

# “Cultural Diversity is Under Attack”

## An interview with Congressman Juan José Bremer

*Juan José Bremer is the new chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Mexican House of Representatives. A former director of the Institute of Fine Arts who earned high marks for handling sensitive issues in the country's artistic community, Mr. Bremer was also vice-minister for Cultural Affairs before his election to the House. Since then, one of the main issues he has taken up is the explanation of cultural differences between Mexico and the United States, differences that often get in the way of mutual understandings. Amidst important debates concerning bilateral relations in the present legislative session, Congressman Bremer spoke with VOICES OF MEXICO's Director, Mariclaire Acosta, and its Editor, Arturo Arias. Excerpts:*

**You participated in the Mexico-United States interparliamentary meeting. How would you define relations between the two countries?**

Relations between our two countries have a history that we cannot disregard, and are highly dynamic and complex. After all, we share the only existing border between the developed world and underdeveloped countries. Nonetheless, and despite the difficulties this implies, new factors are constantly appearing that are necessary to our daily coexistence as well as to the exchange of goods and cultural aspects. There are 2 million crossings over our mutual border each year, and this is something we need to keep in mind. We face the challenge of analyzing this process and of getting to know it. At the turn of the century and during its early decades there were still voids in the relations between our two countries, but now these spaces no longer exist. This is something else that requires attention.

**From what you've said, Mr. Congressman, what should be the basis governing relations between the two states?**

Total respect for the specific nature of each

country should be the core premise underlying Mexico-U.S. relations. We must be capable of accepting the fact that we're diverse societies with different histories and cultural patterns. Recognition of the diversity of each society means respecting each one's development model and renouncing imposition, or the pretense of imposing your own model.

**It has been said that socio-cultural premises differ between our two countries. For example, North American society seems to have little sense of history, unlike ours. In our society the group prevails over the individual, which in the U.S. is to the contrary. Social relations in the United States are more competitive, ours are more solidary. All of this would seem to mean that when we speak of a people's right to free self-determination, they understand one thing and we another. Do you tend to agree with this?**

Yes, I do, and this touches on the special subject of misunderstandings in our relations. I'm not referring to deliberate distortions, which would be another chapter of the relationship. I'm speaking of different cultural codes, of a semantic problem between us. Neither society can be simplified, both are diverse and complex. Both are multicultural nations, though not multinational states. But they're both definitely multicultural. Thus, both nations contain different expressions and debates, different worlds, even. If both our nations refuse to be simplified or schematized, it would be foolish to try to schematize and simplify our relations.

I feel there's a challenge in all of this, a challenge to our capacity for knowledge and analysis. Only by standing up to this challenge can we more clearly define our attitudes on many aspects of our relations. Mexico's overall policy is very clear: respect for self-determination, the defense of our legitimate national interests and the assurance of our own guide to development. But there are numerous other issues that must be analyzed in their specificity: the flow of migratory workers, border-area coexistence and new



problems arising from cultural inter-relation, just to mention a few that require further study.

There's something we find particularly interesting. We've been at several bi-national meetings recently where we've found the basic premise to be that we have to understand each other better in order to improve our relations. Yet it always happens that we end up discussing Mexico's problems and never talk about the problems of the United States. It would seem that North Americans have to understand Mexicans, but that we can't touch on the problems of the U.S. Do you think this is the case?

Economic asymmetry must be faced clearly. It's an asymmetry of power present in everything, including cultural aspects. International news agencies propagate more the so-called First World's view of what happens on our planet than the view of other developing worlds concerning contemporary life. No doubt powerful economic instruments have a role in the large means of communication, and you can easily recognize the importance of imposing a certain world view on the planet as a whole. This is a tremendously big challenge and a starting point we have to work with.

Another important topic in our relations has to do with how we understand nationalism. Highly developed nations tend to disqualify the nationalism of developing countries as an infantile, primary, schematic and demagogic expression which is historically outdated. I believe this is one of the great issues of our time, but there's a lot of confusion surrounding it. In the first place, there's absolutely no contradiction between nationalism and internationalism if neither concept is understood objectively and neither has been manipulated to serve power interests. On the other hand, we should make an historical distinction between two different types of nationalism. The first type has been expressed in powerful societies and is marked

by ideas of ethnic or cultural supremacy. It's aggressive, belligerent and exclusive, and has always been the source of international conflict through acts of conquest or violations of international law. It has also been the seed of the century's world wars and opposes all international community spirit.

