

Educating per Dogma

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Dogmas and factiousness forge the educative strategy. Some policy makers advance a reform that cannot in reality be applied, others undermine it to upset a rival in the presidential-succession race; some demand absolute compliance with what, simply, cannot be complied with and the rest just take advantage of the troubled waters to impose their law and construct their own candidacy. This brings to mind the old witticism on the difference between the paranoid and the schizophrenic: one builds castles in the air and the other lives in them, but it is the Psychiatrist that charges rent in both cases. The point is simple: only the Psychiatrist comes out unscathed; all the rest work for him.

In this entire tragic farce the least important thing is the only thing that matters: the possibility that every Mexican child can build a successful future. That is, break with a key structural impediment to the development of each citizen and to economic growth: an educative system erected for the attainment of ideological hegemony in support of the political system. Ceding educative control to the unions and their dissidents was not by chance: the objective did not comprise an education for success in life (and to equalize opportunities for children born under such unequal conditions), but rather political control.

In this light, the mobilizations of the National Coordination of Educational Workers (CNTE) in the last weeks and months are perfectly explainable and follow an impeccable political logic of which the great strategist Sun Tzu would have approved: hit your enemy where he least expects it and where it hurts him most. The CNTE emerged as dissention within the National Union of Educational Workers (SNTE) and, over time, it became a corporate entity with similar objectives but through different means. In practice, the two organizations complemented each other: the SNTE blackmailed the government with the threat of the CNTE. Both organizations won through setting themselves against the government.

Detention of the Teachers' Union Head Elba Esther Gordillo could not have come at a more sensitive moment. Although the government took action because it feared her opposition to the educative reform, the cost was extraordinary: on beheading its leadership, the SNTE ended up disjointed and the CNTE morphed into the inevitable counterpart in the negotiation.

The CNTE became powerful in the state of Oaxaca where, in control of the State Education Ministry, it extorted the government with an interminable source of money and power. The great merit of the current federal government was to wrest that power base from the CNTE. However, that did not resolve the core matter: the CNTE's credibility among the teachers who support it.

And that is the issue in a nutshell: despite that many teachers participate in blockages and marches because they are obliged to do so, the majority do so out of conviction. The question is why. Years of observing the phenomenon have convinced me that there is a very one straightforward factor that spells it out: the teachers are petrified of being replaced by the reform, that is, they are afraid of failing the evaluations and being left without a job.

Behind all this lies the educative' system's perverse rationality: historically, a person who aspires to be a teacher must initially amass a (relatively) enormous sum of money to purchase a teaching post, which in turn becomes a virtual savings account, with its capitalization at the end of the individual's teaching career on its later sale. On buying this position, the teacher ensures an income for the next thirty years and guaranteed retirement on selling it. The CNTE as well as the SNTE have devoted themselves to making sure that the equation is maintained *per saecula saeculorum* because it is an infallible source of control of the base.

The educative reform, basically labor-related in nature, seeks to redefine the relationship between the union and the Mexican Ministry of Education (SEP) as the basis for an eventual, thoroughgoing educational reform. From this perspective, it is purely the stick and no carrot. That is, it constitutes a huge threat to the status quo in that it does not offer a way out and, in contrast, issues a warning to those living in and from the traditional system. Individuals who bought their posts years ago view their retirement as endangered, and those in the system (probably most) who know they are below par as teachers, live in fear of losing their position due to the evaluations. The reform does not see to any of these elements. If the teacher does poorly in the exam he is out of the system; if she does well, her income does not compensate for the savings inherent in the position that was purchased years ago.

In the face of this, the government has gone from one incident of bungling to another. Some within the administration have taken a hard line, others just want to oust them. Behind all of this is the *other* dialectic of the political reality: the presidential succession. Within this context, the "negotiation" process (government-CNTE) does not address the crux of the problem: above all the crucial difference between the rationale of power and money that lies behind the CNTE's leadership (the old corporatist logic) and the union members' trepidations. Rather than splitting the two, the government's actions only strengthen the alliance -and the fears. The negotiation -and the many agendas in conflict behind it- feed the protest. The risk in all this is that the protest ends up being generalized against everything: education, "the" reforms, the economy, etc. The dogmatism of all of those involved -The Ministry of Education (SEP), the Department of the Interior (Gobernación), Mexicanos Primero, CNTE and SNTE- nourishes the candidacy of the only one that has led with exceptional skill: first backing the mobilizations, then affirming the reform's permanence.

And the children?

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