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Eusebio Leal Spengler on Cuba-Mexico bilateral relations from the cultural links (2000-2006)

Eusebio Leal Spengler en las relaciones bilaterales Cuba y México desde los vínculos culturales (2000-2006)

María del Carmen Iglesias Dubé¹  , Daniel Alejandro Álvarez Fernández²  

¹Instituto Superior de Relaciones Internacionales “Raúl Roa García”, Cuba.

²Comisión Nacional Cubana de la UNESCO, Cuba.

Corresponding author: María del Carmen Iglesias Dubé 

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the diplomatic work of Eusebio Leal Spengler in the bilateral relations between Cuba and Mexico during the administration of Mexican president Vicente Fox (2000-2006), focusing on his actions through cultural ties. The period under study is characterized by significant tension between both governments; however, Leal carried out intense diplomatic activity, taking advantage of his well-known prestige in Mexico to maintain and strengthen ties between the two peoples. His actions included promoting cultural exchanges, visits to the Aztec nation, and building relationships with influential Mexican figures. The results show that his work helped maintain a fluid dialogue, promote mutual understanding, and partially counteract the negative effects of governmental tensions. It is concluded that the cultural diplomacy strategy of the Historian of Havana, despite not being a career diplomat, proved effective in preserving and strengthening the links between both nations.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy; Cuba-Mexico Relations; Eusebio Leal Spengler.

RESUMEN

Esta ponencia analiza la labor diplomática de Eusebio Leal Spengler en las relaciones bilaterales entre Cuba y México, durante el sexenio del presidente mexicano Vicente Fox (2000-2006), enfocándose en su accionar a través de los vínculos culturales. El período estudiado se caracteriza por una significativa tensión entre ambos gobiernos, pero a pesar de esto, Leal desplegó una intensa actividad diplomática, aprovechando su reconocido prestigio en México para mantener y fortalecer los lazos entre ambos pueblos. Sus acciones incluyeron la promoción de intercambios culturales, visitas al país azteca y la construcción de relaciones con figuras mexicanas influyentes. Los resultados muestran que su labor contribuyó a mantener un diálogo fluido, a promover la comprensión mutua y a contrarrestar en cierta medida, los efectos negativos de las tensiones gubernamentales. Se concluye que la estrategia de diplomacia cultural del Historiador de la Habana, sin ser un diplomático de carrera, demostró ser eficaz para preservar y fortalecer los nexos entre ambas naciones.

Palabras clave: Diplomacia Cultural; Relaciones Cuba-México; Eusebio Leal Spengler.

INTRODUCTION

All countries have prominent figures who go down in history for all they have done for their own country. These are people who, with humility, build, found, and leave their descendants the fruits of their sacrifice and dedication. Cuba has Eusebio Leal Spengler (Cremata, 2018).

Leal, as successor to Dr. Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, was appointed director of the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana (OHCH) in 1967. At that time, he took on, together with a group of collaborators, the task of reconstructing the Palace of the Captains General and re-establishing the City Museum. This was the first of all the projects undertaken by the OHCH as part of its work to rescue the heritage of the historic center. At the end of the 20th century, Leal led one of the most dynamic development projects in Cuba, combining a monumental restoration task with a profoundly social one that transformed the lives of those living in the restored spaces.

He devoted his life to defending the highest values of our nation's identity. In addition to his exemplary work as a historian, he was also a politician and educator. Leal transcended the boundaries of cultural management, becoming a reference point for civic ethics and a symbol of Cuban identity.

One of the many functions we can identify in his work is his involvement in foreign policy activities. In this sense, he rendered a significant service to his country as an ambassador of Cuban culture. He was a messenger of the truth about Cuba and the Revolution, carrying it and defending it in all the forums and countries he visited, knowing how to overcome prejudices to masterfully convince many who were confused (Gómez, 2022).

One of the countries where Leal did profound and important work as a promoter of transnational cultural dialogue was Mexico. He was closely linked to that country, both for professional reasons and because of the fraternal ties he shared with various Mexican figures, including political personalities and the people of this Aztec land (Resik & Hernández, 2023).

It is important to note that Leal's friendship and solidarity with Mexico did not remain mere words or rhetoric but translated into concrete actions in line with the responsibilities he held. In these roles, he worked tirelessly to achieve his goals, incorporating his usual tenacity and clarity of purpose. These actions had a greater impact during the period 2000-2006, even though policies of distancing fragmented bilateral relations at the governmental level.

