

1 Interpretation of the “Torn Social Fabric”

The Question of the “Social Fabric”

It is common to attribute Mexico’s violence to a “tear in the social fabric.” At an intuitive level, the image seems adequate, since today’s violent outbreaks crush our most entrenched values: kidnappings trample our ideals of liberty; rape violates personal integrity; murder extinguishes the right to exist; and the deliberate dismemberment of corpses mangles the dignity of those who are defenseless. Finally, the forced disappearance of a person—and today (November 2021) there are officially more than 93,000 disappeared in Mexico, a number that increases daily—forecloses even the customary and universally espoused right to mourn a loved one. All of these transgressions are routinely suffered in contemporary Mexico, and we lack even a widely shared narrative or epic that is capable of recognizing, processing, and beginning the work of putting an end to these outrages.

Sometimes we characterize what is happening as a “war on drugs,” but it is not exactly that. The Trojan War had an end:

the capture of Helen and the sacking of Troy, and the victory of the Achaeans. The so-called war on drugs, on the other hand, has no real finality, because drugs are powerful substances that, like the famous *pharmakon* of the ancients, are at once a poison, a remedy, and a scapegoat. It is impossible to defeat a thing that is both a poison and a cure, much less to vanquish an enemy who serves the useful role of the scapegoat. The addict sees heroin as a cure for her pain, though she knows that her addiction will lead to her own death. To take away the addict's drug is to rob the helpless. For his part, the peasant who grows opium poppies amid his cornfields also knows of the danger that this crop brings with it, but he understands, too, that it is only thanks to *it* that he and his family can scrape through the year. Like heroin for the addict, the farmer's poppies, too, are both a problem and a solution, a poison and a cure. And since our "good society" seems convinced that criminality emanates from drugs and the drug trade, the imprisonment or killing of producers, addicts, and distributors becomes an expiatory act for a society that doesn't know how to secure its own collective well-being. The so-called war on drugs allows Mexican society to set aside the many causes of its many ills.

Given the multiple uses of both drugs and the various actors who are involved in the drug economy, there can be no real war, because there can be neither victor nor vanquished. Mexico is thus entangled in a conflagration that has a ritual purpose, a new edition of the Aztecs' "Flowery War," perhaps, whose captives are served up as sacrificial victims. More than a war, Mexico's current violence is a way of life, and it has as its counterpart a new state that still doesn't know what to call itself or how to

tell the story of its own origin. We are witnessing the Flowery War of a people that has not yet invented its tutelary god, of an empire that has not yet named its true champion, that has not yet invented its Huitzilopochtli.

I say that it is a state that does not know what to call itself because when, in 2006, the government of President Felipe Calderón launched its war on drugs, it did not ask (and no government has asked since) whether the Mexican state, that still fancies itself a democracy, had or has the financial resources required to eradicate the drug economy with measures and means that are consistent with the law. Did Mexico have the police, detectives, forensic experts, judges, and well-conditioned prisons that would have been required to capture and legally process the delinquents who were involved in the drug economy? As I said, this question has not been raised in the fifteen years since the start of the drug war. Had it been raised, the answer would have been a resounding “No.” As a result, the state that is waging this war on drugs is necessarily governed by something other than the rule of law. And neither did the government have the resources to build up alternative economies for the peasants, ranchers, low-level drug dealers, scouts, couriers, and hit men who work in the drug economy. Nevertheless, the government loosed a military offensive against an economy that, as we have already remarked, produces a commodity that is both a poison and a cure.

That decision generated a brutal increase in violence, not only because there were now many more armed confrontations between delinquents and soldiers, but also because Mexico’s armed forces overrode the work of mediation that had until

then been carried out by the ancien régime's poorly funded but always present police and judges and prosecutors. As the old mechanisms for regulating illicit acts fell by the wayside, morality itself became a tactical objective. The everyday customs of various communities, together with the ideas about right and wrong to which they were attached, attracted the strategic attention of armed groups that could only build brief truces and a brittle peace in their constant strife for territorial control.

The outrages that are routinely perpetrated against familial and communitarian mores have been such that they have left us speechless, and so we blame the morality that is meant to uphold those customs: we say that it has been corrupted, that the social fabric has been torn, and we try to find the hidden springs of our new violence in that tear. Stunned by the daily atrocities that resonate in the public sphere, we reach back to the old pillars of communitarian morality as a final recourse. We have seen some plead to the mothers of the drug lords, so that they might do their bit to stop their sons' violence, appealing to the most primordial of all communitarian bonds—the relationship between mother and son—with the hope that this most sacred talisman might be capable of recovering human decency and of staging a collective return to sanity.¹ When that strategy failed, we then heard the president of the republic preach from his podium—that pinnacle of patriarchal authority—calling on Mexico's wayward youth to straighten themselves out and reminding them that perhaps they had forgotten their parents' most elemental lessons. He tried to rescue the distinction between right and wrong with the sort of admonition that Mexican parents use when they speak to their

children: “Violence is *fuchi*”(stinks or is disgusting), “violence, *guácala*” (makes you want to gag or throw up). These reprimands were spoken by President Andrés Manuel López Obra-dor after his landslide electoral victory of 2018, when he still believed that he could resolve all matters pertaining to security in a matter of months.

Like Mexico’s president, those who make appeals to morality imagine that the people who perpetrate violent acts have not been properly socialized, or perhaps they have forgotten their parents’ teachings and so, maybe now, might hear the chiding that comes from the lips of someone who is looking out for them and is willing to take the place of the absent father: the president of the republic. These invocations appeal to that which is most sacred—they are done in the name of the mother or in the name of the father—and they thereby sound a desperate call to preserve the very foundation of society: the family. And when that fails—as it has already failed—we then claim that there is a tear in the social fabric.

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In their book on cloth as artifact and symbol, anthropologists Jane Schneider and Annette Weiner argued that, as a frequently used metaphor for the idea of community, cloth highlights the strength that is found in interdependence, but the metaphor also suggests a kind of fragility of the individual.² The image of fabric invokes mutual aid and reciprocity as the foundational principles of the social, while it also recognizes that, like threads, social connections can easily be cut.

Today in Mexico it is common to say that there is a tear in the social fabric. This claim is grounded in the idea that the most intimate forms of interdependence have broken down; family

values are regularly ignored, communities are weak. This does not necessarily imply that social relations have been strained because of social inequality. Indeed, according to Max Weber, communitarian relations do not imply equality but rather the recognition or feeling of being a part of the same thing. This is why members of communities often rely on organic metaphors to describe the nature of their interconnections: the community is like a body, for instance, or like an organism, and its parts are as different from one another as the head is different from the heart or the arm. And it is precisely for this reason—because the idea of community relies on complementarity rather than equality—that communitarian relations develop numerous mechanisms for mediation, compensation, and exchange. The image of community as a social fabric exalts both the strength and the fragility of these mechanisms of mediation, but when—as today—we don't understand why communities have become so enfeebled, we make appeals not so much to those mechanisms of mediation and compensation as to the bonds that are thought to be most sacred: we appeal to the mothers or to the sacred tenets of the Church, or we rely on the persuasive force of the Great Patriarch, the president of the republic. Except that none of this seems to be working.

Sovereignty versus State

In a recent book on the anthropology of kings and kingship, David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins suggest the utility of separating the study of sovereignty from the many other attributes that are frequently attached to the idea of the state, such as the mo-

nopoly of the legitimate use of force or the administration of justice.³ Through their rich comparative studies of the figure of the king, Graeber and Sahlins show that sovereignty has existed in societies that lacked public administration, where there was no monopoly of the legitimate use of force, and where various other attributes that are usually considered essential features of the state are weak or absent. Indeed, these two anthropologists show that sovereignty historically precedes the development of the state.

Our authors argue that, from a cultural point of view, there never was such a thing as an egalitarian society, because even those societies without internal stratification inhabit social worlds in which humans coexist with spirits or gods who are, in the words of Graeber and Sahlins, “metapersons” who wield sovereign power over the lives and deaths of the members of the community. In other words, the societies that we sometimes call egalitarian existed in a universe that they recognized as hierarchical.

Put another way, small-scale human societies seem always to have imagined themselves as existing in a world that has been populated by multiple sovereigns, and even when society itself lacked such figures, the fate of the people relied on negotiations with metapersons—gods and spirits—who needed to be avoided, appeased, or coaxed, and who might always intervene on their own volition. Often this sort of worldview developed together with a corresponding metaphysical topography, with beings moving between two or more planes or spheres—for instance, between one that is terrestrial, another that is subterranean, and a third that is celestial. The figure of the terrestrial

king is always fashioned in imitation of metapersons who originate in other spaces, and the intervention of such metapersons has always preceded the birth of the king and the creation of a kingly line. Graeber and Sahlins thus turn the classical sociological idea that the divine world imitated the human world on its head: historically, kings have imitated gods, and not the other way around.⁴

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As a corollary, our authors conclude that among humans authority is never truly secular: as an idea, sovereignty always has a foreign, outworldly origin. Because of this, although kings are gods of sorts, the gods always transcend the personality of any one king. A second corollary, which is important to us here, is that sovereignty does not need perforce to go hand in hand with that bundle of attributes that is usually associated with the state. There are gods where there is no state, and there have been kings who have presided over truly squalid administrative structures, with neither a police force nor an army at their disposal.

These ideas, which appear to be so distant from the concerns of contemporary Mexicans, in fact offer us a useful entry point because over the past couple of decades the Mexican state has shed some of its “classical” attributes. And for this reason, we sometimes imagine the violence that has emerged as a symptom of a “failed state,” when in fact we might think of it as an attribute of a new kind of state. Furthermore, the mistaken idea that we are just a small step away from state failure has gone hand in hand with an obsession to “recover” Mexico’s sovereignty—an obsession that is expressed in the current government’s outlandish, even ruinous, subsidies for the national oil company (Petróleos Mexicanos; PEMEX) and the national electric com-

pany (Comisión Federal de Electricidad; CFE), and especially in its extravagant support for the army, whose budget quadrupled between 2013 and 2018, and has grown much more steeply since then; for the navy, whose budget more than doubled in those same years and has also continued to climb; and for the National Guard that was created in 2018 and now has around triple the number of officers as the Federal Police, which it was created to substitute.⁵ The current obsession with the “recovery of our sovereignty” is in fact unnecessary because one of the few attributes that the Mexican state has *not* shed is its demonstrated ability to perform sovereign acts. Thus, even though the Mexican state has utterly failed its duty to administer justice in criminal matters, its presidents still speak in the name of the nation without being challenged anywhere; and they cede more and more responsibilities to the nation’s armed forces, even while the military has shown itself to be incapable of effectively regulating violence at the local level. Indeed, today’s state is marked by an *excess of sovereignty and a deficit of administrative capacity*. This, in a nutshell, is the nature of Mexico’s new state.

The country’s armed forces often experience and suffer from this combination of heightened sovereignty and diminished administrative capacity. Journalists Daniela Rea and Pablo Ferri have documented the extrajudicial killings by the military in its war on drugs, and Rea and Ferri’s work offers many examples of such experiences. One of the soldiers that they interviewed explained the practice of extrajudicial killings as follows: “Even if you take them [captured drug lords or gang leaders] to the judge with confessions, and with their hands and bodies covered in blood, they let them go. We did this [killed them] be-

cause of the people who they had killed.”⁶ A bit further into this same interview, the soldier completed his explanation of the nature of his actions: “What I did was justice. Vengeance is personal. This was justice.”⁷

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For this soldier, then, there is no justice if it is not extrajudicial, executed directly by the army, which is the representative par excellence of national sovereignty. Execution at the hands of the armed forces is therefore not personal vengeance or any other kind of abuse of power but rather an act of justice, done in the name of the people of Mexico. Extrajudicial executions are then a symptom of the surfeit of sovereignty, not of its lack: the army is capable of taking justice into its own hands without any real contest precisely *because* the state lacks credible institutional ability to administer justice. If the military were to hand the criminals whom they catch over to the law, they would be let go. Justice must then be administered extrajudicially, by the sovereign’s armies.

Explanations of the military’s routine use of torture follow this same logic. Rea and Ferri summarize the views of another one of their interviewees: “He knows that it is morally and legally wrong to torture but believes that in Mexico the use of torture is a corrective measure that is practiced in lieu of legally administered punishment, which is always either improbable or too slow in coming.”⁸ This soldier’s perspective—which is far from unusual—reveals some of the reasons for the inordinately high lethality rates that have been typical in confrontations between Mexico’s armed forces and organized crime and that have been denounced by social scientists who have tracked these statistics.⁹

Violence and Reciprocity

Although gratuitous acts of violence do exist, violent acts are rarely lacking in either a past or a future that can be used to justify them. To kill without provocation and without suffering any negative consequences is a sovereign act. And when impunity is routinized and carried out by a collectivity, the violence that is exercised by those who suffer no consequences gives way to the formation of castes.

