

One Size Doesn't Fit All
Spanish Language Markets
18 October 2005
Frankfurt Book Fair

MARCELO URIBE
ERA ediciones, Mexico

Perspective of a smaller Latin-American publisher

Good afternoon. First of all, I would like to express my appreciation for the generous invitation made to Ediciones Era to participate in this Rights Directors Meeting. The comments that follow are not intended to be a scholarly or technical approach to this topic. They are only notes from my personal experience and on some noteworthy aspects I have perceived during almost thirty years of publishing poetry and prose.

I intend to speak —and I know this might not be the perspective of other publishers— from the point of view of an interest in books as a vehicle of cultural and social change; a perspective that considers a book to be a vehicle for a work of art and an instrument to further knowledge and development; books as a voice of criticism and as a tool to limit absolute and arbitrary power; and not only as yet another inert object for sale in the marketplace, a source of potential profits.

In order to establish what Ediciones Era is, I would like to say that clearly I am here in a minority position, for, although I represent a publishing house founded in October of 1960, exactly forty-five years ago to the day, with a more or less solid and long-lived presence and history, I find myself now among gigantic publishing houses, which obviously have long years of work behind them as well, but which were also formed thanks to the intense and much debated process of concentration in the publishing world over the last 25 to 30 years. For those of you

who do not know Ediciones Era, I would like to say that back then, 25 to 30 years ago, we were considered a medium-size publishing house. Today, among the giants that surround us, we are considered a minuscule publishing house, though we haven't modified our size at all. What has happened in this period is not just a matter of scale, but rather of very substantial changes that have affected practically the entire publishing world.

The rights market in Latin America has been modified at the same pace as the process of concentration in a few publishing houses, that is to say, in the huge corporate groups that now undertake publishing. The absorption of formerly independent imprints into these groups has had the same results observed in other languages, in particular in the English language. Catalogues have had to eliminate a substantial part of their back-lists in the constant search for the optimization of profits. A project that has not always been successful, of course, since these matters are not easy to foresee. But along the way they have dramatically shortened the life span of books. Due to the reduction of the total number of publishers, publishing rights have tended to concentrate in fewer and fewer hands. The handful of very well-known authors, such as Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes and Mario Vargas Llosa, has generally remained with the big groups, and their works circulate sometimes under different imprints throughout the Spanish-language world.

However, nobody can reasonably expect that nearly 400 million people scattered in two continents, from the Pyrenees to Patagonia, that do not even speak the same language in the same way, could possibly think the same, read the same, eat the same. In many cases, this doesn't even happen within the same country. One of the countless differences between countries is the enormous variety of legal frameworks one can find in the region. While some countries substantially support the development of the publishing industry by way of tax exemptions and very

significant subsidies, as in the case of Spain and Colombia, others, like Mexico, tend to gradually eliminate all existing subsidies and exemptions. While some enforce fixed price laws for the book in order to protect the bookstores and increase competitiveness in the field of service and stock instead of price, like Spain, others suffer an almost grotesque concentration of the book trade, such as Mexico.

In addition to these differences that make it impossible to consider the region as a homogeneous territory, the vast majority of authors have local audiences and do not travel easily. A Chilean short-story writer is read mostly in Chile, a Colombian novelist is read mostly in Colombia, and so on. In other genres such as philosophy, history, social sciences, anthropology, etcetera, there are several books that can appeal to the interest of international audiences, but in general they are seldom books for mass audiences and therefore their commercial interest tends to be limited.

Diversity and homogenization are issues that arise immediately when one speaks of world-rights and regional rights. However, in recent decades it has been clear that big publishing groups have tried, not always successfully, to turn peripheral countries into consumers of books generated or conceived in a metropolis, an attempt that seems to have collided with the reality of a diversity that has remained reluctant so far to homogenization. The origin of this model could probably be traced to the film industry where the American ideal is that all films be made in one city and then consumed around the world. Where all this has been most evident is in the insistence of the big corporate Spanish-language publishing houses on acquiring world rights. World rights that, on the other hand, have been very difficult to exploit due precisely to local interests. Many of the authors that do not belong to the widely read group of García Márquez, have signed contracts with world rights. They have been published locally and have not fulfilled

profit expectations, and therefore they have been dumped after only a few months. For these reasons, some authors, who have not seen the big publishing houses' promise of world distribution fulfilled, have returned to independent houses in search of a contract that would allow at least a few local editions.