During this period, Eusebio became one of the key figures in the Cuban diplomatic mission's efforts to strengthen cultural relations between Cuba and Mexico. This work garnered strong support from the Mexican intellectual and cultural sectors for the Cuban Revolution.

From his position as a Cuban intellectual and president of the Cuban-Mexican Society for Cultural Relations from 1996 onward, he facilitated cultural rapprochement between the two peoples. His heritage restoration work strengthened his relations with Mexicans, who saw it as a paradigm. For this reason, they defended this process from the perspective of cultural heritage conservation and management, taking it on as a means of cultural cooperation.

In this regard, he made several visits to Mexican institutions to provide technical advice on the restoration and preservation of historic centers. One of the most significant places for him was the city of Morelia in the state of Michoacán, a place with which he felt a strong connection

and where he helped its citizens and institutions obtain recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Leal, 2004b).

In support of the promotion of historical and cultural expressions between the two nations, he was responsible for receiving officials, academics, businesspeople, and personalities from Mexican civil society in Cuba. He also participated in cultural and educational events dedicated to Mexico. In many of these events, he gave speeches that consistently highlighted the common history of these two peoples, interpreting their relations as deeply rooted, essential, and indivisible (Resik & Hernández, 2023).

The study of the figure of the City Historian is vital because he was a man who, throughout his career, was closely linked to Cuba's foreign policy. In addition, he was always in favor of patriotism, history, Cuban culture, and fostering relations based on respect and cooperation with other nations, specifically Mexico. Cuban academia has studied Eusebio Leal's work as a historian and restorer of Old Havana. However, there is little work on his diplomatic career, specifically in relations between Cuba and Mexico.

For all the reasons mentioned above, this study aims to evaluate the diplomatic work of Dr. Eusebio Leal Spengler in cultural relations between Cuba and Mexico during the six-year term of Mexican President Vicente Fox (2000-2006).

DEVELOPMENT

Bilateral relations between Cuba and Mexico reached their lowest point politically. However, it is important to examine how cultural relations between the two nations were established during the period under study. This will provide a better understanding of what was being done and how the figure of the City Historian became a fundamental pillar of the cultural boom at that time.

For her, two fundamental issues guaranteed the task. The first was the Agreement on Cultural and Educational Cooperation between the Government of the United Mexican States and the Government of the Republic of Cuba, signed on September 26, 1964, which was in force at the time. This agreement, legally and judicially set out, established the principles, rules, and procedures that, by mutual agreement between the parties, governed collaboration in the cultural field during this period. In other words, if, due to tensions at the governmental level, the Executive did not invite Cuba to important cultural activities in the country, such as the Book Fair, this document could be invoked so as not to abandon work in the field of culture (M. Ruiz, personal communication, October 3, 2023).

The second important factor in promoting this cultural work between Cuba and Mexico was the intention to diversify this rapprochement with all the states and municipalities of the country. Although the National Autonomist Party (PAN) was in power during this period, at the level of middle-ranking officials, such as heads of state governments and mayors, many delegates from the Institutional Revolutionary Party and the Party of the Democratic Revolution sympathized with Cuba. This translated into significant assistance, which opened doors for the island to organize events in those states and to participate in large events with massive public attendance, where it could share with other countries and promote Cuba's image (M. Ruiz, personal communication, October 3, 2023).

Actions based on Eusebio Leal's cultural ties with Mexico (2000-2003)

Between 2000 and 2001, Eusebio Leal joined the Mexico Task Force, set up by the Ministry of Culture, which further strengthened ties between the two nations. During these years, as part of his role as Director of the Office of the Historian, he dedicated time to meeting with officials from various sectors of the Mexican government who were interested in learning about the restoration work underway in the historic center. For this reason, he received the new ambassador appointed to Cuba, His Excellency Mr. Ricardo A.

Pascoe Peirce (2000), with whom he toured Old Havana, accompanied by Mr. Melquíades Morales Flores, Governor of the state of Puebla. His meeting with Ms. Leticia Perlesca Núñez (2001), Director General of the Veracruz Institute of Culture, accompanied by Commander of the Revolution Juan Almeida Bosque, was important. He demonstrated to her the need to promote, through culture, a rapprochement between the Cuban state and the most significant Mexican sectors, which led to subsequent collaboration projects. In addition, the visit of Mr. Luis Morales Reyes (2001), President of the Episcopal Conference of Mexico, proved to be remarkable because it brought Eusebio and, consequently, the Cuban government closer to this religious sector, which later demonstrated its support for the island (Carranza, 2012).

