***THE MESS THEY MADE: HOW CONSERVATISM WRECKED NORTH AMERICA***

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Over the last twenty years, North America has traveled a strange journey indeed. In the early 1990s, the region bombastically inaugurated what was supposed to become an integrated market, pooling together the economic strengths of three member countries and foreshadowing increased political cooperation. In the early 2000s, however, market integration and political cooperation were clouded by an overarching concern with security. Under the pressure of the strongest partner, all North American countries rebuilt their domestic and foreign security apparatuses; adopting muscular anti-terrorism legislation for internal threats—often to the detriment of civil liberties—, and creating stronger military capabilities—spending impressively unprecedented amounts of public funds in the process. Yet, these measures seem unable to solve the drug war quagmire in Mexico, clearly a North American problem.

Simultaneously, NAFTA's trilateral spirit has been destroyed, mostly over measures to increase border security to even higher levels that are discussed and implemented on a bilateral basis. Overall, during this period of time, internal borders in North America became thicker, not lighter. This is especially true for most people traveling or moving from one North American country to another[1]. Yet, the flow of unauthorized migrants from Mexico to the United States keeps increasing, under the double pressure of demand for their labour in the north, and shrinking opportunities for economic improvement in the south. Canada followed suit, imposing visa requirements on Mexican travelers in 2009 and controlling the flows of temporary workers in an arbitrary manner. Xenophobic positions run amok throughout North America, even legitimized by mainstream politicians, justifying exclusionary views of

[1] The exception to this general rule are business people and professionals benefiting from NAFTA's chapter 16 or the programs made available for a fee to frequent travelers (Nexus). The extremely reduced number of people who benefit from eased travel requirements only underscores the exclusionary nature of the migratory regime in North America. See Abu-Laban, Yasmeen, "Migration in North America" in Abu-Laban, Y., ed., *Politics in North America. Redefining Continental Relations,* Peterborough: Broadview, 2008; pp. 339-352.

each other rather than mutual understanding among the peoples of the region.

Smooth economic and political cooperation among the three countries in the region also remains an elusive goal twenty years after it was announced. North American governments did not react to the economic crisis unleashed in the fall 2008 in a coordinated way, implementing instead piecemeal emergency measures with no regard for their consequences over the neighbours. The benefits of trade liberalization have not been evenly distributed, creating strong regional contrasts in terms of prosperity and worsening the concentration of household income measured in Gini coefficient terms. Nationalisms in the three countries remain strong and aggressive, especially in the United States, justifying exclusionary and unilateral actions against the supposed partners in North America.

Common explanations of these developments, based on realist assumptions, have a hard time making sense of what happened. Their main problem, I would claim, is that these explanations use the state as their unit of analysis, thus neglecting domestic political actors and their political struggles that produced the observed outcomes. Additionally, realism tends to take government policy justifications at face value, without questioning the fundamental motivations and assumptions behind them.

Giving back to ideologies their important place in domestic and continental politics, this paper proposes an alternative theoretical explanatory framework for the current state of the continent. I will argue that the ebbs, flows and paradoxes of North American integration are mostly due to the prevalence of right-wing conservative ideologies and their inherent contradictions. Indeed, these ideologies attempt to reconcile contradictory objectives, such as market goals with non-negotiable social concerns, tainted with hypernationalism and xenophobia; massive security spending with tax cuts; libertarian principles with social conservatism and intrusive and violent law enforcement, and so on. To the extent that conservatism has been a determinant factor in the construction of North America, these incompatible objectives eventually conflicted, thus creating the current uneven, chaotic North American architecture.

In order to make that case, this paper will first discuss the incongruous shape of the main right-wing actors in the three North American countries. Then it will illustrate how these contradictions have had negative impacts on public policy by focusing on three areas of particular importance for North America: migration, security and trade.

**The parties of the right: an uneasy alliance of business and moral imperatives.**

North American integration is a direct product of the end of the Cold War and the process of neoliberal globalization that followed. The collapse of the Soviet Union emboldened global capitalism into believing that there was no alternative left to unrestrained markets, so the only task that governments should reasonably accomplish within the realm of economic policy was to make those markets even freer. Neoliberalism and the policies that flowed from it became conventional wisdom, the hegemonic way of reorganizing economic relations among countries[2].