So, to recall one historical instance of this, Christopher Columbus described the inhabitants of the islands that he discovered in the following terms: “They have no weapons, and they go about naked, and have no ingenuity with regard to arms, and are very cowardly, so that one-thousand of them would not stand up to three [of ours], and so they are well suited to be commanded and made to work, to plant, and to do whatever else might be needed, and to build towns, and be taught to go about clothed and to adopt our customs.”¹⁰

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The invincibility of European arms in America gave way to a frenzy of violence that had few limits, other than those imposed from within the dominant camp itself. And where there is such impunity, there is also sovereignty, and that led to the confirmation of an idea of group superiority. There is an element of such caste superiority present also in the so-called narco culture, where the drug lords (*señores*) strive to give shape to a new caste that has prerogatives and attributes distinct from those of the people who are in their service. We will return to this matter later.

For now, it is worth underscoring that impunity on this scale is infrequent, and that in the majority of cases violence gets

inscribed in a logic of reciprocity or, to be more precise, in a type of reciprocal relationship that anthropologists have called “negative reciprocity.” The paradigmatic form of this sort of reciprocity is the feud, where assassination leads the kin of the victim to seek blood compensation. When there is no state that is capable of performing this duty, the brethren of the victim take the matter into their own hands and kill either the murderer or one of his kinsmen. This counter-assassination then provokes a new round of aggressions, and the two groups embrace in a spiral of violence. According to René Girard, the ancient institution of sacrifice was a remedy precisely against this sort of spiraling violence; the scapegoat distracted aggressions away from the heart of society and toward a weaker third party, thereby avoiding the ungoverned contagion of reciprocal aggressions.

Normatively, state action is supposed to be geared against the two extremes that we have discussed—total impunity and reciprocal violence—and thus is supposed to reduce the autonomy of violent actors, gain a monopoly over the administration of justice, and so guarantee that societal violence will neither go unpunished nor be claimed directly by those closest to its victims. In Mexico, however, the state was unable to consolidate such a position and the institution known as *caciquismo*, in which the state deposits the local administration of justice and regulation of violence in the hands of an intermediary who is not a bureaucrat, is a symptom of this historical fact.

In consideration of this administrative arrangement, a few years ago I proposed a second modality of negative reciprocity that is distinct from the symmetry that characterizes feuds,

which I called “asymmetrical negative reciprocity.” This term describes a form of exchange that is initiated with an act of violence—a rape, a beating, or a murder, for instance—that is performed against a person or group that does not have the capacity to respond in a proportional manner, and that also has no recourse to the state for protection.¹¹ Such violent acts are then followed immediately by a small or symbolic gift, or perhaps by some personal consideration or concession, that gives way to a longer-term relationship of submission. Asymmetrical negative reciprocity is used, then, to establish relationships of domination that originate in acts of violence but are then routinized as relationships framed by debt (represented by the small gift or concession that follows the violent act). This sort of violence generally does not lead to the formation of a new caste, because it is limited in its sphere of action both by a (weak, but still present) state and by local competition, but it does serve to build local hierarchies. It is the world of novelist Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, where the entire village is symbolically related (kin) because all villagers are victims of the violence of the same cacique. In Juan Rulfo’s fictional village of Comala, everyone is a child of the cacique Pedro Páramo. But the power of the cacique is not the point of origin for a new caste as much as the hinge between a weak state and a rural community.

If we keep in mind these three ways of exercising violence—the sovereign form, symmetrical negative reciprocity of the sort expressed in feuds, and asymmetrical reciprocity of the kind that develops in *caciquismo*—we can make some headway into specifying the developments that are today figured in a general and imprecise way under the simile of a “torn social fabric.”

Toward a Geography of Negative Reciprocity

Today's violence in Mexico can be better understood if we analyze it in reference to the different kinds of negative reciprocity that are used to articulate a complex economic geography. I illustrate this notion with a couple of cases so that the idea becomes clearer.

My first example concerns a discussion that transpired in the 1990s scholarly literature regarding the question of whether the heroes of the so-called *narco-corridos* (narco-ballads) conformed to the prototype of what historian Eric Hobsbawm had famously called "social bandits," that is, popular figures who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Certainly, the image of drug lords as benefactors has some resonance, but the complex geography of the illicit economies that they articulate in fact precludes any stable characterization of their connection to either "the people" or "the poor."

Take, for instance, the well-known case of Rafael Caro Quintero, a prominent drug lord who was the protagonist of many narco-ballads and had a reputation as a benefactor in his home community of La Noria, as well as in the municipal seat of Badiraguato, Sinaloa, where he paid for roads, funded schools, and introduced various urban services. From this vantage point, then, Caro Quintero fits the type of the social bandit, but Caro was also the owner of a 544-hectare plantation known as El Búfalo, in the nearby state of Chihuahua, where he planted marijuana with the connivance of both the Federal Police and the Mexican army. That ranch was eventually discovered by agent Kiki Camarena of the US Drug Enforcement Administration

(DEA) and his associate, the Cessna pilot Alfredo Zavala, and as a result they were both kidnapped, tortured, and murdered. In response, the DEA pressured the Mexican army to take possession of El Búfalo ranch and, when that happened, the public learned that it was run with the labor of several hundred peasant captives. They had been lured there from distant states under false pretenses and now lived on the premises and were forced to work under the watch of armed guards, who did not allow them to leave the ranch. In this example, then, Caro Quintero engaged in patron-client ties on his home turf, where he operated as something like a social bandit, while he was a slaveowner in a more distant territory.

A second example can help expand our field of inquiry into the connection between the complex geography of illicit economies and forms of communitarian or anticomunitarian violence.

Studies of the gangs known as *maras* in Los Angeles, California, have described them—and particularly their component cliques, known in Spanglish as *clicas*—as quasi-families. They operate with an ideology one early ethnographer dubbed “democratic anarchy,” where there are no fixed leaders or any internal chain of command.¹² Rather, violence is organized around *jales* (jobs, adventures) that are adhered to more or less spontaneously and in voluntary fashion.

The quasi-familial nature of these gangs in the 1990s made it imperative for members to go out in defense of any other member and also to defend the gang’s home neighborhood. Indeed, the relationship between gang and neighborhood was very important, and gangs generally tried to stop their own members from stealing from or raping people from the neighborhood. In

short, these gangs drew sharp distinctions between an inside and an outside, and that was relevant for both gang and neighborhood identity.

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Gang members say that they lead *la vida loca* (the crazy life), which is a lifestyle that involves a kind of “deep hanging out,” wherein leisure is punctuated by occasional *jales* (often joint ventures involving illegal activity), violent episodes, and public displays of valor. However, gang members can also do work for other, more disciplined and hierarchical organizations, like that of Caro Quintero in his time. For this reason, there are gangs and gang members who end up obeying instructions from bosses in relationships that are neither democratic nor anarchic in nature. Up until the point when a gang gets tied financially to a cartel, it operates as an informal organization that offers *clica* members a sense of belonging and free access to *la vida loca*, as well as protection for their neighborhood or ethnic group (recall that *Salvatrucha* is actually an injunction, that translates into something like “Heads up, Salvadoran!”). Once a neighborhood gang relies on a cartel, however, it becomes an instrument of control over the barrio that is exercised, in the last instance, by actors who have no special connection to the neighborhood.

Here again we see two contrasting ideologies of reciprocity coexisting: the reciprocal ties of brotherhood within the gang, and the transactional business ethos fostered by criminal business organizations of the sorts that are known today as cartels. As a result, a *mara* can be at once the defender and the aggressor of the “social fabric” of its own neighborhood. These are instances of the sort of ambiguities that we must describe in

order to develop a geography of violence, and through it to understand the complex connections that exist between various kinds of violent actors and the social fabric.

The third example of complex geographies of violence that I wish to consider concerns stealing women, and it requires more careful elaboration.

Historical Arc of Stealing Women in Mexico

We do not yet have a proper history of the practice of stealing women in Mexico. My considerations here are limited to a few examples from the twentieth century that reveal a “traditional” set of practices, which I shall then use to contrast with two more contemporary modalities. In order to understand what is at stake, though, we need to linger for a moment on the marriage practices that served as the framework that originally gave meaning and purpose to bride theft.

One common formula for normatively sanctioned marriages in rural nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexico had the following characteristics: first off, weddings were expensive, and they required resources from both the parents of the bride and the parents of the groom. After the marriage, the newly-weds preferentially established residence in the same plot as the groom’s parents (*virilocal residence*) and hoped one day to inherit from them a plot where they might build their own house. These customs meant that brides usually entered matrimonial life as subordinates of their mothers-in-law, and there was much competition between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law for the groom’s favor, a trend that has long been a fac-

tor in the formation of male and female subjectivities in rural Mexico.

In addition, because weddings were relatively expensive, young couples began their married lives indebted either to the parents of the groom or to those of the bride or to both, or, sometimes, to a patron who paid the cost of the wedding. For instance, in late-nineteenth-century Yucatán, hemp-growing landowners typically paid for their workers' traditional Maya wedding ceremonies. Freighted with that debt, the young married couples then settled on the land of the plantation owner as indentured laborers. In such cases, the landowner took the place of the father of the groom, and the plantation became the place to which the young couple would devote its life's work.

One can easily understand the attraction of bride theft in the face of practices such as these. By obviating the expensive marriage ritual, young couples who eloped could live together without the yoke of a major debt toward parents or surrogate parents. Stealing the bride was also a viable path to marriage in situations where the families of the bride and groom did not see eye-to-eye with each other. The victim of this sort of bride theft (*robo de la novia*) was thus not the young woman or girl who was being "stolen"—she was a party to the stratagem—but rather her parents, who would lose a daughter without gaining the recognition and prestige that went along with an elaborate communal marriage ceremony.

Since the aggrieved party was the parents of the bride (and not the bride herself), the parents of the groom frequently took it upon themselves to visit the parents of the bride after their daughter's theft and beg them to forgive their children and to

accept them as man and wife. Sometimes the groom's parents brought a mediator along, who was usually a kinsman of both of the families, or, as in a case described in depth by anthropologist Paul Friedrich in the Tarascan region of Michoacán during the late 1950s, the mediator might be a cacique, who was recognized by all as a force in the local order, and who often was also well versed in elaborate local formulas of courtesy and tact.¹³ In those same years, anthropologist Hugo Nutini described marriage practices in a Nahuatl-speaking village in Tlaxcala where bride theft was frequently practiced. There, both the parents of the groom and the parents of the bride were expected to make a show of anger when a bride was "stolen," since anything short of such formal expressions of displeasure might suggest to the wider community that perhaps the parents did not have the money to pay for the wedding, and that they secretly approved the young couple's transgression of the local norm.¹⁴

So far, then, the practice of bride theft appears as a relatively benign custom that reduced the yoke of marital debt and facilitated the free choice of a marriage partner. Nonetheless, the custom known as *robo de la novia* also had other, more violent, modalities that, in legal terms, might easily have been prosecuted as kidnappings and rapes.

This second kind of bride theft began with a young man eyeing a young woman who was not interested in him. The young man would then organize a kidnapping party, forcefully abduct the woman (often at gunpoint), take her to the house of one of his kinsmen, and rape her. After that, just as in the cases of consensual "bride theft," the feat was made public, so that the entire community knew about the theft, making it an established fact.

In cases of this nature, the presence of a mediator was often indispensable to calm the animus of the parents of the “bride,” and to reduce the likelihood of violence breaking out between the families. Because of the signal importance of mediators in such cases, the parents of the “groom” (rapist) often had to pay the mediator money. Both in the Tarascan case described by Friedrich and among the Nahua peasants described by Nutini, the parents of these unfortunate young women tended in the end to be appeased and to recognize the young couple as husband and wife.

In short, regardless of the bride’s consent, the final outcome of bride theft was similar: the young couple would be married. It is worth noting that the same general formula—bride theft—was used to refer to both of these practices, despite the fact that in one case the bride was party to the decision, whereas in the other she was coerced.

The reason why two such contrasting situations were lumped together into a single formula (*robo de la novia*) was that, as noted, the victims of the theft were thought to be the parents of the young woman and not the woman herself. It was for this reason that the parents needed to be appeased much more urgently than the “bride”; presumably she would later be made to comply by her new husband. The community as a whole was mobilized in order to assuage the feelings of the parents of the bride, since the groom’s parents’ persuasive ability leaned on the informal connections that existed between the two families—either through indirect family ties or due to pressure from the local political boss or cacique. In other words, the “social fabric” was used to bring the parents of the girl, and eventually the girl herself, into line.

In sum, the solution to the social conflicts that bride theft let loose hinged on the dependence that daughters and sons had on their parents, and on the relationship between the two families as they might be mediated by their shared village membership. The social fabric that we are sometimes so very nostalgic about today has not always been as kind as we imagine, and it has frequently exhibited a penchant to sacrifice the weak at the altar of communal harmony.

