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Translation – “Apologo sull’onestà nel paese dei corrotti” by Italo Calvino

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TRANSLATOR’S NOTE

What follows is a translation into English of Italo Calvino’s “Apologo sull’onestà nel paese dei corrotti,” which was published in *La Repubblica* on March 15, 1980. I discovered this fable in a blog by the journalist Pino Bruno, “Perché il futuro non è più quello di una volta.”¹ Judging by the gospels of Google and YouTube, “A Defense” has become quite popular online. Those who have launched this invented folk tale into cyberspace assert that the imaginary land Calvino evokes represents the Italy of today even more presciently than it does the Italy of the 1980s, when the piece was written.

My argument in offering this essay in English is that the fable describes the America of today at least as well as it describes Italy. If there is a difference between the two nations and their peoples in regard to corruption, I would say that Italians generally denounce corruption even as they compromise with it, while Americans trumpet it as progress and congratulate themselves for having invented it.

I was struck as always by Calvino’s way of transforming rage and disillusionment into something productive or, if not productive, at least protective. I would argue that we can see the counter-society of the honest that Calvino prophesies taking shape day by day all around us, compromising when necessary with the reigning foolishness, but always finding new ways to carve out its own shared resilient sanctuary, open to all.

NOTE

1. ‘Perchè il futuro non è più quello di una volta’, *Pino Bruno* <http://www.pino-bruno.it/2008/07/perche-il-futuro-non-e-piu-quello-di-una-volta/>.

A Defense of Honesty in the Land of Corruption

APOLOGO SULL'ONESTÀ NEL PAESE DEI CORROTTI
(*LA REPUBBLICA*, MARCH 15, 1980)

There once was a country that ran on illegality. There were laws, of course, and the political system was based on principles that everyone more or less claimed to share. But as it branched through many power centers, the system demanded unlimited financial resources (once accustomed to having lots of money at hand, one loses the capacity to imagine life any other way) and these could be obtained only illegally, that is, by performing illegal favors for those holding the resources. Those with money to trade for favors usually gained it from favors they had performed in turn; the resulting economic system tended to be circular and enjoyed its own unique harmony.

Although illegally financed, each power center was utterly untouched by any sense of guilt because, according to its own internal moral code, anything done to advance the interests of the group was considered licit, even praiseworthy, because each group identified its own power with the greater common good. What was, strictly speaking, illegal did not exclude a certain higher practical legality. In any illicit transaction for the benefit of a collective entity, a small share naturally remains in the hands of a single individual as fair compensation for the skill and labor involved in mediation and acquisition. Therefore, each illegal action, licit within each group's internal moral code, necessarily brought a fringe of illegality into that code. Upon close examination, however, the private individual who pocketed a personal cut of the collective take was sure that his own benefit in turn benefited the larger community, and so he could convince himself, without hypocrisy, that his conduct was not only licit, but praiseworthy.

At the same time, the country had a huge official budget fed by taxes on every legal activity, from which it financed all those who, legally or illegally, managed to work the system so as to obtain funds. Because in that country no one was willing, not only to face bankruptcy, but to contribute any part whatsoever of his own resources (in the name of what, exactly, would a citizen be expected to do such a thing?), the public budget served, legally and in the name of the greater good, to recoup the business losses of those who had distinguished themselves by illegal conduct while claiming to serve the greater good. Tax collection, which in other eras and civilizations might function by appealing to a sense of civic duty, here laid bare its essence as a forced levy (just as, in some areas, the national tax was augmented by taxes imposed by criminal organizations), a burden to which the taxpayer submitted only so as to avoid still worse punishment. Rather than

the satisfaction of having carried out an honorable duty, the taxpayer had the disagreeable sensation of passive complicity in corrupt public administration and in the privileges derived from illegal activities, which, obedient to the norm, were exempt from taxation.

Every now and then, when least expected, a court would decide to enforce the laws, which caused small earthquakes in some power centers and the arrest of people who up to then had good reason to consider themselves beyond the reach of law. Rather than righteous satisfaction for the victory of justice, the general sentiment on such occasions was suspicion that it was all merely a matter of settling accounts between one power center and another. It thus became difficult to determine whether the law had simply become a tactical weapon in wars between competing illicit interests, or whether the courts, by publicly demonstrating their institutional role, wished to establish that they too were power centers with illicit interests equal to any other.

Naturally, this was a propitious situation for criminal organizations of the traditional type, whose kidnapping and bank robbery (and more modest activities, down to purse-snatching by motor scooter) brought an element of unpredictability into the billion-dollar jousting match, diverting the flow into subterranean pathways, from which the money reemerged sooner or later in thousands of unexpected legal and illegal ways. In opposition to the system, terrorist organizations gained ground by using the same methods of financing as the traditional outlaws, and with a constant, measured stream of murders of illustrious and unknown citizens promoted themselves as the only possible alternative to the global system.

But their real effect on the system was to reinforce it, serving as an indispensable pillar and confirmation that the reigning system was the best one possible and that nothing should be changed. In this way all the forms of illegal conduct, from the slyest to the most ferocious, welded together into a system that was stable, compact, and coherent, where many were able to find practical advantage without sacrificing the moral advantage of a clean conscience. The inhabitants of the country would therefore have been able to consider themselves unanimously happy, were it not for a still numerous category of citizens whose role remained unclear: the honest ones.

These persons were honest not for any special reason (they claimed neither grand patriotic, social, nor religious principles, all these having run their course) but merely due to mental habit, conditioning, or nervous tic; that is, they couldn't help it if the things that mattered to them could not immediately be measured in money, or if their brains still operated by a worn-out mechanism that linked material gain to work performed, or social esteem to merit, or personal satisfaction to the satisfaction of others. In a country where everyone went around with a clean conscience, the honest were the only ones with qualms, always asking themselves what was the right thing to do.

They knew that moralizing, being indignant, and preaching virtue drew only too easily the approval of all, whether in good or bad faith. They didn't find power interesting enough to dream of it for themselves (at least, not the kind of power others were interested in) and they entertained no illusion that things were different in other countries, although perhaps better hidden. They didn't hope for a better society in the future, because they knew that things were always more likely to get worse.

Were they doomed to extinction? No. They consoled themselves by considering that on the margins of every lasting society there has always existed a counter-society of crooks, pickpockets, petty thieves and grifters; a counter-society with no pretense of domination, but only of survival within the folds of the ruling society, affirming its own way of life in the face of the consecrated principles of conduct. This counter-society (if not approached too closely) has always appeared free and vital. Perhaps, in the same way, the counter-society of the honest might live on for centuries at the margins of the reigning practice, with no pretense other than living its own diversity, aware of its difference from everything else, and might finally end up playing an essential role for everyone, as an image of something words can no longer express, of something that has yet to be said and that we still don't know.

Italo Calvino