Leal used his skills as a speaker and historian to participate in events that promoted the values of Mexican history and culture, thereby strengthening existing ties. The opening ceremonies of the Mexican cultural days in Cuba, held at institutions in Old Havana's historic center, were important events that underscored the twinning of Old Havana and Mexico City. At these events, Leal emphasized the bonds of friendship and cooperation that unite the two historic sites, both listed as World Heritage Sites.

He spoke at the unveiling of the statue of Benito Juárez donated by the Governor of Oaxaca to the Benemérito de las Américas House (2001), which symbolizes the highest expression of confidence in that center as a tireless promoter of Mexican culture. He also participated in the unveiling of the plaque at the San Francisco Pier, commemorating the departure of Fidel and the members of the July 26 Movement to Mexico (2000). He joined in the activities celebrating the 12th anniversary of the founding of the Benito Juárez House, as well as the 37th anniversary of the Cuban-Mexican Cultural Relations Society, of which he was still president.

In 2000, he traveled to the Casa Lamm Cultural Center to give a keynote lecture on the comprehensive restoration of Old Havana, and the following year, he traveled to Guadalajara for the first time at the invitation of the José Martí Chair at the University of Mexico and the Julio Cortázar Chair at the University of Guadalajara. There, he gave other keynote lectures, such as "The restoration of the Historic Center of Old Havana: a work of historical and social significance," and chaired the Honorary Committee of the First Ibero-American Meeting of Museums and Historic Centers, Community and Education. He also had the honor of delivering the inaugural lecture at the ceremony in Madrid for the presentation of the First Reina Sofía International Prize for the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage to Her Excellency Sarí Bermúdez, President of the National Council for Culture and the Arts of Mexico, which demonstrates the international prestige achieved by Leal in the fields of restoration and conservation of cultural heritage. This is a sign of his connection with Mexico and the recognition he has received from various sectors of Mexican society (Carranza, 2012).

In 2002, Leal's work took on a frenetic pace as he set out to rescue the fractured bilateral relations through cultural ties. In addition to his traditional activities, this year saw some

notable moments in which his actions in the cultural sphere became more visible.

From February 13 to 16, 2002, he traveled to Mexico to advise the Advisory Council on the rescue of Mexico City. There, he gave a lecture entitled “The Spirit of the Cuban Nation” at the Matías Romero Institute of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Within this framework, he held important meetings with Arturo Montiel, Governor of the State of Mexico; Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Head of the Federal District Government; and the Secretary of the Episcopal Conference, among other high-ranking dignitaries. He also pointed out that, rather than teaching, he went to learn and draw on the Mexican experience.

During Vicente Fox’s visit to Havana, Eusebio Leal was part of the delegation that accompanied the Mexican president and Commander-in-Chief, Fidel Castro Ruz, on their tour of Old Havana’s historic center. This trip, which took place within the framework of the centenary of bilateral relations between Cuba and Mexico, was used by Fox in a ceremony at the Palace of the Captains General to award the City Historian with the Mexican Order of the Aztec Eagle, in the degree of band, the highest distinction that country grants to foreigners.

According to Fox: Leal’s work in promoting friendship between the two countries has been exemplary. He has stood out for his remarkable willingness to engage with Mexican political life and culture, not only from the intellectual perspective of an academic, but mainly from the emotional closeness of a man committed to the values shared by Cubans and Mexicans. (El Norte, 2002, p. 1)

Eusebio, for his part, stated that: ...with extraordinary simplicity, I would like to accept the great honor that the Mexican nation offers to the work we have been doing...I am happy that this is happening today and in this space, before the man whose life and work made mine possible, Fidel Castro. (El Norte, 2002, p. 1)

Eusebio Leal’s participation in the inauguration of His Excellency Lázaro Cárdenas Batel as governor of the state of Michoacán was an act of his deep loyalty to Mexico, especially to that state, which fascinated him. It was also an important moment for him because Morelia was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, a goal to which Leal made significant contributions.

