



# CHARTING THE LABYRINTH: País de mentiras de Sara Sefchovich

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Mexico is a country with a long tradition of self-analysis.<sup>2</sup> While many Latin American have engaged in a definition of the national essence and to chart particular idiosyncrasies, it would seem that Mexico has been particularly rich in this intellectual undertaking. Other Latin American countries have major writers who are known for their poetry or their fiction, including those that have received the Nobel Prize. Only in Mexico has a Nobel prize gone to someone who, in addition to his outstanding poetic contributions, is also the author of a major essay of national identity: the 1990 Nobel Prize winner, Octavio Paz, whose *Laberinto de la soledad* (1950) remains a key intellectual document in the history of Mexican and Latin American culture, no matter how much it may now require intense contestational readings.<sup>3</sup>

Sara Sefchovich, who is primarily a professional sociologist and a research professor at the UNAM, is also an outstanding novelist, and her *La suerte de la consorte* (1999; ed. reescrita y aumentada, 2002) is as much a superb example of social history as it is a feminist narrative of the wives of Mexican presidents whose story has mostly been ignored. In this extensively documented account of various roles played by the wives of Mexican presidents, Sefchovich analyses the life of each of these women. Most wives of Mexican presidents have been content to remain in the shadows, only assuming ceremonial activities such as presiding over entities and agencies judged characteristically proper for society women, such as chairing charity groups. Only recently, and especially with

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<sup>2</sup> The major texts are examined by Stabb in his classical study on Latin American identity in the essay.

<sup>3</sup> See the critical edition by Stanton for a discussion of the current reception of Paz's essay.

reference to the wife of President Vicente Fox Quesada (2000-06), Marta Sahagún Jiménez, who attempted to assert a personal and subjective identity that goes beyond the part of being simply “La Sra. del Presidente”; indeed, Sahagún at one point harbored aspirations of herself being elected Mexico’s first woman president.<sup>4</sup>

*País de mentiras* is a vast work, not only for the scope of material it covers, but for the quantity of evidence it provides in support of its grounding theses. Although it is much more than a series of fragments strung together, it is principally based on the columns that Sefchovich has published for over a decade in the major Mexico City daily, *El universal*. Sefchovich has taken her columns, forged them into a set of unified chapters and provide the sort of careful bibliographical information rarely to be seen in intellectual essays of this sort. Allegations, quotations, printed and interview sources, editorials, statistical registries, official reports, the Mexican Constitution and Codes of Law are all dutifully cited in over a thousand footnotes. It is only to be regretted that the volume is not accompanied by an index of names cited, which would allow the reader to chart the discussion of key individuals and to recover specific references. The front book flap announces that a web site will be created that will allow for an ongoing collection of national lies; the address given is that of the publisher:

www.oceano.com.mx. In this sense, Sefchovich’s book is not a completed investigation, but rather the initial gambit in what she hopes will be a vigorous national debate over the question of lies and lying in Mexican political, social, cultural, and personal life.

The grounding theses of Sefchovich’s book work in both an inductive and deductive fashion. On the one hand, there is the attempt to bring forth a vast corpus that can be duly classified in terms of their historical contexts and their particular dynamic in exemplary social situations. An example of this are those lies that have to do with the customarily enormous gap between the official stories of the Mexican government and its vast subsidiaries and the verifiable facts of actual reality, such as *fecfos y milagros* of each of the six-year periods of the Mexican presidency. In other cases, it has to do with specific culturemes of Mexican society, such as the way in which there is an alarming disconnect between national myths about the family and the actual facts of domestic abuse and assorted dysfunctions. The same is true with

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<sup>4</sup> *Suerte* includes a CD, prepared by Sefchovich in conjunction with Carlos Martínez Assad, Mexico’s most prominent contemporary national historian. The CD includes images from each Mexican presidency, film clips, and songs from the different epochs, all toward aiding the reader in grasping a sense of the historical period of each consort.

the disconnect between the constitutional guarantees with regard to justice, health, safety, and education, which neither the political nor the economic systems are able to deliver on.

In other cases, Sefchovich's approach is deductive, as when, toward the end of the volume, she steps back and attempts to answer the question as to why Mexican social reality is so intransigently grounded in the lie. This she attributes to an inherited tradition of authoritarianism; to the difficult insertion of Mexico into the project of modernity; to the difficult position of Mexico vis-à-vis the United States, the rest of Latin America, and Europe; and to the conditions of survival on all levels of Mexican society where the lack of sufficient resources goes hand-in-hand with the imperative to protect the status one has achieved at all costs. Circumstances of *caudillaje* at all levels of Mexican society; a belief in the power of the word to create reality rather than merely to describe it (Alf I say it is so, it is so); the need, in the context of the difficulties of both modernity and international relations, for Mexico to be perceived as having followed through on the great projects of the Mexican Revolution, to demonstrate that Mexico is the *primus inter pares* in Latin America; and the sheer inability of the economic system— an inability that is only enhanced by uncontrollable corruption, system-wide unaccountability, and rampant fraud— to fund the sociopolitical aspirations of Mexico are all points of references for deducing the way in which the lie is ever and always a process for covering over deficiencies, incompetency, self-serving manifestations of cynicism, and the privileging of both ideology and pragmatics over objective social analysis.

