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The World Humanities Report

Defined by Paradox: The Humanities in Mexico

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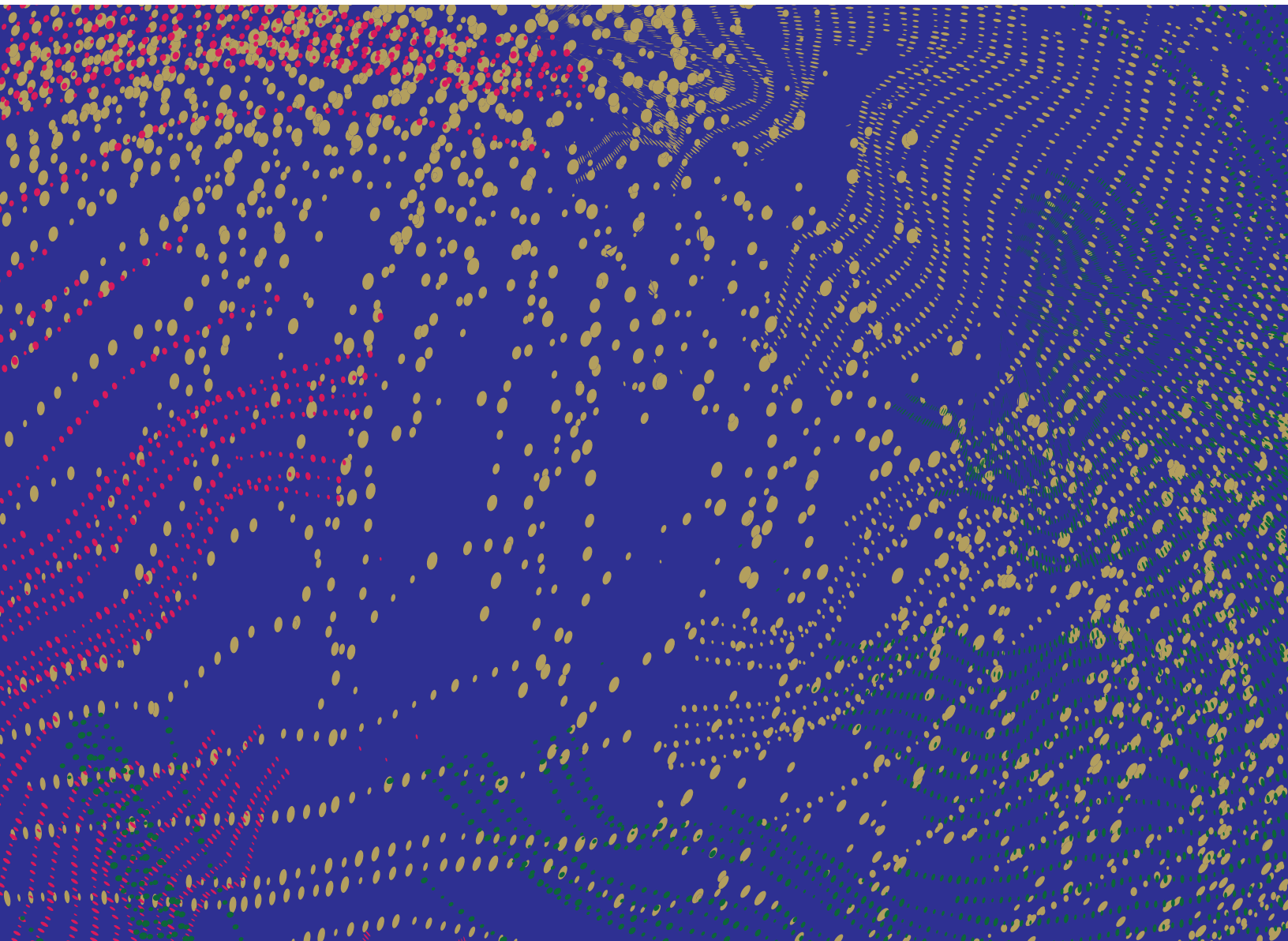

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Defined by Paradox: The Humanities in Mexico

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The humanities have a long institutional history in Mexico, where they play an important cultural role.[1] Their current form was gradually forged throughout the twentieth century, as institutions of higher education were established in Mexico and as the state made major investments in artistic and cultural infrastructure.

