

The rise of Donald Trump shows the need for a deeper understanding of the US in Mexico and elsewhere.

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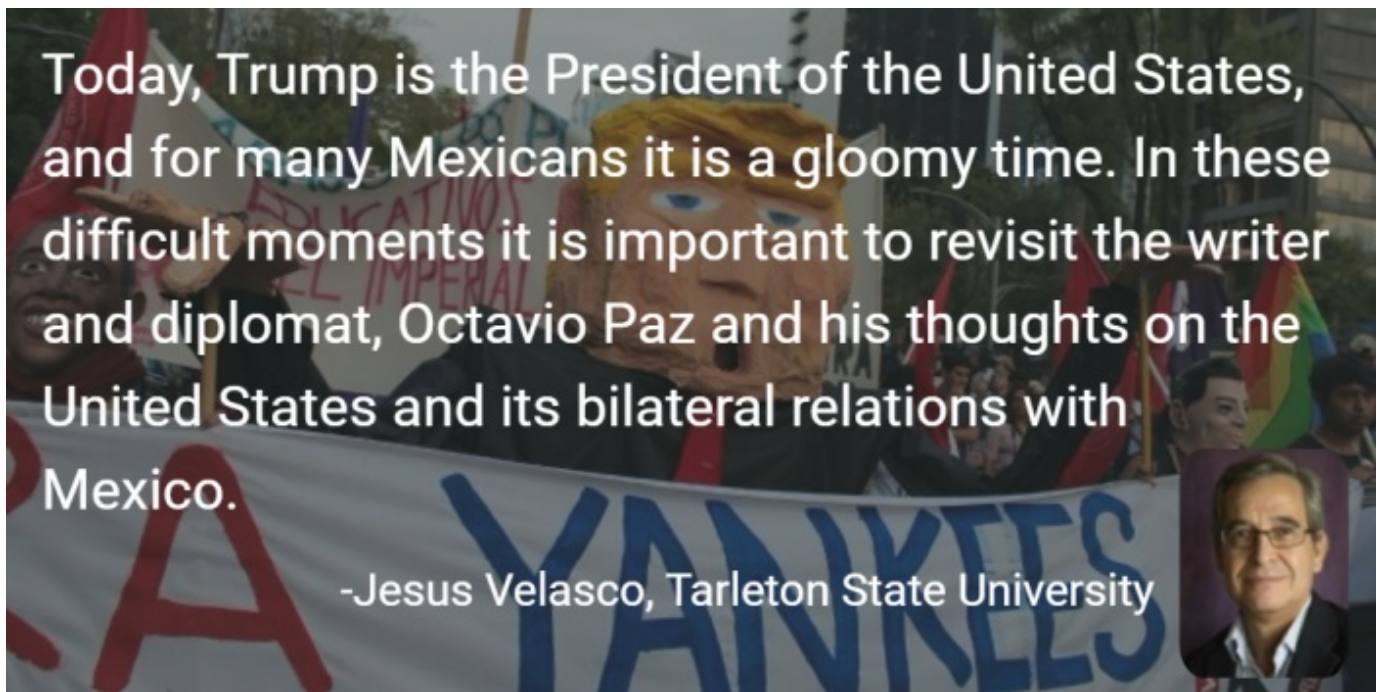
*Recent weeks have seen tensions between Mexico and the United States increase to a point not seen since the Mexican revolution. **Jesus Velasco** writes that these tensions mean that we should revisit the works of Mexican writer and diplomat, Octavio Paz, who argued that the main threat for America was its disavowal of the “other” which could lead to the election of an authoritarian demagogue. Now, he says, those in Mexico and elsewhere need to better understand the US and its full complexity in order to determine the best way to deal with Donald Trump and what he represents.*



The last year and a half has been a complicated time for US-Mexican relations. Donald Trump’s campaign and his recent election as president of the United States have terrified Mexican journalists, intellectuals, and politicians. The Pena Nieto administration did not know how to react to Trump’s ascendance to power. Incredulity, inaction, doubt, controversial decisions, and a difficulty in forming sensible strategies that do conflict with Mexican interests have been the hallmarks of the current Mexican government. Today, Trump is the President of the United States, and for many Mexicans it is a gloomy time. In these difficult moments it is important to revisit the writer and diplomat, Octavio Paz and his thoughts on the United States and its bilateral relations with Mexico. Reviewing his work could help us better understand the situation the United States is currently facing and the nature of the political atmosphere we find ourselves in. Revisiting his writings would also benefit Mexico and its government in promoting more diverse thought about America.