There are also cases of authors that have been successful –even enormously so– in local markets, but that do not make for good exports, and that, when published abroad, end up having catastrophic sales.

Another example that might be considered an isolated case, but may also illustrate some of the problems in the Spanish language rights world is an American author whose book was published a couple of years ago in Mexico by Ediciones Era, and in Spain by a big corporate group. This book, very critical of the Bush government, has not had big sales. The Spanish house that published it not only pulped the book, but also ended up dumping the whole imprint that published it (obviously not because of this title). Ediciones Era, however, decided to keep it in our list, in spite of slow sales. Perhaps because of this presence, the author turned into a well known reference and source of opinion for the Mexican press, so the book ended up earning him a somewhat prominent place in the country.

All this points to the need to continue with local editions and with the role played by independent publishers. The number of these publishers, however, is hugely diminished because of the concentration processes, and so their tasks tend to remain unfulfilled. Nonetheless some of them remain active while others arise suddenly with very noteworthy quality, like the new Mexican publishing house Sexto Piso, which has demonstrated not only a very strong project but also a very successful one.

This leads me to mention some of the valuable aspects of “minority” publishing, not always understood by the big publishers. Negligable as it is from

the point of view of fast sales, it is not possible to reject it altogether, as corporate publishing mostly does. Its importance and its far-reaching effects can be enormous and, in a way, that is one of the main purposes of publishing as such. There are numerous examples all over, but I would like to mention only a few. The first edition of *Les fleurs du mal* by Charles Baudelaire had a print run of 500 copies. That was the same first print run of another notorious book, *The metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, one of the key works of the whole 20th century in any language, whose author never knew it was going to be considered as such.

The first edition of *Pedro Páramo*, by Juan Rulfo, a novel whose rights were fervently sought for by the big corporate houses a few years ago, and that many consider the best Mexican novel of the century lasted many years and, according to accounts by Rulfo himself, was bought almost entirely by the author to give out as presents to his friends.

Muerte sin fin, the long poem by José Gorostiza, acclaimed by many as the best poem of the past century in Mexico, and certainly the most influential, also had a first run of 500 copies that lasted forty years before it went out of print.

And to close this brief list, the work of one of the major poets of the Spanish language of all times, Luis de Góngora, was never published during the author's lifetime, if we except a few loose signatures that were distributed by hand and a few poems included in an anthology by Pedro Espinosa. Many would think today that this 17th century author didn't have a good literary agent, perhaps.

All these works have had a tremendous impact in the literary life and in the real life of millions of speakers, readers, writers and everyday men and women. They have influenced taste, they have laid down crucial issues for the understanding of the literary phenomenon, and they have changed aesthetic notions with which we look at works of art and at the world.

But what would ever happen to books like these that changed the life –and not only the literary life– of thousands, perhaps millions of human beings on this planet had they been in the hands of a big corporate publisher? They would have become confetti a few months later, after proving absolutely useless, a complete sales failure. This is no doubt the fate of many thousands of books destroyed by orders of the marketing departments of large publishing groups. This is the powerful and devastating “market censorship” that could prevent the appearance of the new Juan Rulfos, the new Kafkas, Baudelaires, Gorostizas, and Góngoras.

It is thus clear that the large publishing houses cannot, will not, are not interested in, or are not capable of doing that part of the publishing job, absorbed as they are with offering decent profit margins in corporate boards, frequently constituted by individuals somehow foreign to the practice of reading or, at least, submitted to the obsessions of media moguls.

Even in the case of an author as well known today as the aforementioned García Márquez, I would like to say that the first edition in Mexico of one of his classic books, *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba*, was published by Era with a print run of three thousand copies that lasted for five years. Today thousands are sold every year and the book continues in Era’s catalogue.

Another example, humbler, but no less eloquent, is that of a Mexican writer from the North of the country who was completely unknown when we published his first book of short stories, a genre barely less unappreciated than poetry in the modern editorial world. A public presentation of the author was made and nobody arrived. Absolutely no one. The press gave the book however a substantial amount of praise, but only a few copies were sold. That would have been the perfect moment for a large publishing house to eliminate it from its catalogue and never publish the author again. Fortunately, Era kept the title in its catalogue. Currently,

the book is in its third printing, it has been translated to French, English and Portuguese, and, apart from Mexico, it has been published in Spanish in Spain, Chile and Uruguay. Today the author is considered by many one of the best Mexican writers.

