

# Mexico's Cultural Debate

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Among the many challenges Mexican society faces in the twenty-first century is the viability of the national state. A series of internal and external factors have led our society to have to rethink itself: internally, the long economic and political crisis has put the old order that arose from the Mexican Revolution in check; externally, globalization, capitalist economic development dominated by large multinational corporations and the technological revolution in computer sciences have un-

leashed multiple, complex, contradictory processes of change.

Nevertheless, the current situation puts us in a privileged position: being both actors and witnesses to the rapid changes we have built day by day in recent years. We face a series of profound questions about our society: How can we build a better society? What should we preserve? What should we change? What should be reinterpreted? What should be eliminated? Society is wavering between memory and oblivion, between conservation and modernization, between tradition and progress, between good for the community and the individual. These

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questions and choices lead us to ask ourselves which educational and cultural policy we should support or build.

These questions are the starting point for discussing the different positions that have emerged around the bill entitled the Law for Fostering and Disseminating Culture, presented to Congress September 20, 2005, by President Vicente Fox.

The bill was written by a group from the National Council for Culture and the Arts (Conaculta).<sup>1</sup> A preliminary version was publicized in July 2004 by Mexico City's national daily *La Jornada*. The way in which it was published contradicts government rhetoric about the public's right to know. After its publication, it was analyzed and discussed by different groups active in culture and education. The points they made led the Conaculta team to adjust the original bill, making such elementary amendments as incorporating the reasons behind the changes proposed.

The proposal, known as the Bermúdez Bill, was controversial from the start because it stipulates that Conaculta continue to be "a 'deconcentrated' body of the Ministry of Education in cultural matters, but giving it special legal characteristics and attributes." These would make it the country's guiding body for culture, responsible for coordinating, executing actions and supervising all tasks related to culture.

The idea is to transform Conaculta from a simple coordinator of other bodies into the guiding and superior institution of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) and the National Fine Arts and Literature Institute (INBA). This would give it substantive tasks that up until now the law has conferred on each of these insti-

tutes individually, such as researching, protecting, preserving and disseminating our cultural heritage.

At the same time, the bill is vague about education, the institutions of higher learning, research, dissemination and preservation of our cultural heritage. It completely ignores institutions of higher learning like the National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH), the National School for Conservation, Restoration and Museography (ENCRYM), which belong to the INAH, and the art schools that belong to the INBA, which for more than half a century have trained many generations of cul-

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tural professionals renowned nationally and internationally.

The bill separates education from scientific research into cultural matters. But, what is more serious is that it eliminates it from the INAH's profile, transferring it to a Conaculta bureaucracy, alien to academic and scientific staff.

The bill emphasizes "social participation as a space for citizens' expression" of culture, but defines it as a government policy that supports the activity of private businessmen in specific areas, above all those that can be commercialized like cinema, concerts, performances and access to different archaeological, artistic and historic sites

that are nationally and internationally known tourist attractions. Put this way, it is a slippery slope to an unclear economic relationship. This implies opening up the possibility for large entertainment companies, which are not necessarily interested in protecting our country's cultural heritage, to get government support, not only through tax breaks, but also by actually giving them government monies that should be channeled into the INAH and the INBA.

These ideas are the central axes of the polemic in the country's cultural and academic media.

On the one hand, one group of outstanding academics thinks that current norms contained in the Federal Law on Monuments and Archaeological, Artistic and Historic Sites should be reviewed in the framework of a discussion about the characteristics of a cultural policy in the twenty-first century and a political debate about "citizenizing" culture. This implies taking into account the changes that have occurred because of globalization given that government policy, cultural policy and the organization of the citizenry have gone beyond national boundaries.

To meet the challenges of this twenty-first century society, and given that culture plays an outstanding role as a democratizing agent in society, this group thinks that there should be a strong cultural institution capable of coordinating and raising funds to guarantee to different social sectors the creation of and access to culture.

A different position is held by a broad group of specialists and workers in anthropology, history and culture. The proposals of this group, who work directly in culture and education, have been developed based on the conclusions they have reached in a series of

internal fora organized in their work places. The analysis they have made has produced a series of documents and allowed them to participate in the debates in the national press, as well as in official, public fora that have been held.