In North America, conservative actors thus acquired a hegemonic position. Conservative politicians, NGOs, economists, think tanks, media, parties, etc., ended up shaping the continent's plans and priorities. Their agenda advanced by leaps and bounds whenever they directly ran the federal governments. This occurred especially during three years, from the beginning of 2006 to the end of 2008, when conservative parties were simultaneously at the helm of governments across North America.

The mainstream parties that are the standard bearers of the right in Canada, Mexico and the United States are the Conservative Party of Canada, the National Action Party (PAN) and the Republican Party. They have some important features in common. For the purposes of this paper, the most important commonality is that all three parties resulted from the convergence of all kinds of pro-market, conservative, and religious political interests; that came together in an effort to maximize their electoral leverage. The second important commonality is that at different points in time they have directed the federal government of their respective country of origin, giving momentum to pro-

[2] Noël, Alain and Jean-Philippe Thérien, *Left and Right in Global Politics,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008; pp. 137-165.

market policies such as trade liberalization, privatizations, deregulation and fiscal austerity.

Canada's present-day Conservative Party was born in 2003, from the merger of two pre-existing parties: the Progressive Conservative Party (PCP) and the Canadian Alliance (CA). The respective origins of these parties are very different, even contrasting. The PCP was the heir of traditional conservatism in Canada, strongly influenced by British conservative thought. This brand of conservatism, commonly known as Toryism, played a leadership role in the very creation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867. Later on, it developed a distinctive brand of conservatism known as "red Toryism", which blended political conservatism with social responsibility of the state toward the masses[3]. The PCP was able to form several governments through the 20th century until it faced a crushing defeat in 1993, which reduced its presence in Parliament to only two seats.

In contrast, the Canadian Alliance originated from the Reform Party, created in 1987 on the wave of Western Canadian discontent with the way Canada's federation was run. From the start, the new party adopted a platform that blended populist appeals to reinventing government with market-based policy solutions to Canada's challenges[4]. It also attracted large numbers of Christian evangelists, who found in the party a way to make their values heard in Ottawa. The new party was not conservative in the traditional Canadian sense, but rather right-wing, closely resembling the Republican Party in the United States (see below). Because at the time of the merger the Canadian Alliance was in a stronger parliamentary position than the PCP, its cadres and ideology became predominant and immediately displaced Toryism.

The National Action Party was created in 1939, as a reaction to the radical reforms then operated by Mexico's post-revolutionary regime. It resulted from the collaboration between Catholic militants and technocratic, business interests, both disgruntled with their marginal-

[3] Taylor, Charles, *Red Tories. The Conservative Tradition in Canada*, Toronto: Anansi, 1982.
[4] Laycock, David, "Populism and the New Right in English Canada" in Panizza, Francisco, ed., *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, London: Verso, 2005; pp. 172-201.

ization from meaningful political participation[5]. The coexistence between those two main groups was not always easy, and it reached a confrontational high point in the 1970s, when the Catholic faction imposed a Christian humanist platform on the party. The business wing rebelled, and created a pragmatic current called "neopanismo" which was dead serious in competing and winning elections. It found the opportunity to prevail when it led the opposition to the nationalization of the banks decreed in 1982. After a series of regional victories, the PAN established itself as a serious party, able to capitalize on popular discontent against the post-revolutionary regime, and won the 2000 presidential elections.

In the US, the Republican Party also amalgamated a disparate array of conservative and right-wing interests, building on the systemic incentives to bipartisan politics existing in that country. The party was able to accommodate under a single organization social conservatives and corporate interests. As explained by Jeff Faux: "The organizing genius of conservative Republicans was to compartmentalize the two opposing value systems so they reinforced each other against what was perceived as a common liberal enemy. The social conservatives would bring grassroots energy. The corporations would bring the money"[6]. In particular, Republicans benefited from

a) The business backlash against the Welfare state launched since the early 1970s, symbolized by the Powell Memorandum[7]
b) The religious right, mobilized with explicit electoral purposes first in 1980, with Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority", then in 1988 with Pat Robertson's "Christian Coalition"[8]

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[5] Loaeza, Soledad, "The National Action Party (PAN): From the Fringes of the Political System to the Heart of Change" in Mainwaring, Scott and Timothy R. Scully, eds., *Christian Democracy in Latin America : Electoral Competition and Regime Conflicts*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003; pp. 196-246.

