

In 1995, Bogotá was one of the most violent and dangerous cities in the world. That was when Mayor Antanas Mockus decided to use pedagogical and artful initiatives as policy tools to turn things around.

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More carrots than sticks: Antanas Mockus's civic culture policy in Bogotá

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IN 1993, THE PRESIDENT of the National University in Colombia, Antanas Mockus, dropped his pants and mooned a rowdy student audience in order to silence them. The episode, broadcast that night as part of the evening news, not only catapulted Mockus into the country's public scene, but also revealed to that same public the unusual and eccentric character of his methods. This would be but the first of his many theatrical displays, for soon after, Mockus resigned his post and decided to run for mayor of Bogotá. Although he lacked political experience, Mockus became an electoral success in a country where traditional politics was extremely discredited. And in 1994, he was elected to the country's second most important public office.

I received useful comments on earlier drafts of this article from my colleagues at Princeton University, Elena Peregrina-Salvador and Matthew Tremé. Andrés Sanín and Doris Sommer, from Harvard University, were more than generous in their reactions to the text. My gratitude goes to all of them. Remaining infelicities, grammatical and substantive, are mine alone.



Bogotá was then one of the most dangerous and ungovernable cities in Latin America. Nevertheless, Mockus stepped up to the challenge and soon turned the city into a social experiment, implementing a series of initiatives aimed at promoting peaceful coexistence and legal compliance among the citizenry. This wide range of initiatives, all brought together under the rubric of civic culture (*cultura ciudadana*), included such diverse measures as controlling the most salient risk factors for violence, namely the consumption of alcohol and the bearing of firearms; reconfiguring the institutional setting for policy formulation and implementation; strengthening the metropolitan police; and fundamentally redressing the way citizens interacted with each other, the authorities, and the city.

The objective of this initiative was to bestow the responsibility of dealing with violence not only on the authorities (in charge of enforcing the law) but also on individual citizens (in charge of complying with it in favor of the common good). Thus, Mockus embraced his role as an educator, not only bringing to his administration a new view of governing but also transforming the way people exercised their citizenship. To effect this transformation, Mockus resorted to a creative communicative and pedagogical effort to change the citizens' hearts and minds in favor of peaceful coexistence and legal compliance. Symbols, metaphors, and humor became the language through which the administration would enforce its measures to deal with urban violence. This new approach, principally aimed at educating the citizenry, coincided with a change in the city's violence during the three years of the Mockus administration. The annual homicide rate dropped from 69.69 to 47.08 homicides per 100,000 people and the number of homicides from 3,385 to 2,614.¹

Between 1995 and 1997, after having been considered one of the most dangerous cities in the Americas, why did Bogotá experience a decrease in violence? Throughout the ensuing years, several arguments have been brought forth in order to answer this question, including those that speak of a national trend, an increase in sanctions against criminals, an improvement of socioeconomic conditions, or institutional enhancement.² Although I believe that no

single factor can account for an increase or a decrease in violence, this being a multifaceted phenomenon, it is my contention that one of the intervening factors in Bogotá's experience lies in the implementation of the civic culture policy, and more specifically in a set of measures—artful, creative, and eccentric as they were—aimed at redressing the way citizens interacted with each other, the authorities, and the city.

This article assesses the impact of Mockus's communicative and pedagogical efforts and ventures a hypothesis to explain such an impact. For even if the drop in the city's homicide rate has been widely acknowledged as a meaningful experience in terms of urban governance, mainly because of the figures themselves, there are no explanations as to why the civic culture policy managed to have an impact on the behavior of citizens.³ Ultimately I hint at the relevance of this sort of experiment as part of the wide array of policy options to address urban violence.

I approach Mockus's civic culture program as a set of policy initiatives that, besides their occasional eccentricity or even outright wackiness, are part and parcel of an ambitious philosophical and social project. I first present what I consider to be the most relevant creative measures implemented during the first Mockus administration (1995–1997): the so-called Temperance Law (*Ley Zanahoria*), the voluntary disarmament campaigns, and the two vaccination campaigns against violence. I also present some of the results yielded by these initiatives as a way to assess their impact on the drop in the city's homicide rate. Second, I identify what I believe to be the most salient factors, among others, to account for this impact: Mockus's leadership and the agentive power of creativity and the arts as fundamental components of the civic culture policy.⁴

A new approach to Bogotá's urban violence

In 1995, several municipal agencies got together to draft Bogotá's development plan for the next three years. Civic culture was recognized as one of its six priorities and became one of the articulating

categories that would determine the city's spending during Mockus's incumbency. Here, the concept at hand was defined as "the ensemble of customs, activities, and shared minimum rules intended to create a feeling of belonging, facilitate urban coexistence, and produce respect for collective goods and recognition of citizens' rights and duties."⁵

