

Chapter 12 – Antonio Prado, Language School Director, Puebla, Puebla

Antonio Prado is the director of the Spanish Institute of Puebla. Puebla is the capitol city of the state of the same name. There are many language schools in Mexico, catering mainly to American and Canadian students, though there are usually some European and Asian students. Many Americans study at Spanish schools in popular tourist destinations. My experience is that they usually learn how to party better than how to speak Spanish. From what I've heard about this school it appears to be the other way around. The school has won an award for excellence from UNESCO and credits from it are recognized by the Foreign Service Institute in Arlington, VA. So it is pretty safe to say that it's a top-notch school. What interests me most about it is that the mission of the school is not only to teach the language of Spanish as spoken in Mexico, it also seeks to teach foreigners to understand the culture of the Mexicans. Students live with Mexican families. So his insights into Americans and their impressions of Mexican society are particularly apt.

Antonio, what is the number one wrong impression that Americans have about the Mexican people when they first come to your school?

[He answered without hesitation]. That's easy. The biggest misconception is that a lot of students think they are going to a third-world country. They expect the Mexicans on the street to be wearing big hats and drooping moustaches, like Pancho Villa. They are expecting the stereotypical Mexican from a time before some of them were born. We get mainly college-age up to middle-aged students.

They think that all Mexicans want to go to the United States. They don't understand that those who do go to the United States not because they **want** to go, but because they **have** to.

These are people who have an interest in Mexico and a generally positive view of the country and the people to begin with. I wonder what those who dislike Mexico think.

The prospective students often ask, when told they will be living with a Mexican family – 'Will there be running water? Will there be indoor bathrooms? Will we be sharing a bathroom with other families?'

They don't really know what to expect in terms of Mexican food, or what variety it has. They expect tacos and tostadas like at Taco Bell.

Since you mentioned those Mexicans who do go north to the United States, maybe you can give us your insight on that aspect of the culture.

I think it is important to differentiate the economic class that is going to the United States. I don't think that middle-class income people want to live in the United States because they have a good lifestyle here. Besides their culture and their friends, they have

maids, gardeners and so on. I don't think you could do that in the United States. They could not have standard of living if they were living in the United States. The middle-class people love the life they have in Mexico. They love their lives. I love my life here.

In my case, I make \$65,000 a year and life is a lot better here than it would be at that same economic level in the United States.

The ones who want to go to the States are the ones who are economically suffering. [He thought for a moment before answering]. The best program the USA could have is a ten month work visa. That would be a win-win situation. The American government would know who is coming in and that those who do are not committing crimes. As it is now, a lot of people end up stuck on the border not knowing what to do. They are stuck between two countries.

The Mexicans who go north give up a lot and are not always happy. They miss their family, they miss their culture. This is what Mexico is all about. Families people can knock on their door at ten o'clock at night and they know it is perfectly safe. In the United States that's not the case.

A lot of the immigrants don't find the American dream of working hard and improving their lives to be true for them. They come back dispirited. You don't hear about those. The vocal ones, the ones with the new pickups are the ones who get the attention. But it does not work for everyone.

Can you define middle-class?

You can't. Middle class in Mexico always is going to have some kind of help in the house. A maid. In Mexico you cannot determine middle class by the amount of money you make. It is the social as well as the economical. If you look like you should be middle or upper class then you will be treated as such. Cantinflas said "The way you look is the way you will be treated." I have seen that here because although I don't know the governor, when we have been at a restaurant, twice he has come over to say hello because of the way we look.

[Cantinflas (1911-1993) was the signature character of Mario Moreno Reyes, a Mexican comedian who captured the hearts of Mexicans like no other. Charlie Chaplin called him. "the greatest comedian in the world." Others called him "the Charlie Chaplain of Mexico." Some say he represented the identity of the Mexican people onscreen. He was important in establishing Mexico as the film capitol of Latin America and in the 'golden era of Mexican film-making.' He also starred in some Hollywood films (*Around the World in Eighty Days* was one), bringing his comedic talents to American film-goers].

If you did put a dollar figure on entry to the middle-class for a family of four, it would be approximately \$10,000 - \$15,000 US dollars a year.

Is the middle class shrinking?

Ten years ago there was an increase. I think now that it is starting to go down again. I think that in the last year (2008) things have been especially hard.

