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Mexico at the Cross Roads [1]

“Poor Mexico“ the nation’s nineteenth century dictator Porfirio Díaz supposedly remarked, “so far from God and so close to the United States!” His lament continues to strike a chord today. Mexico remains fundamentally connected to its neighbor to the North both by economic and cultural ties. A substantial number of Mexicans work in the United States and the remittances that they send home play a significant role in the Mexican economy. American brands and popular culture are everywhere in Mexico. Hollywood films are released simultaneously here and in the USA, and the country is considered a prime market. Mexican TV also screens plenty of American material. The billboards of Mexico City are advertising 90210 and Gossip Girl just like the billboards in LA. For this reason a trip to Mexico to discuss issues of Soft Power, cultural and public diplomacy inevitably raises issues about the United States and its regional image. It was not always easy listening.

I traveled to Mexico City in November 2008 to take part in a conference on public and cultural diplomacy at the Matías Romero Institute – the think tank and diplomatic academy attached to the SRE (Mexico’s foreign ministry). The conference organizer – Mexican cultural diplomacy scholar, César Villanueva – also arranged for me to speak to his international relations class at the Universidad Iberoamericana, and to meet with some of the scholars working on issues of public diplomacy. It was my first visit to Mexico, and besides the intellectual engagement with the PD issues raised it was a delight to eat real Mexican food, see some of the Aztec and colonial sights, and get to know some of the art history of the country, including the amazing muralists and the ubiquitous, macabre images of mortality which so transfixed British literary visitors like Graham Greene, D.H. Lawrence, and Malcolm Lowery. It was a powerful experience just to walk though the pulsing Mexico City streets, to see the diversity of Mexican faces, and to recognize in them the profiles I recognized from Aztec and Mayan sculpture and textbook reproductions of Diego Rivera paintings. Like the first time I looked from an Italian train window and realized that the Tuscan landscape really does feature the impossibly precipitous hills and wind stunted trees, I had an exhilarating feeling of the sudden collapse of the distance between art and reality. I am here and it is all real.

While I had come to talk about the history of American public diplomacy many of my discussions came back to the question of Mexico’s place in the world and the best strategy and themes for its future public diplomacy. I asked the students at Iberoamericana what they thought could be a source of Mexican soft power. They came back with “our friendliness,” ”Corona Beer,” ”our painters,” ”our cuisine” and then ran out of steam. Our other discussions raised such names as the great comic actor Cantinflas and contemporary star, Salma Hayek. Frida Kahlo was not favored as Mexican aficionados consider her a creation of the New York art market. Linguistic associations with the country are little help in expanding the list and rather serve to illustrate the problem. British English conjugates the term Mexican with an odd array of concepts. There is the Mexican Wave (aka the Stadium Wave which came to attention in the 1986 soccer world cup), the Mexican Standoff (that action film clique in which three or more antagonists are locked in a stalemate with weapons drawn), and the self-

propelled seed-pod so beloved of school children: the Mexican Jumping Bean.

The question of Mexico's soft power was not raised idly. Mexico has imminent cause to court international attention and consider its place in the world. 2010 will be both the bicentenary of Mexico's revolution against Spain in 1810 and the centenary of the outbreak of its twentieth century revolution in 1910. The country could use the opportunity to present more of the same, reprising the blockbuster exhibitions themed around the Aztecs or the great Mexican painters that have been staples of its recent cultural diplomacy, or it could reach for a more dynamic image.

This was my response: Mexico is too often seen as a place on the periphery, marginal to America's world, but it could easily be re-imagined in its public and cultural diplomacy as a crossroads: a center. The idea fits the pre-Hispanic identity of Mexico City and its great temple as the "navel of the world," but it also speaks to the reality of Mexican life as a crossroads: a magnificent collision of Europe and the indigenous Americas and of North America with the South. This is everywhere in Mexico: in the architecture, the art, the cuisine, and the faces of the people. It is the story behind the preferred highlights of Mexican cultural diplomacy. The crossroads need not be a mere intersection, destined to be walked over. In many traditions it is a place of magical power where heaven, earth, and the underworld collide. The crossroads of Mexico City is the vast square called the zócalo – a word meaning pedestal – which César tells me referred to the presence of an old plinth which had originally belonged to the equestrian statue of the Spanish King Charles IV by Manuel Tolsa. The plinth remained incongruously in the center on the vast plaza some years after the sculpture was relocated for political reasons. It is now the standard Mexican term for any town square. One could imagine a zócalo strategy in Mexico's public diplomacy – presenting the nation as a meeting place – a zone of multi-directional exchange for the nations which converge at this point, and reaching out in this spirit as an intermediary, teaching Latin American Spanish, facilitating the cross translation of literature, and acting as a broker between neighbors and more distant nations. Mexico's experience in issues of democratization and transition from dictatorship, immigration and diaspora, economic development, and the management of diversity will all resonate internationally. No nation has definitive answers on any of these issues, but sharing works in progress would be mutually beneficial.

But for every discussion of the image of Mexico there was the matter of the image of the United States. There was plain resentment of the hard power of American cash that pulls Mexicans north in search of work, and the soft power of American culture that holds many Mexicans in its thrall. My host lamented that a million Mexicans attended a Disney parade in the early 2000s while a scant few thousand turned out to mark the 40th anniversary of the massacre of students by the dictatorship in October 1968. The students I met spoke readily of a love/hate relationship with the United States, but the part they and the other Mexicans I spoke to hated was not what one usually finds. Many nations – and many Americans – assume that their government is hated while the people are loved. The Mexican situation seems to be rather different. The people I spoke with admired the American political system and its values of free speech, and all were delighted by the election of Obama. Their objection was to certain American people. Disturbingly, the object of their disdain was not the brash elderly "Ugly American" tourist so loathed in Europe for lurid checked pants, multi-decibel conversation, and eternal condescension: "Oh your little country is so cute." Their pet hate was young people: the spring breakers who descend on Mexican resorts in American waves each year, and indulge in everything forbidden at home, often in excess and in public. It was plain that any attempt to rebuild the image of the United States in Mexico will require some attempt to address this issue. If Mexico does brand itself as the zócalo, and invites the United

States along to participate in the great conversation – please ensure that the younger members of the American delegation are sober.