

"WE HAVE OUR OWN INTERESTS"

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An interview with Sergio Aguayo.

Recently, conflicting points of view between the United States and Mexico on questions such as Central America, migrant labor and drug-smuggling have brought relations between the two countries to an all-time low. Here, the ensuing attacks on Mexico in the U.S. media have led some people to believe that not only are we misunderstood by our big neighbor to the north, but that there may actually be a campaign to make Mexico look bad in the eyes of the U.S. public. To assess such matters, VOICES OF MEXICO's Rafael Azuela met with Sergio Aguayo, one of the country's leading experts on Mexico-U.S. relations and a Senior Researcher at the Center for International Studies of El Colegio de Mexico. Excerpts:

What are the basic characteristics of how Mexico is viewed in the U.S.?

The U.S. regards us through the prism of its own interests, and these have undergone changes throughout the years. So, over time the U.S. view of Mexico has changed, but the constant reference point is a stable Mexico that follows a development model in basic accordance with U.S. interests.

I'd say that there have been three distinct stages in the way the U.S. has viewed Mexico during the post-war period. The Cold war was a first stage. Between 1956 and the early 60s Mexico was regarded as an imperfect democracy that would eventually evolve into a political system more similar to that of the U.S. We can take Robert Scott's book as an example. He describes a point of view regarding our economy that does not totally approve of the role of the state in the economy, or with PEMEX being state-owned. Nevertheless, there was an overall positive view of Mexico.

Rebellious minorities and the movement against the Viet Nam War in the 60s brought about changes in the U.S. view of the Third World, and Mexico. Serious doubts arose concerning the stability of the Mexican political system and the efficiency of its economic model. By the 70s serious differences had developed concerning the situation in Mexico. There are significant differences between liberals and conservatives, and the main point of conflict and misunderstanding is Mexico's foreign policy.

But when we speak of how Mexico is viewed in the U.S., we should distinguish two different levels. The first is U.S. society in general, that tends to know very little about Mexico and works from a series of stereotypes, which do not correspond with reality. But most important is what the establishment thinks, the point of view of the foreign policy elite. All of what I have been saying refers to this elite, which includes government, business, academics and the press. It's important to understand what these four sectors are thinking.

To what extent does the view of the press influence economic and political policy makers?

I think it's very important and influential, particularly the major press. About ten newspapers really have an influence on the



Sergio Aguayo. Photo by Renzo Gostoli.

elite, among them the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times, etc. But there are some deep differences between what the press considers to be in the U.S. national interest and the government point of view. During the Cold War period there seemed to be a basic consensus on foreign policy between this elite, —the press, academics, Congress, the bureaucracy— and the executive branch. That came to an end, basically with Viet Nam and Watergate. Now the press has a considerable degree of autonomy, although it does not challenge the basic tenets of the U.S. system. There are differences of nuance vis a vis the strategy to be followed toward a certain government, a certain country. In this sense, what the press says is very important.

To what extent are the elites also influenced by stereotypes?

I think there has been a clear improvement in the quality of analysis on Mexico. Nevertheless, there are still a series of er-

rors that can be attributed to the idiosyncrasy of these elites or to the very nature of their point of view. Let me mention two of these. Concerning Mexico, the main deficiency one finds in the U.S. press is that the United States itself is absent. Over 95% of the time when the economic crisis, corruption or the drug problem are analyzed, there is no mention of the U.S. as an important factor, although not the only one of course, in shaping the situation under discussion.

Let's take Alan Riding's work.* Throughout the eleven years that Riding was in Mexico and even in his book there is a great gap in his analysis, that of the role of the U.S. in Mexico's life. Why is this? Well, because there's an ongoing process of ignoring something that we find personally painful or critical. If North Americans base their point of view on the premise that their political and economic system is the best in the world and that Mexico must follow suit, this often makes it difficult for them to consider the negative impact that the U.S. can sometimes have on Mexico.

The U.S., or the U.S. press implicitly or explicitly propose a capitalist model to resolve Mexico's crisis, and Mexican private enterprise is seen as the potential savior. But they don't realize that we are speaking of different species of animals. They take the U.S. private sector as the model, but it in no way resembles the Mexican private sector, which is as corrupt and inefficient as is the state, and this can be supported with examples.

