What a Ph.D. with Jorge Dominguez Does to You

May 8th, 2015

Viridiana Rios

Conference to Celebrate the Contributions of Jorge I. Dominguez. Harvard University

CEO of Mexico Como Vamos and Research Fellow of The David Rockefeller Center for International Studies, Mexico (vrios@post.harvard.edu)
Chapter 1

It is weird what a Ph.D. with Jorge Dominguez does to you.

To begin with, it makes you warm and enduring.

It all begins the minute he receives you at his office. He talks to you in the most refined Spanish you’d ever hear. He ask you how was the move. You are excited. You are young. And naive. You start babbling:

“Prof. Dominguez, I am so excited to be here. Being at Harvard is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me. I cannot wait to see the snow, I’d never seen the snow, I think I’d love it. Imagine months of snow. All white. How beautiful it will be. I like the cold. Mexico City sometimes get cold too.”

Jorge Dominguez smiles. He knows you do not know what a Massachusetts winter is.

His advice is wise and profound: Young lady, he says, get a coat. A good one.

So, I did.

I got a coat.

It was that coat the one that was with me during my five Cambridge winters. The one that saw me wait for the bus crying because, it turns out, I discovered, that when winter is at its peak and wind blows, your body reacts by crying. You are OK, but your body is
crying. It is telling you. Return home. Go back to the normal colds of Mexico City. But no, you clean your tears and ride the bus. You came to stay and finish. PhD is just starting.

There it is. Jorge’s mentorship makes you warm and enduring.

Chapter 2

Getting a Ph.D. with Jorge makes you humble and eager.

I thought I had understood Darwin’s The Origin of Species at high school. Clearly I had not. It was only next to Jorge that I understood what being an inferior specie really meant. Gosh! Could somebody please explain to me, how many words per minute can Jorge Dominguez read? How many emails can Jorge answer per day? How many topics can Jorge intelligently talk about? How many arguments can Jorge elegantly dismantle with a single question? How many book chapters can Jorge write per academic term?

Those that mistakenly had concluded that humans only use 10% of their brain, clearly did not have Jorge Dominguez at their research sample.

There it is. Jorge’s mentorship makes you humble and eager. Humble to realize how much you need to learn, eager to do it.

Chapter 3

Getting a Ph.D. with Jorge makes you bold and defiant.

It was 2008 when I started thinking I should research the political economy of Mexico’s Drug War. I was afraid. Not much of drug traffickers but of political scientists. Crime was not an orthodox topic of comparative politics. Mexico was a single-country sample. Official crime statistics were co-founded with state presence. Criminals hidden for a living. They didn’t answer surveys. They didn’t go to the lab. Assuming I survive the drug war, I thought, chances are I won’t survive Tuesday’s Latin Americanist seminar.

Jorge Dominguez listened to all my concerns. His advice was brutal and daring: Go for it.
So I did.

I studied Mexico’s Drug War. I started asking questions. I became the mentoree of an experienced US-Mexico border journalist (to my understanding, the only way to survive the drug war). I learned formal modeling (to my understanding, the only way to survive the Latin Americanist seminar). It was Jorge who made me realized that social science was not a topic but a way of thinking. Next to him I understood the power of a precise argument, the effectiveness of a pungent question, and the strength of a clever claim. There it is. Jorge’s mentorship makes you bold and defiant. Bold to pursue your research project, defiant towards the cannons of comparative politics.

Chapter 4

Getting a Ph.D. with Jorge makes you confident and innovative.

July of 2010. Fully immersed into studying the drug war, I wrote to Jorge from the US-Mexico border:

“I am getting very unsettled about my research. Everybody is talking about drug trafficking now. What if, by the time my papers start coming out, I just say what everybody already known. What if all publish before me, what if, what if... The email kept going.”

Jorge Dominguez listened to all my concerns. His advice was sound and sensible: Relax.

So, I did.

I relaxed. It was Jorge Dominguez who taught me it was more important to be accurate and creative, than to be the first. It was he who encouraged me to look at the other angle. To search for tunnels where others were looking for bridges. It was he who gave allowed me to trust myself, to believe in my work. To dare to say it the other way. To stand by it. There it is. Jorge’s mentorship makes you confident and innovative. Confident that you have something to say, innovative because the first step to innovate is believe that it is possible.

Chapter 5
Getting a Ph.D. with Jorge makes you feel secure and protected.

“Elections are tomorrow in Juarez” I wrote to Jorge one morning from the border “I am fine but journalist have just stop going to the streets. I am not going into the rural areas of Chihuahua because my Mexican contact, the photographer, told me that he just does not feel right about it. I did not either. I did not sleep well thinking about it. Nobody knows how traffickers will react during the election. Juarez is in war. Mexico is fighting a war without resources. Military break into private houses to steal food and fans. Policemen complaint of having to buy their own bullets. They steal the bodies that find at the street”

That afternoon, I started being followed. Man approached me. Showed me they knew about me. And left. I emailed Jorge. I became really scared. “I need Harvard SOS to pick me up at my hotel” I wrote “Please, call somebody at Harvard. I need you to pick me up and take me into the US. I am afraid of taking a taxi”

But this time, Jorge Dominguez did not answer. There was only silence. Until, my phone rang.

At the other line, there was a former student of Jorge Dominguez. A high-level official at Mexico’s department of the interior. I believe Jorge had reached him. Cross to El Paso, his student said. He instructed me on how to get to the border. He stayed with me at the line until I got there. It was his voice, the voice of a Jorge Dominguez’s student, the one that soothe me. The one that kept me connected and secure.

There it is. Jorge’s mentorship makes you secure and protected. Secure because you know Jorge is always there, protected because he is there in one or another way.

Prof. Dominguez,

Thank you.

Thank you for teaching all of those who are here to be warm, enduring, humble, eager, bold, defiant, confident and innovative, all while making us feel secure and protected. I am
not exaggerating when I say one cannot ask for a better mentor.

The last time I saw you at your office, when I had finished my PhD and I was going back home, you gave me a simple advice: Enjoy.

I am happy to tell you, I am enjoying.

The think tank I direct, Mexico Como Vamos, keeps doing what I always did next to you. Link academic knowledge with real topics. Discuss sharply about the direction of Mexico.

I do not study the drug war anymore because the real war must be one to create prosperity for all Mexicans (not just for a few). So, I am doing it.

I am doing my homework. Publishing my papers (but I am not doing a book)

You are part of my daily life in many different ways. Actually, mom still talks about your words at commencement (every Christmas).

Thank you Prof. Dominguez. Thank you for doing this to me and to all of us.