To achieve its purposes, the civic culture policy encompassed a wide range of legal measures and communicative initiatives, often involving creativity and the arts, all aimed at engineering a change in the way citizens interacted with each other, the authorities, and the city. These initiatives were conceived as a series of concrete measures and actions to prevent those events and circumstances considered to induce or trigger violent behavior: the misuse of alcohol, the bearing of firearms, and violence within the family. All of these measures were especially aimed at young people as a way to redress the way they behaved and interacted in public spaces.

Arguably the most controversial measure undertaken by the Mockus administration was the Temperance Law, which was intended to reduce the number of alcohol-related deaths in the city. Forensic data has revealed to the administration the close relationship between alcohol consumption and violence. In 1995, most of the violent deaths in Bogotá took place late at night and mostly over the weekends.⁶ Furthermore, alcohol was involved in 49 percent of traffic accidents, in 33 percent of homicides committed with firearms, and in 49 percent of those committed with knives.⁷ With these figures, it was evident that something had to be done.

Thus, in accordance with the Temperance Law, implemented in December 1995, no alcohol could be sold in Bogotá after 1:00 A.M. In addition, bars, clubs, and restaurants that offered alcoholic drinks were required to close at this hour. Roadblocks and police enforcement were boosted, and sanctions against drunk drivers were drastically increased. However, due to the resistance not only of bar and restaurant owners, but also of youths and young adults, the administration was required to undertake an aggressive campaign to underscore the importance of this measure and commu-

nicate its intent and alleged results.⁸ Such initiatives ranged from the symbolic display of giant carrots at the mayor's office to shocking television ads, and a series of alcohol-awareness lectures, in which more than thirty-five hundred teenage students participated.⁹ Among them, 79 percent declared being more aware of the dangers of alcohol consumption, and 57 percent reported a change in their alcohol consumption practices.¹⁰

Those same data led the Mockus administration to control the bearing of firearms in the city, which included not only administrative and police measures but also an aggressive campaign to promote voluntary disarmament. Based on the fact that more than 70 percent of homicides in Bogotá involved a firearm, the administration launched an initiative in December 1996 through which people could exchange firearms and ammunition for Christmas gift cards.¹¹

In this first campaign, 2,538 legal and illegal firearms, ammunition, and explosives were voluntarily surrendered.¹² By 2001 and through other similar initiatives, that figure had risen to over 6,500 firearms.¹³ In the same way and by enhancing police control, the number of confiscated illegal firearms and weapons increased from 6,000 in 1995 to almost 16,000 in 2003.¹⁴ All the weapons were melted and turned into tablespoons, each of them with an inscription that stated where it came from: "I was a firearm."¹⁵

Furthermore, and in accordance with the hypotheses that placed violence within the family—namely against women and children—at the core of the production of a culture of violence and a generalized tolerance for and trivialization of violent practices, the Mockus administration implemented what would become one of its most creative initiatives: the two vaccination campaigns against violence, which took place in 1996. More than a prevention strategy against violence within the family, this initiative was intended to sensitize the citizenry about this issue and, most important, its role in the reproduction of violence in general. During these events, a series of symbolic mechanisms were employed, with the aid of psychiatrists and psychologists, to allow victims of abuse to express their feelings toward their aggressor. Participants were asked to recall a past aggression or abuse, draw the features of the

perpetrator on a dummy, and verbally or physically express their feelings against it. At the end, victims were given a placebo as a symbolic vaccination against the reproduction of violence. More than forty-five thousand people participated in this initiative.¹⁶

The effects of the civic culture policy on the city's homicide rate are still a contested issue due to the lack of a comprehensive and complete set of data that would allow such an evaluation. However, a considerable number of students of this phenomenon regard these measures as an effective, and even exportable, means to address urban violence.¹⁷ Furthermore, econometric analyses have argued that the measures to control the consumption of alcohol and the bearing of firearms can be said to account for 22 percent of the decrease in the city's homicide rate,¹⁸ which fell from 58.91 to 39.04 per 100,000 people, between 1995 and 1999.¹⁹

Whether this impact is considered significant or merely marginal is not a matter of interest for the purposes of this article. My argument is that what is of foremost importance is that they had an effect: they constitute an intervening factor in the shift in the city's violence by changing the way citizens interacted with each other, the authorities, and the city.

