

Interview with Enrique Rajchengberg, Chair of the Americas



Enrique Rajchengberg's research focuses on Mexican history and economy, but also on democracy in Latin America and Mexican neoliberalism. He holds a doctorate in history and economics from the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM) and is an editorialist for the newspaper *El Día*.

What brought you to Rennes 2?

I was contacted by Jimena Obregon, President of the Institut des Ameriques (GIS: IDA-Rennes). She asked me if I might be able to participate in the Conference on Transamerican Studies. The event also coincided with the 15th anniversary of the creation of the Chair position. So that was the motivator for my visit this time around, but I have been here twice before, each time as Chair of the Americas. The first time was in 2005, which was in fact when I first started to build collaborations with staff and faculty members here at Rennes 2, and the second time was in 2011.

What can you tell readers about the Chair Program and some of the collaborative projects you've been involved in that have come as a result?

It really is an extraordinary program that allows for academics from all over Latin America to exchange with our French peers, but also with teachers and researchers who come from Canada and the United States. For those one to three months, it allows for real exchange on issues common to us all. Plus, it is also the facilitator for the development of a number of common research and teaching projects between Rennes 2 and other universities.

Throughout the years, UNAM and Rennes 2 have together on projects, and we intend to continue in this direction, but we'd also like to deepen this exchange. We are in the process of finalizing an agreement between Rennes 2 and UNAM, which is the largest university not only in Mexico, but in all of Latin America with 300,000 students. The program will likely entail different components including a student mobility exchange program between our Master students and Rennes 2, and we would like to conclude an agreement for a joint doctoral program between the two universities. My hope is that it will really be a magnificent project if we can manage it.

Of course, it will likely include an element of co-supervision and at the end of the program, students will obtain two diplomas, one from Rennes and one from the UNAM. There would also be two professors who would supervise the student's research work from beginning to end.

And so far there is no framework agreement between UNAM and Rennes 2?

Rennes 2 has agreements with other Mexican Universities but not with UNAM in particular. I was speaking with the International Relations Office about this the other day. Since I work closely with Jimena and other staff and faculty here, I'm hopeful we can reach an agreement between the two universities very soon. These kinds of agreements are like empty boxes and you have to fill them with specific projects. An agreement itself does not really launch joint initiatives but it allows you to be able to start filling the boxes. Once you have that box or legal framework, it will govern the activities that are carried out to ensure that they're not being carried out in an individual or purely pragmatic fashion. In this case, our two universities already have enough to be able to start filling this box.

Given our shared history and common interest in similar types of projects, Rennes is really a good choice for this fit. There is the IDA-Rennes and the Master of the Americas program, which the IDA is very helpful in promoting. There is also quite a bit of interest in the Americas in general. Everything that has been organized as part of the Chair program has resonated among colleagues and students alike. There is an audience ready to discuss issues related to the Americas.

Outside of the presentations and research collaborations you've been working on, while here did you give any student lectures?

Yes, I held a number of lectures for the students, similar to what I have done in the past and it goes very well. Generally, it's all very well organized in regards to the curriculum they are following. I normally am invited to lectures that are relevant for a particular aspect of the curriculum, and I think this approach works well with the interests of the students. The lectures can be given in either French or Spanish. There are times when I conduct the lectures in Spanish and take questions in French afterwards. It really depends on the students I have in front of me and how well they seem to understand the language.

Your visit here happens to coincide with the news surrounding the tense political situation in Venezuela. Given that you're a specialist in democracy in Latin America, have you received many questions on the subject?

Yesterday I had a conference at the l'Institut Etudes Politiques (IEP), and one of the questions that was raised led directly to the topic of Venezuela, the new Mexican government and the relationship and potential complications that could arise with the American government.

The reaction to these events from the Mexican government is going to be an object of interest from a historical point of view, a geopolitical point of view and a geostrategic point of view. Mexico is very much visible. The subject of Venezuela affects Mexico very closely for two reasons.

The first is that because Mexico has taken a very different position to most Latin American governments and, of course, to the American government. While all of the Latin American governments and the Trump government have recognised the President of the Assembly, Juan Guaidó, Mexico has come out in favour of non-intervention and, in any case, has offered its mediation in the conflict.

Secondly, the media repercussions surrounding the Mexican government's reaction to what's happening in Venezuela will likely be very important for Mexico's future. Taking a position on what is happening in Venezuela is like taking a position on what Mexican foreign policy will be like with the United States. That is, depending on what is said about Venezuela, it will have an impact on what happens with the United States.

And I imagine that as long as the situation continues to be tense, the question of the Mexican government's reaction will continue to be closely observed.

Yes, definitely. But I would say that it should interest us all, regardless of whether or not we're Mexican, Venezuelan, Latin American, etc. It should interest us because this conflict could turn into a kind of case that we'll end up having to come back to later, with new and similar cases. Can or should a political conflict between parties in one country lead other governments to recognize an alternative government in the country in question? Is there ever a good reason to intervene in another country's domestic policy? These are the kinds of questions we should all be asking. But clearly Mexico's stance for the moment is very different than what others are doing currently.

What are some of the research projects that you're currently working on?

We're in the process of discussing a potential project that came out of the Conference on Transamerican Studies. It would consist of putting together many of the contributions that came out of that day. We would also call for other contributions and articles related to relevant and associated topics to compile a sort of book or journal. Much like a business card, it would be a symbol of the cooperation between Rennes 2 and UNAM. We hope the project can be launched in a few months, and we envision that it would be ready for September / October.

I'd also like to be able to include another research project that I've been working on for some time which examines the relationship between Mexican and American border in the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries.

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