Either their own interests, or the very strength of their beliefs, then, often lead U.S. elites to an incomplete analysis of what is happening in Mexico. But if you tell them this, they get annoyed and say you are a radical, or they react with surprise or cynicism. There's an anecdote that's worth telling. When I was working on my doctoral thesis (which will be published as a book), I did an in-depth analysis of Alan Riding's work. I interviewed him as he was finishing his book and asked him why he didn't include the role of the U.S. in the formulation of Mexican policy. His answer was, "I have no explanation for that." I think that rather than not having an explanation, Alan Riding was dishonest. In all truth, he was clearly conscious of the impact of the U.S., but he refused to deal with it. Why? He obviously had his own interests in mind. Either the New York Times wouldn't publish him or he was afraid of being seen as a radical.

What kind of political framework does the U.S. use to judge Mexico?

* Distant Neighbors

I believe that since the Viet Nam War, and then after August 1971, when Richard Nixon annulled a series of agreements which had regulated the post-World War II global economic system, most U.S. authors recognized that the U.S. has been losing power. Thus, for the last ten or fifteen years the U.S. has made a series of attempts to respond to this new situation. Both Carter and Reagan came up with different responses to this crisis and designed two very different strategies to deal with it. A more liberal or more realistic one, if you like, that seeks to establish some kind of multilateral relationship with its Latin American neighbors, that would help develop more trustworthy allies. Conservatives give a hard-line response: they seek to recover the past.

In practice, both liberals and conservatives view Mexico with increasing concern. They're very worried about the possibility of Mexico becoming destabilized. They give different reasons or explanations for why this may happen. Mrs. Kirkpatrick, or even Mr. Reagan himself, might say that Mexico is being contaminated by Central America. Granted it's a poor analysis, but it's what they say. Others would say that the erosion of the legitimacy of Mexico's political system is destabilizing the country. In any case, there are a variety of explanations.

The important thing is that they all agree that Mexico is in trouble and that this can affect U.S. national security. On this matter there is total agreement. But there is no consensus on what to do about it. Here they come up against a tremendous practical paradox. For some, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party, in power for close to 60 years) no longer represents the best option for the defense of U.S. interests. But what is the alternative? Others believe the PAN (National Action Party) should be strengthened, but this implies unleashing a complex social dynamic that could easily go haywire, and they're even more scared of that than of leaving the situation unchanged.

I believe that these polarized alternatives explain why Ambassador John Gavin has breakfast with PAN leaders one day and meets with the PRI the next. There is really no conceptual clarity about what to do or what policy to adopt towards Mexico.

What does the United States think national security means for Mexico, and to what extent is their judgement wrong?

There is a basic problem. Most North Americans base their point of view on the premise that Mexico's national security



"We have our own opinions". Photo by Renzo Gostoli.



Not so distant neighbors, not so close encounters. Photo by Renzo Gostoli.

interests are similar to their own. This is a serious problem because even though there are coincidences, we are a very nationalistic and independent-minded country. We have our own points of view, our own foreign policy and our own interests in Central America, or in the United States. Yet this is one of the issues that has received the least discussion, either in Mexico or in the U.S.

Once again from the Political Perspective of the U.S. on Mexico, what makes the U.S. think that Mexico is heading toward a bipartisan political system, and why is this point of view misleading?

Well, the basis for this point of view seems to be the PAN's electoral gains. From this vantage point some people believe that the system could evolve into a bipartisan one. But it is as misleading to say that we are headed toward a bipartisan system as it is to say that we are headed toward a Marxist regime. At this point I don't think anybody in their right mind, either in the U.S. or in Mexico, can really say what direction we are going to take. The truth is that we are in the midst of rapid economic, political and social change. This could lead us in a variety of totally unpredictable directions. Social change goes on constantly, but there are times when history seems to move more rapidly; we are going through such a period in Mexico.

We also need to distinguish between electoral strength and social force. This distinction isn't always drawn in the U.S. where according to the press, elections and the vote are practically sacred. They ignore the fact that in Mexico and in many other countries (including their own) social forces that are organized around specific programs are often far more important. I believe that's what is not recognized in the United States. Social forces in Mexico are beginning to mobilize around different programs. This partly explains the prevailing uncertainty.

