

To Return to the Past

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Borges wrote that “everything is determined, but we must have the illusion of there being free will and that what occurs in history is the consequence of what happened before.” The illusion of recreating an idyllic past is tempting because it permits challenging the notion, brilliantly shattered by Manrique in the *The Couplets on the Death of his Father*, that the past was always better.

In matters of security and drugs, the last several years have not been good for Mexico, now under scrutiny of the international human rights organizations. Thousands of deaths, abductions and great social strife are only the most obvious manifestations of a period no one would wish to repeat. Some administrations sneered at the problem; others assumed it as a personal call to battle. While the distant causes are sufficiently clear (an enormous market, immense profits, tremendous capacity for corruption), there is no similar political agreement on the diagnostic of the causes of the deterioration of security or on the possible solutions. There isn't even recognition of that this is no longer the country the era of singing idol Pedro Infante or, more to the point, that the country does not have the ropes of a modern police and judiciary, capable of confronting the problematic inherent to the XXI Century.

These differences have led to extremes of viewpoint as well as of action. Felipe Calderón committed his administration to combating organized crime. His predecessor basically pretended that a problem did not exist and his successor considers that on strengthening the image of the presidency the problem will disappear. Now another current has come to the scene: one that asserts that the problem isn't Mexico's but rather that of those who consume the drugs.

Mexico legalizes drugs, runs the argument, allowing them to transit to their final destination (the U.S.) and turns over the budget now allocated to security to the promotion of social causes and growth of the economy. The benefits of redefining the reality and adjusting it to one's liking are obvious and fantastic of course. The implicit supposition of this perspective is that the government would stop confronting the narcos, these would then focus on their business –transporting drugs- returning to the peace and tranquility of before: happiness all about.

The problem with this romantic view is that it has no sustenance at all in the reality. There are two reasons to think this. First, the reason why in the past the drugs flowed north without much negative domestic impact no longer exists. That happened because the narcos of the time were Colombians and their sole interest was moving their merchandise toward the final market. On not having local roots, they utilized the most convenient means and geography for their business: the Caribbean, Mexico or Canada was all the same to them. They contracted some Mexicans (presumably many of those who later took charge of the business), but Mexico was no more than a stopover in their supply lines: a logistical hub. Narco monies corrupted diverse authorities but that was nothing exceptional in a political system whose instrument for forging allegiances was precisely graft.

Much more important in yesterday's schema was the enormous strength of the centralized and authoritarian, hierarchical and vertical political system whose weight was sufficient for maintaining the narcos at bay. The federal government tolerated (fostered?) the narcos for two reasons: because they didn't meddle in the domestic politics; and because the narco furnished the political system with an additional source of proceeds for the members of the revolutionary family. It seemed to be a marriage made in heaven: everybody was a winner. Nobody perceived the slightest cost.

None of those halcyon premises continue to be valid today. To begin with, narcotrafficking at present is controlled by Mexican mafias who have territorial roots and local interests of diverse sorts. In that they could scarcely be more different from their Colombian forerunners. At the same time, the context within which the narcos operate is radically different from that of the past: formerly it was the government that established the rules and took command because it had the capacity and might to do so. Today we have a weak government system that is finding it difficult to keep itself afloat.

What changed? On the one hand, simple growth and diversification of the country ended up rendering the old political system inoperative. Little by little from the sixties on, its capacity of imposition and control had increasingly deteriorated and nothing was done to restructure or modernize the government. The process was accelerated by the liberalization of the economy and the decentralization of power the resulted from the defeat of PRI in several states but particularly in the presidency in 2000. Also, the instruments of control that were workable at the beginning of the 20th century became irrelevant eight decades later. The point is that the federal government ceased possessing the capacity to control everything while the local and state governments never developed new capacities for doing this. This great vacuum coincided with changes in the world of organized crime, creating the space for the criminality that we have now.

The only true solution lies in reforming our system of government with the aim of developing police and judicial capacities from the ground floor up. That is, Mexico's problem is not drugs or criminality but lack of government. Inasmuch as we do not accept that and act accordingly, the deterioration will continue unaltered.

The old system has no possibility of solving the problem of today. Today's reality calls for a government dedicated to basic functions: security for citizens, services for economic development and clarity of objectives. This may perhaps be a dull road to take but it is the only one that would countenance the constructing the foundations of a modern country. All the rest, Borges might have added, is pure illusion.

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