According to information from the country's System of Cultural Information, Mexico has 3,086 universities. While many of these institutions are private and lack studies in the humanities, the university infrastructure contains a considerable number of humanities programs. Within the national public university system (including the National Autonomous University of Mexico [UNAM] and the Autonomous Metropolitan University), research centers (particularly the College of Mexico) and even the National Polytechnic Institute and the National Pedagogical University include structures devoted to research and teaching. What's more, these institutions also have branches focused on cultural expansion and outreach, including book publications, museums, theaters, film archives, movie theaters, and other spaces relevant to the humanities. This structure also has equivalents in numerous public research centers, federal institutions dedicated to fine arts education, film schools, schools specializing in other artistic disciplines, and counterparts to the College of Mexico in other regions of the country.

[1] This report is based on a conversation between the author and four contributors—Maricruz Castro Ricalde (Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education), Benjamín Mayer Foulkes (17, Institute of Critical Studies), Rafael Mondragón (National Autonomous University of Mexico), and Sayak Valencia (College of the Northern Border), held in response to an invitation from James Shulman of the American Council of Learned Societies. Citations from the four contributors are drawn from the transcript of their conversation. Examples privilege the contributors' own work. The report identifies general trends but is by no means exhaustive. An in-depth discussion of the humanities in Mexico is a broader project that has not yet been undertaken there; this is still a pending task. Finally, the information cited in this report, according to its respective organizations, comes from Mexico's System of Cultural Information (https://sic.cultura.gob.mx), the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (https://www.inegi.org.mx), the Transparency portal of the National Council for Science and Technology (https://conacyt.mx/transparencia/), and the Data Mexico portal (https://datamexico.org), jointly developed by the Secretariat of Economy and by Datawheel. This text by Salvador Malo on Mexico's National System of Researchers was also consulted: https://educacion.nexos.com.mx/que-pasa-en-el-sni/. With respect to the UNAM, information from the General Directorate of Academic Personnel Affairs was consulted: https://dgapa.unam.mx. The text references other sources as needed.

Likewise, different versions of these structures are found on the state level. Each of Mexico's thirty-two states has its own public university, and every one of those institutions offers both humanities programs and structures for cultural outreach. Finally, the private system contains a set of university systems, nationwide in their coverage, that also offer humanities programs; among the most prominent are the Monterrey Institute of Technology and Higher Education, the University of the Americas in Puebla, and the Ibero-American University. There is also an important private university devoted specifically to instruction in the humanities, the University of the Cloister of Sor Juana.

As for government infrastructure, the existence of a federal (cabinet-level) Secretariat of Culture warrants mention. Each of Mexico's thirty-two states has a similar entity, be it a secretariat, an institute, or a council (the name and government level vary by state). The System of Cultural Information has 576 municipal institutes of culture on record. These structures encompass another complex structure that includes support for cultural institutions, artist patronage, book publication systems, and many other elements relevant to the humanities.

While this panorama is by no means exhaustive, it is clear that the humanities are ascribed a massive cultural infrastructure in Mexico, encompassing both university and government entities. Mexico's, in fact, is the largest structure devoted to the arts and humanities in Latin America and is among the largest in the world. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, culture (covering the arts and humanities) constituted 3.1 percent of Mexico's gross domestic product, which accounts for a substantial investment structure in the humanities.