The result is a dense, sustainedly engaging, and often uproariously outrageous—but definitely *not* funny—characterization of the texture of Mexican life: *APero así son las cosas acá* (101). Mexico, of course, is not alone in being a country of lies nor is it unique in the evolution of baroque or brutal survival skills. The Argentine novelist Jorge Asís has one of his narrator's conclude a novel by affirming, *AAquí estamos en la jungla, jodiendo para no ser jodidos* (*Los reventados*; 1977), and it is not infrequent to hear Argentines affirm *AEste no es un país serio*. But what Sefchovich has set out to do is not just to characterize the way in which lying is inherent in Mexican life, but to trace its sources, document its particular interactions with the issues of contemporary Mexican society, and to think about what the effects are of lying as a way of individual and collective life.

There are many ways in which Sefchovich's work here is as much a rhetorical analysis as it is an investigation into the semiotics of social and political discourse. On the one hand, she catalogues in considerable detail differing forms of lying

and their characteristic linguistic and semantic structures, recognizing thirty- three different categories of lying in the second section of the first part of *Libro Primero*: *ALas mil y una formas de mentir.* Note that the fact that Sefchovich organizes her text as a social science document, along with the extensive documentation, is part of the way in which hers is not a document of personal opinion, but rather of laborious scholarly research.

In the case of discourse analysis, one need only look at the second part of the *Libro Primero*, which is organized around *ALas grandes mentiras,* which are divided into two parts, *AFicciones para exportación* and *AEngaños para consumo interior.* In the case of these two balanced and juxtaposed segments, each of which runs over fifty pages, the author analyzes, principally through the use of rhetorical questions, major culturemes—that is, ideologemes having to do with cultural instances or institutions—such as, in the case of the first section, Mexico’s commitment to issues like human rights, multiculturalism, diversity, relations with non-Mexicans, and democracy. The second segments focuses on questions like the family, social justice, education and culture, indigenous populations, the economy, and the perennial Great Matter of national identity. It is in these two segments where the student of Mexican literature and cultural production in general is likely to find the greatest material of interest. If Sefchovich

is especially jaundiced with regard to the possibility of answering any of her rhetorical questions in a positive manner, she provides ample evidence as to why this must be so. The continuities between such conclusions and contestational writing in Mexico are especially evident here.

The second section of the third part of the *Libro Primero* deserves quotation in its entirety, as it is a perfect synthesis of the book as a whole:

**La impartición de la justicia: ¿algo que decir?**

Dice el artículo 17 de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos: *AToda persona tiene derecho a que se le administre justicia por tribunales que estarán expeditos para impartirla en los plazos y términos que fijan las leyes, emitiendo sus resoluciones de manera pronta, completa e imparcial. Su servicio será gratuito, quedando en consecuencia, prohibidas las costas judiciales.*

¿Es posible imaginar una mentira más grande?

Porque en México ni toda persona tiene derecho a que se le administre justicia, ni esto sucede de manera pronta y expedita, imparcial y completa ni mucho menos gratuita.

Escribe Jorge Zepeda Patterson: *A*No vivimos en un estado de derecho. Todos los días miles de mexicanos humildes son víctimas de tribunales y autoridades que operan a favor del poderoso o del que ofrece más. Háblenle del

estado de derecho a Lydia Cacho, a las víctimas de Ulisis Ruiz en Oaxaca, a los campesinos que suplican a un funcionario que ya vendió su casa@.

Por eso Miguel Carbonell y Enrique Ochoa Rizo afirman: ACualquier análisis del sistema de justicia criminal en México, debe partir de una certeza: es tan defectuoso que podemos decir, sin temor a exagerar, que es completamente fallido. Se trata de un proceso que hace agua por todas partes: *a*) no sirve para atrapar a los criminales más peligrosos; *b*) da lugar a un muy alto nivel de impunidad y corrupción; *c*) no garantiza los derechos fundamentales ni de las víctimas ni de los acusados; *d*) no establece incentivos para la investigación profesional de los casos y *e*) considerando su muy pobre desempeño, resulta extremadamente costoso@. (277; I have suppressed three bibliographic references)

The articulation of an issue; the formulation of a rhetorical question; the categorically negative answer to it; and the adducing of a series of documented examples and the words of authoritative sources: such is the basic writing process Sefchovich follows in *País de mentiras*.

It is necessary to point out two significant circumstances of framing for Sefchovich's book. One is that she is writing as a woman, in a genre that has been overwhelmingly dominated by masculine—and masculinist voices. This social and discursive positionality is particularly important when she addresses prominent sociopolitical issues that systematically exclude women and discredit their voice: men's voices have authority, while women's express only mere opinions. And it is important when she addresses issues that have priority in women's lives, such as domestic abuse, abandoned families, and work place guarantees.

The other significant framing detail is that Sefchovich writes as a Jew in a society in which national identities have not only systematically excluded those with immigrant roots (Sefchovich was, however, born in Mexico) and those whose roots at odds with historical Mexican traditions. Again, Mexico is not the only society in which there is the anti-Semitic view that one cannot be both a Jew (whatever being a Jew is understood to mean) and being a fully invested national. Mexico may not have had the same level of persecution of Jews as Argentina, where one famous patriotic imperative asserted AHaga patria, mate un judío,@ but if anyone believes that anti-Semitism does not exist in Mexico, s/he is simply not paying attention. Sefchovich does make allusion to her Jewish roots, but her name is unmistakable in any Mexican registry (as is that of Elena Poniatowska, who, although not of Jewish origins, nevertheless bears a Aproblematical@ name). Yet her discussion of Mexican lies about cultural diversity, religious tolerance, and multiculturalism have unquestionable personal resonance.

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