

## Mexican Freedom: The Ideal Of The Indigenous State

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### I. New World Idealism

In spite of differing histories, Canada, Mexico and the U.S. share a common North American spirit whose instinct is profoundly post-European. Defining this spirit is no easy task if for no other reason than that the political formation of North America must still be regarded a work in progress.<sup>1</sup> What unites its three principal societies philosophically is the legacy of the political idealism which originally inspired European settlement in the Americas. This idealism was not, of course, sketched against an historical tabula rasa; colonization took place in a time of profound division and confrontation: the 16th century European struggle between an emergent modernism and the forces of conservative Christian institutionalism - 'Catholicism'.

Settlement in the New World was in large measure in response to this struggle. The inspiration that fired the imagination of the early colonists was not merely materialistic - the lure of new wealth or a desire to escape the persecutions of the time. It was also distinctly political: the prospect of beginning anew in pristine territories as providing the site and opportunity for a radical overcoming of the crisis brought on by the Reformation; the founding of an entirely new kind of polity specifically conceived as transcending the old order of a decaying Europe.

How the various colonial powers conceived and pursued this hope of the New World were accordingly profoundly different. Chiefly schooled in the Reformation, the English colonists saw America as an opportunity for religious freedom and the reinvention of society on individualist principles of moral and practical self-making. The Spanish arrived with an utterly contrary intent: America was to provide the site for a New Spain, a reconstruction of Roman Christendom on a grander, more permanent scale. French settlement would straddle these extremes; partly there is devotion to a New World independence, partly also a lingering loyalty to monarchical traditions.

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<sup>1</sup> The 'twilight' of European political culture in his own time and the emigration of the *Weltgeist* to America and elsewhere, is the pivotal event animating Hegel's account of modern history: see *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Pt. IV, 'The German World'; and *Philosophy of Right* Ss.358-360.

In these differing motifs can be discerned the germ of North America's three main political societies, the United State, Mexico and Canada. While the English arrived lightly clad in a thoroughly internalized protestant-Christian heritage, the Spanish would transport the whole bag and baggage of renaissance Catholicism bodily across the ocean with a view to perfecting there what irreconcilable divisions had prevented in Europe. In barely a century they managed to transubstantiated the whole world of Counter-Reformation Spain, tenet by tenet, institution by institution, stone by stone, to the Americas, imposing an aggressively neo-mediaeval culture, deliberately frozen in time, on the indigenous population. They thereby transfigured a whole diverse continent of peoples, bringing it under a single cultural regime: a 'Spanish America'<sup>2</sup> which in essential ways was to endure virtually unaltered for three hundred years. Even today, visitors with a conventional view of early America as peopled by pioneers paddling canoes and living in hand-hewn houses are astounded to discover everywhere in Spanish America renaissance cities and towns, intact and entire, dating from the era of Guy, Cartier and the *Mayflower*.

This profound diversity of colonial legacies has made the experience of what it means to be North American something very different for Mexicans than for Americans or Canadians. In those latter countries, liberal individualism and pluralism have become second nature whereas, in spite of an equally strong sense of themselves as a New World people, three centuries of Spanish contra-modernism have fixed a decidedly anti-liberal bias in the Mexican soul. If citizens of the U.S. are notoriously unable to imagine there could be any other version of the American Dream than their own - how anyone else, indeed, is properly to be called 'an American' - the truth is a Mexican version of that dream does exist, and, though less distinctly, a Canadian one too.<sup>3</sup>

Consideration of these differences in the forms of New World idealism as they have worked themselves out constitutionally in the histories of the three countries, might foster fuller insight into what North American freedom itself is, and in a sense wider than the typical U.S. stereotype allows. What follows is a brief and speculative attempt to compare the sense that political freedom has in the three principal cultures with the chief focus on the constitutional legacy of Mexico. As that legacy only begins, with NAFTA, to be somewhat appreciated in the rest of North America, a very brief sketch of it is herewith undertaken before returning to the main discussion.

## II. A Brief Constitutional History

To observe with historians that Mexico was conquered rather than colonized is more than to note that the Spanish, unlike the settlers farther north, encountered a vast

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<sup>2</sup> The now more common term 'Latin' America was the 19<sup>th</sup> century brainchild of Louis-Napoléon who sought to promote a French-dominated world-imperial alliance of the French and Spanish ('Latin') peoples

<sup>3</sup> As the formal name of the Mexican state is 'United States of Mexico', any reference to 'the United States' is rendered technically ambiguous. Hence the American habit of using 'Americans' and 'America' to refer exclusively to themselves and their country has been acquiesced in throughout.

indigenous empire in their path. Beyond that contingency is the fact that their ruling ambition was not at all fueled by philosophical notions of founding a new kind of society but of extending and consolidating an already existing one. The ideal of a 'New Spain' was directly and explicitly inspired by the anti-modernist politics of the Counter-Reformation,<sup>4</sup> and this meant that the whole approach of the Spanish to the new lands was from the first conquistadorial, not colonial.

The temptation to view the history of Mexico as following a pattern similar to the rest of North America must thus be resisted. Not only was the pre-colonial situation very different - 'Mexico' as a highly organized aboriginal empire already existed - but early European settlement had a very different thrust and result, as did the subsequent drive to independence and revolution. Before Cortés, the Aztecs or Mexicas had established their violent militaristic hegemony over an immense cluster of Indian city-states. At a single stroke the Conquistadors brought this vast empire to ruin, imposing upon it another no less violent, the Vice-Royalty of New Spain. The 19th century movement to independence, in turn, sought to graft a modern state on the unyielding remnant of New Spain.