In your opinion, what kind of economic framework does the U.S. use to judge Mexico?

It's simple. The conservatives who've been in power for almost six years now believe the recipe for success is based on very limited state involvement; the private sector plays the main role and foreign investment receives all the guarantees that it could ever want. The Caribbean Basin Initiative and the Baker Plan are both based on these ideas. This is their view not only of Mexico, but of the whole world. The liberal's view is less simplistic. They try to understand different regimes on their own terms. From this point of view, what they're clearly saying in Mexico's case is that perhaps the role of the state is inevitable.

Again within the same framework, how are Mexican illegal migrant workers judged, and what are the errors of judgement in this point of view?

I think they're pretty clear on this even though it is seldom said outright. Many sectors of the U.S. economy depend on illegal migrant labor to maintain their production levels and low prices. But at the same time, policy makers worry about the lack of control over this influx of labor, and that accounts for the different positions on the problem.

Conservatives argue that the border should be closed. There are all sorts of possible positions, some even based on astronomical figures such as 10 million undocumented Mexicans in the United States. Others argue in favor of stricter controls while simultaneously applying President Carter's amnesty plan, or support amnesty for those already in the country. I think some new type of control is likely because of the interests and perceptions involved.

But a point I want to make is that from the U.S. perspective, the problem of undocumented workers is an internal issue, not a bilateral one. So they take what, in theory, are totally ac-

ceptable, unilateral measures. Any sovereign state is entitled to decide on what happens within its own borders. What's unacceptable is to seek Mexican collaboration in carrying out their unilateral projects, which is what has happened in several cases.

Once again on the question of images. Why do you think it is that Mexico is seen through a simplified view of specific issues such as corruption, drug traffic and insecurity for tourists?

I guess it's in the nature of the press in the United States and for that matter, the world over. There's a tendency to simplify complex issues, working on the assumption that readers aren't interested in the fine points. It's an old pretext in the media. I think it's a process that actually shapes the readers, and that there is a problem of political culture. It's not part of a conspiracy.

Coverage on Mexico has improved since the 1940s but it's by no means 100% satisfactory.

What is the real impact of a misleading media campaign?

Well, you can't really call it that. In Mexico people don't like to see things in print that reflect on certain aspects of our reality. But what is a journalist who covers PEMEX and its union going to write about? The corruption is obvious. The problem is that people here are unfamiliar with the nature of the relationship between the press and government in the United States.

A campaign would imply decisions from some government master plan to influence public opinion. That happened in the United States when there was a campaign to create a negative image of President Jacobo Arbenz of Guatemala in 1954. The same thing happened for Chile with Salvador Allende and for Cuba with Fidel Castro. Those were campaigns in the full sense of the word. But in the case of Mexico today the press is reporting on issues that concern U.S. interests. In my opinion there is no campaign there.

Nevertheless, don't you think these different views on the part of both governments influence their relations?

Of course the coverage in the U.S. media on Mexico leaves a lot to be desired. Certain factors are not included and they should be. You could criticize the point of view on Mexico presented in the U.S. press as being partial and incomplete. For example, there is as much corruption in Mexican business circles and in U.S. firms operating in Mexico as there is in the government. Nobody ever talks about that. If it were mentioned it would be attributed to some sort of campaign against CONCANACO (National Confederation of National Chambers of Commerce) or COPARMEX (Mexican Confederation of Businessmen), and then, they would leap forward in self-defense, yelling at the top of their lungs. This has been common in the past.

My point is that the inadequacy and poor quality of the analysis of the Mexican situation plays an important role. It's definitely an influence. There's no sense in denying it.

Certain influential sectors in the U.S. believe that what they think about Mexico is what Mexico should think about itself. Why do you think this happens?

This is natural given that they have grown accustomed to success and to thinking that their political system is the best. They don't have anything special against us. They've told half of humanity what to do. This problem is part of U.S. political culture. That's where the novel, *The Ugly American* fits in. I understand it to be self-critical in this aspect. But the problem is an old one, and it is still there. ★