Stealing Women Today

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In contrast to the two “traditional” practices of *robo de la novia* that we have described thus far, today the degree of dependence of rural youth with regard to their parents is much reduced, thanks to which a girl and a boy who wish to marry or live together can usually do so without their parents’ permission and with little need for mediation. If the young couple is not accepted, it can also emigrate, often with relative ease. This is due not only to the opening up of the labor market for women—a market that had been quite restricted until the early 1980s—but also to the fact that today farming tends to provide only an income supplement, rather than a full family income.¹⁵

On the other hand, if a man kidnaps a young woman and rapes her with the intention of living with her, it remains to be seen whether community relations would be strong enough to enforce the union. Today, if an abducted woman manages to escape from her assailant, she can accede to a salary much more easily than in the contexts described by Friedrich or Nutini for the mid-twentieth century. On the other hand, if a young cou-

ple seeks to live together without their parents' consent, the role of rural inheritance has declined sufficiently to make this step relatively tempting. Finally, the consolidation of the Mexican state and the rise of women's rights have made it easier for a woman or for her parents to initiate prosecutions, so that the young rapist might find himself having to flee his village or face possible imprisonment.

In principle, then, the decline of peasant economies, the urbanization of the countryside, and the integration of women into labor markets should all be factors leading to the disappearance of the practice of bride theft in either of its two modalities. Nevertheless, as anthropologist Adele Blázquez has recently demonstrated in her extraordinary ethnography of daily life among opium poppy growers in the municipality of Badiraguato, Sinaloa, there are regions in today's Mexico where a significant proportion of unions between men and women begin with an abduction.¹⁶

The survival of practices of this kind, which would appear at first blush to be so unlikely, suggests, once again, a fragmented economic geography wherein violence plays a central role not just for patrolling social boundaries but also in breaking down communitarian ties.

Blázquez's study explores precisely these issues. Like all of the poppy-growing regions of Mexico (which are erroneously imagined as the point where organized crime originates), Badiraguato is part of a zone wherein difficulty of access has been deliberately made into an economic resource. This resource is mainly exploited by a class of merchant-caciques, known locally as *pesados* (men of weight), who have enough money to

finance peasant poppy growers as well as the strength of arms needed to defend their distant ranches and protect the commercialization of their product (opium gum).

Blázquez shows that geographic isolation is a key resource for this dominant class of caciques, who meld financial capital, coercive force, and the networks and ability to negotiate with municipal and state authorities, as well as with the army. Violence is an instrument that serves to build and accentuate the physical remoteness or isolation that poppy-growing peasants and their *pesado* bosses both rely on. Indeed, the region's isolation is the combined result of physical distance and a deliberately cultivated geography of fear that has attached risks to traveling to Badiraguato. Similar strategies of heightening distance by violent means have developed in other drug-producing regions of Mexico, such as Michoacán's Tierra Caliente or the mountains of Guerrero, as well as in a number of urban areas where illicit economies need to interrupt ease of access.

Alongside this politics of isolation, the territories within Badiraguato are fragmented around the boundaries of various hamlets (ranchos). These boundaries are always contentious and subject to invasion and even to the eviction of local communities. The *pesados* and their gunmen have a role in defending those ranchos with which they are identified. In a context like that, stealing women again becomes not only viable, but in fact much more violent than it had been in the Mexican countryside fifty or sixty years ago. Keeping a woman confined in a community is more difficult than it used to be, and neither the women nor the men of those communities have easy recourse to government mediators because they all live off of an illicit

economy. As a result, a kind of neotraditional marriage has developed, which is locally referred to as *Ley del Monte* (“Mountain Law” or “Law of the Wild”). Frequently, this sort of marriage is marked by the use of violence in the abduction of women, and it might be thought of as a neo- or pseudo-traditionalist form of marriage that is facilitated by a complex and violently enforced economic geography.

Disappearances

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I conclude with a few remarks concerning the forced disappearance of women in today’s Mexico. As opposed to the practice of bride theft, the disappearance of women does not lead to the creation of a conjugal tie or a household. Both old-school bride theft and the neotraditional practice as discussed for Bahiraguato are stratagems designed to anchor a young woman in a family; the phenomenon of forced disappearance, on the other hand, does not build on social interdependence the way that old-style bride theft did. Rather, disappearance is an act that precedes either murder or enslavement, and so the communitarian relations of the stolen women’s families generally become deeply strained, rather than reinforced, with disappearances.

We still have not assimilated the social implications of disappearance, which has reached such tragic proportions today in Mexico, with around 95,000 people disappeared and not found, either alive or dead, according to the official count in November 2021. In practical terms, a disappearance means that there can be no mourning of the victim, and without mourning

the line between life and death gets blurred. For this reason, the family members of a disappeared person cannot return to what had until that point been normality.

There are many consequences of a situation of this kind, and all of them affect the social fabric: there are husbands who leave their wives because the wife is a daily reminder of their son's or daughter's disappearance and of the husband's impotence and inability to recover the one abducted. Often, the mother, father, sister, or brother of someone who has been disappeared begins slowly to feel invisible as well. A mother, for instance, may feel that she cannot talk about what she has done during the day (seek out her disappeared loved one, or become submerged in depression, or try to lose herself within her own mind), because the subject of the loved one's absence makes itself unavoidably present in conversation and produces discomfort. Disappearance produces deeply troubling uncertainties—the disappeared person is neither ascertainably alive nor dead—and as such it produces a kind of awkwardness and unease. Friends and acquaintances can neither offer condolences nor easily suggest a change of subject. And so the family members of the disappeared begin to feel like they themselves are disappearing from their dwindling social world, which becomes trite and formal.

The psychosocial effects of this condition, which has now engulfed so many families in Mexico, have still been insufficiently discussed, but we know that the stain associated with disappearance is spreading, and that the interminable suffering associated with it produces concentric circles of silence, holes in human communication that are leaving Mexican society like a Swiss cheese.

The various traditional and neotraditional practices of stealing women that we have reviewed were all geared toward anchoring young women in marriage and toward rooting young couples in a community. The forced disappearance of women, on the other hand, uses violent means to generate expansive holes in families and to leave them suspended in a limbo between life and death. As in the case of Caro Quintero, who was a benefactor in his ranch in Badiraguato and a slaveowner in neighboring Chihuahua, violent social organizations can steal women in order to consolidate families in some instances and steal them in order to destroy families and communities in others. And if we do not make an effort to describe, study, and understand how these contrasting logics relate to the complex geography of illicit economies, we shall fail to comprehend the political dimensions of our contemporary violence.

Conclusion

In this first lecture I have presented the theme with which I shall be occupied during my conference cycle this year, which is the analysis of what we now refer to as Mexico's torn social fabric. I proposed a few elements needed in order to study the matter by focusing on the connection between reciprocity and violence within complex economic geographies.

I argued, first, that today's explosion of violence cannot be understood through any narrative that hinges on a tale of a war on drugs, because drugs are both poison and medicine—and so they can never be eradicated—and because drugs are also thought to be the cause of all crime, so that the people involved

in the drug economy easily serve as scapegoats. I argued, too, that our contemporary surge in violence is a symptom of the consolidation of a new type of state, for which we still do not have a name, but that is no longer an instance of a (developing) welfare state, and that can be characterized generally with the formula “Much sovereignty, little administration of justice.”

I then laid out a few general ideas concerning the connection between specific kinds of reciprocal relationships and violence, with an emphasis on three points: first, that when group violence goes unchecked and has no negative consequences for its perpetrators, it paves the way for the rise of a caste system; second, that when violence is reciprocal and symmetrical, it careens into a spiral of the sort that can be observed between neighboring urban gangs, for instance; and third, that when there is asymmetry in the deployment of violence, but violent displays are constrained spatially by the action of a weak state, a system of local strongmen—*cacicazgos*—emerges. I argued that it is useful to study how these three forms of negative reciprocity operate and relate, in order to comprehend the connection between illicit economies and the new Mexican state.

My next point was to note that today’s illicit economies frequently rely on the articulation of activities that transpire in distant territories, and that this multilocal quality goes hand in hand with a differentiated set of strategies for gaining compliance, particularly regarding the connection between reciprocity and violence. I thus showed why it is that the same bosses who operate as “social bandits” in their home communities can be slavers somewhere else, or simple businessmen in yet other places. And why they can steal a woman to live with her in some

contexts, and disappear a woman in order to destroy her family forever in others. In a different sort of example, an urban gang that identifies with its neighborhood can become a predator of that same neighborhood, if it is articulated to a “cartel,” and through it, to a transnational economic geography.

I then closed with a few ideas regarding the theft of women and forced disappearance. I showed that bride theft, which had long been part of the traditional repertoire of available strategies leading to marriage in the Mexican countryside, was a strategy that leaned and depended on the “good health” of the social fabric, whereas bride theft in the deliberately isolated territories of today’s drug economy implies an intensification of violence inside the community. And I concluded with a few thoughts on the ways in which both traditional and neotraditional forms of bride theft contrast with today’s staggering figures of disappearance, noting that whereas bride theft was geared toward rooting women in families and communities, forced disappearance destroys families and weakens their social networks.

The rise of the new state and the geography of the crisis of communitarian mores shall be the subject of my Colegio Nacional lectures this year.

5 Island of Rights, Sea of Extortion

Iver the past few decades, a new kind of state has been gestating in Mexico. It is characterized by heavy investments in sovereignty, understood here as autonomy of its central executive power, and by something close to an abdication of one of the traditional functions of the modern state, which is the regulation of policing and criminal justice. In this lecture, I delve further into this idea.

My argument shall be as follows: the seeds of the new state were planted during the context of the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, when a new economic space emerged. This space was governed according to criteria of legality and transparency that could be measured and judged outside of Mexico. Such a system would enable global financial markets, US and Canadian interest groups, and labor unions to have the information that they required to support commercial integration with Mexico. I refer to this rule-governed economic space as “the island of rights.” It had been prefigured as early as the 1970s with the creation of a free trade zone that ran the length of the US-Mexico border, but the idea really took off with the proposal

that Mexico would become a part of “North America,” by way of a free-trade agreement—NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement—which was promoted during the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–94) and which finally came into effect on January 1, 1994.

Mexican promoters of NAFTA believed that NAFTA’s regulations and rigorous procedures for certification and guaranteeing accountability would serve as a beachhead for the development of the rule of law, a condition that had never existed in Mexico’s history. The implementation of the rule of law—albeit in the limited spaces of Mexico’s new export-oriented economic platform—was, in fact, protected by the terms of NAFTA. Mexico’s NAFTA enthusiasts wagered that transparency and equality before the law would spread beyond the confines of NAFTA-protected export industries and to other portions of Mexican society. The enclave of the rule of law was thus meant to grow in reach and extension, until one day it would provide legal coverage and protection for the entire country.

This ambitious project required deep reforms to Mexico’s governmental infrastructure. For example, police reform was urgent because, as we saw in our second lecture, Mexico’s system of policing relied on the systematic use of extortion, both for funding and as its enforcement strategy. During the era of Mexico’s one-party rule, police extortion was tempered only by the limits placed on policemen by their superiors, usually in response to ad hoc requests from powerful politicians. Such a system was of course contrary to the very idea of the rule of law, where equal access to police protection and the equal application of rules is expected.

The fact that this violent and corrupt system of policing played an important regulatory role in the construction of the social order, and that it offered a measure of protection in cases or sites that had been singled out by politicians, was not immediately taken into consideration by Mexico's neoliberal reformers. What they saw and understood was that the NAFTA-sponsored "islands of rule of law" needed to count on a different kind of police force, less open to political clientelism, less reliant on bribery and extortion, more professional, and capable of protecting both citizens' rights and property rights. Rule of law requires a police force that does not rely on extortion as its main source of revenue. A total rehaul of Mexico's system of policing would thus be required.

However, the push for an ambitious reform of Mexico's system of policing competed with another equally urgent pressure, which was to preserve the mechanisms for regulating order in the ample sectors of the economy that were not up to the standards of code that were expected on the "island of rights," even though these sectors offered services that were important to keep the costs of Mexico's export economy down. Building a modern police force for the country required investments of the highest order—in sheer financial terms, certainly, but also in expert training and education. Given their mode of operation, Mexico's policemen were minimally educated (most did not even reach middle school), and training in police academies provided a socialization for cadets that was geared toward respecting internal hierarchies and understanding extortion practices.

In addition to its substantial price tag, reforming the police would also carry political costs, in particular, because reforms

implied bringing new blood to the force—cadets with a high school education, for instance, or even with university degrees, and new mid- and high-level leadership. A shake-up in personnel disrupted preexisting relations of patronage. Moreover, if it was serious about extending the rule of law, the government would also need to modernize and strengthen the capabilities of its district attorneys' offices, courts, public prosecutors' offices, and prisons. Although neoliberal presidents from Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000) onward acknowledged the need to intervene in those spaces, their efforts were inconsistent and important strategical mistakes were made, so that, by the time the war on drugs was declared in January 2006, government resources were already being channeled preferentially to the military rather than into repairing the justice system, and municipal police forces were increasingly neglected, while moves were made to bring the state and federal police under military command.

That situation has, if anything, worsened. The project of reforming the courts, DAS, prisons, and police has been scrapped, while the government has continued to pour more and more resources into what is by now rampant militarization.

It was the 2006 declaration of a war on drugs that closed the gestation period of Mexico's new state, which had been characterized up to that point by confidence in the idea that the rule of law would spread quickly beyond its NAFTA-protected beachhead. The decision to declare a war on the drug cartels was taken almost immediately after the 2006 presidential elections, when the losing candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, challenged the validity of the elections and theatrically

inaugurated a parallel, so-called legitimate, government, of which he was the “legitimate president.” Having thus battered the credibility of the electoral process, confidence in extending the rule of law by consensual means sagged, and the government veered instead to further centralizing political power by declaring a national emergency of sorts: a war on drugs. That is when the formula “A lot of sovereignty, not much justice” began to take shape.

