How a small magazine reframed human rights in Argentina

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In 2001, as the collapse of the Argentine peso left millions out of work, three boys gathered on a corner in downtown Córdoba, looking for a way to give their families a hand. The Llanes brothers washed windshields on cars at the stoplight, while Hernán began to experiment with selling one thing or another. "It was the time when mobs broke into the banks to get their money back," Hernán told me. "When we went up to the windows of the cars, people would tell us that they had no money at all. Even so, you could still make enough coins to take something home for your family."

Their stoplight lay between the once-rich downtown and the always-poor *villas de miseria*, close to the lazy river that runs through this city of two millions people and on the road to the ancient *Universidad Nacional*. Everyone seemed to pass by at some time or another. "If you wanted to learn about what was happening in Argentina back then," Hernán declared, "You could do worse than to stand by that stoplight."

As their hours of work became longer and longer, the boys found their way into the traditional culture of the street; not just other boys forced to work because their fathers and mothers had lost their jobs, but also kids and adults with years – or even generations – of life on the street. This new culture introduced them to some bad habits – the drugs and alcohol so present among the homeless anywhere in the world – but

also brought some unexpected benefits. Hernán found a match for his intellectual curiosity among the long-term denizens of the street, while all of the boys found a magazine: *La Luciérnaga* [The Firefly].

Though European street newspapers like *The Big Issue* (London) inspired *La Luciérnaga*, its editors adapted the magazine for a Latin American context. Building on a long tradition of newspaper-boys, teenagers would sell the magazine instead of homeless adults, and they would take their earnings back to their families. Volunteer journalists would write the articles, so that the vendors could keep as much of the profit as possible. During the economic crisis, almost two hundred kids were selling 40,000 copies of the magazine each month, and Hernán and the Llanes brothers quickly jointed their ranks.

The boys learned that they could make more money – and meet more people – if they divided their tasks. One would wash windshields and another would sell the magazine as the third rested; at the end of the day, they divided the earnings equally and took the long walk home into the *villas*. Hernán, inspired by the words he was selling in the magazine, took advantage of his free time to read; with what spare change he could muster, he bought used books by Nietzsche, then read them in the dusty plaza as he waited for his turn at the stoplight.

"You don't get much time to meet people when they just stop for a red light," Hernán explains in a documentary he, several of his friends, and I made about his experience on the street. "Washing windshields, generally it was just a 'no' or they would turn on their wipers and that was it. But with the magazine, it was different. People would talk with you; they would ask questions; they might tell about what was happening in their lives." He made a point of reading the magazine carefully each month, so that he could speak with anyone that rolled down a window. "People looked at me differently then. I learned how the magazine can transform society."

When we think about how words can transform society, we think mostly of their message: Lenin's pamphlets, Upton Sinclair's muckraking journalism, the poems of García Lorca inspiring the republicans in Spain. For Hernán, though, the press had a

more physical impact. By selling a magazine instead of merely washing windows, his world had changed: people looked on him with different eyes, they asked him questions, they responded to his eye contact. The "transformation in society" hadn't come from a new law, let alone from a revolution, but from a small shift of place. Hernán no longer stood *outside* of society, invisible and annoying; now his opinion and his voice mattered somehow.

Thinking only of these boys, we might see "transforming society" as a grandiose phrase, unfit for the small shifts of power that happened when they carried a magazine instead of a squeegee to the stoplight. Let me give a larger example. Over the last several years, in the face of a perceived (and sometimes real) crime wave, many Latin American cities have contracted professional security consultants from the United States, "experts" with a supposed panacea for crime and violence. Led by the Manhattan Institute, these consultants have promoted a "Zero Tolerance" model, one supposedly based on the success of New York, but in fact much more repressive and less community oriented. "Crime" has replaced "National Security" at the center of a rhetorical system, but the results are often similar to what we saw in the Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s and '80s: forced disappearance, constraints on civil rights, and the criminalization of dissent.

In 2005, the Manhattan Institute came to Córdoba, offering the same prescription it had offered in so many other cities. Under the "theory… that public disorder, like graffiti, leads to greater social pathology if left unattended,"[1] these policies effectively lead to the criminalization of homelessness and informal businesses, highly armed police on the street, and regular invasions of the shantytowns. In a formal statement, the consultants declared that street children and other homeless people destroyed the social fabric so much that they could only be considered "urban terrorists". City Hall prepared to implement their recommendations.

Within days, the streets filled with protesters: not just homeless people and human rights advocates, but the broad middle class of the city. The mayor not only backed

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[1] http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cci.htm#03, accessed on July 19, 2007.

down from the repressive plan; he proposed a new series of social services and micro-lending for people that live and work on the streets. Over the last half dozen years, I have worked in many cities proposing a Zero Tolerance policy, but Córdoba is the only one to consider and *reject* the strategy. To understand why, we have to listen carefully to Hernán's insight that the magazine transforms society.