During that trip, the Morelia City Council presented him with the keys to the city from the state’s constitutional governor, in what was his first official act as Michoacán’s leader. After receiving them, Eusebio pointed out that the task of being there was precisely due to the commitment to continue the policy of cultural exchanges between both cities and with a country that had always been a great moral support for Cuba. At the end of his speech, he said: “...any idea of development that leaves culture aside will only achieve commercial superficiality.” (Galván, 2002) Once again, he highlighted the importance of culture in rescuing and, above all, in strengthening relations with other peoples, as in the case of Mexico.

The 16th Guadalajara International Book Fair, held in December 2002, was one of the most significant moments in the cultural policy implemented by the embassy. According to Fernando Garza, mayor of Guadalajara, the Mexican people were able to see firsthand the advances and quality of Cuban culture, which brought the best of its production and relevant personalities. Without a doubt, this fair raised the bar for cultural exchange (Smith, 2002).

One of the figures who participated and stood out notably was Dr. Eusebio Leal Spengler.

He gave several keynote lectures at different Mexican institutions, participated in exhibition openings, and presented awards to the winners of the 8th Architecture and Heritage Competition at the 2002 International Book Fair (ARPAFIL).

At the end of this period, in 2003, Eusebio Leal, as part of his traditional activities, held meetings with people from both the academic and cultural spheres. In this case, he received Mr. Juan Carlos Nolté, Coordinator of Institutional Collaboration at the Autonomous University of Mexico, and Ms. María Luisa Armendáriz, director of the Guadalajara Book Fair.

His work on the international stage was reflected in the trip he took that year. He was part of the Cuban delegation that attended the Meeting of Intellectuals in Defense of Humanity, where he presented 14 of the 50 volumes that make up Antonio Núñez Jiménez's work "Cuba, Nature, and Man" at Casa Lamm.

On the national level, as he did every year, he spoke at the ceremony marking another anniversary of the Cuban-Mexican Society for Cultural Relations at Casa Benito Juárez. He also attended the grand cultural gala celebrating Mexico's 192nd anniversary of independence at the Karl Marx Theater. He participated in a tribute held in Fraternity Park before the bust of Father Hidalgo.

Actions based on Eusebio Leal's cultural ties with Mexico (2004-2006)

The year 2004 was another significant moment in Eusebio Leal's diplomatic work regarding his relationship with whom he considered "the older brother." At a time when diplomatic relations between Cuba and Mexico were limited to the level of *chargé d'affaires*, Leal intensified his efforts and trips to the Aztec country to avoid losing the cultural ties that had always prevailed.

The first of the most important actions was the invitation to participate in the Ibero-American Congress on Heritage, Culture, Development, and Tourism in Morelia. As he almost always did, he gave two keynote speeches, one on the last day of the event and the other at the Faculty of Architecture of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). It was precisely this institution of higher learning that paid him tribute. He received the Manuel Tolsá Medal from Felipe Leal, director of the Faculty, who said: "This award is not gratuitous, nor is it the result of friendship; it is the decision of two collegiate bodies made up of professors and students, who today pay a well-deserved tribute to a Cuban intellectual whose work has universal significance." (Pérez, 2004, p. 1).

The other crucial moment that Leal took advantage of to strengthen the bonds of friendship between the two peoples was his visit to Mexico City to make a special presentation of *Opus Habana* magazine at the Casa Lamm Cultural Center. This event had great significance in the intellectual and cultural sphere of Mexican society, as it inaugurated an exhibition of artistic works created expressly for the covers of this publication.

This exhibition confirmed that *Opus Habana* is a benchmark for critics and promoters of Cuban art. Works by renowned figures such as Roberto Fabelo, Zaida del Río, and other young artists, including Ernesto Rancáño and Agustín Bejarano, stood out, promoting Cuba's cultural and artistic expressions in this sister country. Leal also took the opportunity to give interviews to the press in that city, highlighting that this event was made possible by the fraternity between the cultural sectors of both countries.

The highlight of this trip came the following day, when the Historian of the City of Havana received the diploma accrediting him as a Corresponding Member of the Mexican Academy of Language. This event had a great impact, as Cuba had not had a representative in the respected Aztec institution since the death of writer Raimundo Lazo in 1977. In an official letter, the Secretary of the Academy, Don Salvador Díaz Cíntora, stated: "I am sure that this appointment will contribute to strengthening the cultural ties between our country and the great island from which the Spanish language came to us" (Colección Facticia, 2004). This appointment served to confirm Eusebio Leal as a symbol of cultural relations between Cuba and Mexico.