[6] Faux, Jeff, *The Global Class War. How America's Bipartisan Elite Lost Our Future and What It Will Take to Win It Back,* Hoboken: John Wiley, 2006; p. 82.

[7] Available at http://reclaimdemocracy.org/corporate_accountability/powell_memo_lewis.html

[8] Martin, William, *With God on Our Side. The Rise of the Religious Right in America,* New York: Broadway Books, 1996.

c) The generous use of populism, aimed at convincing the masses of the superior democratic qualities of the market over party competition[9].

The Republican new-found strength was first decisively manifested in Ronald Reagan's victories in the early 1980s, surfing on a tidal wave of popular support[10].The Democratic administrations of Clinton (1992-200) and Obama (2008-present) have been unable to reverse the right turn in US politics that started with Reagan[11].

In sum, in all three North American countries we witness a process of gradual, sometimes uneasy amalgamation of pro-market, business right-wing and socially, religion-inspired conservative organizations. In principle, these factions have been able to coexist, to the extent that they share some core values, such as the rejection of state intervention in the private lives of people, seen both as economic and moral subjects. By the same token, they generally praise the primacy of the market over society. They are equally pessimistic about human nature, thus supporting a heavy-handed approach to the preservation of law and order as a condition for peaceful human coexistence. Finally, they pragmatically agree that they need each other to gain the necessary political momentum to win elections and thus implement public policy.

However, quite often, when it comes to putting specific public policies into practice, the different conservative right factions aim at goals that are not only incompatible with one another but end up undermining the very efficacy of these policies. In order to illustrate this paradox—political expediency destroying policy efficacy—I will briefly discuss three broad public policy areas: migration, security and trade.

**Migration Policy**

Mexican migrants into the United States have historically been an important economic factor. Since the building of

[9] Frank, Thomas, *One Market under God. Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy*, New York: Anchor Books, 2000; pp. 23-50.
[10] Faux, *The Global Class War…*; pp. 76-89.
[11] George, Susan, *Hijacking America. How the Religious and Secular Right Changed what Americans Think,* Cambridge: Polity, 2008: pp. 1-12, 243-254.

the railroads two centuries ago to intensive agriculture, retail, fast food, manufacturing and the hospitality industry today, countless business operations in the United States have relied on the supply of abundant and affordable labour flowing from the south[12]. This labour was important in the accumulation phase of these economic activities, providing a net subsidy that made these industries viable and competitive. Its importance has not waned, since "Northern capital today requires labor that is maximally cheap and exploitable—hirable at subminimum wage, without benefits or regard for regulations on overtime, health, environment or safety, and easily dispatched when not needed"[13]

Yet, despite their crucial economic importance, migrants are socially and politically rejected as undesirables. Migrants from Mexico have commonly been constructed in the United States as the epitome of the Other, as invading hordes that not only violate regulations but also abuse public services and threaten to destroy the host society's social fabric.

Demonization of migrants is, paradoxically, very politically and economically convenient to some specific interests. Many a politician[14] has built a successful career by portraying themselves as the defenders of the country's integrity against the onslaught of illegal immigration. Anti-immigrant policies also justify the preservation and continuous growth of the surveillance complex, a multi-million dollar industry paid with public monies that provides employment to thousands of officials and other employees. Both contractors and border enforcers have a vested interest in preserving and even enhancing this surveillance complex.

Most people who hire migrants and/or portray them as undesirables, all the while reaping the political and economic benefits of their presence in the United States, are Republicans or at least identify themselves with that party. Economic interest leads them in one direction, social conservatism in the opposite sense. A telling

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[12] Mize, Ronald. L. and Alicia Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labour. From the Bracero Program to NAFTA,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.

[13] Brown, Wendy, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, New York: Zone Books, 2010; p. 111.

[14] Including Tom Tancredo, Jesse Helms, John McCain, among many others.

example clearly illustrates this irony: Golden State Fence Company, a private subcontractor installing sections of the wall along the Mexico-US border mandated by the Secure Fence Act (2006), hired hundreds of undocumented workers to do the job[15].