Could you compare living in the United States to living in Mexico for someone of middle-class means?

Every country has its advantages and disadvantages.

There are a lot of things that are cheaper in the States like technology – computers, phones, all technology costs more in Mexico.

Everything that has to do with labor is cheaper here. For instance, a gardener gets \$25 for 5-6 hours. Here you pay a maid and cook, \$120 a week.

The middle class to upper classes are not interested in living in the United States. Their kids are going to the USA to study. It is not that the schools are in the US per se. It is that the quality of education they seek is there. Some go to Europe.

A lot of the Mexican kids who stay in the United States after graduation, it is because they marry Americans. It is 50-50 whether they will stay for good or come back in a few years. Those who come back know they will make less money but they return because of the culture. A lot of Mexicans say there is no culture in the US. That is not true it is different.

There is more civility in society here, and more stratification. People treat others according to their class. Workers will address their bosses with the formal form of “you” which is “Usted.” You can use the more informal “tu” when speaking to a worker.

Is there a fear of Americanization of Mexico?

This is true in a sense. A lot of the popular culture comes from the United States. I don't feel that Mexican society will be absorbed, but changed.

There are differences between the way people from the United States think of their pets than Mexicans do. Could you elaborate?

There are few Mexicans who have cats. They are mystical animals. Mexicans are afraid of cats. The only time you will see a pet cat is if the family has lived in the USA or is not a Mexican.

Dogs are not treated the same way in Mexico. A couple came here to study and they brought their dog. They needed a host family that could host the dog. About 4 or 5 days later, the host family was confused. The dog was like these people's kid. The Mexicans were amazed. I have had students who have brought a cat or dog. For Mexicans it is very

hard to understand. Here they look at a dog as a protector, but not in the sense that they are children.

Safety in Mexico is a big concern in the United States. While I personally have never felt unsafe in Mexico, if all I knew was what I saw on the news or read in the papers or heard about on talk radio, I would think that the entire country of Mexico is like a war zone. What can you say to that?

Most of our students are surprised at how safe they feel in Mexico compared to how they thought they would. I have been at this school for ten years. In that time we have had about 5,000 students. The worst thing that happened to any of them was that two had their pockets picked. Most Mexicans are afraid of the States from what they see on TV. My wife and I went to a Catholic Mass. There was a Black man there. My wife was afraid to shake his hand because of the negative stereotypes from movies.

The people who are committing the crimes in Mexico know who they are committing crimes against. I feel very safe and in twelve years of living in Mexico, I have never had an incident. In the USA I was broken into, my car was stolen. Here the worst that happened to me was that the mirrors from my car were stolen.

When you analyze the statistics there was a lot more crime in Mexico City than New York City, but once you analyzed the crime itself there were more people killed in New York City. In DF it was mainly pickpockets. The crime in NY there was a lot more violence.

The border is a completely different country than the interior. Even the people who cannot cross the border who are stuck there become criminals.

There were some recent, highly publicized violent episodes in the interior of Mexico, in Merida and Morelia. What can you say about them?

The incident in Morelia was very unusual. The 12 people in Merida made sense.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: On August 30, 2008 11 or 12 (depending on the news story you read) headless bodies were discovered Near Merida, Yucatan. The pragmatic comment above means that those killed were involved in drug dealings, thus it is logical that they would suffer the consequences.

On September 16, 2008 (Mexican Independence Day), 7 (or 15) people were killed by two grenades exploding in a crowded square. A friend of mine is a journalist who had recently moved to Morelia at the time. He missed being in the crowd when the explosion occurred. When asked if that made him think of leaving Mexico, he said not at all. But the implication of the attack was that it was a completely different tactic by the drug gangs to intentionally harm civilians. That Michoacán state is where President Calderón is from probably has something to do with Morelia being chosen for this demonstration

of their power. Fortunately, apart from some [probably] cartel-financed demonstrations against the army in border cities, no other episode like this has occurred.

For the purpose of this book, it shows that Antonio [and I argue, Mexicans in general] can separate the sensational from the endemic.

Was the golden age of Mexico the 1950's?

It might have changed but when I first came here ten years ago it was the first time that people could get loans at fixed rates, and could move up. Then came Fox's presidency and it helped. I think Mexico's potential is ahead of it, in the next ten years. It was just like happened in the USA in the 1980's.