This succession of regimes followed a fatal logic of superimposition whereby one regime, though overmastering its predecessor, proves unable to assimilate it. Its political spirit broken, the vanquished culture survives nonetheless as a moribund fossil-bed into which the newly dominant one attempts to put down roots in vain. A dynamic of unsublimated repression has ensured that every Spanish attempt to quash the native cultures of Mexico has failed, as have revolutionary-modern attempts to exorcize the spectre of Spanish colonialism. Never able to draw upon a pre-existing popular spirit, government in Mexico has ever been possible only through a policy of sustained domination - the 'institutionalization' of authoritarian power<sup>5</sup> - and the history of Mexico has thus been a series of convulsions rather than a continuous unfolding. The Mexico of today is the product of three successive, discontinuous political cultures, Mexican, Spanish and Modern, grafted upon one another.<sup>6</sup>

As Mexico's pre-eminent political philosopher, Octavio Paz, has put it, the ruling principle of the Mexican polity is pyramidal, not historical: a crude layering of distinct legacies upon one another.<sup>7</sup> Basal political instincts remain native, not only in that the main population remains mostly *indio* and a substantial residue of material aboriginal

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<sup>4</sup> This is consistent with the views of Mexico's preeminent cultural historian, Octavio Paz, to be discussed later. Hegel also makes the point in *Philosophy of World History* p.166ff.

<sup>5</sup> The notorious proclivity for and acceptance of authoritarian power is no 'genetic' Mexican trait, as some would claim, but belongs to a distinctive political legacy. Even later liberal and revolutionary governments, contrary to their express ideologies, could maintain themselves only as authoritarian regimes.

<sup>6</sup> See Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz*, (tr. Peden, Cambridge, 1988) pp. 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> Paz finds in the pyramid a universal metaphor for Mexico: at once topographical, cultural, psychological, theological and political. The county rises up from the sea, plateau by plateau. Nature's pyramids (the ubiquitous mesas) are match by man-made ones everywhere dotting the plains. The pyramid also symbolizes the hierarchical divine-earthly order of indigenous nature-theology, mirrored in a political culture and everyday mentality equally rigid and hierarchical. See Octavio Paz, "Critique of the Pyramid" in *The Other Mexico* (New York, 1972).

culture survives, but in that the authoritarian mentality of the old Aztec order still dominates in public and private life.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to a romanticism which depicts pre-Columbian societies as instinctively harmonious and democratic, free of the aggressiveness which European invaders are supposed to have introduced, the actual temper of the Mayan and Mexican regimes was in fact extremely fierce. Order, security and prosperity were maintained through state-instituted violence and fear, including a commitment to constant warfare, ceremonial sacrifice and the cannibalizing of victims. Paz contrasts the theo-political outlook of the old Aztec nature-state with modern notions of polity:

The Aztec theocratic dictum is: 'the god is us', not the democratic 'we the people are god'. Divinity is incarnate in society and imposes upon it inhuman tasks, such as human sacrifice. The 'Aztec peace' is the absolute converse of democracy.<sup>9</sup>

Such a cosmo-theological view of the foundations of community is, Paz believes, the distinctive trait, not only of the ancient Nahuas and Mexicas, but of all American Indians. Its fundamental metaphor is autocracy, not democracy; hierarchy, not community; the pyramid, not the level playing field. From it springs a fascination with power in all its forms still current and strong among Mexicans, who generally accept its abuses as the inevitable price of maintaining public unity, security and prosperity. Contemporary Mexican pundits regularly cite this persistent national obsession with power, and passive acquiescence before it, as the most formidable of obstacles to the emergence of true democratic culture in that country.

In the great Counter-Reformational struggle against nascent modernity, Spain had become the principal defender of the old order, perceiving as its sacred mission the rejuvenation of Roman Christendom, to be led by a coalition of monarchy and clergy. In 1521, the year Luther was called to account before the Diet of Worms, Hernandez Cortés with but a few hundred soldiers defeated a Mexican standing army among the largest in existence at the time.<sup>10</sup> Confronting him was no mere tribal coalition, but the legions of a vast, unified and centrally administered empire considerably larger than most European states at the time and whose fabulous capital, Tenochtitlan, was the fourth largest city in the world. Upon the carcass of this vanquished empire Cortés erected a regime no less fiercely aristocratic, reenforced by an ascetic religiosity no less fanatical than that of the blood-soaked Aztec priests.

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<sup>8</sup> A weakness for rule by *caudillo*, the authoritarian strongman, seems indelible in the Mexican character. 'Caciqueism' is a term routinely employed by Mexican pundits to describe this notorious Mexican susceptibility, the '*caciques*' being the elite class of warrior chiefs who formed the Aztec emperor's mainstay.

<sup>9</sup> *Other Mexico*, p. 305. The Aztecs thought the survival of their state depended on ensuring the continuation of the current cosmic era, the rule of the 'fifth sun'. Success or failure of their military enterprises demanded daily ritual feeding, by human sacrifice, of "the insatiable appetite of this solar-political divinity".

<sup>10</sup> The classical account is that of a contemporary chronicler, Bernal Diaz, an officer in Cortés' tiny army: *The Conquest of New Spain* (London, Penguin, 1963).

Carried out with brutal resolve and in astonishingly short order, the Hispanification of Mexico was an abrupt displacement of a pagan nature-theocracy by a Christian feudalism no less implacably authoritarian, hierarchical and superstitious. Far from seeking to redeem the culture they had overwhelmed, the Spanish set out to suppress it with an infamous zealous cruelty. Reduced to spiritual and political serfdom,<sup>11</sup> the Mexicans and their culture were eclipsed; shedding no light on each other, the two cultures endured in a mutually calamitous master-slave relationship for almost four centuries.

The ideals which created New England and New Spain were thus more than different; they were in some ways antithetical. Each sought to incarnate and complete in the Americas a new kind of political society that would embody the ideal outcome of the great conflict dividing Europe, as seen from one side or the other. Thus the one would seek to found a brave new world of enlightened individualism, the other a renewed Christendom based on neo-medieval orthodoxy. Stretching from Florida to California and Nevada to Guatemala, the empire of New Spain dwarfed the northern colonies in every respect. Within decades Spain was literally reconstituted in America; its art, its architecture, its feudalism, its monarchy, its holy orders, its ecclesiastical hierarchy, its theology-dominated universities, its inquisition. An imperial viceregal government pursued policies intent upon nullifying every tendency toward moral, social or intellectual change - toward 'modernity'. It would instead deliberately establish a rigid Christian-theocratic order of life perpetuated with a thoroughness consistent with the declared belief that the Christian millennium had already arrived and had rendered all further history superfluous.