In addition to this political crisis, economic growth had not accelerated rapidly enough to formalize Mexico’s enormous informal economy, and therefore didn’t bring working conditions to the expected standards of the NAFTA aisle. The policy measure that probably worked the most to help transform working conditions in the informal economy, designed by economist Santiago Levy and put into practice by health minister Julio Frenk, was to channel public investment in order to offer universal health care. Through the consolidation of that baseline of public well-being, the micro-family businesses that are prevalent in the informal economy could increase their productivity and progress toward integration with the economies and labor standards of the United States and Canada.

That policy made important strides—it was by no means a failure—but it was still a work in progress when the project was aborted during the current government of López Obrador, which slashed public health budgets after 2018 and dissolved the Seguro Popular program shortly before the COVID-19 crisis. This led to steep increases in medical expenditures, particularly among Mexico’s poorest sectors. There ended the only consistent effort to formalize Mexico’s economy.

In synthesis, rather than grow until it had extended its standards to the entire national economy, NAFTA and its protected businesses remained an archipelago within Mexico, with over half of the population working adjacent to it. This situation was further complicated by the exponential growth of the illicit economy that grew in tandem with the rest of the transnational economy. Its entrepreneurs took advantage of the deep recessions of the 1980s and 1990s and of Mexico's democratic transition to infiltrate legal business ventures and local politics. We already discussed this in lectures 3 and 4.

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That is how the competition for political power between the two nodal sectors of the new economy—the formal sector and the informal sector—began, each with its most powerful segment deeply enmeshed in the transnational economy. Thus, there were the businesses involved in NAFTA on one side, and the so-called cartels, which are involved in the drug economy and in other legal and illegal businesses, on the other. This competition quickly moved into the political terrain to such an extent that by 2006 the government, that still championed the interests of the formal economy, launched its war against the cartels. That war was provoked, in no small degree, by the worrisome political influence that had been achieved by the illicit economy.

The rise in petty crime had been increasing since the mid-1980s, alongside the consolidation of organized crime, and this favored the sort of politics known as “punitive populism,” wherein politicians and political parties campaign on platforms that favor building new prisons, tougher sentencing, and multiplying legal interdictions. Political grandstanding took

precedence over finding ways to change Mexico's increasingly dysfunctional system of policing and overhauling its equally inadequate judicial system. Such projects were a lot more difficult to achieve than tougher sentencing laws, and less immediately effective from an electoral point of view. As a result, politicians of every political party preferred to cut corners, neglect costly and difficult reforms, and lean into punitive populism.

In addition to those unresolved challenges, the so-called war on drugs was launched without a close analysis either of the nature and size of the illicit economies that were being combatted, or of the implications that such a war would have on the previously existing system of security and justice. As a point of fact, the government did not have either the financial or the human resources to conduct a "war" while preserving its aim to extend rule of law. It lacked the institutional and the fiscal resources to do that. And it was precisely at the crossroads between a project of expansion of the rule of law through North American integration and a project of consolidation of internal control over the illicit economy by way of the military that Mexico's new state took its current form, governing with declared and undeclared states of exception, executed by the armed forces, with almost no capability to process malfeasance judicially. Inevitably, local policing fell under the control of organized crime and, as a result, governmental capacities to regulate the informal economy declined. And as the Mexican state lost its ability to regulate and oversee the operation of both informal and illicit economies, local and federal governments fell out of joint.

The transition from the early drug war moment of the new state to the regime that now calls itself the Fourth Transforma-

tion (i.e., the López Obrador presidency and the movement that it leads) is characterized by an inversion, a flipping over, of the government's most basic alliance: whereas earlier governments had represented the interests of the formal economy, that is, of the “island of the rule of law” that was built on NAFTA, the current government champions the interests of the informal economy, including the illicit economy. In this sense, the movement that pompously calls itself the Fourth Transformation—trying to stake a claim for a status that is comparable in significance to Mexico’s independence movement, or to the social revolution of 1910–20—is in fact a much more modest “second transformation” of the state that was born out of the implementation of neoliberalism and North American integration. Indeed, the “first transformation” is what happened when the war on drugs was declared in 2006, a move that led to the neglect of the project of expanding the rule of law, particularly in regard to policing and criminal justice, in favor of imposing order by way of direct military action; and the “second transformation” (always lower case) is the one that is currently under way. It began when the political group that was aligned with the project of the “island of rights” lost control over local governance.

In Mexico’s current phase, dominated by interests that represent economic sectors that are oriented to politicizing the economy rather than to securing property rights and reducing transaction costs, the government by no means seeks the abolition of the North American economy, because the informal and illicit economies that it represents have a relationship of codependence with it. Rather, Mexico’s government uses its resources to augment pressure on the formal economy, and so

widen the margins of negotiation between the formal and informal sectors, by applying political pressure on property relations, prices, and by increasing transaction costs. Mexico today is littered with roadblocks organized by various social movements, rife with organized criminal groups that charge rent for protection, street vendors demanding the right to expand territories, and so on. The Mexican state is now committed to re-politicizing the economy, against the ideal of the rule of law and self-regulating markets, in order to increase the political clout of the informal and illicit economies, as well as of a few allies among national entrepreneurs in the formal sector.

A corollary of these facts is that the differences between the state that began to develop under the neoliberal aegis and the current state do not turn on a left-right axis, as is often claimed, but rather on alternative uses of the state as an ally of the formal, export-oriented economy versus the informal and illicit economies. This does not imply that there are no active strands of the left and the right in Mexico—they certainly exist—but it does mean that left and right as traditionally understood do not accurately name the two opposing sides of the current divide, which has veered toward a form of identity politics marked by a polarity between the social classes that are culturally, educationally, or economically tied to local economies and those who are—again culturally, educationally, or economically—able to move freely in the formal spaces of North American integration.

Rather than a competition between left and right, ideological contention in the new state is anchored in alternative visions of the nation. One side sees Mexico's destiny as being tied to deep assimilation into North America and another sees

government as the protector of a “people” who are territorially rooted in Mexico and who rely crucially on their ability to extract transaction costs from private investors. However, this polarity can obscure some of the shared interests between the two positions, because both parts need “the island of rights” to continue to exist—albeit with contrasting horizons of growth and well-being—and both need to guarantee some sort of status quo in the “sea of extortion” that surrounds “formal sector” investments. As a result, both favor the concentration of power in the presidency and militarization (albeit in different degrees and sometimes at cross-purposes), and both end up abandoning any serious attempt to reform the system of justice and policing, albeit—once again—for different strategic reasons.

The Problem of the Island

The idea that the transnational formal economy would serve as the rock on which the rule of law would be established always faced practical difficulties. We still don’t have a documented history of what exactly happened in that regard; I am here proposing a reading of current events, as well as a set of questions, rather than a set of firm historical conclusions that are anchored in a thorough scholarly investigation.

The first question to raise concerning the dissemination of the rule of law on the basis of the regulatory apparatus introduced by NAFTA regards the relationship between Mexico’s export-oriented businesses and their immediate physical surroundings. We know that these businesses were monitored internationally and had to conform to NAFTA’s rules regarding the

security of their property rights, access to supply chains and distribution, labor regime, and environmental standards, but what was the relationship between these businesses and the working environment that lay immediately beyond the industrial park?

Investments in Mexico's export-oriented manufacturing base grew astronomically with NAFTA, to the point that Mexico exports more manufactured goods than the rest of Latin America put together. These investments required training specialized and highly productive workers, but they also relied on keeping the cost of this labor force low, which could be done because worker reproduction relied on the services provided by Mexico's vast informal economy that provided workers with meals and domestic help and innumerable other services. Expanding investment thus did not imply uprooting the informal economy, any more than increasing the informal economy's leverage implies eliminating the export-led formal economy. These two economies are codependent.

At the same time, although NAFTA businesses also required a lot of public investment in transportation, schools, and urban services for their workers, private foreign investment was frequently enticed to this or that town by deals that allowed them to pay a minimum in taxes, at least for some years, so that the relationship between the "NAFTA island" and its immediate surroundings was not as immediately conducive to the extension of public goods, and to the extension of the rule of law, as one might suppose. The project that tied NAFTA to the consolidation of rule of law in Mexico presupposed that foreign investments would generate enough monetary spillover for the local

tax base to grow and so, little by little, allow for the consolidation of proletarian residential neighborhoods that initially had been built under precarious and irregular conditions, often lacking paved roads, lighting, sewage, and other basic services. The hope—in the rare instances when it was explicitly formulated—was that the services that were in the hands of the informal sector would slowly be formalized as the residential areas around the factories consolidated their public services.

This idea was usually more of a tenet or belief than a conclusion based on hard-nosed economic calculations—since it depended on variables that were beyond the government's power to deliver. For instance, it was sensitive to the numbers of migrants who would arrive to try to find work in these new “poles of development,” or to the actual number of businesses that would be attracted by the opportunities that were being granted to lure them in. Because growth under NAFTA was a wager, no firm calculation regarding the quality of public goods that would derive from direct foreign investment was truly possible.

As a result, the informal activities that flourished around Mexico’s new industrial economy varied from place to place, but in no case was there an immediate and straightforward extension of the rights and work standards from the NAFTA isles to their informal suppliers. Indeed, a kind of apartheid developed, with a sharp contrast between the clear rules that governed the formal export economy and the consistent jockeying and negotiation that is required to manage the economy in its immediate surroundings.

Perhaps the most revealing expression of this tension, because it was the first to erupt in scandal, is the hundreds of un-

solved femicides that occurred in Ciudad Juárez during the 1990s, which exposed the city's deeply insufficient investments in public lighting, transportation, policing, and housing for the women who worked in that city's assembly plants. The case also revealed a disconnect between Ciudad Juárez's export-manufacturing base and city governance. The assembly plants appeared to be insufficiently identified with their immediate surroundings: it was known that those factories could just as easily have set up shop in Ciudad Juárez, Tegucigalpa, or Guangzhou—and that they had chosen Juárez at least in part because of competitive tax arrangements. So, from the start, the new state was involuntarily generating images of the rule of law as an insular condition, surrounded by a society that was poorly policed, an economy that was poorly regulated, and a city that had to get by with insufficient public investment.

Codependency between the Island and Its Surroundings

At the same time that they began competing in the political arena, a codependency developed between the NAFTA islands and their immediate, predominantly informal, surroundings. Transnational corporations depended on the informal economy to cover some of their basic needs, while the cities that received them needed those businesses to provide jobs and opportunities to produce the spillover required for the upkeep of their entire population.

Beyond this, some formal-sector investors use their easy access to unregulated economies to access local resources that do not always have a legal provenance: access, for instance, to

the exploitation of an aquifer for the operation of a mine, or to a sand mine that lies on community (*ejido*) lands. In such cases, those companies have often relied—directly or indirectly—on the intervention of armed groups or politicians who have ties to the illicit economy, in order to gain access to those resources.

In these situations—which are common in Mexico’s mining industries, as well as in the burgeoning export agribusiness—the connection between the NAFTA islands and their environs can lead to quite complicated arrangements around policing, combining reliance on private security firms that watch over the island with military surveillance over roads, while organized crime secures access to resources that are beyond the immediate reach of the company or guarantees safe passage to and from a mining facility.

Hybrid systems of protection and coercion have indeed multiplied in Mexico, combining municipal, state, or federal police, armed forces, private security firms, and armed units belonging to organized crime. These alliances are by nature unstable, since they are beholden to leaders who have conflicting interests. I have shown in the last three lectures that a political group that gains control over a municipal police force can be in conflict with the head of the state’s police force or with the army officer in charge of the local military zone. Similarly, a company’s private security firm may or may not find the support that it needs in local or state police, or in local, armed, organized crime. Indeed, criminal organizations can be unreliable for a variety of reasons, ranging from intergroup competition to lack of accountability; moreover, the armed organizations that are tied to the illicit economy generally try to diversify their portfolios

and develop interests both in the licit and the illicit economy—drug trafficking or gasoline theft, for instance, wedded to legal transportation businesses, ranch ownership, or real-estate investments, so that the armed groups have too many chestnuts in the fire to become dependable partners.

As a result, the isle needs to develop a dense and heterogeneous network of local connections, and this implies engaging in constant negotiations—large and small—that are often marked by extortion and bribery or the application of political pressure. This field of negotiation pertains to what I call the “sea of extortion,” although the appellation is perhaps too simplistic and maybe also too dramatic, since many of these negotiations do not quite reach the terrain of extortion, though they do always transpire with the *possibility* of extortion as a backdrop, since negotiations occur with the understanding that the rule of law does not extend to the economies in question, and therefore that recourse to public force and the justice system, too, must be negotiated.