We could go on and on with innumerable examples of the same sort, but they would all point the same way. Corporate houses only publish to have a book in the market for a few months and they take advantage of the sales curve brought by the book's release, and then they make haste to take it off their list. Independent publishing houses try to constantly enrich their lists, to build an intellectual, aesthetic corpus that attempts to open a space in society.

However, the development of corporate houses, and their need to acquire imprints and concentrate them under them has jeopardized the future of independent houses and their ways of approaching the publishing craft. The voraciousness with which publishing houses have been bought up seems to show that the large groups believe they must suppress competition, get hold of their best-selling titles and incorporate their logos to their own collections. What they do not seem to understand is that when they buy an imprint and submit it to the new rules that they have established, not only do they not acquire with it the former independent publishing house's way of working, but they irrevocably destroy that particular way of doing things, as this has been proved once and again.

It is not clear that a process like the one which is now in motion within the Spanish language publishing world can be reversed. However it does seem clear to me that everything must be done for the survival and, if possible, the growth and strengthening of independent publishing. With all its limitations, it remains the space where new issues and new voices with the power to bring about change are generated.

Because of their very nature, the new information and telecommunication enterprises, these “entertainment” industries, are incapable of fulfilling the needs of minority readers, who are the true agents of change. One only has to think of feminism, of the gay and lesbian rights movements, and of ecological groups that thrived and grew under the wing of minority publications.

Following the logic of globalization and savage capitalism has led to a dead end for authors (who see their books disappear), for publishers (who see their catalogues lose much of their diversity and richness), for bookstores (which cannot keep valuable back-list titles in stock), for readers (who cannot find anything but the newest and generally blandest titles) and, ultimately, for culture (now conceived as what the market decides in the recent weeks). A phenomenon indicative of some of the trends that are at play is the appearance in Spain of the magazine *Qué leer*, that is closer to *People* and *Hola*, than to *The New York Review of Books* or *The London Magazine*.

The book world, as many other aspects of the world, needs to preserve an ecological balance, and this balance has been broken. The book should have a different status in the economy, and cannot play by the rules of other products. A proof of that is found in the book trade in Europe, and in particular in Germany – certainly the healthiest environment for the book in the world to my knowledge – a set of mechanisms of exception has been put forward, such as the fixed price, that have played a definitive role not only in the survival of the book in the context of savage capitalism, but also in maintaining cultural diversity, and a more democratic access to the book in the whole country.

In the context described here, it seems essential that creative projects arise that could develop existing possibilities in a joint effort to face the challenges of the incredible concentration of publishing into a few hands.

In this world of books that vanish faster and faster, in which rights tend to be centralized more and more, in which the local receive neither attention, nor time from big publishers, Ediciones Era has for some time now sought alternatives that allow for a better exploitation of rights and for a wider readership of its authors beyond our frontiers. Thanks to encounters in book fairs with other independent publishers we have managed to form a network called precisely Editores Independientes. This network, that includes four publishers, Txalaparta from the Basque Country in Spain; Lom Ediciones, from Chile; Trilce, from Uruguay; and Era from Mexico, intends to export each other's catalogues in the best possible way within the Spanish-language area, and with the resources of independent publishing.

The model of operation seems simple, and it is based on sharing among us the rights to our books in the most active way we can. The idea was to find in each other's catalogues the books that could travel to other regions of the Spanish-language world. It has been clear to us that not all the books in our catalogues can find an audience elsewhere, but so far we have published over sixty titles from each other. Although very different in conception and orientation, our publishing houses share the interest in independent publishing and cover different aspects of the book spectrum. But once the differences were recognized, we discovered that without losing our independence and specific profiles we could undertake joint projects beyond the rights sharing, such as distribution of titles that could not find an audience big enough as to have a local edition. We have recently undertaken a pocket book series. And we have also started to buy world rights to certain books that we feel can be done in all four countries and distributed regionally by each of us. Our association has been very careful to respect the independence of each publishing house, and that way we feel closer and closer to each other in many

aspects, and can undertake new projects. It has not been easy to meet in person, but so far we have managed to do it once a year for the past six or seven years, occasionally twice. And from each of these meetings new projects appear on the horizon. Our small network is perhaps only a gesture, an attempt to offer some of our authors an alternative audience, and an attempt to swim against the flow of the waters in a world that, as an American friend, who also happens to be a publisher, said recently, ideas, poems, novels, short stories, and works of art are judged for the first time in history, not by their intrinsic value, but by the amount of money they can make.