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Another aspect of humanities work in Mexico involves the profound governmental presence in research. Salaries at Mexican universities are exceptionally low. According to the portal Data Mexico, which collects official information, there are 270,000 workers registered as professors in institutions of higher learning. The average income is 8,750 pesos monthly (around $400). Even in Mexico City, where the median is much higher, income averages 43,000 pesos per month (approximately $2,000). According to UNAM

databases, the income earned by most academics is a combination of salary plus various incentives related to productivity, hiring levels, and other factors.

For this reason, a considerable number of full-time professors supplement their income through the National System of Research (SNI, its acronym in Spanish). Under the auspices of the National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT), this system evaluates researchers across all disciplines and offers grants at three levels. It involves a point-based productivity-evaluation mechanism that catalogues their various professional activities. Without a doubt, the SNI contributes financially to researchers' income, but it also adds a major layer of bureaucracy to their work, while also exposing much of the research infrastructure to the whims of governmental politics. We will elaborate on this topic later in this report. According to the register of SNI funding recipients, 4,002 researchers belong to Area IV, "Humanities and Behavioral Sciences," which comprises 14.8 percent of members, a percentage similar to that of the other six areas of scholarship. However, we must note that five of the seven areas fall within the disciplines that the Anglo-Saxon world refers to as STEM, while the social sciences in their totality, and the humanities in their totality, constitute just one of the funded areas each. As a result, the system tends to uphold requisites of evaluation and impact that are directly designed for STEM disciplines and that do not always correspond to the material reality of humanities research.

Challenges Facing Humanities Research in the Twenty-First Century

Beyond the description of their infrastructure as such, we must note that the humanities in Mexico are marked by strong internal contradictions. These contradictions shed light on the perspectives of the various disciplines that constitute them, both in the present and into the future. According to Sayak Valencia, the humanities have developed along two parallel paths: neoliberalization and corporatization. For one thing, certain hegemonic humanities have taken form, and in powerful ways, in response to changes wrought by neoliberalism in the university. In particular, the SNI has fostered quantitative competitiveness in academic output. The point-based system often fails to account for the nature of different publications (although standards of excellence certainly exist). Moreover, the constant reporting process to qualifying commissions limits professors' chances of pursuing projects that aren't tethered to continual publication.

However, as Rafael Mondragón observes, some CONACYT and SNI projects

have managed to identify alternative ideas within the context of public universities. For example, CONACYT advanced repatriation and lectureship programs that allowed Mexican universities to create full-time teaching positions, as well as to fill some of them with graduates of universities in other countries, thus contributing to diversification of the professorial body. Unfortunately, such projects lack continuity, as they often dissolve with changes of government. In some cases, they spark resistance in local governments, which may make professorial hires in different ways; in addition, according to Mondragón, beneficiaries of federal programs are pressured to leave their positions.

Besides confronting these and other challenges, full-time professors are a minority of university instructors. At the UNAM, career professors and researchers make up just 21 percent of the teaching body, while per-course professors (equivalent to the category of adjunct in the United States) make up a full 58 percent.

Private universities, as observed by Maricruz Castro Ricalde, face a strong emphasis on academic rankings, as well as the use of quantitative indicators of excellence, including some modeled on those commonly used in the United States. Such mechanisms put the humanities at a disadvantage. What's more, Castro Ricalde points out, the ability to participate or not in these mechanisms of excellence creates major inequalities that favor certain private universities, as well as public universities whose states make major investments in them (namely the federal universities or the state universities of Nuevo León, Puebla, and Veracruz, among others), sidelining other private and public institutions.

The quantification system also subjects academics to paradoxical structures. Public universities, in Castro Ricalde's assessment, are sometimes more highly favored by the SNI because they house prominent academic presses; it is difficult for scholars to publish via these presses unless they are affiliated with the university in question. Unlike the Anglo-Saxon peer review system, which encourages academics to publish at universities other than their own, it is extremely common in Mexico for academics to publish their work through the press at the university that employs them. This has various ramifications, including real disadvantages for academics working in universities without a press and the mass publication of books published for the express purpose of accumulating points for the SNI—which sometimes means these books have almost no circulation at all and are made inaccessible even to specialized readers.