Recently, international migration has become politicized in Canada too, as it has been reframed as a security issue[16]. Since 2006, successive Conservative governments have advanced an increasingly restrictive agenda that is changing the basic tenets of this country's migration policy. In February 2012, the Harper government introduced an omnibus bill styled "Bill C-31, Protecting Canada's Immigration Act" [17]. The new bill consolidates and strengthens partial, negotiated reforms introduced in the recent past, allegedly aimed at controlling the flow and stay in Canada of refuge claimants and deterring human smuggling into this country. Bill C-31 is adding more restrictive features, such as: a) giving the minister the ability to unilaterally determine which countries are safe and democratic, thus automatically rejecting claimants coming from those countries[18], b) speeding the refugee claim process, limiting the possibilities for investigation and appeal, c) refugee claimants who were somehow assisted to reach Canada are subject to a discriminatory treatment, accused of being complicit with human trafficking, and d) the government gives to itself the power to collect biometric information on anyone coming to Canada, either as visitor or worker, allegedly as a meausre intended at deterring future frivolous refugee claims. The parliamentary opposition sees the new bill as a betrayal of previously negotiated compromises for migration reform, aimed at ramming the government's conservative agenda now that the PCP is leading a majority government. They also accuse the government of scapegoating immigrants, without really making Canada more secure for that action.

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[15] Brown, ibid.

[16] Crépeau, François and Delphine Nakache, "Controlling Irregular Migration in Canada. Reconciling Security Concerns with Human Rights Protection" in *IRPP Choices*, vol. 12, no.1, Febrary 2006.

[17] See Cohen, Tobi, "Tories Beef up Refugee Legislation" in *Edmonton Journal*, February 17, 2012; p. A16.

[18] Notably, refugee claimants coming from Mexico and Hungary, where real dangers exist for people threatened respectively by the drug cartels and extreme right anti-Roma militias, have been turned over and even deported back to their countries of origin.

Migrants leaving Mexico are also judged under a double discourse in their country of origin. On the one hand, especially since the PAN government led by Vicente Fox, they are praised and courted as a part of the Mexican nation that provides an important economic contribution to their country of origin through to the money they send to their relatives (the so-called remittances). On the other hand, however, migrants are also seen in Mexico as a handy solution to the pressures, both real and potential, derived from the increasing abandonment to unemployment of impoverished peasants , the urban poor and, more recently, the society at large. The notion of emigration to the United States as an "escape valve" was conveniently adopted by the Mexican government to avoid defending or actually protecting migrants, other than through rhetorical references[19].

**Security Policy**

Although cooperation on security matters was not part of NAFTA's original design, 9-11 put this policy area decidedly at the centre of the North American agenda. As a result, all three governments, to different extents, implemented anti-terrorism strategies, boosted their defence expenditures and engaged into muscular illegal drug enforcement. This extraordinary diversion of public attention, institutional effort and government monies built on fear of repeated terrorist attacks instilled in the population, conservative law and order priorities, social conservative concerns about the use of drugs and a general sense of insecurity felt by many.

However, providing a sense that the government is doing something to increase people's security and safety comes at a high cost. The consequences of the security apparatus buildup are vast and alarming[20], even from a conservative point of view. There are at least three troubling developments associated with it:

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[19] Bustamante, Jorge A. "A Dialectical Understanding of The Vulnerability of International Migrants" in Castro Rea, Julián, ed., *Our North America: Social and Political Issues beyond NAFTA*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012.

[20] A comprehensive discussion of those impacts is found in Castro-Rea, Julián, "Assessing North American Politics after September 11. Security, Democracy, and Sovereignty" in Ayres, Jeffrey and Macdonald, Laura, eds., *Contentious Politics in North America: National Protest and Transnational Collaboration under Continental Integration*, London: Palgrave, 2009.

1. Exponential increase of government expenditure, which directly violates the priority of fiscal conservatives of keeping expenses and state economic intervention to a minimum. Security expenditure has reached such levels that it might soon become unsustainable, especially during this era of economic crisis[21],

2. Anti-terrorism measures resulted in important restrictions to civil rights and freedoms, promptly justified by their proponents as necessary given the emergency situation[22]. Suspension of individual freedom and the rule of law, however, should be a major concern for right-wing libertarians.