Nevertheless, the way in which the authorities launched and promoted these initiatives exhibit certain particularities that go beyond the specificities of the Temperance Law, the voluntary disarmament campaign, or the vaccination campaigns against violence. These particularities refer to the incorporation of public health and epidemiology as effective ways of addressing urban violence, but also their combination with specific efforts to modify citizens' behavior through communication, educational and pedagogical activities, and artful interventions.

The agentic power of creativity and the arts

Although the impact of the civic culture policy can be explained through a whole range of factors—among them, the institutional setting of its implementation is of the foremost importance—my

contention is that other factors are in play, and they are commonly overlooked by those who study this experience: the leadership exercised by the mayor himself and the agentic power of creativity and the arts.

In this respect, it is necessary to understand that Mockus appeared in the public sphere at a critical juncture in Colombia, one of extreme discrediting of traditional politics. This would explain why, with less than ten thousand dollars and in a country with strong political machineries, an independent candidate managed to win the election to Colombia's second most important public office, with 64.5 percent of the vote and breaking the Liberal and Conservative monopoly of power in the city.

As both a candidate and mayor, Mockus shook Bogotá's political arena not only through eccentric public displays like the one described at the beginning of this article, but also by introducing an innovative discourse in the exercise of political power itself. Creativity and the arts, as policy and pedagogical tools, would become the privileged ways in which his administration would communicate with the citizenry.

Humor and eccentricity, instead of coercion and top-down authority, gave way to an effective communication between the administration and its constituents. For example, in 1997, a water shortage hit the city. In accordance with the theoretical guidelines of the civic culture policy, Mockus implemented a campaign to promote saving water and to prevent restrictions in its supply by the official authorities. The strategy was one of intense communication. Each week, the mayor would report back to the citizenry the amount of water that had been saved. Furthermore, and very much in his style, he would appear on television shows while taking a shower; he would turn water off as he soaped and ask fellow citizens to do the same. However, as Cristina Rojas points out, communication went both ways. When water consumption increased by 2 percent at the end of the first week, the administration determined to find out why. When asked in a survey, citizens said they had been collecting water in case of a cut in the service. The administration reassured users and explained once again the whole

purpose of reducing water consumption. In just two months, water consumption dropped by 14 percent and kept on dropping when people realized how much money they were saving due to the incentives approved by the Mockus administration.²⁰

Although this story has little to do with urban violence, it is a good example of how Mockus managed to become an agent of change, setting a positive example and engaging in effective communication with his constituents, transforming the way they interacted with each other, the authorities, and the city, not only in terms of violent behavior but also in terms of everyday attitudes and practices.

Thus, in order to close the gap between the legal, moral, and cultural regulatory systems of human behavior, the Mockus administration directed its efforts at communicating and explaining the convenience of complying with legal and civic prescriptions, thus reducing the moral or cultural legitimacy of illegal or noncivic actions. This was its message from start to finish. And by sticking to it, Mockus managed not only to implement a set of policy initiatives but also to run a successful communications strategy, which reinforced the former and contributed to achieve its desired results.

But while Mockus's leadership, simultaneously as mayor *and* citizen, did play a fundamental role in the implementation of the civic culture policy, another intervening factor in the effects this initiative had on Bogotá's violence lies in the agentive power of creativity and the arts. Both of them, displayed through symbolism, humor, and subversive language, constitute main components of this initiative. The mayor's leadership and creativity's agency are intimately intertwined. And ultimately the iconoclastic and refreshing character of Mockus's policies can account for his own political success. More than ten years have passed, and most citizens effectively recall civic culture as embodied by pantomime performances at the city's crossroads, by the symbolic power of approval or disapproval of the thumbs-up and thumbs-down cards used by drivers and pedestrians, or the giant carrots displayed as a trademark of the administration. But while the precise effect of these

creative and artistic instances is almost impossible to quantify, their agentive power can be theoretically accounted for.

If one of the civic culture policy's main achievements was to restore and enhance communication between the citizenry and the authorities, what was the role that creativity and the arts played in this effort? Here I offer a twofold answer: creativity and the arts lent themselves, on the one hand, as effective tools for giving the concept of temperance a new meaning; and on the other, following Doris Sommer, as estrangement mechanisms that broke "the spell of indifference to rules and refreshed the public's perception of mutual dependence or vulnerability on the streets."²¹

In her ethnographic account of how the Temperance Law came into being, Ángela Rivas Gamboa recalls how, when asked by the local news media about the control of alcohol consumption in the city, Mockus came up with the concept of temperance (*lo zanaborio*) out of the blue.²² *Zanaborio/a*, in its masculine and feminine forms, literally translates into English as "carrot-like." Traditionally understood in a pejorative sense, this adjective is applied in Colombia, especially among young people, to someone considered dull or boring for exhibiting overly temperate behavior. However, during the Mockus administration, this word underwent a process whereby it was given a radically different meaning. Now the concept of temperance has been vindicated and is associated with a certain way for people to exercise their citizenship. To be *zanaborio/a* is to be able to interact with other citizens, the authorities, and the city in compliance with a set of minimum shared standards for peaceful coexistence; it is, in short, the result of breaching the gap between the legal, moral, and cultural regulatory systems of human behavior.