Among the many activities carried out this year to analyze the bill are the Alternative Parliament of Culture and Education, held August 6 to 8 at the National School of Anthropology and History in Mexico City, and the Fourth Congress of Researchers of the National Institute of Anthropology and History, held September 22 to 25. At both fora the concern was clear about the consequences of the passage of the bill for Mexico's tangible and intangible cultural, archaeological and historic heritage, as well as for cultural producers and indigenous groups who have inherited and continue to embody this cultural heritage, and the difficulties of access to this patrimony that different sectors of society would have, particularly indigenous groups.

The reasons for this concern were based on the following problems found in the bill:

- 1) It proposes that Conaculta manage and coordinate the cultural institutions in an excessively centralized and bureaucratic way, which invades the jurisdiction of the INAH, the INBA, institutions of higher learning and anthropological, historical, restoration and cultural research centers.
- 2) It gives the Conaculta and its president broad decision-making and executive powers, but does not establish the necessary mechanisms for evaluation and monitoring to guarantee its appropriate functioning, *de facto* turning Conaculta into the orga-

nizer, supervisor, evaluator and executor of the cultural policies it designs.

- 3) The bill does not clearly establish Conaculta's functions and attributions because it would perform simultaneously as a guiding body, a coordinating body, a direct promoter and disseminator, educator and creator of cultural services. With this law Conaculta subordinates the bodies and cultural entities that the Constitution stipulates are in charge of the conservation, protection, dissemination, education and research into our cultural heritage, eliminating the autonomy and abil-

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ity to act with which they were originally endowed. In this way, educational, research and extension activities are not only separated out and disarticulated, but they also stop being one of the central axes of state policy. They are left out in the cold. President Fox's policy takes interest only in historic and artistic buildings or in traditional fiestas because they can be commercially exploited. It is not concerned with the symbolic, religious, identity or historic function that our patrimony may have for different sectors of Mexican society.

- 4) The concept of culture developed throughout the bill, which should

articulate it, is confused and limited. For example, culture and cultural heritage are used as synonymous when the former term is much more limited than the latter. The concept of culture used in the bill is restricted to cultural goods that can be commercialized and enjoyed individually by an elite. It also does not recognize our country's multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic reality. By contrast, the concept of cultural heritage recognizes both individual cultural production and production by different sectors of society, including diverse cultural manifestations, from great architectural monuments of different periods, masterpieces of painting, to food, indigenous languages and traditional popular music, to mention just a few.

- 5) The proposal only takes into consideration cultural goods that can be commercialized, assuming a false dichotomy between culture as a good to be appropriated and accessed individually versus culture as a patrimony that is both collectively and individually created and appropriated and something that contributes to the development of democracy. By not recognizing the specificity of cultural patrimony, the bill counterposes itself to existing legislation in the matter, which emphasizes its social uses, historic and educational aims as well as those of social cohesion that are fundamental for strengthening local, regional and national identities.

The Bermúdez Bill would not only offer government support for, but would actually promote, cultural industries like the Tajín Summit, a music festival

held in the Tajín archaeological zone in the state of Veracruz. There, Televisa, one of Mexico's two private television giants, promotes its performers, and in the first few festivals actually built metal structures on top of the pre-Hispanic buildings with complete disregard for their preservation. Another example is the Xcaret theme park, located at the site of a natural sinkhole in the state of Quintana Roo; there flora, fauna and the reef have been damaged, and the price of admission puts it out of reach of all but the high-income sectors of society.

Given these problems, a series of proposals have been developed. Among them is the idea that to legislate appropriately about culture it is necessary to discuss both the role of the state and cultural and educational policy

beyond what can be programmed for a single six-year presidential term. For that discussion to be successful, it is necessary to have a solid conceptual basis about culture and its different manifestations, carry out a historic and contemporary analysis of our country's cultural institutions and of the population's cultural needs and also achieve a consensus of the different sectors involved.

These proposals must also include the idea that any legislative decision about culture should be based on a broad, integral diagnostic analysis of the country's cultural situation. This analysis should be done by the organized cultural community's different sectors and specialized bodies and will have to consider the structure, functioning and specific situation of the

institutions that carry out specific tasks in the educational and cultural field, identify different needs and distinguish levels of attention in accordance with federal political organization.

The discussion about the Law for Fostering and Disseminating Culture and about the role of the policy of the state, cultural and educational institutions and society in creating their imaginary, their identity and their symbolic values is by no means exhausted and is fundamental for the country's economic, political and social development. ■■■

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Conaculta was founded in 1988 under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. Its current president is Sara Bermúdez.