The content of the magazine mattered in the debate over Zero Tolerance: *La Luciérnaga* had run article after article about the dynamics of life in the shantytowns and on the street, so its readers were sympathetic to the plight of the poor. More important, however, was the *act* of selling, that brief moment that Hernán describes when the driver rolls down his window and asks what's in the magazine this month. The magazine's founder, Oscar Arias, also appears in the movie that Hernán and his friends made about how they got off the street:

> *"The children, their magazines in hand, re-signify the content of* La Luciérnaga. *You read an article about the economics of education, and then you ask the vendor, 'Do your brothers and sisters go to school?'*
> *'I do'*
> *'Who pays for their books and uniforms? You do?'*
> *'Yes'*
> *'And you're still in school, too?'*
> *'Absolutely…' "*

People walking through the streets and galleries the city didn't learn about poverty in abstract terms: they read about it, and then talked directly to children suffering exclusion.

Like the gift in many traditional South American cultures, the magazine became the catalyst for a relationship between two people or two groups that would otherwise never interact. The words in the magazine, and the words they inspire between the buyer and the vendor, break down the class apartheid that rules so much of contemporary Latin America. The middle and upper class came to know the poor on a

level that, if not truly equal, approached equality, and they came to see the virtues and to appreciate the struggles of people outside their ken.

In most cities, people see poor teenagers as criminals and gangsters – a threat to the city – and this stereotype perfectly serves the goals of repression. In Córdoba, when people thought of poor teenagers, it was different: they thought of the young men and women that sold them *La Luciérnaga*. They knew hard-working, good kids, hardly the "urban terrorists" described by the Manhattan Institute. Not only on a small scale, but also on a large one, Hernán was right: the magazine had transformed society.

Though many of the teenagers that sell *La Luciérnaga* are illiterate, and the schools in the shantytowns taught only a few of them to write well, the editorial staff had long dreamed that the kids themselves would write the magazine. The editor, Eliana Lacombe, recruited two young journalists to help her teach a group of street kids how to become writers, and they began a five year long communications workshop. The kids learned photography, created a radio show, and eventually made an hour long documentary film, but everyone involved agreed that the most important – and the hardest – lesson was working with words.

Writing matters as communication; writing matters as politics. The vendors at *La Luciérnaga* also showed that writing could be the seed of a relationship between people living on opposite sides of the economic wall. In the communications workshop, Hernán and his friends also learned that writing could *mediate between the writer and himself*, that words provide the critical distance that allows a child to think. As they wrote for the magazine, representing both themselves and the people they wrote about, journalism became the mirror in which they could perceived themselves and their world anew.

Journalism – good journalism, that is, something that has become more and more difficult to find in the Western Hemisphere – forces the writer to step outside of himself, to see the world with other eyes. Lacombe, *Luciérnaga's* editor, described the experience with these words:

> *"They stopped seeing themselves only as victims, and began to see that many people in the world are suffering. They want to denounce all that… but they aren't denouncing what is happening to themselves, but what is happening to other people. I think that it provides a sort of unmooring from being stuck as the victim, a way to become a protagonist in your own life, to say, 'other people matter to me.'"*

The young journalists recorded their interviews on tape, and then sat at the computer to write those words down and to transform them into a story. In the process, their fingers took on the identity of the poor grandmother from their neighborhood, the police officer patrolling downtown, even touring international music stars like Manu Chao. As Lacombe said, they learned empathy for each of these people as they wrote the words of the other with their own hands. At the same time, seeing the world through new eyes, they had discovered the experience that Kant called parallax: the apparent change in the object because of the real change in the subject. For Kant, because the noumenon or thing-in-itself is always and forever hidden, parallax was the only way to get closer to truth: you can't ever get at the thing itself, but you can see it from different perspectives, experience it in different ways. As they stepped out of their own perspective, the young journalists experienced exactly that feeling.

Hernán found the words to describe this transformation in the vocabulary of film. "Being in front of the camera, you feel a responsibility," he told me at the end of our work together. "You're teaching something to other people, and that means that it is serious. You have to think hard, examine yourself, wonder how your life can have an impact on other people." The issue is not only, as Lacombe says, that the other becomes important for the street child, *but that the street child becomes important for the world*. He becomes important, visible.

Working with words is, in fact, an unmooring from the position of victim, from the limited world of exclusion in the shantytowns. But at the same time, the writer temporarily anchors herself to another person, and sees the world from another perspective. Then finally, through the act of writing, this new perspective becomes important to individual people reading on the streets of Córdoba; it teaches them something new.

In Kantian terms, *La Luciérnaga* works for transcendence: to transcend the walls that separate classes in Argentina – both through words and through individual relationships – but also to transcend the limited perspective through which any one person sees. We can't get closer to the world as noumenon, but we can look at it from here and there, learning something more each time.

"What did I learn from Nietzsche as I sat in that park, waiting for my turn to wash windshields?" Hernán ask in his film. "I learned that I can overcome myself. I learned that I have to meet the world as an actor on life's stage, not as a victim." If I may correct Hernán a little, I don't think he learned all of that from Nietzsche. I think he learned it from reading the words of Nietzsche, then selling written words in a magazine as he exchanged spoken words with people from other social classes. Even in our "post-literate" society, words still matter.