Mockus as mayor, and hence as a representative of the state, constantly performed the role of a *zanaborio* citizen, whether dressed as a superhero called *Supercitizen* or displaying conducts that would conform to the concept. This fact not only conveyed great credibility to the whole process, but also consolidated Mockus as an agent of change, something that is corroborated in the almost unanimous association between the former mayor and the concept

of civic pedagogy.²³ This function allowed Mockus to closely interact with the citizenry and broadly pose the question of citizenship in terms of rights and, especially, responsibilities.

Furthermore, creativity and the arts had the foremost effect of breaking the citizenry's habitual disregard for basic norms of peaceful coexistence that had been expressed in a wide array of violent attitudes, from aggressive driving to more deadly practices. As Sommer states in a seminal article on the social and political aftermath of artistic interventions, "Artful interruptions can unblock procedures mired in habitual abuses or indifference in order to get those practices back on track."²⁴

As part of her argument, Sommer rescues from oblivion a fundamental concept in aesthetic theory: Viktor Shklovsky's estrangement. According to the Russian formalist, this is the intrinsic effect of the aesthetic product, as it alters the perceptive automatism through which people tend to experience the world. This is precisely what the civic culture policy achieved, articulated in a powerful paradox that signals both failure and success: "The mimes and participants in other civic games produced the immediately refreshing effect of estrangement. But by the time their performances failed as art, they had succeeded in effecting a secondary delayed result; a renewed respect for law that brought Bogotá a step closer to coordinating law with culture and morality."²⁵

Nevertheless, while I do not challenge Sommer's assessment, it is my contention that between the implementation of creativity and the arts as policy tools and the change in the way citizens interacted with each other, the authorities, and the city as the ultimate effect of this policy lies an intermediate stance: the fact that aesthetic estrangement fundamentally constituted a strategic communicative effort on the part of the administration. Thus understood, and amid a profound distrust of traditional politics, the creative and artful elements of the civic culture policy can be accountable for restoring and enhancing communication between the citizenry and the authorities, making citizens realize that there was something wrong in the way they exercised their condition as such. Hence, this renewed respect for the law constitutes a mediated effect of

aesthetic estrangement: between the failure of art and the success of policy lies the activation of effective channels of bidirectional communication between the citizenry and the authorities. As traditional grounds of contestation, there can hardly be a better way of doing so than creativity and the arts: “Art can enable politics by interrupting deadlocks, intersecting debates to get past an impasse of breakdown and facilitate a return to procedure.”²⁶

Conclusion

This article has examined Bogotá’s decrease in violence as the result, albeit partial, of the civic culture policy, while at the same time interpreting this policy initiative as a broader philosophical and social project, at the core of which lies the will to redress the way citizenship is perceived and exercised.

The civic culture policy advocates for the emergence of a new type of citizen—a *zanaborio* citizen—as the result of breaching the gap between the legal, moral, and cultural regulatory systems of human behavior. The *zanaborio* citizen is characterized by the awareness not only of his or her rights but also his or her responsibilities, an awareness that leads to self-regulation and compliance with legal and civic provisions. It also advocates for a different way of exercising political power: not through coercion and top-down authority but through direct communication with the citizenry.

In this way, personal leadership and the agentive power of creativity and the arts have played a fundamental role in accomplishing the objectives of this initiative. It is possible that were it not for Mockus’s positive example, not only in the face of a water shortage but also constantly performing the role of a *zanaborio* citizen, and for his communication skills and artful interventions, the civic culture policy would not have had the slightest impact on the way citizens interacted with each other, the authorities, and the city.

