

## **BIG PICTURE REALITIES: CANADA AND MEXICO AT THE CROSSROADS**

**DANIEL DRACHE, (ED.)**

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**Review by Julián Castro-Rea\***

Under its intriguing title, what this edited book really wants to accomplish is to track the changes that have developed in North America over the years following the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The chapter collection takes good note of the fact that this deal, supposedly of a pure economic nature, had numerous unintended effects, spilling over many a policy area in the three countries involved. The book also accounts for the unexpected yet radical change of direction toward security matters that North America followed after the September 11, 2001, events. Canada and Mexico were forced to follow the US lead to the extent that, from the latter country's perspective, they are more important as neighbours than as partners (p. 14).

To tackle these issues, a respectable brochette of authors was assembled. Experts on either Canadian or Mexican perspectives—a refreshing break from similar collections, usually dominated by US-based authors or US-centred perspectives—contribute to make the point on current North American issues. The fifteen contributors include prestigious Mexican scholars not frequently published in Canada, such as Isidro Morales, Víctor López Villafaña, and Jorge Chabat. The sixteen chapters the book comprises deal with topics such as economic integration, borders, human rights, migration, foreign policy, security, energy, and geopolitics.

Although admittedly this book offers a respectable collection of insights, on the downside it shows some weak spots that I would like to address. First of all, it is not clear to the reader what the “big picture” (or “the crossroads” for that matter) really is about. Is it the North American perspective, the global scene, cross-border interactions (p. 9), or what exactly? All in all, the term chosen as the main title for the book, and presumably the driving concept, is ambiguous and not especially useful as an analytical category.

This book of course, as any new title does, aims at being original. Yet, the whole effort has a strong *déjà vu* flavour. The book essentially takes stock of North America's official agenda, without devoting specific chapters to look at crucial continental realities beyond what governments deem to be “policy worthy.” Important aspects that define the North American dynamics of today—such as the informal economy, transnational political activity, cross-border ideological influences, drug and arms trafficking, Indigenous issues, the democratic deficit, social inequalities, and regional identities, to name but a few—are mentioned casually at best, but clearly not discussed in a serious and consistent way.

Moreover, the editor's interpretation of Canadian public preferences is somewhat disconcerting. He presents an essentialist view of what Canadians are, like, or choose, which makes it look like many recent Canadian government actions are at odds with public

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preferences. The uninformed reader may get the impression that the Conservative government in place since March 2006 has been somehow imposed on Canadians, to the extent it betrays so many supposedly deep convictions held by the Canadian public. The editor fails to acknowledge that, in fact, the Conservative government, even if in a minority situation, has been actively supported by a considerable number of voters (close to 5.4 million in 2006, 5.2 in 2008, representing, respectively, 36 percent and 37 percent of the electorate, according to Elections Canada).

So perhaps it is time to accept that “Canadian values” and priorities have changed, and that the conventional understanding of what makes a Canadian must be revised, whether we like the new realities or not. Mel Hurtig, in his recent *The Truth about Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2008), makes the interesting case of shifting the Canadian domestic record and international behaviour away from its traditional markers, a process that is actively supported by large sectors of the Canadian citizenry.

More to the point, it is time to acknowledge the deep ideological gap dividing Canadians—or Mexicans, or people in the United States for that matter—when it comes to discussing North America. “Country” is not the most useful unit of analysis for analyzing the region; realist approaches offer limited insight into the continental architecture. In other words, it is imperative to stop assuming that the interests of all people within a national state are the same, and that governments unmistakably represent that homogeneous interest in the best possible way when they deal with their counterparts. The truth is, of course, that domestic political processes matter, that some interests are better represented in government while others are downplayed or ignored. Therefore, for analyses about North America, instead of considering “Canada” or “Canadians” as the main actors, it is necessary to identify who in Canada specifically pursues certain policy initiatives, who benefits from their adoption or marginalization, and why the government is responsive to some actors and not others. Domestic politics is a crucial factor that shapes North America’s architecture, and this book does not acknowledge this reality to its full extent.

Curiously, then, a fairer account of North America today would require a look at a “bigger picture” than the one viewed in this book.

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