

The Challenge of Modernity

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The moment was unique: Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, observed the workings of the London Stock Market. Legions of operators bought and sold stocks according to the traditional procedure: by shouting. Impressed by this spectacle, Nehru decried those "who sit in stock exchanges, shout at one another and think themselves civilised". Years before, a reporter asked Gandhi what he thought about Western civilization, to which he responded: "I think it would be a good idea". The matter is less frivolous than it appears: What is civilization and how do we know whether we're part of it or when we are?

A few weeks ago I wrote about some contrasts between Spain and Mexico. Many kind readers complained to me that Spain is experiencing enormous problems, high unemployment rates and generalized discontent, suggesting it's not really a relevant model. Spain is without doubt a country in problems: although its economy has improved, its economic situation is complex and a good number of cases of corruption have surfaced. How easy it would be to conclude that Spain is all washed up and that it, like so many others, has failed in its modernization process.

The reality is another. Spain is a country that is very distinct from Mexico and I do not pretend that it constitutes a desirable or feasible model for us. But observing other nations allows one to better understand our own. In Spain the streets are well paved, police function and people pay their taxes. Beyond the government of the day, Spaniards know that governmental services work because they do not depend on the elected government. This comprises a transcendental difference: the existence of a separation between the government and the bureaucracy is one of the crucial factors in the process of civilization. In this Spain is a nation that was meticulously transformed and the contrast with Mexico is incommensurate.

Spain was transformed in its culture and in the attitudes of its people. After Franco, the country, everything, was liberated and passed on to another stage of its history. It is obvious that there have been good and bad governments and it is evident that many things do not work. Similarly, it is clear that its government in 2008 erred in its diagnosis of the nature of the crisis, which led to its raising its expenditure radically, instead of correcting the financial aggregates. Living within the Euro was a blessing while they were able to enjoy, as ex-President Felipe González once stated, German interest rates with a Mediterranean lifestyle. When the crisis broke out the Spaniards pretended that it was possible to continue in the same fashion, resulting in their postponing the necessary adjustment and ending up where they are today.

Their problems today are the product of two circumstances: first a series of bad decisions at a specific moment in time, on top of years of lethargy during which the productivity of its economy did not rise, while many special interests and sources of privilege were perpetuated. In the meanwhile, day-to-day life functioned thanks to Spain's professional bureaucracy, something non-existent in Mexico even in the best locality in the country. In Mexico everything depends on politicians who change every three or every six years and their particular states of mind and interests.

Second, and much more importantly, Spain's essential problems, those transcending the financial situation, are deviations from the norm. For example, corruption cases are addressed and prosecuted. In Mexico corruption is the soul of the political world and is solely ferreted out when it threatens that world. In Spain, the police, the judiciary and basic governmental functions operate in parallel to the government itself. That tells the story of a civil service and civil servants, of a professional bureaucracy, which renders possible civility and civilization. Its flaws are deviations, exceptions, not the norm.

While politics is ever changing, as it should be, the bureaucracy is key because it is, or should be, what remains permanent. In England, for example, the Ministries are headed by a professional, a manager, in a manner of speaking, who is told by the politician in charge (the Minister) of the course of action of the government in turn and implements it: the point is that the bureaucracy itself does not mix with the political. That is, they don't leave streets unpaved or stop maintaining transport systems. Following this example, the politicians decide whether to construct a new Metro line or a new airport, but it is the professional bureaucracy that is responsible for this taking place. That difference is core. With all of its problems, Spain (or the UK) is very different from Mexico, because they have taken that leap to civilization that we fear or are unwilling to indulge in.

Mexico's is monumental, nearly analogous to the separation of Church and State: it is that of disjoining politics from day-to-day administration. One example illustrates the difference: what comes to mind are the basic-goods stipends that some state governments dole out or monies that go to older adults, projects decided upon by politicians, as it should be. However, in a civilized country, those programs would be managed by the professional bureaucracy, not by the politicians themselves. The difference is obvious: were this to occur in Mexico, more than one political party would disappear because people would see those programs for what they are: a right with a cost and not as a handout, a mere electoral exchange. A world of difference...

What's most important in life, said Mexican comedian Cantinflas, is to be "simultaneous and successive at the same time". Mexico is living under the pretense of civilization but with the reality of underdevelopment. The day that the discourse and the reality are consequent, "simultaneous and successive", the country will be another. Not a day before.

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