

Vignettes of Corruption

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Argentines employ the term “viveza criolla” (native cunning) and define it as “opportunistic depredation: timeliness in taking maximal advantage of the most minimal opportunity, sparing no effort in making use of either consequences or prejudices for others.” This is not distinct from cutting corners, acquiring a benefit by purchasing the good will of an inspector, the maître d’ at a restaurant, or the police officer on the corner, pretending that there’s no cost involved. The problem is that the cost is enormous because it entails a way of being that is incompatible with the world in which we live in and therein lies a good part of the economic backlog that characterizes us. The cost is exorbitant.

Corruption is not new; what’s new is that it has become extraordinarily dysfunctional. In a traditional rural or industrial economy, the bribe –in any of its means of acceptance- constituted a way of solving problems. The distance inherent in rural life and the on-the-job discipline involved in the industrial workplace favored the controls exercised by the political system and no greater consequences seemed to be involved. In the knowledge economy what adds value is the intellectual work, from computer management to information analysis, whether in the field or factory: today (nearly) everything is information. What was functional before has stopped being so and this is equally true for the lordliest of entrepreneurs as for the most unpretentious farmer.

In my youth I worked for two summers at a land developing company that sold land for credit to persons with very low incomes. The contract established monthly payments and persons who had fallen behind in these ran the risk of losing their land. I reviewed the cases of individuals who came to pay up after various months of delay in their payments. It was impacting to see how they took out bills, all rolled up, obviously the product of their “nest eggs” accumulated little by little. The majority of the cases had a solution and were fixed immediately. What most impressed me was that at least one of three persons who had their matter resolved wanted to give me a few coins as thanks. These were people who were accustomed to having to navigate the turbulent waters of a bureaucracy devoted to abusing the population instead of complying with its most basic responsibility.

Corruption has many faces and entertains many derivatives. Many call for interaction between public and private actors, but others are exclusively one or the other. White collar crime, an employee taking things from his workplace, is not very different from tax evasion. The use of privileged information with respect to public works about to be constructed has been the legendary way that public functionaries have acquired wealth throughout history and does not involve private actors but, in essence, is not very distinct from striking a bargain with constructors that submit a padded bill and divide the spoils among the civil servants responsible.

Some twenty years ago, when the express kidnappings began, I went to the drivers’ licensing office to request a change of address so that mine would not appear. Armed with a copy of a friend’s office’s property tax receipts, I went to request the change. I explained the reason and the response was “one hundred pesos”. Not sure to what the officer referred, I asked for the concept or area involved. The

answer was fascinating: “the service costs one hundred pesos, whatever is changed”. I asked, sarcastically, if that included a change of name. “One hundred pesos for any change”.

Traffic police perhaps constitute the most frequent “interphase” between the authority and the citizen. When someone goes through a red light or makes an illegal turn the matter is clear and transparent, not subject to interpretation. However, the great contrast between licenses in Mexico (at least in the Federal District) and the rest of the world is that no driver there knows the traffic rules and regulations. First, these change as if they were shirts: there is no new local government that does not merit a new regulation of its own, usually one more ludicrous than the previous. But in the DF something else happened: in the interest of reducing or eliminating the corruption at play in the issue of drivers’ licenses, the solution of our esteemed bureaucrats was to eliminate the road test and the knowledge and vision examinations. This may have reduced corruption in the administrative process, but I wonder whether it isn’t more corrupt to allow people to drive who do not know how or who never found out that there are rules for driving. Inevitably the police abuse the unwary (and ignorant) driver. Maybe that’s why they keep changing the rule book.

In the State of Mexico, police officers frequently stop cars with license plates from the DF, independently of whether or not a traffic violation existed. It’s sufficient to threaten to impound the driver’s license or the vehicle registration certificate, if not the vehicle’s license plates, “to ensure payment” for the best of us to start to shudder.

The point is that clear rules do not exist, rules that are known to all, that are rigorously applied, key elements in a Rule of Law. Corruption is the product of the entire structure of government created and conceived to control the citizen. When the Federal Government was almighty the worst and most absurd excesses of the wholesale corruption were controlled. Today every police officer and every inspector or functionary has a life of his own and conceives of the post as a means to get rich.

No one should be surprised that the economy is at a standstill and that the citizenry despises the government. The problem is not the State but the system.

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