As bilateral relations between Cuba and Mexico during 2005 and 2006 were not particularly significant, Eusebio Leal's work was not as intense. However, he undoubtedly maintained his goal of promoting closer ties between the governments through good cultural relations.

To promote historical and cultural exchanges between these countries, he participated in cultural and educational events. Examples of these include: the Mexican cultural gala and ceremony for the Grito de Dolores in the amphitheater of Old Havana (2006), the inauguration of the postgraduate course Mexico, History and Culture (2006), and the photographic exhibition "Raíces" (2005), held at the Casa Benito Juárez. In addition, as Director of the Office of the Historian, he supported the cultural day for Mexico's 195th anniversary of independence. He spoke at a friendly meeting between the two countries held at the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP) (2005).

To maintain bilateral relations in cultural matters, he met with many Mexican personalities who expressed interest in visiting the historic center. , to name a few, held meetings with Mr. Armando Tamez Moreno (2005), Treasurer of the Nuevo León Society of History, Geography, and Statistics of Monterrey, Mexico; Mr. Roberto Carballo Díaz (2005), Director of the Hotel Posada Maya, of the real estate company Caminos del Mayab S.A de C.V of Mexico; Gilberto Limón Enríquez, Chargé d'Affaires of the Mexican Embassy, and His Excellency José Ignacio Piña Rojas (2005 and 2006), Ambassador of Mexico (Carranza, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that the main actions of Eusebio Leal's diplomatic work in cultural ties during bilateral relations between Cuba and Mexico during Vicente Fox's six-year term (2000-2006) were: welcoming Mexican dignitaries, participating in national events on Mexican issues, and taking part in official visits.

Dr. Eusebio Leal Spengler emerged as one of the key figures in this process from his position as president of the Cuba-Mexico Friendship Society in Cultural Relations and as head of the Cuba-Mexico Parliamentary Friendship Group.

It was identified that, through his diplomatic work based on cultural ties with Mexico, he achieved a greater scope for his objectives. In these six years, his practice of welcoming Mexican dignitaries increased approximately fivefold compared to all those received during the 1990s. This demonstrated Cuba's senior leadership's, and Leal's in particular, willingness to foster a more direct rapprochement with all sectors of Mexican society. The City Historian represented a channel of access for these individuals to the Cuban government during years when relations at the governmental level were tense.

His official visits to Mexico went from four during Ernesto Zedillo's six-year term (1994-2000)

to at least one trip per year during Fox's administration (2000-2006). There were years, such as 2002 and 2004, when, despite heightened tensions in bilateral relations, Leal made 7 official visits. In all of them, and especially in those years, he carried out a series of actions aimed at strengthening cultural and political ties between the two nations.

Eusebio not only attached importance to international activities, but also to participating in national events related to Mexican issues. In this sense, his presence at these events as president of the Cuba-Mexico Friendship Society for Cultural Relations confirmed his commitment to promoting Mexican culture in Cuba and the historical ties that united it with the Cuban people. This shows that his diplomatic actions based on cultural relations between Cuba and Mexico increased during the period analyzed.

This study demonstrated that Eusebio Leal's diplomatic efforts, grounded in cultural ties, contributed to improving bilateral relations between Cuba and Mexico during the Vicente Fox administration. It showed that, without being a career diplomat, his work was very valuable in preventing the traditional ties between Cuba and Mexico from reaching a lower level. His role as an ambassador of Cuban culture became necessary at that difficult juncture and contributed to strengthening ties between the two countries.

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Formal analysis: María del Carmen Iglesias Dubé, Daniel Alejandro Álvarez Fernández.
Research: María del Carmen Iglesias Dubé, Daniel Alejandro Álvarez Fernández.
Methodology: María del Carmen Iglesias Dubé, Daniel Alejandro Álvarez Fernández.
Project management: María del Carmen Iglesias Dubé, Daniel Alejandro Álvarez Fernández.
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Supervision: María del Carmen Iglesias Dubé, Daniel Alejandro Álvarez Fernández.
Validation: María del Carmen Iglesias Dubé, Daniel Alejandro Álvarez Fernández.
Visualization: María del Carmen Iglesias Dubé, Daniel Alejandro Álvarez Fernández.
Writing - original draft: María del Carmen Iglesias Dubé, Daniel Alejandro Álvarez Fernández.
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