The Logic of Polarization

One of Ernesto Laclau’s most frequently cited ideas regarding populism as a political logic is that populism—that is, politics based on dividing society between “the people” and an “anti-people”—generates consensuses that are unstable with regard to their specific content, since the figure of the leader, who is essential to this political form, functions as an “empty signifier,” whose programs vary according to the nature of the coalitions supporting him, and subsequently to the ways in which his

adversaries—the anti-people—are defined. For this reason, again in LaClau's view, populism can be adopted by the right or the left, and it can be either a progressive or a regressive force.¹

I'm not interested in the debate on what is and what is not populism, or what its characteristics are. My concern is both more modest and more specific: I wish to characterize a new state that has emerged in Mexico. In order to achieve that aim I take a path that runs contrary to LaClau's pursuit of a "political logic." Instead, I wish to identify the substantive class dynamics that define and mark the limits of the new state.

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The political form that we call populism has an intrinsic relationship to democracy, since democracy is characterized by a latent tension between the institutional management of the state and the very notion of popular sovereignty, which is anchored in an ideal of universal suffrage. This tension between the will of the people and the work of the state is the condition of possibility for the emergence of a leader who represents—or claims to represent—the majority against the institutions of the state and its established modes of representation. It is a kind of tension that can be found in ancient Rome as well as in twenty-first-century Argentina. Here I am interested in something else.

The new state in Mexico began to gestate after the 1982 fiscal crisis and the institutional reforms promoted by the International Monetary Fund that were unleashed as a result. Today, this new state is governed by a populist president, but its characteristics transcend the liberalism/populism duality, even though there are tangible and significant differences between those two political alternatives: they are in fact antithetical manifestations of a single process of state formation.

The 1982 debt crisis abruptly closed the era of import substitution industrialization as Mexico's development strategy, and the country's turn to free trade and neoliberalism presented the Mexican state with both a challenge and a promise. The challenge was that it had to restrict the scope and application of some of its traditional practices of political control, such as, for instance, the corporativist organization of political society that since the 1930s had been organized around the social classes that were pillars of the official party. The government also had to relinquish its monopoly over the legitimate politicization of the economy, which had until then been accomplished through the extraction of tribute—what we today call “corruption”—in exchange for guaranteeing the operation of the market.

This created serious political difficulties for both the government and the official party, foreclosing any possibility of continuing to govern with the single-party, presidentialist system that Mexico had managed to sustain since 1929. In short, the economic crisis of 1982 also generated a political crisis. But Mexico's transition to a neoliberal economy also presented reformers with an opportunity, which was finally to promote a viable route for the installation of the rule of law, understood as a system wherein all persons and institutions are accountable to laws that are equally enforced. This route gained traction thanks to NAFTA, a treaty that emplaced the rule of law in a number of areas of Mexican life.

So, although neoliberalism provoked a major crisis of governability, laying the way for the collapse of a regime that had been in place for the better part of the twentieth century, it also opened up a new horizon that had its own sources of support and popularity: the achievement of the rule of law. That goal

served to justify no end of more or less sound, more or less improvised, policies and institutions. And it was used to alleviate the political pressure that came from sectors working outside of the NAFTA island, where lives were being affected, sometimes gravely, by the deep social and economic changes that free trade wrought.

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The government faced two big challenges, then: it needed to design a workable system of representation and control—since the earlier one could not continue functioning under the new economy—and it had to extend the island of the rule of law beyond the formal export economy to which it was initially tied. It is in this dialectic, this tension between the need for order and the goal of expanding the rule of law, that Mexico's new state began to take shape.

In its early stage (late 1980s to early 2000s), Mexico's reformers had no intention of neglecting the country's policing and criminal justice system, but rather the opposite: they sought to change the system so that the police and the courts might stand as guarantors of equal access to the law. The physiognomy of the new Mexican state is a story of the defeat of the project of achieving the rule of law for the country as a whole. That story has the 2006 drug war as a key turning point.

The Failure of National (Elite) Pacts

Given the challenges that the old political class faced, Mexico's transition to democracy turned quickly to the idea of a national pact, based on agreements between signal members of various elites, as a useful—perhaps indispensable—mechanism to

transition from a hegemonic, one-party state to a democratic government with institutions capable of implementing the impartial application of the law. This sort of compact seemed necessary to lend credibility to new institutions: only if they were recognized by the country's most widely respected personages might they be trusted. Instead of being run by members of the old political class, and rather than relying on the informal mediation of traditional caciques, the state's new democratic institutions would need to be autonomous, and they would be placed in the hands of exemplary citizens, whose personal reputations were beyond question.

Mexico's democratic transition thus leaned on two related strategies. The first was to seek agreements between leaders of varied—and sometimes opposed—interest groups, by way of creating fora that allowed those leaders to speak freely among themselves, gain some trust, and arrive at shared principles for governance. This was tried on several occasions, beginning perhaps with President Miguel de la Madrid's Pacto de Solidaridad Económica, which brought together labor and business leaders to agree on how to distribute the hardships that came with the deep recession and hyperinflation of the 1980s; the Grupo San Angel was organized a dozen years later to facilitate the transition away from control of the presidency by the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI); and, more recently, the Pacto por México sought to establish ground rules between three main political parties, geared toward strengthening the state in exchange for establishing various political concessions to each. These initiatives, and others like them, brought together prominent politicians of different persuasions, opin-

ion leaders, media tycoons, intellectuals and journalists, union leaders, captains of industry, and other weighty figures with the idea of finding common ground toward a modern system of political parties, reliable elections, and the consolidation of a democratic institutional framework.

Curiously, the effort to create what liberals refer to as a “level playing field” thereby relied on an antiquated, nineteenth-century sort of figure—the *notable*—who, in Mexico, still held some sway. The notable is a person with a well-known name, whose honorability is everywhere recognized. Often notables come from important families. Usually these people—whom the press frequently refers to with the prefix *don* (or *doña*) or sometimes as *maestro*, in the case of prominent artists or intellectuals—are prominent members of the liberal professions, artists, well-known university professors, or valiant leaders of civil society. Occasionally they may be politicians who have risen above the drab rituals of submission characteristic of the one-party system.

These notables, together with captains of industry, politicians, and union leaders, were brought together in a kind of Parnassus, where they acknowledged their differences and worked to reach agreements that would help transition Mexican political society peacefully, while guaranteeing spaces and concessions to each sector. Nevertheless, this social imaginary—the idea of a summit agreement—necessarily left out many prominent leaders of the illicit and informal economies. There were no leaders of taxi driver associations or market vendors, captains of organized crime or leaders of peasant villages, whose livelihood was being undermined by free trade. As a re-

sult, while the notables' agreements flooded the opinion pages of Mexico City's papers, the summits as a whole were detached from organizations that were taking shape in response to dire circumstances, or from the substantial illegal opportunities that were presented by the new economy.

Ironically, this process ended up destroying the notable as a politically relevant figure, since the notables' influence depended, in the end, on a courtly logic that was still operational in the neobaroque mannerisms of the old PRI era. This logic crumbled with the arrival of new economic elites and, more broadly, with the values that came hand in glove with the new economy. Eventually, even the republic's presidents began neglecting the deference that they'd once extended to this estate of notables. Every day they felt less compelled to be close to them, or to the high culture that was that estate's most rarefied possession.

It is true that the system of notables appeared to have been reanimated after the 2018 ascension of Andrés Manuel López Obrador to the presidency. López Obrador's obsession with inscribing his name in the great hall of Mexican Patriotic History had as a natural consequence an almost irrepressible attraction for surrounding himself with people with last names imbued with the aura of history. Thus, López Obrador appointed a Vasconcelos here, a Cárdenas there, and a Scherer over there; or perhaps a descendant of a revolutionary leader like as Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama, or one of the few remaining historic leaders of the '68 student movement, or the daughter of a well-known victim of Mexico's Dirty War of the 1970s. López Obrador's cabinet and his congress are speckled with descendants

of historic personages. However, the president did all of this not to guarantee the legitimacy of his governing institutions but rather to endow his personal image with the gravitas of History (with a capital *H*), manifested in the presence of the remaining descendants of History's protagonists. López Obrador needed this to become not just a sitting president but a leader who, like King Arthur, identifies his own body with the body of the nation; for, as López Obrador declared on the night when he finally won the national elections, "I no longer belong to myself."

The notables' influence subsequently went into a tailspin—as they transitioned from being autonomous actors, members of a kind of aristocracy, to being the subordinates and employees of the president. They were now used principally for an ornamental, liturgical purpose, and their ability to protect even their honor was often worn down by bots, memes, and tweets, including the anonymous and gratuitous vilification that characterizes public exposure in the digital era. And as the notables, who had existed for two hundred years, went down the road of extinction, so too did the idea that the country could be governed by way of a summit agreement.

What developed instead was a strategy that relies on polarization to organize the political field. Polarization turns on two alternative camps: the champions of a rule of law that is in line with international treaties, standards, and global objectives, including human rights and environmental objectives, and that is anchored in a globalized (formal) economy, versus the sectors that favor the politicization of the economy, making it sensitive to brokerage and negotiation within a nationalist frame that is (ideally, though not necessarily) orchestrated by the govern-

ment. In other words, the central contradiction in Mexico appears to be organized around those who would use nationalism to further what Karl Polanyi called a socially “embedded” economy—which is a position that has at its heart informal and illicit economic activities that always need to be negotiated in order to exist, but that also involves the ambition to gain direct control over government jobs and revenue—against sectors that prefer to strengthen the rule of law by way of deeper cultural, economic, and political imbrication in a globalized sphere, a position that has cultural implications, too, since it requires moving beyond—if not outside—the national frame.

What is interesting about this polarity is that neither side has any real possibility of eradicating the other. So, for instance, the language of human rights and the rule of law is a recourse for the entire political spectrum by this point, with no exceptions, while the clientelist, ad hoc negotiation of concessions—beyond any *a priori* rights—is an equally quotidian and universal practice.

Finally, it is worth noting that the competition between a formal globalized economy that is anchored in internationally monitored rules and a local economy that favors political intervention in markets does not correspond to contradictions, à la Marx, between capital and labor. The informal and formal economies are, as we have seen, codependent, and each has its own workers, entrepreneurs, and political elites. A country that is as complex as Mexico can be ruled neither for the formal nor for the informal sector. For that reason, the current government does not actually seek to bury the NAFTA “island” (rebaptized in 2018 as the T-MEC island, for the Tratado entre

México, Estados Unidos y Canadá). On the contrary, López Ob-
rador fought tooth and nail to renew the trade accord—even
agreeing, in order to secure US approval, to dedicate thousands
of troops to catching Central American migrants and keeping
them out of the United States.

Suspicious Truths

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In my second lecture I described how the Mexican state be-
came estranged from its institutions of criminal justice. That
estrangement occurred in part because of the uncoupling of
the local police corps and the institutions that they're meant
to coordinate with, a situation that has led to conflict—some-
times even armed conflict—between municipal and state po-
lice forces, between state and federal forces, or between police
and the military. This disarticulation between police institu-
tions makes it hard to reach credible judicial resolutions even
in emblematic cases, such as the case of the forty-three Ayot-
zinapa students, or the case of two mass graves for murdered
and tortured people that belong to the state of Morelos's attor-
ney general's office in the towns of Tetelcingo and Jojutla, or the
massacre of seventy-two and then of almost two hundred ad-
ditional Central American immigrants in San Fernando, Tam-
aulipas, or the thirty-five presumed Zetas who were beheaded
in the port of Veracruz, or the thirteen police officers who were
recently murdered in the town of Coatepec de Harinas, or the
eight state police officers who were ambushed and killed in the
town of Aguilla, Michoacán, a couple of years ago, or the twenty-
eight inmates who were killed in an uprising in the Acapulco

prison in 2017, or the fifty prisoners who were killed in the Topo Chico penitentiary in Monterrey in 2016, or...or...or...the list of unsolved “emblematic cases” goes on and on. No scandal is big enough to ensure that justice will be served.

Indeed, it is surprisingly difficult to produce a broadly shared view of the truth in any one of these cases or in any other case like them. This is due not only to insufficient investments in the justice system—in professionalization of forensic experts, training police investigators, and so on—but also to lack of co-ordination between various institutional authorities, or even to open conflicts between them. Thus the Enrique Peña Nieto government spent copious amounts of money to establish what they pronounced as the “Historical Truth” of the forty-three disappeared students in the Ayotzinapa case, but even their thousand-page report did not succeed in establishing a widely believed version. The López Obrador government, which has continued to invest profusely and disproportionately in this particular case, has also failed to produce a socially accepted truth or to execute justice. This is because, in matters of criminal justice, the new Mexican state no longer has the capacity to establish truths that can be generally believed, because it lacks a judicial system—judges, district attorneys, investigative police, forensic experts—that is sufficiently professional, trusted, and well-funded for its results to be credible.