This is how Paz describes the spiritual standpoint of this remarkable project:

Criticism hardly existed in this closed and satisfied world. The principles that ruled society were immutable and untouchable. Spain no longer invented or discovered; she extended her rule, defended herself, enjoyed herself. She did not want to change; she wanted to endure... The colonial world was a projection of society that had already grown mature and stable in Europe. New Spain did not seek or invent; it applied and adapted...the 'grandeur of Mexico' was that of an immobile sun, a premature noonday that no longer had anything to conquer except its own decay...

Religious speculation had ended centuries before. Doctrine had been established and an attempt was made to live up to it.... The decadence of European Catholicism coincided with its apogee in Spanish America: it spread out over new lands at the very moment it had ceased to be creative. The fervour...of Mexican religious feeling contrasts with the poverty of its creations... We [Mexicans] do not have a great religious poetry, just as we

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<sup>11</sup> Only later did the Jesuits pursue a policy of reconciliation of sorts, by forcing upon native mythology the interpretation of it as a form of primitive or pre-Christian Christianity. They were thus largely responsible for the peculiar amalgam which is conventional Mexican Catholicism.

do not have an original philosophy nor a single important mystic or reformer.<sup>12</sup>

For three hundred years a colonial priesthood fastidiously maintained total censorship of the scientific, philosophical and political literature of modernity. Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, the most celebrated Spanish-American poet and scholar at the close of the 17th century, betrays in her own writings or in the records of her vast library not a sign of even the most cursory acquaintance with the ideas of Descartes, Newton or Gassendi, much less of her actual contemporaries, Locke and Leibniz. For her and for her generation, intellectual history was brought to an abrupt halt with Aquinas and Suárez. In Paz' account:

New Spain was a society oriented toward opposing modernity, not achieving it... The Counter-Reformation presented itself as an answer to Protestantism and as a moral and intellectual renewal of the Catholic Church. Its not inconsiderable first fruits were sublime works of poetry, painting, music, sculpture, architecture... but based on its very suppositions, the movement was destined to ossify.

If any society has merited the designation 'closed society'...[it] was the Spanish empire. Defensive by nature, the monarchy and clergy constructed walls, sealed windows, and closed all doors with a double chain and padlock... The intellectual history of orthodoxies -- whether of the Counter-Reformation in Spain or of Marxism-Leninism in Russia -- is the history of the mummification of learning.<sup>13</sup>

This New-Spanish legacy has left its indelible mark upon Mexico's cultural and political personality. The magnificent architectural, ethical and linguistic residue of that regime is still what chiefly charms and amazes the visitor to Mexico. The same legacy has also bred a fixed and abiding distrust of modernity, its intellectual outlook and its social principles. Wholly drawn to modernity in one way, the strongest prejudice nonetheless remains among Mexicans that there is something fundamentally corrupt, perhaps too 'protestant', in the individualistic opportunism of American society. Nor did their own revolution do much to alter the traditional Aztec-Spanish taste for autocracy and hierarchy; "there is a bridge" writes Paz, "that reaches from *tlatoani* [chief] to viceroy and from viceroy to president".<sup>14</sup>

Independence from Spain in 1821 did little to alter the old semi-feudal order. The *criollos* - the Spanish-descended but local-born landowners and priests - simply wrested the role of ruling class from the peninsular governors. The Vice-Royalty of New Spain became the new Empire of Mexico, ruled by a series of creole generals, Santa Anna perhaps the most notorious. But continuing infiltration of American settlers into the Empire's northern provinces in the 1840's led to war and an invasion of Mexico City (the

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<sup>12</sup> Octavio Paz, *Labyrinth of Solitude* (New York, Grove, 1985) p.104.

<sup>13</sup> Paz, *Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz* p.259.

<sup>14</sup> *Other Mexico*, p. 324.

'halls of Montezuma') by U.S. Marines. The Americans subsequently annexed almost half of Mexico's territories, an episode Mexicans still consider the most heinous and humiliating in the whole of their history.

A reform movement under Benito Juárez eventually sought to supplant the imperial order with an American-style constitutional state, but in the absence of a substantial indigenous middle class the liberal regime proved unstable and by the 1880's it degenerated into a dictatorship of the capitalist elite under Porfirio Díaz<sup>15</sup>. The country languished for thirty years under a capitalist feudalism dominated by foreign interests and sustained by tyrannical state police. Thus even liberalism, paradoxically, wanting for popular support, had ultimately to be imposed and sustained by force - to be 'institutionalized'.<sup>16</sup> The revolutionary overthrow of Diaz in 1910 is conventionally seen as the true commencement of the modern Mexican state. The country was plunged into another twenty years of continuous violence and chaos as military and guerrilla strongmen - Carranza, Zapata, Pancho Villa -- fought for dominance. Marxism and Fascism also wrestled to capture the popular imagination, but what eventually prevailed was a military dictatorship of generally socialist cast which, in 1929, established the one-party system that is still in power. For almost 70 years now this system has maintained exclusive, uninterrupted power through a Mussolini-style incorporation of social institutions into a monolithic, all-powerful party organization, ruling by graft, intimidation and favoritism, headed up by a president-dictator who after six years gets to choose his own successor.

The party's name, 'Party of the Institutional Revolution' (PRI), is instructive. It signifies that in Mexico even government by the people still cannot count on any pre-existing political sentiment and thus can only maintain power through state coercion. Though other parties are permitted, and of late have gained much ground, they have been traditionally obliged to play the role of mere window-dressing in a parody on democracy. The collective memory of twenty years of general civil mayhem and revolutionary war early in the century, together with a deep-rooted belief in the inevitability of authoritarian power, sustains public toleration of the system. The current Mexican state thus runs true to form: if the Aztec *caciques* ruled by ritual public violence, the colonial masters by spiritual and political repression and liberalism by corruption into capitalist dictatorship, so too the Mexican revolution has been 'institutionalized' as the rule of an all-powerful political class maintaining absolute power through systematic intimidation and rigged elections.

This culture of institutionalized revolution everywhere prevails. A distinctly propagandistic revolutionary history of Mexico is standard fare in the schools. The divinized names and images of the main heroes and events of independence and revolution dominate squares, buildings, streets and the everyday calendar of public festivals. This wholesale romanticization of Mexican history typically tells how Spanish

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<sup>15</sup> Díaz declared 'Positivism' - a mélange of Comte, Mill, Spencer and Darwin - official state philosophy, seeking thereby to satisfy the Mexican penchant for fusing spiritual with political categories. The Aztec cosmo-political mythology passes through Spanish-Christian theocracy into liberal-secularist ideology.

