civil society networks and indigenous autonomy movements; a credible left-of-centre PRD presidential candidate (López Obrador) in the 2006 election who was narrowly defeated by probable electoral fraud, a well co-ordinated politics of fear and the abusive use of presidential power by the outgoing leader Fox; and the new extra-parliamentary spaces opened up by *la otra campaña* of Marcos (now *Delegado Cero*) and the Zapatistas. Nevertheless, the obstacles cannot be minimized. Above all, the internal divisions in the PRD and the related resurgence of the PRI and the lack of fundamental difference between PRI and PAN have created an electoral political stalemate that ensures the ritualistic maintenance of the status quo for the foreseeable future. What is required is an unprecedented form of social reconstruction and democratization that Mexico cannot undertake without global input and support. This task goes beyond the purely political in order to confront the tasks of creating new forms of 'social density' in local and intermediate groups (most concretely embodied in civil society and social movements) (Olvera 2004, Olvera 1999, Otero 2004). For example, the problem of corruption is not merely a matter of the political will to crack down on individuals or visible mafias in a social order in which family survival has long depended on forms of clientelism that function as the only alternatives to the weak rule of law and the lack of equal opportunities. As a result of a deformed process of what might be called 'patrimonial modernization' and the manipulation of popular fears of disorder, Mexico has been ravaged by a parasitic state, the dominance of patrimonial elites and brutal market forces, and the result is in what sociologist Sergio Zermeño has called '*la desmodernidad mexicana*' (Zermeño 2005). Consequently, transformative change must also address how the forms of subjectivity arising from patrimonial domination are the site, even among the oppressed, of what Norbert Lechner has called the 'interior patios of power' that facilitate the reproduction of autocratic authority and social domination (Lechner 1990).¹⁴ To conclude, as Paz might have put it, both the US and Mexico must recover themselves historically and democratically before they can authentically engage each other, given their deepening misunderstandings as tragically estranged distant neighbours in a new transnational world.

Part VII Conclusions

14 The Mexican anthropologist Rossana Reguillo has provocatively explored Lechner's notion of the "authoritative appropriation of fear" in relation to the fragmentation experienced by youth cultures in Mexico and Latin America; in English, see Reguillo 2004.

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