The effects of this are sorely felt by anyone seeking justice, as can be ascertained by the aforementioned example of the mass graves found in the towns of Jojutla and Tetelcingo, in the state of Morelos. Those graves are in municipal graveyards, in sections that belong to the attorney general of the state of Mo-

relos, and they were supposed to be used for the interment of unclaimed, duly and legally processed corpses. Thanks to the work of family members of victims of forced disappearance in the region, however, it turned out that these graves had been used instead to inter literally hundreds of murdered, tortured, and unregistered bodies (at least 211 have been discovered so far, though there is a section of the Jojutla burial site that has not yet been excavated, where more remains are believed to be buried). The collectives of the families of the disappeared of the state of Morelos have not stopped demanding a convincing investigation of the case, which has not yet happened. The federal prosecutor has refused to take the case on, so Morelos's attorney general is supposed to lead an investigation into the dysfunctionality or criminal complicity of his own office.

In such a context, the organizations of family members of the disappeared do not trust *any* governmental institution with the work of DNA identification of the bodies. Rather, they demanded that four different institutions carry out separate, independent DNA tests, and that they then cross-check results between them to be sure that a positive ID could be credibly established for each victim. In other words, the families of the victims are convinced—thanks to their previous experiences—that there is no government institution that can be trusted with the process of DNA identification of the presumed victims of organized crime. In Mexico's new state, governments have forfeited their power to establish any credible version of the truth when it comes to criminal justice, and this incapacity to create a shared truth has in its turn led to the creation of a new set of state rituals. I shall conclude today's lecture with a brief note in this regard.

Rituals of the New State

In my introductory lecture I referred to David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins' remarks on the advisability of analyzing sovereign acts and the sacralization of sovereign power separately. The acts through which sovereignty is established—the acts of the founder of a royal dynasty, for instance—are, as a rule, extraordinarily violent, both materially and symbolically. They frequently include acts of incest, fratricide, parricide—that is how kings are recognized and kingdoms are established. This is because the sovereign is always an extraneous force with respect to the customary order; violence is used to demonstrate this eccentricity or, more precisely, to invade and overwhelm the customary order. This externality of sovereignty is what makes kings sacred beings, separate from everyone and therefore capable of judging others. Indeed, Graeber and Sahlins claim that “the monstrous and violent nature of the king is an essential condition of his sovereignty.”²

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Societies develop rituals that serve to tame the unpredictable violence of the king and to attenuate his propensity for violence. This argument has some kinship with another, developed by Moshe Halbertal in his discussion of sacrifice in monotheism. For Halbertal, sacrifice is different from a normal gift because there is an unbreachable distance between the condition of the sacrificer and that of God, so that no offering, no sacrifice, is capable of compelling God to do anything. That is the frightful lesson of the story of Abel and Cain, who sacrificed the products of their labor to God. The shepherd Abel sacrificed a ram, while the farmer Cain offered the fruits of the earth. And God accepted Abel's sacrifice, but he rejected Cain's. Why? We

cannot know. Halbertal argues that this uncertainty—the anxiety of not knowing whether one's sacrifice will be accepted or rejected by God—leads to obsessive ritualization. The logic, simply, is that if sacrifices are carried out in highly standardized, punctiliously ritualized ways, the likelihood of their being accepted increases because, in principle, there would be no difference between sacrifice A, sacrifice B, and sacrifice C. People fear sovereigns because they are inherently unpredictable and because of the lack of any true reciprocity between themselves and their sovereign. This infuses even willful submission with a degree of fear and uncertainty.³

When he was inaugurated as president, López Obrador declared, “I no longer owe myself to me.” The apparent meaning of this statement—which has often been repeated since—is that the president’s life is now owed to the people, who are the source of his power. However, there is also a second implied meaning, which is that, because López Obrador is no longer attentive to his own interests, he is different from everyone else. He is no longer self-interested and is therefore set apart from society; it is from this place of separation that he might judge even his own kin if they were proven to be corrupt (or so he claimed). The president can carry out violent acts of sovereignty, because he is outside of the “social fabric.” He is not an interested party. He does not own himself but is owned instead by a metaphysical entity (the people).

This exteriority with regard to the social fabric inspires fear, because it is a place from which violence can be exerted, and so the president’s entourage ritualizes its interactions with the president with panegyrics and loyalty oaths, forms and formal-

ties, to try to appease or mollify him. The president's words and gestures therefore become the subject of punctilious, daily exegesis. This is sacralization at work, and the new Mexican state—both in the period led by the champions of the island and in the period when it is championed by an ally of local and informal economies—has developed those characteristic new rituals, in the face of the violence that presidents can let loose.

Criminalization of the Victims

The first sacralizing ritual of Mexico's sovereign power was the criminalization of the victims of violence. This strategy was initially developed during the presidency of Felipe Calderón, though it is still a part of the official arsenal today. It consists of separating the victims of violence from the rest of the nation to such a degree that the dead or the disappeared can be treated as if they were nationless or, to put it another way, as if they were not members of the same political community.

This strategy of blaming the victims, and separating them from the political community, was also used to sacralize the violence of the sovereign, since the armed forces are identified as coexistent with sovereign justice. The armed forces have the president as their commander in chief, and through them the sovereign is identified as the provider of a kind of justice that rises above the courts. The violence of the state becomes sacralized as a purified violence, capable of transcending petty or corrupted institutions such as the police or the courts, or as a form of transcendental—quasi-divine—justice.

Abdication, Infiltration

As a popular supplement to this ritual, which serves to purify the violence of the state, other rituals and symbols were developed by criminal organizations that served to indicate the kind of identification they sought with that very same fetishized state. The instability of these identities is of crucial importance. So, for instance, there are some militias that (1) seek to be seen as one with the people, or (2) flaunt symbols of class or even caste distinction with regard to the lower folk in their communities, or (3) develop in a mimetic relationship with the armed forces. Thus, when the army enters towns that are under the power of a cartel, there have at times been popular protests against this “outside intervention,” often with women and children in the front lines bearing signs and banners as if in a spontaneous expression of popular rejection. Such protests are often orchestrated—it is known—by the cartels themselves, whose members blend in with the populace and stand in opposition to the army. In such situations, “organized crime” presents itself as being *one with the people*, and it presents the army with a situation wherein fighting the cartel might well imply fighting the people.

There are other occasions when criminal organizations adopt all of the trappings of the military, wearing modern military uniforms with the insignia of their cartel, using tactical military equipment, riding on monogrammed vehicles that bear the insignia of the cartel, and so on. In such cases, the cartel seeks to communicate that they are capable of acting responsibly, predictably, and in a visible manner, just like the state. To the

government, they are saying that the territory that they occupy belongs to them.

These swings in strategy concerning cartel identification perform the alternative sort of situation that organized crime seeks to establish vis-à-vis the state. In some instances, organizations want to be confused with “the people”; in others, they prefer to be recognized as a local or regionally dominant oligarchy, a new class of big men; and in yet others, they are at pains to appear as an organized, state-like, bureaucratic force that is capable of enforcing an impersonal and predictable order in the towns that the cartel occupies.

In the new Mexican state both “society” and “the state” thus live in fear of having been “infiltrated” by organized crime, and so there is a deep current of anxiety with regard to the cohesion of the *community*, as much as there are obsessions with regard to the integrity of the *state*. Sometimes this complicated politics of identification is reflected in the names that criminal organizations give themselves, which oscillate between corporate images, such as La Empresa, Cartel del Milenio, and Cartel del Golfo, and communitarian sorts of images, such as La Familia Michoacana or Unión Tepito. Just as the new state is haunted by the suspicion that the crowd that presents itself as “the people” may perhaps not be speaking for the people but rather for the private interests of organized crime, so too are communities sometimes unsure of whether local armed groups are their protectors or their invaders. The new state is thus characterized by blurred lines between the illicit economy, society, and the government.

Gregor Samsa in Mexico

Claudio Lomnitz, interviewed by Max Nelson

“Truth—open, public truth—is under attack both by organized crime and by the state itself.”

August 31, 2024



Claudio Lomnitz

This article is part of a regular series of conversations with the *Review's* contributors; read past ones [here](#) and sign up for our [e-mail newsletter](#) to get them delivered to your inbox each week.

In our September 19, 2024, issue, [Claudio Lomnitz reviews Marcela Turati's *San Fernando, Last Stop*](#), “arguably the most thorough and absorbing piece of investigative journalism yet produced about Mexico’s brutal political economy.” In the spring of 2011 Turati traveled to the northeastern city of San Fernando—where [eight months earlier](#), Lomnitz writes, “the Zetas cartel had wantonly murdered seventy-two Central American migrants”—after authorities discovered almost two hundred corpses from another, even larger massacre there. When local and federal governments neglected to bring the killers to justice or even identify all the victims, Turati resolved to accomplish “what the country’s criminal justice system

failed to do: explain how and why hundreds of young men traveling north by bus to the border cities of Reynosa and Matamoros were abducted and murdered.”

Over the course of his four-decade career as an anthropologist of Mexican politics and culture, Lomnitz has returned again and again to the country’s histories of violence, migration, and state crisis. In *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (2005), he traced a genealogy of “Mexican death totemism” from the Spanish imperial slaughter in the sixteenth century to the present; in *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (2014), he assembled an admiring group biography of a transnational network of anarchists during the Mexican Revolution who “dared” to imagine a politics beyond “the cult of the state” on the one hand and “old-style liberalism” on the other. His new book, *Sovereignty and Extortion: A New State Form in Mexico*, which came out in July, examines the contemporary proliferation of violent, illicit economies and the state’s inability to contain them.

This week Lomnitz and I corresponded over e-mail about the treatment of the dead, the assault on press freedom in Mexico, and what it means for a president to call his own state a “rheumatic elephant.”

Max Nelson: *When and how did you start doing sustained research on the violence of contemporary Mexico’s illicit economies?*

Claudio Lomnitz: For many years I had a regular column in Mexico City’s daily press, which forced me to read no end of newspapers. Happily, I quit a couple years ago, but I had the daily news swirling around in my head for a long time, which undoubtedly helped lead me into the subject of violence.

In 2014 I wrote a piece for *La Jornada* on a conflict that was raging in the state of Michoacán between the Knights Templar cartel and a community defense movement. I argued that in Mexico the crisis of the state went hand in hand with a crisis of the community and, especially, of the family. After that I started considering how violence reconfigures the connections between the state, the family, and various communitarian forms.

My first sustained foray into the subject, beyond occasional op-eds or academic papers, took the form of a play—a musical, in fact—that I wrote with my brother Alberto, who is a theater director in Mexico City, and the musician Leonardo Soqui. It was based on my research into a federal police raid on a youth hospice in Zamora, Michoacán. We called it *La Gran Familia*, and Mexico’s National Theater Company staged it in 2018. Shortly afterward, I was elected to Mexico’s El Colegio Nacional, an institution that was created in 1943 on the model

of the College de France, and I decided to use that podium to develop ideas on violence, the crisis of communitarian social forms, and the rise of a new kind of Mexican state.

In your Review essay, you compare that state to Gregor Samsa, “an oversize insect...with too many uncoordinated extremities to count.” That line seemed to echo your argument, in your new book, that the Mexican state has grown “estranged from itself.” What form, in your account, does the estrangement take?

One of the scariest things about Kafka’s story is the thought of waking up one morning with more extremities than you could possibly know what to do with. Those long antennae, for instance, and those extra legs...plus the dreadful premonition that you even have other appendages on your back: some folding wings perhaps? The glorious divine proportion of the human body is no more, and you’re stuck instead in a contraption with too many moving parts.

When I say that the Mexican state is estranged from itself, I mean two different things. On the one hand, the sovereign doesn’t know how to recognize, address, or reform his own bureaucracy. So, for instance, shortly after entering office as president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador characterized Mexico’s public bureaucracy as a “rheumatic elephant.” The image invokes a separation between the president, who presumably is trying to guide the elephant, and the public administration, the rheumatic elephant. And their relationship is a bit like Gregor Samsa’s still human consciousness trying to guide his alien body.

In the face of his inability to reform the intractable “elephant,” President López Obrador relied on the military to take over numerous public projects. He tried to colonize the public administration’s functions directly, relying on his sovereignty as chief executive and commander-in-chief. That is one way the state is estranged from itself: the sovereign is estranged from the apparatus of administration.

The second sense in which one can say that Mexico’s state is estranged from itself is that, like the insect’s flailing body parts, the various “arms” of public administration find it impossible to coordinate their actions. The jurisdiction of each governmental institution is not entirely clear, and so they tend to come into conflict with one another. In the small wars that have been unfolding in Mexico over the past twenty years, sometimes municipal police have engaged in shootouts against the state or federal police, and sometimes the army has tortured police officers.

Your essay begins and ends with the state’s disgraceful treatment of the dead. Reading those passages, I thought of a line from the very start of your Death and the Idea of Mexico: “Mexico’s colonial and dependent heritage has made it difficult to draw a sharp line between the nation and

its enemies, between inside and outside, between the dead who must be named and honored and those who are to remain uncounted and anonymous, in unmarked graves.” Looking back at that book, what would you consider some of the central questions you were hoping to answer? How has that work come to bear on your current research into violence and the cartels?

Death and the Idea of Mexico is the foundation for practically all of my thinking on this subject. Historically, Mexico has had acute anxieties concerning the definition of what is internal and what is external to the polity. Of course, this is not a peculiarly Mexican phenomenon. Defeated and humiliated nations often seek to identify internal enemies, as any history of antisemitism in France or Russia can handily illustrate. Even so, Mexico is an unusual case.