<sup>16</sup> See note 5, above.

atrocities had wrested from the people their ancient polity, frequently depicted as a sort of humanized Aztec or pre-Aztec Eden; how independence was finally achieved but immediately corrupted again by the Americans and other foreign capitalists; how the people's revolution has begun the process of winning it back. The main perpetrator of this nationalist mythology, as critics like Castañeda, Fuente and Paz have pointed out, is the PRI itself, whose typical rhetoric is openly aimed at justifying an exclusive hold on power in the name of its sacred mission of completing the revolution and restoring the authentic Mexican popular polity as so depicted. The most compelling fact of contemporary political life in Mexico is precisely a mounting awareness that this revolutionary mission itself, and the party which represents itself as its agent and guardian, have in turn been corrupted, and that the time has come to move beyond it, though in which direction remains unclear.

### III. Three Political Cultures

#### *America*

The political cultures of the three North American states express historically differing forms of a common North American commitment to a free society. Americans ever have Individuality in view: in their political language, 'universality' means the uniform opportunity for self-made, self-active individuals collectively to seek emancipation from nature through technical enterprise and from history through a melt-down of differences in an all-leveling competition. Mexican idealism lies at the other extreme; more communalist than individualist, nationalistic than democratic, it is aesthetically attached to the vision of authentic, indigenous popular culture; universality in the sense of rootedness in a common immediacy of earth, place, family and tradition. The Canadian ideal lies somewhere between these extremes: a post-colonial confederacy, it clings to the forms of the old nation-state. Part America and part Europe, it counts itself a modern democracy but such as would be tolerant of and conserve the diverse cultural traditions of its constituent peoples, whether aboriginal, French-English, or new-immigrant. Such respect for cultural distinctness Canadians deem essential to what properly defines a universal, humane community.

This differing stress on individuality, indigeneity or history should not however cloud the fact that each is nonetheless a variation on the one supreme North American political theme: the state seen as the foundation and mainstay of a universal human freedom. In this is entailed a commitment to the principle that *the legitimacy of the state can no longer be founded on a merely national principle*, that is, on the appeal to a political identity based on contingencies of nature, i.e. race, tribe or clan, or on vicissitudes of history, i.e. conquests, treaties or extant cultural legacies. In their origin, thrust and character, and in spite of a residual deference to the older language of nation and nationhood, the North American states are both in origin and in essence post-national states.



To this notion of the state as legitimate only where founded in a universal freedom the Americans alone might well claim to be true; their founding declaration explicitly invokes enlightenment language to proclaim the inauguration of just such a polity. Americans interpret their freedom, however, in entirely pragmatic terms of individual initiative. The world is the universe of possible action; of opportunities for uninhibited individual enterprise and innovation, the meaning of this activity lying, not in some predetermined objective end, but just in action itself as the means by which individuality makes its truth manifest, by which freedom is made flesh. For Americans freedom is doing, not being; the right to self-redemptive self-making, not the expression of some communal identity or existential condition; in this sense again American freedom is profoundly post-European.<sup>17</sup> The cardinal American sin: to accept the world as one finds it; the cardinal virtue: to transform it and make it one's own. 'America' is not a collective national ideal for Americans but a reality enacted and reinvented each moment in the self-initiated dreams of individuals.

The characteristic ingenuity, confidence and inexhaustible productivity of Americans stem from a commonly-held belief that reality and value have their source nowhere else than in the individual consciousness and will. It is a certainty that determines their view of the essential human relation to nature and to history. The former is profoundly technocratic, for the certainty of freedom demands that nature no longer be viewed as an alien reality posing an immutable limit but as an infinite resource, open and available to all manner of constructive human enterprise: a frontier endlessly to be conquered and crossed. And the relation to history is profoundly revolutionary in the sense that freedom implies that the values of culture and history are subordinate to those of conscience; that time and habit are in any case constantly transformed and renewed through the present initiatives of individuals. The notion that some given of nature or history could provide a sufficient principle upon which to base ethical and political life is, to most Americans, anathema; a superstition that denies freedom itself and which only a resolute commitment to radical individuality can cleanse away.

Americans are accordingly never in doubt but that their own contractual democracy, determining all relations as relations among free individuals, is the standard by which all others are to be measured.<sup>18</sup> Constrained by attachment to their national cultures, thus to a finite, existential view of their freedom, Europeans have trouble appreciating what

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<sup>17</sup> American freedom expresses itself in a boundless enthusiasm for 'busyness' for its own sake. "The American Will inhabits the sky-scraper...[its] ruling passion joy in business...making it greater and better organized, a mightier engine in the general life" (Santayana. in Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 1982, p.60). The logic of pragmatism is associated with James, Dewey and others but quite another account of it appears in Hegel (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, C.[AA].c) under the heading: "Individuality that takes itself to be real in and for itself".

Americans generally understand the 'universality' of freedom as the unrestricted availability to all of the opportunities for individual self-making; a view which is correspondingly weak on the metaphysical and political dimensions of freedom: freedom as elemental human nature and as an objective political condition.

<sup>18</sup> American political philosophy has long been devoted, almost exclusively, to the defense of individualism in some form. Even what is now called communitarianism is really a variation on the liberal theme: its argument that reasonable individuals will voluntarily set limits to their freedom in the interest of a common welfare and culture does not really go much beyond the older moralistic liberalism of a Kant or a Mill.

appears to them as the uncultured egoism and crass materialism of Americans. As unfair as this caricature may be (Europeans being no strangers to either vulgarity or greed) American individualism does foster an extravagant delight with the externals of freedom; with individual fame and individual wealth, with the novel, the unusual, the uniquely venturesome, with showy displays of disdain for everything conventional.

