

## **Absurdities and Costs**

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In his book on his experiences as a reporter in Beirut, Thomas Friedman relates the complexity of a society in the process of decomposition. In a trip to the airport, Friedman tells of the following: "I once watched a man being kidnapped in Beirut. I was on my way to Beirut International Airport when my taxi became stalled in traffic. Suddenly I saw off to my right four men with pistols tucked into their belts who were dragging another man out of his front door. A woman, probably his wife, was standing just inside the shadow of the door, clutching her bathrobe and weeping. The man was struggling and kicking with all his might, a look of sheer terror in his eyes. Somehow the scene reminded me of a group of football players carrying their coach off the field after a victory, but this was no celebration. Just for a second my eyes met those of the hapless victim, right before he was bundled into a waiting car. His eyes did not say "Help me"; all they spoke was fear. This was Beirut. Moments later the traffic jam broke and my taxi moved on to the airport. The Lebanese driver, who had kept his eyes frozen straight ahead the whole time, never said a word about the horror show which had unfolded in the corner of his eye. He talked instead about his family, politics, anything but what had happened alongside us". He then goes on... "When authority breaks down, society collapses... in a state of nature, men will do anything to avoid being poor or solitary".

Friedman's description could be applicable in various regions of Mexico and to many at certain moments during the last lustra. It is not that Mexico in general is headed toward a Hobbesian state of nature, a situation in which the law of the jungle reigns, but yes, the deterioration of a society does not take place solely as a result of the activity of violent groups and criminals but also when lethargy, lack of governmental action and systemic abandonment of institutional construction become a way of (un)governing. Today nobody is building the Mexico of the future.

Ignorance, arrogance and, above all, the enormous distance that characterizes the governors with respect to the population and its needs, concerns, fears, illusions and jadedness lead to absurd decisions that put in jeopardy the country's stability and viability. This can be observed equally at the local and federal levels.

In Mexico's Federal District, for example, the government has just published a new driving code whose logic is, at least conceptually, reasonable: traffic penalties rise dramatically when there's even the slightest violation of the new regulations. It sounds good, except that their translation into daily life cannot be other than to increase the cost of the bribes. More intense penalties within the framework of the corruption and impunity characterizing today's Mexico will inexorably lead to –what else?– greater corruption and greater impunity. It couldn't be any other way, something paradoxical for a government that possesses perhaps the most successful program of urban traffic regulation precisely because it attacks the heart of the problem: the breathalyzer that Mexico City established has worked not because it entails steep penalties (although it does have them: 48 hours jail time at "El Torito"), but because the presence of diverse and competing authorities at the place of the test impedes collusion, thus corruption. That is, the local government achieved something unique in Mexico: it succeeded in making

the incentives inherent in the program's goals coincide with the incentives of those who operate it, no small merit in our milieu.

The new traffic law is the opposite: a stick with no carrot. This will not improve coexistence in the city, but will bring about a new, and huge, source of corruption. A government that falls on its sword is not a very resolute government and much less presidential material.

On the federal plane, the matter is even more obvious. The environment is complex, inclined toward conflict and there are no institutions or mechanisms capable of channeling the conflict and maintaining social peace. Within this context, any situation can become explosive: the police are not particularly dexterous in conflict management, the Attorneys General haven't a clue as to what a criminal investigation is and the military assigned to assume police activities have high proclivity for exceeding in the use of force. None of these situations is exceptional in the country: these are the realities with which we live on a daily basis and that necessarily lead, sooner or later, to crisis situations. One would think that the way to get started on the problems that would arise would be to construct responses that advance in the direction of institutionalizing public life, in this manner reducing the burden on the governor.

The federal government's way of acting has been exactly contrariwise. Instead of accepting that there are a thousand and one circumstances that will come *to blow up on it*, although not of their doing (Ayotzinapa is a paradigmatic case), it has been paralyzed every time crisis has struck. The ideal response would be to ride out the storm creating convincing mechanisms, susceptible to avoiding similar cases in the future, but that doesn't happen.

When there was a political assassination in 1989, then-President Salinas recognized the explosive potential of the phenomenon and moved proactively: he created the Human Rights Commission, a response that strengthened the institutional framework in the long term and that relieved him of the hot potato in the immediate term.

To confront cases of potential conflict of interest, the current government unerringly did the opposite: it not only submitted itself to the initial severe beating, but also it employed an inadequate mechanism – the Comptroller General which, oddly, reports to the president- thus the beating would be repeated some months later. It would have been much better to transfer the function of supervision of the executive to the legislature, thus creating a new platform for future cases of conflict of interest, corruption and similar occurrences.

The present government lacks accepting that the real world is not as it imagines it to be and that its capacity of action is infinitely superior than it conceives it to be, but only if it recognizes that the prerequisite to acting is to construct institutional capacity beyond its control.

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