Why do you think there will or won't be a devaluation?

The economy has a lot more reserves than they did at the time of the economic crises of the 1970's. I think the economy is a lot sounder than it has ever been.

What can you say about the education system?

By law every kid must go to school. Most middle income will not use public schools. There are more private schools per capita than there are in the USA, I think. Parents pay [in US dollars] \$50-\$300 a month per kid, depending on the school. Education in Mexican and Latin American private schools is better than education in high school and junior high in the States. I went to the USA in my senior year of high school after going to earlier years in El Salvador. Even the most advanced classes in school in the USA, I had already covered in El Salvador. Private education in Latin American countries is more rounded. Yet a college degree is worth more from the USA. In private school by the time you get to your junior and senior year, you take 10-11 classes instead of 6-7 in the States. You get a little bit of everything; philosophy, psychology, chemistry, physics and math, literature, Spanish, English.

There is a wide variety of quality in private education. And there is corruption that spans every area. If you give a gift you graduate.

Do you think there is less corruption now than ten years ago?

I got stopped for actually committing a traffic violation. The police officer wanted to give me a ticket not to get a bribe. I think things are more transparent. I think with the last two presidents we have had people are willing to speak out.

Corruption in the United States is at a lot higher level.

Do you believe that Mexican people are open minded?

[Without a moment's hesitation] People are more open-minded in Mexico. It is a more relaxed culture. Sixty percent of our students come from the USA. They expect certain rigid standards. They are frustrated by the cultural differences.

To accommodate the students' expectations, I implemented bonuses if teachers are on time. There is still a little latitude about time. There is no reason for me to stress about the time schedule. The stress level is not as high.

I have heard over and over again that children come first in Mexican society. Can you explain how that applies to one of your teachers and her job? For instance, if a kid is sick, what is the policy?

Yes, I have that all the time. That is one of the reasons I have to always have one teacher on call. For the first two days that a teacher says her children are ill, we just say okay with no questions asked. However by the third day, we require a doctor's certificate.

How would you feel about putting your parents into a nursing home?

It would be a disgrace. They would take it as an insult. The only people who go into a nursing home are those who have no family. The one with the worst job will quit and take care of them.

What do you know about the relationship between China and the USA?

The perception that China is causing problem with our economy started a couple of years ago because China bought all the scrap metal from Mexico and the rest of the world. Everybody was feeling it. China today produces many of the products that used to be made in Mexico. But you see that in the United States, too.

It's been said that the housing market in Mexico is growing. True?

Yes, there has been a huge increase in the market of low income housing. [AUTHOR'S NOTE: This does not translate the same as 'low-income housing' in the United States. Middle-income would probably be more appropriate]. People are starting to buy houses on credit now because they want to feel they have something. There are home loans at 13% fixed. A lot of our teachers are buying houses and cars because now they feel that they can do it. There are still variable interest loans.

What are the greatest misconceptions that Mexicans have about Americans?

When host families start working with us they are very surprised at how nice the American students are. They are amazed at how the Americans go out of their way to be nice to them. They hear how bad the American people treat the immigrants and think the whole country is anti-Mexican. They say they are shocked that their perception of Americans was so wrong. They (Americans) are such nice people. A lot of people confuse government with people.

I think Mexicans know more about Americans than Americans know about them.

Definitely an average Mexican knows more about the world than the average American. This is especially true in geography. Mexicans (in general) know more about what is going on in the world. Most Mexicans know who is running for president of the United States or France or Germany or Japan. Most Americans don't and most don't know the name of the Mexican president.

[AUTHOR'S NOTE: During the 2006 campaign for governor of Texas, at least two of the four candidates did not know the name of the president-elect of Mexico. Texas is Mexico's biggest trading partner and we mutually depend on each other economically. Texas' trade with Mexico exceeds trade with all the European Union countries combined. 38.6% of Texas' exports go to the one Mexican state of Chihuahua. So, it would seem that Antonio's statement above is justified. Source for the statistics above from a report by Texas Senator Eliot Shapleigh, <http://www.csg.org/meetings/documents/Eliot%20Shapleigh.pdf>.

END OF INTERVIEW