But this powerfully practical, outward-turned orientation of American freedom has, over the long run, eaten away at its own inner, spiritual underpinnings. Detached from the puritan faith and enlightenment moralism which originally both inspired and disciplined it, the American pragmatic conscience has already lost much of its former capacity to discriminate between true autonomy and mere caprice. Correspondingly, the principal thrust of American democracy, the commitment to the unlimited creation of leisure, now finds itself increasingly challenged by the revolt of nature itself against the insults visited upon it by a rampant technocracy. The engines of their national dream thus somewhat faltering, Americans are being forced to come to terms with what is intrinsically self-conflictual in it: the idea of an ultimate human conquest of nature, of an economy expanding *ad infinitum*, and of a post-historical culture that literally steps beyond time.<sup>19</sup>

### Canada

Mexico and Canada have long sustained a characteristically ambiguous relation to American freedom with its commitment to the universal sway of private interest and the assimilation of every difference under the one rubric of individual right. Like Europeans, they are forever damning this view of freedom while at the same time, as North Americans, drawn inexorably to it.<sup>20</sup> They have long sought to define and develop different visions of what a free society requires though with much less sensational success. Technically independent since 1917 and 1982 respectively,<sup>21</sup> both countries have struggled, and struggle still, toward a political stability which seeks in some other way to reconcile their respective aboriginal, colonial and revolutionary legacies. Canada did not follow the revolutionary route of constitutional contract; its founding resolve was defined precisely by the refusal to do so. Instead it was quite literally conferenced into existence through a series of treaties, resolutions and compacts, creating a 'parliamentary' democracy intended to sublimate, but not disavow, the country's monarchic constitution, so to hold together various conflicting colonial traditions. However, the ambivalence inherent in this uncertain wedding of democratic monism with cultural pluralism has fueled endless, inconclusive wrangling over national unity, attempts to resolve which

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Rorty (e.g. *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 1982) articulates this ironic or sceptical turn in American idealism with great clarity; he attempts a post-pragmatic pragmatism such as would both transcend the American Dream and at the same time conserve and continue it.

<sup>20</sup> A Canadian example of the horror of American pragmatism may be found in the works of George Grant, e.g., *Lament for a Nation* (1965) or *Technology and Empire* (1978).

<sup>21</sup> Canada gained limited self-government only in 1867, legislative autonomy in 1927 and gained full control of its constitution as late as 1982. Colonial dependency has thus been shed only gradually and its shadow still remains. As for Mexico, it is questionable how far its revolutionary-democratic constitution of 1917 can be said to have succeeded; twenty years of chaotic civil strife was resolved in 1929 only by recourse to a military junta which unilaterally established the present virtual one-party regime.

have ever been frustrated by the recalcitrance of various regions and groups, principally the Aboriginal- and French-Canadians, concerned about safeguarding and advancing what is unique in their cultural life.

Recourse has been made more recently to the fashionable idea of Canada as a 'multi-cultural' state, in theory, one which would seek to empower any number of political sub-cultures under a single liberal-democratic roof. But this has only resulted in a proliferation of 'minorities', real or self-appointed, each claiming exclusive political rights within and against the state. The idea is a typically Canadian hybrid: liberalism fettered by nationalism, democracy circumscribed by history.<sup>22</sup> Attempts in recent times to conference these ambiguities into submission in turn have failed; the repeated call for a truly universal polity, otherwise felt strongly by Canadians, is drowned out by the clamour of nations, clans, cults and genders all seeking special recognition like so many upstart tribes in a colonial empire. The Canadian system is indeed just this: a system of internalized colonialism, issuing in chronic national uncertainty and a residual colonial sense of an independence possessed only second-hand. On the fence between revolution and history, a Charter of Rights appended to a monarchical constitution, able to sustain its communitarian (read: post-colonial) values only by dint of its dependency on a very non-communitarian American prosperity, Canadians continue to nurture a notion of themselves as a 'kinder and gentler' people.

Canada's lingering colonial constitution has produced a stock national persona at once defensive and defiant, imitative and paranoiac. Canadians like to flatter themselves the good life they enjoy is directly the product of their own virtue and avoid giving credit to the heavy role American culture and enterprise play in their fortunes. Without a clear national thrust of their own, Canadians tend to languish in a kind of political impotence giving rise to a tendency to compensatory euphemism: indecision becomes a unique talent for compromise, reticent sovereignty an aptitude for peace-making, cultural indistinctness a tolerance for multi-cultural values etc. If therapeutic in its local application, this timorous rhetoric has little or no currency abroad, where Canadians tend generally to be viewed as a rather mild-mannered, less consequential sub-species of American. The image is one also shared by its near neighbours; not a few Americans and Mexicans are quite unsure where exactly Canada is, or what sort of people live there. The ruling impression is of an American satellite culture on the fringe of a mostly vacant northern wilderness.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In practice in Canada 'multi-culturalism' focuses chiefly on aboriginal and to some extent immigrant claims to rights of cultural identity within the mainstream 'Eurogenic' society. In its more enthusiastic expressions lies the irony that the very English and French legacies through which the concept of universal right was established and developed in North America are typically refused like recognition as 'legitimate' political cultures; indeed are denounced for an alleged dismal record of overt repression and expected to apologize for past sins of racism, ethnic discrimination and the cruel enforcement of alien 'western' values such as scientific medicine, court justice, Christian education, modernization and so forth.

<sup>23</sup> A recent painting in the Mexican tradition of political allegory expresses the common view in that country of North America under NAFTA. Central is a dominant President Clinton enthroned as master of the continent against a backdrop of American industrial opulence. At his feet in the lower foreground is former President Salinas, represented as an ant (his nickname), heading up the great ant-invasion of the

But however idealistically inconsequential it may appear to the cynical, the belief that the state is humane only to the extent it respects and conserves the historical traditions of its constitutive peoples is nonetheless a profound one, sincerely ascribed to by Canadians as definitive of who they are as a people. The foundation of the state in freedom can be secure only where it attempts to incorporate and redeem the manifold expressions of freedom itself throughout the course of human experience, rather than simply override these differences as is the manner of radical democracies.<sup>24</sup> This notion of the state as a liberal, comprehensive good order had all along found expression in Canada in its attachment to older European-monarchical institutions, though a strengthening will to a more authentic North American autonomy now renders this traditional colonial nationalism no longer acceptable. Canadians urgently seek a new way of reconciling Reason and History, of uniting many historical legacies in one universal life.