As in most Spanish American republics, the hierarchical relationship between the European and native populations was difficult to meld into an image of a national subject. Mexico struggled with this issue for the better part of the nineteenth century; with the Mexican Revolution, though, it finally settled on the idea of itself as a mestizo nation. Even so, the mestizo was still figured as the product of rape, as Octavio Paz keenly discussed in “The Labyrinth of Solitude,” his 1950 essay on the national subject. In short, the ideal or typical national subject of the twentieth century was represented as the offspring of enemies, and so the way that Mexican national history is narrated necessitates reconciling those enemies.

Another reason that in Mexico some corpses are treated like garbage is that, unlike, for example, in France—and perhaps a little more like in prerevolutionary Russia—Mexico’s state never fully became what Michel Foucault called a “pastoral state,” one that manages social reproduction through a network of public institutions. This form of modernity has been—and remains—an ideal that Mexican society, like so many others, still strives to achieve. One implication of the debility or insufficiency of Mexico’s state is that the direct use of violence is a more immediate temptation for those wishing to create order. And the people who become the objects of such violence fill the country’s morgues and unmarked graves.

Finally, there is a more recent cause for the multiplication of unmarked graves and clandestine makeshift crematoria. This is the Mexican state’s recent—and, to a considerable degree, failed—attempt to modernize. The one-party state’s default on its foreign debts in 1982 was met first by neoliberal reform and then with an ambitious but in many ways incomplete project of North Americanization by way of NAFTA. The various offices and departments that were developed to effect that transition proved insufficiently robust to manage Mexico’s vast informal and illicit economies, which are still being violently reorganized by the cartels and various governmental actors.

One of the central questions in *Death and the Idea of Mexico* is: What is the symbolic work of death in a nation that is built on the reconciliation of enemies? In my current work, that question is still important, though it is supplemented by an analysis of the economics and politics of violence itself.

Your review emphasizes how many obstacles stood in Turati's way as she tried to piece together why and how so many young men were killed: evidence goes unacknowledged, leads go unfollowed, bodies get quietly moved or buried in mass graves. In your new book you make a broader point to this effect: "In Mexico's new state, governments have forfeited their power to establish any credible version of the truth when it comes to criminal justice." What have been some of the implications of that development?

In Mexico there are staggering rates of impunity for crimes committed, which means that crimes get reported to the police at a depressingly low rate. What is the point of reporting if the crime will not be investigated? But the fact is that such impunity coexists with a lot of incarceration, and the country's prisons are packed.

The connection between crime and punishment is therefore a bit mysterious. Well over a third—almost half—of the people languishing in these overstocked prisons have been put there with no formal charges filed against them. And Mexico's congress is now widening the government's discretionary powers to indulge in an Orwellian practice called “preventive imprisonment.” We can now expect to see many more people being taken into custody with no formal charges. The combination of a lack of investigation, impunity, and the capricious administration of punishments proves how anemic the government's commitment to justice has been.

And because there is no firm relationship between justice and truth, truth has become an uncomfortable and even dangerous pursuit. Mexico's scores of murdered journalists testify to this fact. Indeed, since 2016, Marcela Turati herself has been under investigation for her research on the San Fernando massacres. As a result of the assault on journalism, the production of truth increasingly relies on rumor, social media, and a variety of small-scale social explosions: a roadblock here, a protest there. But truth—open, public truth—is under attack both by organized crime and by the state itself.

You wrote this piece before Mexico's elections this past June, in the waning days of the AMLO presidency; now it's being published a month before Claudia Scheinbaum takes power as Mexico's new president. What do you make of her prospects? How might, or mightn't, her approach to violence and the informal economy differ from AMLO's?

My track record as an oracle is terrible. I sometimes fail even at predicting the past. But here goes: Mexico's democratic transition creaked and eventually croaked under the weight of the violence that has wracked the country since the late 1990s and early 2000s. You can't uphold a democracy when you have literally tens of thousands of unsolved and legally unprocessed assassinations every year. This crisis has little to do with "corruption," which is a symptom rather than a cause, and much to do with shoddy and dramatically insufficient institutional infrastructure.

And yet Mexico still has not faced up to the scale of the problem. It has been easier for governments and the political class to use crime for various political purposes—for politicians, crime generally pays—than to attempt the serious economic and institutional reforms that might phase out Mexico's robust illicit economies and bring peace. President Sheinbaum is a capable public servant, and I wish her the best, but she has yet to unveil a plan that could lead Mexico out of its deep humanitarian crisis. ●

Claudio Lomnitz

Claudio Lomnitz is the Campbell Family Professor of Anthropology at Columbia. His most recent book is *Sovereignty and Extortion: A New State Form in Mexico*. (September 2024)

Max Nelson

Max Nelson is on the editorial staff of *The New York Review*.

Mexico: Anatomy of a Mass Murder

Claudio Lomnitz

Marcela Turati's account of the massacres in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, is arguably the most thorough piece of investigative journalism yet produced about Mexico's brutal political economy.

[September 19, 2024 issue](#)



Xinhua/Alamy

Members of the Central American Mothers Caravan with photos of their missing relatives, Guadalajara, Mexico, December 2013. The group was petitioning the Mexican government to release DNA information about victims of cartel violence in San Fernando.

Reviewed:

San Fernando, Última Parada: Viaje al crimen autorizado en Tamaulipas [San Fernando, Last Stop: A Journey Through Organized Crime in Tamaulipas]
by Marcela Turati
Mexico City: Aguilar, 420 pp., \$19.95 (paper)

In April 2011 Mexican soldiers discovered mass graves in San Fernando, a city of some 30,000 people in the northeastern state of Tamaulipas. One hundred and ninety-three corpses were exhumed and moved to the border city of Matamoros. Soon the local morgue was swamped with people trying to discover whether their disappeared family members were among the bodies.

To cover the story, the news magazine *Proceso* sent a journalist named Marcela Turati. She was shaken not only by the crowd of families seeking information about their relatives but also by the behavior of the local, state, and federal governments, all scrambling to avoid any bad publicity that might dissuade tourists from visiting Matamoros over the approaching Easter vacation. To reduce media attention, forensic services moved the bodies again, this time to faraway Mexico City, permanently dispersing the mobs of desperate family members, most of whom could not afford an extended stay in the capital. No government body conducted a serious criminological investigation or made an effective attempt to bring the mass murderers to justice.

Turati, however, launched a twelve-year investigation that took her to villages in Michoacán and Guanajuato and as far as Guatemala and El Salvador in search of the victims' families. It also led her into San Fernando itself, a town so deeply mired in cartel violence that she only dared visit it for the first time five years after the massacres, and even then at considerable risk. Her devastating account of the case, *San Fernando, Última Parada*, does what the country's criminal justice system failed to do: explain how and why hundreds of young men traveling north by bus to the border cities of Reynosa and Matamoros were abducted and murdered.

The book is made up of interview upon interview, deftly collated and divided thematically into sections preceded by Turati's brief, expert comments. It becomes a collage of the voices of witnesses: policemen, store owners, the victims' family members, local and national politicians, journalists, doctors, forensic specialists, funeral-home owners, women and men, young and old. With this chorus Turati has given us arguably the most thorough and absorbing piece of investigative journalism yet produced about Mexico's brutal political economy.

Today Mexico's illicit economies involve the violent regulation of a wide range of markets, from gasoline theft, human trafficking, agribusiness, and real estate to illegal logging, fishing, and mining. But it was in the drug economy that entrepreneurs first developed the forms of social organization necessary to deploy such violence. In Mexico the term *narco* has therefore come to stand for any mafia, including organizations with only a secondary involvement in drugs.

In the mid-1980s, when the crack epidemic was a major public concern in the United States, Washington hardened its policy toward Colombian cocaine trafficking, shutting down the cartels' smuggling routes. Soon Mexican drug trafficking organizations began moving cocaine into the US instead, and Colombian words such as *cartel* and *sicario* came into use in Mexican Spanish. Involvement in the cocaine trade transformed the social organization of trafficking, since it required vastly more complex operations. Having previously peddled

only local marijuana and heroin, cartels now imported cocaine from Colombia (and later Asia) and developed distribution networks within the US.¹

As they scrambled to control ports of entry—not just along the US–Mexico border but also on Mexico’s coasts, on its southern borders, and at its airports—they started engaging in bloody confrontations. At first, beginning in the 1990s, these took the form of gangland killings. Then, in 2003, an outright battle erupted between the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels for control over Nuevo Laredo. Not long after, the Zetas and La Familia Michoacana began fighting for control over Michoacán and its port of Lázaro Cárdenas.

In 2006, in accordance with a US-promoted strategy that prioritized capturing high-level “kingpins,” President Felipe Calderón declared a “war on drugs” that involved deploying troops en masse, federalizing various drug-related crimes, militarizing the federal and state police forces, and trying to wrench policing functions away from local governments. Rather than reduce armed violence, these policies accelerated competition and fragmentation among the cartels. The most brutal confrontations arose when cartels broke apart, because any faction knew the methods of any other perfectly well.

The country’s weak judiciary and unprofessional police were incapable of handling a conflict on this scale, and no president has been willing or able to confront this grievous shortcoming. Calderón’s successor, Enrique Peña Nieto, thought he could solve the problem simply by downplaying cartel brutality, but reducing police communiqués to the media failed to stop the tide of homicides and disappearances. Mexico’s outgoing president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, bragged that he would resolve the “insecurity issue” with social programs—a platform to which he gave the catchy slogan “*Abrazos, no balazos*” (hugs, not bullets). But he seemed to have no sense of the size and shape of the economies that he was trying to replace, no formula for how to integrate or dissolve cartels or street gangs, and no viable plan for transitional justice. Homicides climbed during his tenure.

Each of these presidents’ reactive and ill-conceived security policies has involved increasing the military budget, and Mexico’s armed forces have grown exponentially. But its violent informal economies have expanded along with them: according to a recent estimate, Mexico’s cartels currently have around 175,000 people on the payroll, making them one of the country’s largest employers.² Since it has no way of substituting alternative economic resources for illicit economies, the army often seeks to regulate rather than extirpate cartels, frequently by siding with whichever organization in a given region provides officers with the most lucrative and stable conditions.³ Warring cartels

therefore sometimes seek to keep the military and police neutral, emphasizing that their violence is directed not against the government but against their rivals.

The violent economies have also spread geographically. The southern state of Chiapas, for instance, is undergoing a siege of such proportions that Rodrigo Aguilar Martínez, bishop of the town of San Cristóbal, declared it a failed state: “We are suffering murders, kidnappings, disappearances, threats, harassment, natural resource extraction, persecution, and the confiscation of property.” The López Obrador government’s signature public works megaprojects—notably the Interoceanic Railway in the Tehuantepec Isthmus and a train circling the Yucatán Peninsula—have only intensified cartel expansion into those regions, because they require changes in land use and development that cartels can exploit for their own benefit. The rapid investment in such projects also gives cartels the opportunity to expand protection rackets and markets for illegal resource extraction, human trafficking, and drug retail. As a result, indigenous communities are facing assaults on their resources at a scale with no recent precedent.

Ahead of the national elections this past June, López Obrador started turning against prominent human rights activists in his own government, forcing out the special prosecutor he had appointed to investigate the emblematic case of the forty-three students kidnapped from Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers’ College in 2014. But even a president as popular as López Obrador loses his power to persuade in the face of intractable violence.

The events Turati narrates took place in 2010 and 2011, but they remain entirely relevant today. The Mexican state is still unable to prevent homicides, disappearances, and extortion rackets. Its officials no longer understand their own government, and its justice apparatus has become a disjointed assemblage of local, state, and federal institutions unable to act as one and reclaim a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Having shed the smooth outlines of a leviathan, the state has turned into some other, untamable monster: an oversize insect, perhaps, like Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, with too many uncoordinated extremities to count. It cannot look in the mirror without recoiling in horror and lapsing into denial.

San Fernando is a sparsely populated municipality spread over 2,671 square miles. Crisscrossed by a vast network of secondary and tertiary roads, it contains hundreds of ranches as well as several coastal villages on the Gulf of Mexico. By the start of 2011 it was already a war zone. The previous August the Zetas cartel had wantonly murdered seventy-two Central American migrants there. Mexico’s investigative police came to refer to the slaughter simply as “San

Fernando 1” when the even larger massacre at the center of Turati’s book was discovered mere months later. Shamelessly, they call the latter “San Fernando 2.”

The municipality had been living under the rule of the Gulf cartel for a little more than a decade. Turati interviewed a Zeta operative who explained that in August 2001 the cartel’s leader, Osiel Cárdenas, asked his nephew, a federal policeman named Rafael Cárdenas Vela, “to establish a stronghold (*sentar plaza*) in San Fernando, because in those days no one controlled that area.” Cárdenas Vela obeyed, distributing bribes to local and state police and military personnel. Local press and radio stations were also put on the payroll. “But we didn’t have to pay the mayor money,” the former operative explained, “because we’d already financed his electoral campaign.”

