

**The "Iron Cage of Bureaucracy" and the Bleak Tale of  
Officer Rojas: A Review  
of *Highway Patrolman (El Patrullero)***

By

Kurt Borchard  
University of Nebraska at Kearney

*Highway Patrolman (El Patrullero)*  
Directed by Alex Cox.  
Spanish with English subtitles.  
Photography: Miguel Garzon  
Released: (1992) VHS, Color, 91 minutes.  
Rating: NR

German sociologist Max Weber believed that bureaucracy represented the tragic theme of modernity. For Weber the rationalization of work was tragic because the benefits of bureaucracy (such as increased efficiency) also came at a cost (including the stifling of creativity within such organizations as well as their frequent inability to address exceptional individual cases). Alex Cox's 1992 film *Highway Patrolman* (or *El Patrullero* in Spanish) is far removed from Weber's Germany of the former century, but it provides one example of Weber's "iron cage of bureaucracy." The film is an elegantly bleak portrayal of one patrolman's attempt to address individual cases within the context of Mexico's national highway patrol bureaucracy, and the patterned injustice of a corrupt law enforcement regime that is informed by and reproduces social inequality.

Pedro Rojas (played by Roberto Sosa) begins the film as an idealistic young police cadet. In several early scenes, Cox foreshadows the ongoing moral dilemmas Rojas will face as an officer. Trainers use him for personal chores, and Rojas is once reprimanded after failing to open a car door for a well-to-do trainer's wife on a shopping spree. We also witness Rojas being taught by superiors that the first thing a highway patrolman should do when encountering motorists is to stop them, and then afterward figure out what the charge against them should be. These latent lessons in bureaucratic inflexibility, absolute authority of the police over citizens, and their translation into everyday injustice are apparent as Rojas is taught that, regardless of circumstances, all citizens have already broken the law.

After becoming an officer, Rojas is assigned to a northern border district. He is issued a brand-new patrol car, and he is ready to reap the rewards of his training and professionalism despite his early experiences. When he has difficulty fining emotional and impoverished motorists, when he refuses to accept the bribes of others, and when he ultimately fails to meet his department's ticket quota, he is reassigned to the "pig route," an even more difficult assignment with which to show professional competence. The escalating material demands of his growing family (Rojas marries a woman who he meets on patrol and they

quickly have a child together), on the one hand, and his increasing professional disenchantment, on the other, slowly lead him to personal and professional corruption, as Rojas begins accepting bribes for transportation permits and seeking personal escape through involvement with a drug-addicted prostitute.

The Faustian bargains that Rojas begins to accept soon make clear the tragic content of the story. Rojas accidentally crashes his new patrol car, and while waiting for its repair, he is assigned another one that barely meets safety standards. While on routine patrol, he is shot in the leg by drug smugglers. Immediately after the shooting, his father, who expressed his disapproval of his son's career choice by refusing to see him, comes to Officer Rojas in a vision, telling his son that he is now crippled for life. Rojas eventually receives medical attention, but, ironically, he learns that his disappointed father has died the very night he himself was shot. While one could easily interpret these events as karmic payback for Rojas's choices, the irony of a once noble individual, joining a corrupt force and battling corruption, is driven home by the senseless murder of his fellow officer and friend, Anibal (played by Bruno Birchir), who is killed while pursuing drug smugglers.

Now morally corrupt, physically disabled, and unable to change the system that defiled him, Rojas begins devising a Robin-Hood-like scheme to help the poor by stealing drugs and drug money from smugglers. He returns the prostitute with whom he has become involved to her family to clean up, but she threatens to return to prostitution unless Rojas helps her financially. Although his appropriation of contraband goes temporarily unnoticed, Rojas decides to resign after avoiding near detection of his theft by his superiors. Near the film's end, Rojas begins giving his former prostitute a regular cash allotment from his stash of funds and starts a new career by helping his wife with her farm business. While transporting laborers to the fields, the movie's final scene shows Rojas driving past a road sign that reads "Paying Taxes is Participation."

The film's finale seems to enforce its overall fatalism, reminding viewers that all of Rojas's attempts at agency within the system, and now outside the system, cannot stop it. Cox's film indicates that Weber's "iron cage of bureaucracy" comes in many forms, including governmental, legal, judicial, and political. Like Weber, Cox seems to be critiquing the inescapable nature of such bureaucracies. In this story Officer Rojas cannot be a hero because the system he joins directs his actions. On the other hand, even when Officer Rojas abandons the bureaucracy and his position, Cox indirectly notes that the effects of these bureaucracies will continue well beyond the departure of the individuals personally involved in their day-to-day maintenance.

Cox presents a concrete, contemporary example of how Weber's ideas can be applied to illuminate the complex relationships that exist between bureaucracies, socially structured inequality, and the

pursuit of justice in one criminal justice system. The film might be particularly useful for instructors who teach courses on the sociology of corrections or law enforcement and who could combine its viewing with a brief introduction to Weber's ideas. Also, as a cross-cultural example of corrections and law enforcement, an instructor could ask students to consider if the issues presented in the film are at all similar to those faced by police officers in the United States.