### *Mexico*

Mexicans have no less difficulty than Canadians articulating what it is that moves them politically. Their relation to their own history is a distinctly negative one, typically represented in tales of endless conquest and oppression and unrequited yearning for liberation. Paradoxically, they are far more profoundly attached than are other North Americans to their pre-liberal traditions; even their view of their own revolution fails to conform to conventional 20th century notions of what a post-historical, revolutionary millennium is supposed to be about. Neither individualist nor even socialist its thrust was somewhat to restore an original, popular community, perceived as ancient and lost but still latent.<sup>25</sup>

Mexican resistance to democracy is not at all due to an innate incapacity for it, as Americans often suppose; rather their very notion of popular polity is simply not Lockean or Rousseauesque at all - not a metaphysical contract between abstractly free individuals - but a vision of a timeless, Mexican peoplehood predating the tyrannies and vicissitudes of history, and as reluctant now in adapting to the politics of modernity as resistant earlier to the impositions of Aztecs or Spaniards. The yearning to return to an indigenous, tangible, communal life, to the earthy ethos of the *pueblo*,<sup>26</sup> is a constant in the Mexican

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Mexican working poor. On the distant north horizon, posing before a pristine background of woods, water and other resources and stripped naked except for little boy's short pants and a fatuous smile, is the Canadian prime minister.

<sup>24</sup> The ultra-liberal disrespect for tradition may be seen as limiting true democracy. Chesterton, for one, speaks of tradition as "the democracy of the dead", which he describes as a much wider constituency than "the arrogant oligarchy of people who just happen at the moment to be walking around".

<sup>25</sup> Paz (*Labyrinth of Solitude*, pp.146-49, 175) distinguishes two main forms of the revolutionary ideal: one (the American, French and Communist revolutions are examples) would attempt to found an entirely new kind of humanist order beyond both nature and history; the other rather would seek to rehabilitate an 'original' political condition which history is seen as having corrupted. Mexico's revolution entailed elements of both, but the latter version certainly predominated, an outlook clearly manifest in the well-known revolutionary art from that era.

<sup>26</sup> The ordinary word means both 'town' and 'people', expressing an essentially populist vision which directly identifies the state with a particular people (*Volk, peuple, pueblo*), defined according to some characteristic of race, language, culture etc., in other words, a tribal principle. In modern times it has been

imagination, a nostalgia heard in every poem or song. It is Mexico's unique version of the American dream and it has bred a very different complex of political values and habits of mind. A profoundly aesthetic vision of community, it contrasts sharply with the liberal perspective of its northern neighbours.

Due to roots set in an ancient, once-flourishing indio society whose descendants still form the vast majority of the population and whose symbols, customs and outlook still form the baseline of everyday culture, attachment to the idea of an aboriginal, indigenous political community is far more entrenched in Mexico than in Canada, for example, where native peoples were originally more scattered and politically disunited and still today form only a small minority. As an essentially aesthetic notion, this appeal to aboriginality does not lend itself to conceptual or pragmatic articulation; Mexicans indeed tend to disdain such modes of comprehension. There is, as Paz points out, virtually no tradition of political philosophy in Mexico;<sup>27</sup> its political visionaries and critics, even today, are not philosophers or economists so much as poets, novelists, muralists, sculptors, painters. The sources and symbols of Mexican patriotism are emotive, not intellectual; artistic, not doctrinal. To the extent political ideologies have currency in Mexican history they have always had the appearance of foreign growths, as if grafted artificially on a communal sentiment which itself is profoundly and sensuously self-absorbed and thus not easily modified.

Nor is this sentiment to be confused with the more intellectual and ideological 'political anthropologism' promoted by academic defenders of native rights in Canada and elsewhere, who conjure idyllic images of uncorrupted native communities harmonious and complete in themselves.<sup>28</sup> Upon peoples living in a pre-technical, pre-political condition (though the fact is none ever do, or rarely wish to, or could for long) 'aboriginal rights' are conferred and assigned absolute priority over all other rights that are based on history or reason, on the grounds they are immediate and intuitive, thus conferred directly by nature, as it were. It is the romance, as old as Plato's *Republic*, of those who, seeking a wholly uninhibited autonomy, flee civil society into a fiction of pristine, pre-political community. That it is a pure romance is clear on grounds both of reason and fact. If to be human is to be free and the impulse to freedom is thus universal, then society is and must be always and everywhere *political*, not natural, *institutional*, not

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associated with fascism and various milder forms of 'ethnic nationalism' such as inspires the Quebec separatists.

<sup>27</sup> "We [Mexicans] have had no age of critical philosophy, no bourgeois revolution, no political democracy, no Kant, no Robespierre, no Hume, no Jefferson" *Sor Juana*, p.16.

<sup>28</sup> A world-recognized authority on pre-Columbian culture in his own right, Paz is warmly critical of the 'cult of anthropology' in his own country whose shrine is Mexico City's famous Museum of Anthropology (*Other Mexico*, p.321ff). Its tendency to worshipful veneration of the ancient native cultures, with its incongruous Nietzschean vision of the natural freedom of the earth-community, has more to do with a contemporary desire to escape modernity than with historical fact. As for the actual violence, terror and general paucity associated with tribal life, the typical response is to deny such conditions ever existed, or where facts become undeniable (as in the recently exploded myth that the Mayans were an entirely peaceful people) to mark them as vices introduced by interlopers, particularly the Europeans. Paz, on the other hand, sees Mexican populism as having far more tragic roots.

spontaneous.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, what is known about actual pre-historic societies suggests a scenario quite other than one of pristine social harmony. Far from promoting liberty, equality or the pursuit of happiness, aboriginal regimes in fact typically maintained a fastidious authority over every aspect and detail of common life. The Mayan and Aztec regimes were exemplary incarnations of this severe, elemental will to power; they sustained the civil order of the state with a notorious ferocity through elaborate, merciless public rituals whose specific aim was the conspicuous, symbolic ripping out the heart of rebellious individuality.