This interpretation of Bogotá’s experience has three important theoretical implications in connection with youth development initiatives. First is the idea that neither citizenship nor the way it is

exercised constitute cultural givens; change can be effected and people can in fact interact with one another, the authorities, and the city in more democratic and inclusive ways. Second is the idea that for better or worse, this change can be effected by enhancing communication between the authorities and the citizenry and by broadening the sphere of deliberation. Third, and most important, is the idea that a top-down exercise of political power can be replaced by a pedagogical approach to public administration as an effective model of democratic governance. Let us not forget that Mockus was first and foremost an educator who put himself in charge of a classroom of 6.5 million people. This is a model that could be replicated on a smaller scale in youth development initiatives, where creativity and the arts could be used as tools to reactivate effective channels of communication, implementing a more democratic and bidirectional exercise of authority.

However, when attempting to export Mockus's model to other contexts, a call for caution in the overenthusiastic assessment of this initiative is in order. First and foremost, by looking at Bogotá's historical homicide rate, it is not difficult to see that the major decline presented itself in 1994, a year before Mockus took office. This renders impossible any attempt to establish direct causality between the civic culture policy and the shift in the city's violence trend. Perhaps this shift had to do with the start of an institutional effort during the Jaime Castro administration (1992–1994) to reorganize the city and claim violence control as a local responsibility. Nevertheless, this question remains open and does not undermine the fact that after the initiative was implemented, the tendency continued and even became more pronounced at one point.

Second, caution is called for because of the difficulty of accurately assessing the impact of the civic culture policy on violence in the city. As many scholars acknowledge, this is due to a lack of accurate and comprehensive data, whether about alcohol consumption before and after the implementation of the Temperance Law or about the relationship between the geographical distribution of homicide rates and the geographical origin of the weapons collected during the disarmament campaigns.

This lack of information has led to different assessments and interpretations of this initiative, some more enthusiastic than others. While I do not challenge these assessments—in fact, some of them feed into my argument—one overlooked factor also played a role: the civic culture policy’s creative and artful interventions as a means to strengthen communication between the authorities and the citizenry and redress the way citizens perceived and exercised their condition as such.

Ultimately I hope to have conveyed throughout this article the need to think creatively when addressing such complex issues as urban violence. Hard-line options might seem more desirable or effective. Nevertheless, I believe their effects to be limited in their own immediacy. In this sense, Bogotá’s experience is a good example of how, even in the most difficult circumstances, creative and communicative pedagogy can be important tools for reducing the level of violence and facilitating peaceful coexistence among citizens.

Notes

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2. Acero. (2002).

3. Acero, H. (2005). La seguridad ciudadana una responsabilidad de los gobiernos locales en Colombia. In L. Dammert & G. Paulsen (Eds.), *Ciudad y seguridad en América Latina*. Santiago de Chile: FLACSO; Llorente, M. V., & Rivas, A. (2004). La caída del crimen en Bogotá: Una década de políticas de seguridad ciudadana. In L. Dammert (Ed.), *Seguridad ciudadana: Experiencias y desafíos*. Valparaiso: Ilustre Municipalidad de Valparaiso.

4. In a longer version of this article, I also argue that the institutional context under which the civic culture policy was implemented is also one of the factors that can help account for its impact.

5. Mockus, A. (2002). *Cultura ciudadana, programa contra la violencia en Santa Fe de Bogotá, Colombia, 1995–1997*. Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank. P. 7 (My translation).

6. Llorente & Rivas. (2004).

7. Mockus. (2002).

8. After the implementation of the Temperance Law, and between 1996 and 1998, the number of homicides dropped from 3,303 to 2,482, and the number of deaths in traffic accidents from 1,301 to 914. Acero. (2002).

9. Mockus. (2002).

10. Llorente & Rivas. (2004).

11. Mockus. (2002).
12. Mockus. (2002).
13. Mockus. (2002).
14. Llorente & Rivas. (2004).
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17. Acero. (2002); Concha-Eastman, A. (2002). Urban violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: Dimensions, explanations, actions. In S. Rotker (Ed.), *Citizens of fear: Urban violence in Latin America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Mockus. (2002).
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19. It is worth noting that the figures that are often cited by scholars are the ones pertaining to the city's homicide rate between 1993 and 2002, in which time it registered a plunge from 80 to 28 homicides per 100,000 people. However, here I chose to present the figures just for the period between 1995 and 1999, so they would coincide with the initial implementation of the Temperance Law and the time when the econometric analysis was produced. Acero. (2002).
20. Rojas, C. (2005). Descentralización y la cultura ciudadana de Bogotá, Colombia. In I. Licha (Ed.), *Ciudadanía activa: Gestión de presupuestos locales en Asia Oriental y América Latina*. Washington, DC: Inter-American Development Bank.
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22. Rivas Gamboa, A. (2007). *Gorgeous monster: The arts of governing and managing violence in Bogotá*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller. P. 70.
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26. Sommer. (2005). P. 269.

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