3. The death toll provoked by the drug war in Mexico has reached horrific levels. Since December 2006, it has claimed the lives of at least 47,000 people in only five years[23]. Despite the escalating militarization and violence that it creates, the drug war has had limited effects in curbing the cartels' power or actually reducing the production and distribution of illegal substances. Requests made by the Mexican government to Washington to do something to stop the traffic of guns that end in the hands of drug dealers are rebuffed with the argument that unlimited gun possession and sale is a constitutional right in the United States.

**Trade Policy**

Trade liberalization was at the centre of the launch of trilateral cooperation in North America. It was sold as a sure path to prosperity for all countries involved. The increased wealth it was supposed to produce would improve everyone's standards of living, from business people to workers. In order for that to occur, a regime of full national treatment for trade and investment was proposed, and NAFTA was a decisive step in that direction. Deregulation and tax cuts were supposed to entice

[21] Johnson, Chalmers, *Dismantling the Empire: America's Last Best Hope*, New York: Henry Holt, 2011.
[22] Castro-Rea, ibid.
[23] The government estimate of victims is 47,500 (from Dec. 2006 to Dec. 2011). Independent estimates, based on reports by federal, state and local law enforcement agencies, claim a much larger total of 60,420 for the same period; that is, an average of 12,000 deaths per year. See Mendoza Hernández, Enrique, "Cinco años de guerra, 60 mil muertos" in *Proceso*, no. 1832, Dec. 11, 2011; pp. 16-21.

corporations to invest more, to the extent that less governmental intervention was supposed to help them become more competitive and productive.

However, although these conservative dogmas were very useful excuses for the governments to shy away from implementing positive remedies to alleviate the impacts of trade liberalization, they did not live up to reality. Assumptions of automatic growth once the market was fully liberalized acted as a deterrent for government action aimed at improving distribution measures (better minimum wages, progressive fiscal regimes, and the like)[24]. Additionally, nationalism crept in, creating important exceptions to the regime of national treatment; the most blatant of which are the "Buy American" policies put in place since 2009 to stimulate economic recovery in the US.

The response that the three governments offered to the economic crisis manifested since the fall 2008 has been tepid, piecemeal, and over all ineffective. Harper's "Canada Action Plan" was discontinued after three years, leaving infrastructure works half way through at a time when the economy is not still sitting on firm grounds. Cuts to government spending, particularly in social programs, are already being made, putting the fragile economic recovery in jeopardy.

Right-wing ideologies are an obstacle to the sustained adoption of alternative approaches to economic policy making. The market is supposed to create in due time what the governments refuse to do to reboot the North American economy toward a more sustained growth, and to alleviate the urgent needs of marginalized populations across North America.

## Conclusions

The casual observer is tempted to interpret the constant policy contradictions found among right-wing, conservative political actors in North America as a clever conspiracy to achieve their goals while deceiving the public into believing they are doing something else. For example, the combination of tax cuts to corporations and wealthy individuals with out of bounds expenditure on security is so blatantly absurd that it seems guided by a hidden, unacknowledged objective. Is this apparent incoherence a

[24] Faux, *The Global Class War…*; pp. 35-37, 126-154.

cunning strategy to “starve the beast” of big government, making deep cuts inevitable once public finances are in crisis?[25]

My discussion above suggests a different, more mundane explanation: conservative actors seem to be victims of their own success in creating effective political machines, amalgamating very disparate factions under a single umbrella. These coalitions work well during election times, animated by the common goal of reaching power. Once in power, these actors feel compelled to please their different constituencies simultaneously. Yet, different conservative supporters have contrasting priorities, which sooner or later clash when the time comes to put them into concrete action, producing incoherent and ultimately ineffective policies.

Are these conservative political actors bothered by their dismal policy performance? It is highly unlikely. Looking at the sorry state of the three policy areas discussed above, and the way they fulfill political goals, we must come to the alarming conclusion that conservative actors do not seem to care about the internal coherence or the effectiveness of the policies they implement. In their view, what really matters is the political success they get, keeping their supporters content.

We witness then a clear case of what Peter Andreas once called “policy failure, political success”[26]; which has become the hallmark of conservative governance throughout North America. In the process, conservatism is wrecking North America.

[25] Maher, Stephen, “Harper Channelling Reagan with ‘Starve the Beast’ Strategy” in *Edmonton Journal* February 2, 2012; p. A21.
[26] Andreas, Peter, "US-Mexico: Open Market, Closed Borders" in *Foreign Policy*, no. 106, 1996; pp. 51-70.