The appeal to the idea of an aboriginal, indigenous polity has really little to do with any actual craving to revert to a stone-age, hunting-and-gathering culture, a proposal absurd on its face. Its lies rather in the deeper intuition that the objective ethical order, the state, is no arbitrary contrivance, whether of power or contract, but something permanent and substantial, the real, ever-present embodiment of a people's will to community. It does no justice to this intuition of the 'originality' of the state to represent it as a 'state of nature', for on the contrary, the communal will has its source precisely in human freedom, not human nature. But if the very notion of a 'natural' freedom (Nietzsche speaks of will-to-power as the 'instinct to freedom') is a gross contradiction in terms, it is perfectly plausible nonetheless to refer to indigenous right if by that is meant the right of every people to a political life that is their own; the right to live in a state. So understood, indigenous right may indeed be said to take precedence over all others, not in a legal or historical sense, but so far as *political community as such* forms the unconditioned condition, the aboriginal context, within which alone rights and freedoms first become possible and can gain recognition.

Finally, indigenous right has little to do with questions of 'who was here first', who is or isn't 'native', or the rights of this or that tribe to this or that piece of geography. It is in limiting their arguments to this kind of literalism that native activists in Canada and the U.S. weaken their case and betray a certain philosophical naivety. Understood more essentially - that is to say conceptually, in terms of freedom - aboriginal right refers to the apprehension of the state, the political community, as primordial and permanent; a common ethical-cultural context always and already there and given, a life existentially lived and which grounds and encompasses all human doings; a mundane reality as tangible and as real as one's immediate family ties, the field one ploughs, the cycles of the sun and the seasons.<sup>30</sup> From the typical perspective of the older tribal peoples political community is not a conjured contingency but an eternal power both grounding and comprehending all the petty actions and fortunes of individuals. In the old Aztec

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<sup>29</sup> Hegel, for one, is adamant on this point (see *Encyclopedia*, s.482) as was Aristotle: man is a 'political animal', that is, is defined in and by active participation in the institutional life of the ethical community, the state

<sup>30</sup> The aesthetic ideal of indigenous community is 'pre-historic' in the sense it entails, as Paz points out, "a distinctively pre-linear view of time merging yesterday, today and tomorrow, as if every event were, like the rising of the sun, an eternal return of the same". The hierarchical and cyclical movement of Nature, not the linear course of History, provides the basic paradigm, which may somewhat explain why a progressive, future-oriented outlook does not come easily to the Mexican psyche, nor for that matter, does the everyday expectation of good government.

symbolism, the state is the sun in whose orbit all things come to life and pass away, and in whose rising and falling is the beginning and end of time itself.<sup>31</sup>

If America is in some sense the apotheosis of contractual society, Mexico is in many ways its antithesis. From Juárez to Zedillo, Mexicans have flirted with American-style liberal democracy even while declaring it repellent on its moral and metaphysical side. A sense of indigenous populism has ever inclined them to resist liberalism even while adapting it to their own ends. Americans have perennially misinterpreted this recalcitrance as a kind of genetic incapacity for freedom, a view Mexicans intensely resent as the epitome of gringo arrogance. If from an American-pragmatic perspective there is much that is airily romantic in the Mexican yearning for a utopia of their own, it is nonetheless just this tenacious national spirit that survived centuries of Aztec, Spanish and American domination and still resists today the new regime of globalizing neo-liberals.<sup>32</sup>

The Mexican distrust of political individualism is not, as Americans suppose, rooted in socialism or backwardness. The spirit of the Mexican revolution was fueled, not so much by modernist doctrines as by the vision of rescuing a Mexican communal legacy from its usurpers, an outlook to which the much revered, ubiquitous murals of Mexico's celebrated revolutionary artists vividly attest. The antagonism of a Rivera or an Orozco to their country's perceived oppressors was directed, not just against the evil empires of history, but equally against the purveyors of 20th century capitalism, fascism, liberalism and socialism. Their heroes were not social technocrats like Lenin or Henry Ford but early independentists like Father Hidalgo or agrarian-pastoral reformers like Emilio Zapata or Pancho Villa. For Mexican intellectuals it is the Americans who are politically retrograde, their free-enterprise rhetoric seen as a mere mask for a constitutionalized greed. Raised to a view of themselves as of all things open and fair-minded, Americans are often taken aback to find themselves assimilated to an unflattering stereotype of the gringo as a duplicitous hypocrite, waving pretentious banners of freedom and virtue while robbing you blind.

Mexicans cultivate this suspicion of American freedom to an extreme bordering on paranoia. Their otherwise strong resolve to become active participants in a broader North American economic society is frequently inhibited by a habit of invoking a litany of past conflicts and disputes with the U.S. in which the latter is inevitably revealed as a

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<sup>31</sup> The abrupt collapse of the formidable empire of the Aztecs before a handful of Europeans is one of history's great enigmas. Yet the record is clear that Montezuma and his priests were convinced the matter was quite out of their hands, the solar-political divinities having already forsaken their state and foreboded its doom. As its 'time' was quite literally up, there was no longer any will to defend it. Cortés only provided the catalyst for a defeat which is as attributable to the fatalistic passivity with which the Aztecs viewed the fortunes of their state as it is to Spanish arms. The sudden, catastrophic collapse of other pre-Columbian civilizations, e.g. the Mayan, may be susceptible to a similar explanation.

<sup>32</sup> Political assassinations, regional rebellions and massive economic failures attest to spreading scepticism in Mexico concerning the neo-liberal policies of the 'perfumados' - the clique of American-educated economists currently running the PRI. The popular issue is never what is the right or wrong way to Americanize, but how modernization might be carried out in a manner more consistent with Mexican rather than American ideals of community.

scheming, untrustworthy enemy. Like Canada, Mexico's post-independence struggle toward statehood did in fact take place in a context of confrontation with the Americans, from the expropriation of California and Texas and invasions of Veracruz and Mexico City in the mid-19th century to latter-day American collusion in assorted plots to assassinate presidents, support dictators and thwart reform. Mexican paranoia concerning 'American intervention' is profound - Mexico City even boasts a state-run Museum of Intervention to document it - and a good deal of everyday patriotic lore centres around national figures whose claim to fame lies in acts of heroic defense of the Mexican state against the American invaders. American free enterprise has long been popularly viewed in Mexico as a renewed form of conquistadorial tyranny, threatening the destruction of their national sovereignty.<sup>33</sup>

In spite of the ascendancy of an industrial elite who now control the ruling party, the popular spirit in Mexico remains strongly anti-liberal. What has sustained the PRI's seven decade-long hold on power is not its once socialist and now liberal rhetoric so much as its ability effectively to collaborate with American capitalism in practice while continuing to exploit popular anti-American paranoia at home. This has done little to 'democratize' Mexico; instead, increased Americanization under NAFTA has produced new extremes of wealth and poverty, widespread technological devastation, and perpetuation of chronic Mexican political vices of bossism, violence, and corruption, turning much of contemporary Mexico into an ugly *mélange* of the worst elements of both cultures. Far from restoring and rejuvenating a uniquely indigenous Mexican community, government by PRI has for the most part only exploited this dream to reinstitute, in yet another form, an unfortunate legacy of political exploitation on the part of violent elites.