Such paradoxes define the humanities in Mexico: a central presence in economic and university life accompanied by precarious working conditions; copious output supported by the state, yet subjected to a quantification system that is entirely divorced from the humanities and obeys neoliberal ideals of productivi-

ty; a vast number of people devoted to the arts and humanities, but a hierarchical working system that grants full-time positions to a minuscule percentage of researchers and depends mostly on casualized labor; a major infrastructure of institutions dedicated to the humanities, but one that is intensely stratified by funding inequalities.

The Humanities and the Public Sphere

The second dimension noted by Valencia is a counterhegemonic space of the humanities, which have always been associated both with cultural and artistic vitality and with political and social movements. Under this aegis, various public and private efforts have emerged in hopes of extricating the humanities from ideas, traditions, and disciplines of cultural output (many recreated in the structure of the SNI and of universities themselves) in order to imagine alternative spaces and transdisciplinary models.

One of the contributors to this report, Benjamín Mayer Foulkes, is the founder of 17 (17edu.org), an institution that exemplifies these objectives. 17 defines itself as a "post-university, located at the intersecting paths of academia, culture, and psychoanalysis." The institute supports a publishing project, a center for advanced studies, research projects, and university extension and consulting services. Thanks to the flexibilities of this model, 17 is among the institutions that have been working to promote and advance the humanities, encompassing subjects such as posthumanist studies, the relationship between art and technology, aesthetic and political thinking, and disability studies, among others.

17 echoes a tradition of cultural studies that has been gaining prominence in Mexico, albeit in affiliation primarily with the qualitative social sciences, for example, cultural anthropology and communication sciences. However, the strong presence of cultural studies in certain institutions, such as the School of the Northern Border (COLEF, its acronym in Spanish) in Tijuana and the Western Technological Institute of Higher Education (ITESO) in Guadalajara, has made room for interdisciplinary discussions in the humanities, as evidenced by the work of Sayak Valencia, a researcher at the COLEF. There are also institutions such as Centro (centro.edu.mx), self-defined as an "institution of higher education devoted to professionalizing creativity."

In public universities, we find recently established humanities programs such as the one offered by the Autonomous Metropolitan University (Cuajimalpa

campus) in Mexico City.[2] Its professors include specialists in literature, intellectual history, arts across numerous disciplines, film, and media, among many others. Also noteworthy are programs with a special interest in the material infrastructure of culture, such as the bachelor's program in cultural development and management at the UNAM's National School of Higher Studies in León, Guanajuato,[3] focused on training coordinators of cultural policies and programs, with applied humanities at the heart of the curriculum.

All of these curricular advancements are also reflected in the gradual (sometimes downright slow) evolution of traditional humanities research toward models of study that are firmly rooted in interdisciplinary work and connected to the demands of the public sphere. For example, the Center for Gender Studies at the College of Mexico and the University Program of Gender Studies at the UNAM have, in past decades, accompanied the rise in social movements devoted to the rights of women and sexual minorities, including calls for justice in the face of the femicide epidemic; the struggle to legalize abortion; the drive for LGBTQIIA rights; and, in more recent years, the response to the #MeToo and Ni Una Más movements, as well as the struggle for trans rights. These developments have been spearheaded by colleagues like Valencia and Castro Ricalde, who have dedicated their careers to the encounter between such phenomena and their own research agendas.

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More broadly, these connections between civil society and cultural spaces enable the creation of projects that avoid bureaucratic limitations. Other examples include the work of academics with the Zapatista movement in Chiapas; the Cuernavaca-based group developed through the work of Ivan Illich; and the network of experts working every day to confront problems related to the war on drug trafficking. In addition, as Mondragón points out, the tradition of alternative epistemologies, participatory action, and popular pedagogy, among other practices, have been essential in connecting

[2] UAM Cuajimalpa, Licenciatura en Humanidades, http://dcsh.cua.uam.mx/humanidades-licenciatura/presentacion-licenciatura-humanidades/.