But another type of nationalism has been emerging during the XX Century, one which is a path for the confirmation of societies whose history is different from that of the great western power centers. These societies have characteristics of their own that define their specific identities, and they justly defend the cultural crossbreeding that has produced them. This is a type of nationalism that defends national sovereignty and doesn't seek to impose its own cultural patterns and forms of political organization on others in the belief that they're superior. Quite the contrary. This type of nationalism is the basis for a real understanding of what the international community is or should be: a real community devoid of distortions and demagogic elements, one whose roots are healthy.

I believe that one of the main characteristics of our planet is its diversity. There is biological and cultural diversity, and its defense in the world is an essential part of contemporary humanism. There's no denying that today cultural diversity is being attacked by the uniforming phenomenae generated by market-oriented industrialized societies who need to create standardized behaviour patterns that can be applied to different population groups. This trend is eroding the diversity of groups, of nations, of regional cultures and even of individuals.

Some think that trying to defend cultural identity is romantic, nostalgic or demagogic. But I think there's an error of interpretation in this line of thought. In the first place, it's not a defense. It's an affirmation of an identity that is part of a nation. In the second place, a nation's identity, just like that of an individual, is in a constant



Photo by Renzo Gótsoli

Congressman Bremer talking with VOICES' Mariclaire Acosta and Arturo Arias.



process of evolution. Identity is not something that remains unchanged throughout history, since history itself is never still. Identity is always a fluent and dynamic process that surges and develops on the basis of historic memory. A nation without a memory loses its spinal cord. In the same way, identity implies a consciousness of the present, a factor that obviously links up with historic memory. Finally, the constant stimulus of creativity substantiates identity as a process.

And, naturally, Mexico-U.S. relations are situated within this framework.

Yes, they are, they're in this framework despite the fact that economic relations are the most publicized topic these days. Yet even if the economy is the great subject of the decade, this still doesn't mean it's not part of this broader field we've been talking about. Nations grow and develop as a result of their interrelation with each other. It has been said that the West's great cultural developments were produced by a mingling with other cultures. Christianity is a good example of this, for as we well know, it is not originally a product of the west. Neither is the gothic, which is a consequence of the first renaissance, the one before the Tuscan renaissance. It was brought to Europe by the Crusades, the great connector of the Atlantic world with the essence of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Thus, there's no contradiction between a universalist world view and the healthy assertion of a society's own values. This is why I am so insistent on the subject of recognizing diversity. In this attitude there is none of the immature reaction that comes from an inferiority complex. Rather, it's the conviction that the human spirit can be expressed and fulfilled from different perspectives which are an enormously enriching aspect of universal culture.

Are these values you're talking about found in the Mexican people?

Well, large sectors of our population also have a colonized mentality. What do I mean by this? It's the uncritical devotion to anything coming from the outside as well as the uncritical underrating of what comes from our own country. This is what characterizes the colonized mentality, and it's also why we must demand an objective analysis of our own values as well as of those of other countries. But in order to do this we must first shake off colonization.

In this context we can see how relations between Mexico and the United States are reflected in various ways throughout the different layers of our population. Thus, I would like to mention some ingredients that should be present in our relations with the U.S. in the future. First, a full-fledged rescue of the concept of patriotism as a sense of clear and consistent defense of our national interests and values. Only from these can we establish power relations with the wealthiest nation on Earth. Second, we must make a great effort to be objective, because

we tend to sway between handing ourselves over completely and outright immature rejection. We must establish a firm, intelligent adult relationship beyond these harmful extremes, one capable of detecting which are the national-interest issues appearing in the new interrelationships.

Don't you think a profound examination of our identity and a broad debate among Mexicans are necessary so that all this objectivity and patriotism result from a process that for the most part we carry out ourselves?

It is fundamental to evaluate our own interest in greater self-knowledge and to further study Mexico-United States relations. These are both challenges for our country's institutions of higher education. An exchange of points of view among specialists, intellectuals and those interested in going into our mutual relations in greater depth must be stimulated. Likewise, foreign affairs research institutes should feed into our foreign policy decision-making centers, because it often happens that these efforts are lost because they're not linked to political decision-making. I believe this is essential.

Is it possible to apply economic formulas designed for other societies to our country?

We haven't touched on cultural subjects as a means of avoiding economics. I've been speaking of our social and cultural diversity in order to highlight how these factors have a decisive impact on our development model. Consequently, this is precisely why it's not possible for others to give us economic recipes that may be effective in the U.S. but cannot function in our society for obvious reasons. A quick mention of these reasons would include international aspects, for example, meaning Mexico's position in the world. Another would be our level of development, which is different from that of the United States. Finally, and this is what I have most gone into, our country's specific cultural and social roots.★



Drawing by Alberto Beltrán