#### IV. North American Freedom

The three North America states share a common development. There is first a continent inhabited by primeval peoples alternately warring and confederating under more or less developed tribal, cosmo-theocratic forms of political culture. This culture reaches its highest sophistication in the 15th century Aztec Empire. The Europeans then arrive on the scene, bringing North America into world history. They decisively wrest the political initiative from the aboriginal cultures, which suffer eclipse, subordination or decay, and establish their own New World experiments in revitalized Christian-monarchic society. Finally in the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries there is the move toward independence from Europe, marking the foundation of the three present-day democratic federations.

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<sup>33</sup> For an extensive summary of the manifold mutual biases which infect Mexican-American relations, see Pastor, R.A. and Castañeda, J. *The Limits of Friendship*, New York, 1969. An example of the extreme sensitivity of Mexicans to American intentions was the furore created in the '60's by a single U.S. light plane conducting cloud-seeding experiments over the Gulf in a year of massive crop failures due to drought. A huge national outcry was raised by both press and government seriously alleging a U.S. conspiracy to 'steal Mexico's rain'.



Each has passed, in a relatively brief time-span, through similar transformations from an aboriginal to a colonial to a revolutionary form of political culture, though in such a manner that one or the other of these forms tends to predominate or remain residual. The Americans embraced their revolutionary constitution with a fervour that entailed a corresponding summary repudiation of native and colonial roots. In Canada, where there has never been a revolution as such, a gradual shedding of colonial institutions has tended to conserve the residue of a number of somewhat disparate histories, so that what predominates is a democratic amalgam of regional and national traditions.<sup>34</sup> What makes itself most strongly felt in Mexico, however, is the ever-present reality of an aboriginal heredity and popular culture. This powerful legacy has sustained a notorious ambivalence concerning both the Spanish-colonial past and the revolutionary passage into modernity, transitions that were both violent and notoriously inconclusive. The effects of this long legacy of instability alternating with authoritarian rule still dominates all aspects of political life in contemporary Mexico.

These differences in constitutional history help account not only for the peculiar flavour of public life in the three countries but also for their inability severally to realize fully all that may be contained in the concept of a free, universal polity, to which ideal all nonetheless severally subscribe. There is a certain incompleteness, a residual ideality, preventing them from actually becoming the kind of state they already purport to be. The political spirit in Mexico remains fettered to a *tribal-aristocratic* prejudice which tends to identify freedom with power, typically translated into the aggressive, autocratic power of an elite upon whom the welfare of the vast mass of the people is forced to depend - the Aztec *tlatoani*, the peninsular Spanish nobles, the revolutionary generals, and now the corrupt plutocrats of the PRI. Canada's *colonial-monarchic* constitution has long predisposed its citizenry to a passive relation to their state, a reliance on it as the benign and benevolent patron of their social and economic welfare which in fact has always depended on the energy and initiative of other dominant peoples, first the British, now the Americans. Finally, the American *revolutionary-democratic* view of society would enlist state institutions wholly and solely in the service of private enterprise on the assumption that what is necessary for the realization of a universal, productive polity is already there in the inexhaustible potential and inward moral sense of the individual; for Americans, accordingly, their state is a subjective affair, a shared pragmatic ideal, never attaining to stable, objective form.

There is no attempt here, of course, simplistically to suggest that the constitutions of the three North American states embody three quite distinct views of freedom or that each espouses and articulates one as exclusive against the others.<sup>35</sup> The suggestion rather is that they represent differing, developing facets of one and the same New World vision

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<sup>34</sup> . In Canada the debate over 'distinct society' suffers from the ambiguity that while Quebec nationalists view political rights as primarily cultural-historical, native peoples regard them as indigenous and most other Canadians as rights of individuality as incorporated in the 1982 Charter.

<sup>35</sup> As it has been waggishly put, Canada was intended as a blend of French culture, American know-how and British talent for politics; instead it became a muddle of French politics, American culture and British know-how.

of the free society. Each incorporates a principle coequal to the others as essential to that vision, their respective constitutions roughly distinguished according to which of these principles has the ascendancy: freedom as primordial communal condition, as the historical project of states, or as rooted in the moral will of self-conscious individuals.

There is no doubt each tendency, so far as it goes, represents a major truth about political freedom. The intrinsic right of peoples to political order, to a state that grounds and is comprehensive of the whole of their common life, is certainly fundamental to freedom, and the yearning to see this requirement satisfied might well describe the basic political passion of Mexicans. Yet freedom also requires that a merely instinctive sense of community be educated and disciplined through popular allegiance to objectively represented national ideals, to which historical sense of their community Canadians seem bound to cling. But for individuals to acquiesce fully, freely and self-consciously in the life of the state, it is above all required that they explicitly know the infinity of freedom as their very own essence, and then know the state as the reality of that freedom, a reality created and sustained by nothing else but their own actions.

It is not easy to imagine how these ideological nuances could be recognized - much less reconciled - in the course of everyday political and trade relations as they clearly entail fundamental political-philosophical differences upon which economic and such differences are merely consequential. But as one might expect closer relations in a post-NAFTA era almost certainly to exacerbate these political differences themselves and increase general awareness of them, there is room for optimism that the internal logic obtaining among these constitutional tendencies might be brought more evidently to light, perhaps to disclose an essential interdependence that might indicate what the spirit of freedom that shaped North America has yet to accomplish here.