[3] Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores Unidad León, Desarrollo y Gestión Interculturales, https://enes.unam.mx/desarrollo-y-gestion-interculturales.html.

the academic humanities with the worlds of artistic activity, civil society, and research. The progression of these spaces helps us imagine forms of the humanities that endeavor, without sacrificing their relationship with the vast existing infrastructure, to envision a different future.

Humanities and Diversity

To discuss the question of diversity in the humanities, we must resist the temptation to apply the US model. Diversity is always relative to cultural hegemony; as a result, it is important to understand which factors have shaped structures of inclusion and exclusion along racial, socioeconomic, and gendered lines.

Mexico has narrated itself as a mestizo country, born of the encounter between Spanish and Indigenous culture. Although the notion of *mestizaje* puts forth, in the cultural sphere, the central idea of a unified, inclusive nation, the reality is that *mestizaje* has failed historically as a catalyst for an egalitarian society.[4] What's more, it is now acknowledged, thanks to the work of authors like Roger Bartra, that the ideas of *mexicanidad*, *mestizaje*, and other categories that strove to capture national identity ultimately laid the groundwork for legitimizing the dominant political party that ruled Mexico throughout the twentieth century.[5] At the same time, we must also recognize that *mestizaje* and *mexicanidad* are powerful myths that have been widely accepted among Mexicans. Moreover, these ideas have made it possible to distinguish Mexico from the segregationist dynamics that characterizes the United States. As a result, most Mexicans do not identify according to clearly demarcated identities, as is the case in US society, where the terms "African American," "white," "Latine/x," and "Native American" take on a clear significance beyond the erasures they entail.

In Mexico, the concept of the *pigmentocracia* (pigmentocracy) has been developed to address the way in which different skin tones—not necessarily identifiable with a social category like "Indigenous" or "Afro-descendant"—correlate to phenomena associated with discrimination and socioeconomic class.[6] Therefore, debates about discrimination and inclusion are rooted in the idea that racism in Mexico has operated not through the categories of segregation found in the United States but rather through a continuation of ethnic and racial discrimination that has been concealed by the very myth of its eradication

[4] For more on this topic, see Pedro Ángel Palou, *El fracaso del mestizo* [The failure of the mestizo] (Mexico City: Ariel, 2014).

[5] Roger Bartra, *La jaula de la melancholia* [The cage of melancholy] (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1989).

[6] See the study conducted by the College of Mexico at https://colordepiel.colmex.mx.

through *mestizaje*. This racism is persistent and real, but it is not made explicit in every instance— much like what we see, for example, in the concept of "racial democracy" in Brazil. Authors such as Federico Navarrete have advocated for exposing the structures of racism hidden behind the idea of *mestizaje* in order to raise awareness about the discrimination experienced by Mexicans because of their ethnic background or skin color.[7]

In response to this challenge, a movement has emerged, both in civil society and in academia, toward recognizing historically marginalized populations and undertaking a critical reading of race in Mexico. Figures like Navarrete, as well as the actors Tenoch Huerta and Maya Zapata, are part of a movement called Poder Prieto (Dark-Skinned Power), which advances narratives of pride and self-recognition among dark-skinned Mexicans, acknowledging Indigenous and Afro-descendant people while accepting that this phenomenon applies to those who identify as mestizo as well. In addition, there has been a boom in studies of historically excluded populations. Following the acknowledgment of the Black, Afro-descendant, and Afro-mestizo population in the Mexican census, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography has identified 2.5 million people in this demographic. There is also growing academic interest in Afro-descendant history and culture. The recognition of migrant populations has expanded, too, as well as of different populations that originated in East Asia, with particular attention to the discrimination and violence they suffered on being rejected as subjects of *mestizaje*. Anti-Chinese, anti-Black, and antisemitic sentiments have been identified in recent years as a shameful part of the *mestizaje* discourse, which has historically refused to accept people with roots other than Indigenous and European as Mexican. While such movements foster and support an identity politics for and a differentiated recognition of these populations, academic studies continually depict the complexity of populations that have simultaneously faced

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[7] Federico Navarrete, *Mexico racista: Una denuncia* [Racist Mexico: A denunciation] (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2016).

discrimination and been part of the country's racial makeup.