Octavio Paz was a life-long observer of the United States. Like many international scholars, he noted the duality of America. He was a profound admirer of the US, expressing at the same time his distaste for it. Writing in the mid-1980s, he described problems that still resonate with American politics today. The United States was “at once an empire and a democracy,” and for Paz, that profound contradiction went to the core of the American existence, creating a conflict of identity and an inherent struggle in deciding its future. Paz’s view was that if the US “chooses a truly imperial destiny, it will cease to be a democracy and will thereby lose its reason for being a nation. But how to renounce power without being immediately destroyed by its rival, the Russian Empire?” That was a major question. Nonetheless, it was imperative to Paz that America solve this contradiction because “at stake are [American] life and identity.”

Paz was deeply concerned in those years about social and economic inequalities in the US and about a society divided by the “clash of tremendously selfish interests.” Though Paz was living at the time when American political polarization was not near as profound as it is today, he was able to foresee that the “malady of democracy is disunity, mother of demagogism.” He thought that American democracy had shown its vitality and viability in science, technology and the arts, but its politics have been “so overwhelmingly mediocre, [because of] the lack of good judgment.”



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-Jesus Velasco, Tarleton State University

Paz asserted that, in its domestic and foreign policy alike, the United States has always disavowed the “other.” Paz’s proverbial other regarded those different in any capacity from the socially constructed view of America and Americans. This grew to include minorities and other nations around the world. This disdain for the other, Paz argued, was detrimental to American politics and undermined American identity. From his perspective the others were essential. The others were the majority of the population around the world and were prominent people, independent of their wealth or status. The others were essential because they simply represented a “precious version of mankind.” The main threat for America then was not international but national, as the segregating rhetoric threatened an internal rift. The true, internal enemy was America’s “mixture of arrogance and opportunism, blindness and short-term Machiavellianism, volubility and stubbornness which has characterized its foreign policy during recent years. “

In those yesteryears, Paz observed significant aspects of American politics that are not only prevalent today but were emphatically displayed in the 2016 presidential election. The United States, according to him, has free elections and a high regard for the institution of democracy; however, “the will of the majority is not synonymous of wisdom.” He judged that democracies run a big risk, that of electing an authoritarian president or prime minister. Therefore, wisdom was an essential component of democracy, as noted by Paz. It was a fundamental ingredient of a healthy and respectable democracy. Wisdom, in a nutshell, is the only antidote to the onslaught of dictators in the ballot boxes.

Paz’s solution to American democratic problems was to return to the past, and they are certainly applicable to today. First, the United States has to recuperate its unity, which today seems idealistic and complex. Second, America needs to return to “the origins, to the foundation of the nation. To recuperate the vision of its founders, not to copy them, but to make a new beginning.”

Finally, Paz sustained that the Mexican idea about the “United States is contradictory, emotional, and impervious to criticism; it is a mythic image.” He argued that American intellectuals and society in general have made the same mistake. With few exceptions, Paz averred, the United States has misunderstood Mexico. “In general, Americans have not looked for Mexico in Mexico; they have looked for their obsessions, enthusiasms, phobias, hopes, interests—and this is what they have found.” Of course, he recognized the important historical differences and trajectories that have made Mexico and the United States “two distinct versions of Western civilization.”

More than thirty years ago, Paz offered a diagnostic about the United States, the strengths and weaknesses of

American politics, and democracy itself. His view is still relevant today. He saw profound contradictions, serious inequalities, and a reluctance to learn about and acknowledge the “others.” Paz found America to be a country full of prejudices. But he also found it a place of great virtues, a vibrant democracy, and, I would say, of strong political civility. He saw America as a complex country, a nation that does not falter to simplistic interpretation because one-dimensional views tend to confuse rather than clarify. Simplistic perspectives provoke misperception and antagonisms and rarely further understanding. He recognized the need for knowledge and wisdom in regards to other countries and minorities. Now, it would be appropriate to better try to understand the US, as Paz did, rather than to label it and its leaders. If we do that, if we really appreciate it in its full complexity, maybe we will be able to better understand Donald Trump and what he embodies. Perhaps then we will be able to figure out the best way to deal with the forty-fifth president of the United States. In doing so, Mexico will not only be able to make better-informed decisions, enriching its foreign policy, but will also teach its northern neighbors how important is to fully understand the other.

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