Finally, we must point to a significant change in race studies that has occurred in the twenty-first century thus far. Historically, the study of Indigenous peoples has been conducted in the humanities by academics, from Mexico and elsewhere, who are not themselves members of those communities. While this remains the case, due in large part to the solidarity developed by scholars in the field toward the communities in question, recent years have witnessed a rise in Indigenous intellectuals and artists. Among the most prominent figures is the linguist Yásnaya Aguilar Gil of the Ayuuk (also known as Mixe) community. This rise has been bolstered by a state-sponsored funding apparatus for Indigenous writers and artists, including the National Fund for Culture and the Arts and the General Directorate of Popular Cultures. In addition, Indigenous higher education has been notably strengthened (though not without substantial limitations) by the intercultural university project overseen by the Secretariat of Public Education.[8]

As for matters of gender, universities have played a major role since the late twentieth century, both in creating the field of gender studies—as in the programs at the College of Mexico and the UNAM, for example—and in accompanying social movements. Maricruz Castro Ricalde, one of the figures who have accompanied this movement from within academia, notes serious institutional problems that have yet to be addressed. Attempts to establish gender policies are accompanied by a sense of insufficiency with respect to what institutions have accomplished thus far. For example, protocols against gender-based violence have been developed in response to demands regarding problems such as sexual harassment and femicide, and women students in Mexico have raised their voices in protest against these problems. As a result, demands for the continuation and progress of efforts articulated by gender studies, for social mobilization on the rights of women (including trans women) and people with nonbinary identities, and for gender equality within university institutions have gone hand in hand.

[8] Subsecretaría de Educación Superior, "Universidades Interculturales" [Intercultural universities], accessed May 18, 2022, https://educacionsuperior.sep.gob.mx/interculturales.html. An assessment of these universities appears in Gunther Dietz and Laura Selene Mateos Cortés, "Las universidades interculturales en México: Logros y retos de un nuevo subsistema de educación superior" [Intercultural universities in Mexico: Achievements and challenges of a new sub-system of higher education], accessed May 18, 2022, https://www.redalyc.org/journal/316/31658531008/html/.

Final Considerations

As they are elsewhere, the humanities in Mexico are faced with a paradox. There is broad public interest in the humanities' objects of scholarship (e.g., the arts, literature, media, social identities), as well as a considerable infrastructure of study in the humanities, encompassing both the education system (public and private) and the state. But the panorama is also marked by a constant exacerbation of precariousness and numerous threats against humanities entities: governmental budget cuts, the pressure to neoliberalize universities, criteria of accreditation and prestige that have nothing to do with the concrete nature of the humanities, and so forth. Nonetheless, the humanities in Mexico are very much alive. There is not, as there is in the United States, a perceptible scarcity of students. Programs continue to serve sizable populations, due in part to the vibrancy of culture in the public sphere. Likewise, academic bodies of great strength and presence continue to research and produce knowledge in the humanities.

That said, this optimism must not obscure the fact that the Mexican academy, despite its size, lacks the resources possessed by its neighbor to the north, the United States. The scarcity and expense of bibliographic resources and the scant transnational circulation of academic work in Mexico as a result of limitations in the distribution of knowledge and the lack of material cooperation in the humanities between Mexico and the United States are problems in urgent need of redress. Nonetheless, if it continues in its current direction, Mexico could build on its strengths and remain a benchmark for culture and the humanities around the world.

Translated from the Spanish by Robin Myers

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