When a town or a state is under the thumb of a single criminal organization the status quo is sometimes called a *pax narca*—“narco peace”—because the reigning cartel and government usually commit fewer homicides and disappearances than several cartels competing for local control. For years a “peace” of this kind held in San Fernando. Then a fratricidal war broke out among the Gulf cartel’s ranks.

In 1997 Osiel Cárdenas formed Los Zetas as his private guard. Six years later he was imprisoned and deported to the United States. When the cartel’s Sinaloa-based competitors took advantage of his absence to try to conquer some of the border towns then under Gulf control, especially Nuevo Laredo, the upper echelons of Los Zetas—composed of former special-ops military recruits—proved to be indispensable for the Gulf cartel’s survival. As their clout increased, they came into conflict with their erstwhile employers, leading eventually to an all-out war.

As a territory, San Fernando has strategic importance. You need to cross it to reach the border cities of Matamoros and Reynosa from the south—which makes it a common transit point for migrants—and a vital gas pipeline runs through the vast but largely unpopulated municipality. The fishing villages on its coast are useful for running drugs, and a network of dirt tracks offers alternative transportation routes from the US border to the city of Monterrey. If the Zetas managed to capture San Fernando, they would effectively contain their Gulf rivals to a fringe along Mexico’s easternmost border with Texas, between Reynosa and Matamoros.

Once the conflict erupted, San Fernando was caught between warring sectors. Both cartels already had people stationed there, but because the Gulf initially had fewer fighters, they imported gang members (*maras*) from the US and Central America and set up camps to train them. The Zetas followed suit, and soon San Fernando was filled with marauding gang members with no prior connection to the town’s society. Because the Zetas initially had fewer business connections in

the international drug market than their former partners, they had to squeeze the local population to pay for their war effort. Then the Gulf cartel started doing the same. Soon every local business paid taxes to one cartel or the other.

As the fighting grew more intense, the bodies of Gulf and Zeta soldiers began to pile up. According to one of Turati's informants, as many as two hundred were killed in one major battle. The mode and targets of violence were also changing. "They initially respected children and women," another source told Turati, "but then they stopped. They started capturing each other's wives."

On March 31, 2010, the Zetas staged a final assault on San Fernando, attacking the Gulf-controlled police headquarters. The police fled, the Gulf cartel was ousted, and the entire municipality fell into their hands: the Zetas created a new municipal police force under their direct control, and the military checkpoints on Highway 180 never challenged them. Neither, for that matter, do they seem to have met with any resistance from San Fernando's municipal president or any other official from the state capital.

The victors celebrated by looting the boutique of a Gulf cartel boss. They kidnapped a woman who had been a lover of one of the Gulf members in front of her children and later decapitated her. They looted a stationery store and raffled off its merchandise. They dragged a woman off by the hair for being a Gulf informer; she was never heard from again. They burned down a restaurant with its owner, her son, and an employee locked inside because they had refused to pay for protection during the war.

The entire municipality—almost 60,000 people—was subjected to military discipline. A curfew was set for 6:00 PM. All local businesses, no matter how small or large, had to pay tribute. The Zetas abducted people to serve as workers, including a woman whose street food they liked, along with her husband and child. Practically anyone thought to have any connections to the Gulf cartel was disappeared. A visiting reporter recalled that a body was rotting in the street outside a local cybercafe where he was working. No one was allowed to bury it. An owner of a funeral home told Turati that "there were decapitations and dismembered bodies strewn about. At first it was horrifying, but you get used to it, as if they were dead animals."

Local girls became the new overlords' girlfriends. They could report on you to the Zetas if they didn't like you. Many of those girls, too, ended up dead. On a popular Facebook page, Frontera al Rojo Vivo, people informed on one another or asked the Zetas outright to get rid of their rivals. People whose names appeared there usually fled; when they did, their houses were sacked.

The Zetas forced eleven- and twelve-year-old boys to watch while they butchered people. If they withstood the experience, they were recruited.⁴ “Many boys wanted to have guns, to have girlfriends, to be like ‘them,’” a San Fernando parent told Turati. “Schoolchildren sometimes threatened to disappear their teachers if they flunked them.” Another resident remembered that “many families that had money” were ruined: “In one case that I know, the mother is now a servant; others have had to prostitute themselves.” The town was teeming with orphaned children. Even its complicit and indolent municipal president complained to state authorities about that.

To understand the Zetas’ local governance strategies, Turati also interviewed people who supported them. One resident of La Ribereña, a low-income neighborhood, told her: “They wouldn’t hurt us.... In fact, they pampered us. They paid for our Children’s Day and Mothers’ Day festivities, and brought Triple A Federation Wrestling matches to La Ribereña.” When the Zetas killed a truck driver from the SuKarne meat company, “they distributed meat in the whole town,” the same source said. “You had to take that meat, and if you didn’t, you fell from their graces.” They organized bingo nights at which local attendants won loot taken from victims’ homes. After a few months the city settled into a stable dictatorship. By then, a local official told Turati, around 30 percent of the town had left.

All of this happened with no intervention from the federal or state government. No prosecutor was investigating active case files, the military was never sent in to pacify the town, and on the whole the media was silent. Then in 2010 an Ecuadorian migrant managed to reach a military checkpoint near the border and reported a massacre in the El Huizache ranch in the city of San Fernando. Investigating authorities found seventy-two Central American migrants murdered there, and San Fernando became infamous.

It is still not clear whether this mass atrocity was carried out as part of the Zetas’ murderous competition with the Gulf cartel or to terrorize the US-based families of Central American migrants in the hope of increasing revenue from human trafficking. The one surviving witness said that the Zetas had forced their captives to fight and kill one another, gladiator-style. That claim was generally kept quiet and circulated principally as rumor, though the practice has since been documented in other cases, including as recently as last August, in Lagos de Moreno, where the Jalisco Nueva Generación cartel filmed such an event and posted the footage online.⁵

The torture and murder of so many foreign nationals created an international scandal. The case put the spotlight on the cartels’ turn toward extorting migrants passing through Mexico.⁶ It also contributed to diplomatic tension between Mexico and Central America over migrant protection. But the Zetas held their grip on San Fernando. To prove they could still intimidate law enforcement

officials, they murdered the local prosecutor and chief of public security. A car bomb went off outside the local offices of Televisa at Ciudad Victoria, the state capital, because they had aired a story on the migrants, but a reporter who covered the assassination of the two local officials told Turati that Zeta operatives had, in that case, ordered the press to take photos of the corpses:

The guy who called us was a policeman, and his instructions were clear: “All reporters should go and take pictures of the son of a whore prosecutor and Public Security Chief, because we’ve disemboweled them. And if there’s one reporter who doesn’t go, I want to know about it.”

Then came “San Fernando 2.” By the start of 2011 the war between the two cartels was creating shortages of soldiers, to which the warring parties would respond by increasing recruitment, importing gang members from abroad, or accepting soldiers from allied cartels. To curb the meteoric rise of the Zetas, both the Sinaloa and the Familia Michoacana cartels supported the Gulf cartel with soldiers. Heriberto Lazcano, the Zetas’ supreme leader, decided to take advantage of his organization’s choke hold on San Fernando to stop these reinforcements from reaching their allies in Reynosa and Matamoros. He ordered his men to round up all the working-class men passing through San Fernando on the northbound bus route and treat them as enemy combatants.

While the Zetas had carried out the previous massacre in a single day, this second mass killing was drawn out over a series of murders in February and March. The crimes followed a general pattern. Long-distance buses traveling toward the border from the south were systematically stopped in San Fernando, either by local police or directly by the Zetas. The young men riding on those buses were told to get off, loaded onto pickup trucks, taken to a ranch outside San Fernando called La Joya, and killed. Here, too, the executions were carried out with extreme cruelty. One Zeta commander known as El Kilo was a street-fighting aficionado. “He’d give each [captive] a sledgehammer,” a former Zeta told Turati, “and say: ‘You want freedom? Whoever survives this fight will work for us.’” When Turati inspected photographs of the corpses taken to the morgue in Matamoros, 120 had had their heads bashed in.

Around 94 percent of all major crimes in Mexico go unreported, and those investigations that do take place tend to be perfunctory. Even so, at least some paperwork is inevitably shuffled between various government offices. In the process, sometimes deliberately and sometimes due to incompetence or insufficient resources, murder victims who might conceivably have been identified and returned to their families often end up buried anonymously in potters’ graves without forensic identification—an alarmingly frequent practice known as administrative disappearance. Many Mexican states have just one or two state morgues, and most homicide victims are

handled by private funeral homes, which are said to often have deals with the state attorney general's office. Collusion between the cartels and state forensic services has enabled administrative disappearances, as have governmental efforts to diffuse public scandal.⁷

Turati offers numerous examples of such cases. When a media scandal started unfolding outside the Matamoros morgue, for instance, the government simply stopped digging up more bodies in San Fernando. "During the time of the scandal," Turati tells us,

forty-seven mass graves were opened [at La Joya] and 193 bodies were dug out. But subsequent news stories and the versions of people from San Fernando estimate that there were over five hundred bodies buried there.

She offers testimonies to this effect. "I don't know why they didn't reveal the real number [of the dead]," one witness of local interments said:

I deduce that it was to diminish terror. It's not the same when you say "this week they found fifteen bodies" than when you say "they found seventy-five bodies," and then again to say next week that they found "another seventy-five." Imagine. My sense is that they [didn't publicize the findings] in order to calm things down but, yes, many more were killed.

Of the corpses that were disinterred, the majority were sent to a morgue in Mexico City. A great many were tagged as "Identity Unknown" and buried in common graves, leaving the victims' families to search for them indefinitely. Many of the young men who were abducted from the buses had left luggage behind, but for four years, Turati writes, it was "abandoned in boxes and stacked in a warehouse." When she was at last "allowed to inspect the photos of the objects that were in the suitcases" in 2022, she came across "clues that would have allowed for the identification of some of the unidentified bodies. In several cases I, and the Attorney General's office before me, knew exactly who those individuals were."

It was a testament both to the state's criminal negligence and to a society's indifference to the suffering of the victims' families. Turati resolved to seek out as many of those families as she could, visiting some in their native states of Michoacán and Guanajuato and others in Central America. In some cases she was the first to confirm for a family that their relative had been killed in San Fernando years earlier, ending their long night of uncertainty and making it possible for them to mourn their loss.

After 2011 federal forces drastically increased their presence in San Fernando and built a new military barracks outside the city. The army successfully hunted down a few crucial Zeta bosses and reduced the cartel's presence, even as the Gulf cartel worked stealthily to recover lost ground. These forces have managed to bring a modicum of

peace but not to fully remove the cartels from local economic life. During the pandemic cartels monopolized the sale of beer and cigarettes; gasoline theft continues unabated.

There are rumors of occasional armed confrontations (*encontronazos*) between competing cartels—which now include organizations like the Jalisco Nueva Generación cartel and competing fragments of the Zetas—over control of villages along the Gulf Coast or access to the municipality's gasoline pipelines. The army even failed to permanently stop criminal groups from kidnapping migrants from buses: in March 2019 gunmen forced forty migrants off two buses on the San Fernando highway that leads to Reynosa. Last December another thirty-one were kidnapped from another bus passing through the area (they were later released). There is, in short, a kind of new normal, more peaceful but with no lasting guarantee of calm.

The persistence of the old political class is a symptom of the shallowness of the current peace. Tomás Gloria Requena, San Fernando's municipal president at the time of the atrocities, has spent the past decade hopping from one political party to another, climbing the bureaucratic ladder rung by rung. From the Industrial Revolutionary Party (PRI) he moved first to Mexico's notoriously corrupt Green Party, then to the current governing party, Morena. He is now undersecretary of government for the state of Tamaulipas.

At one point Turati asks Gloria Requena whether he had been aware of the atrocities unfolding while he was in office. He responds that everyone knew about them, but as the municipal authority he was tasked with prosecuting the cases that were brought to him, and no cases had been put forward. Turati then points out that San Fernando's municipal police force took an active part in kidnapping busloads of passengers every day for two months at a bus station just a few blocks away from the municipal building. Seventeen of his thirty-six policemen had been arrested after the discovery of the mass graves, Gloria Requena tells her, but they were later acquitted, and it was not his job, after all, to second-guess the judge's work. Finally Turati asked Gloria Requena whether he didn't feel guilty for not having done more to intervene as the butchery unfolded. "I informed my superiors at the proper time and through the proper channels," he answers.

Meanwhile, back in San Fernando, many unidentified bodies were left to be buried locally, a task that fell to San Fernando's eighty-four-year-old gravedigger, nicknamed Capullo ("Bud" or "Button"), who has gone out to the cemetery daily for decades in the company of his dog. (Two dogs were shot dead, he laconically remarks to Turati.) He explains how he arranged the bodies of the unidentified victims in neat rows, insisting that each grave be marked with a cross to provide each person with at least divine recognition. For the government, on the other hand, it is secrecy that is sacred:

More than a hundred bodies were buried here in a common grave. I can't tell you whether they were men, women or children. Their families were looking for them, but the bodies were brought to me in tied-up bags, and you can't open those.... I have a lost son and I couldn't even see who I was burying.

Capullo kept a register for each burial, but the Zetas compelled him to hand it over to them. With the logbook went the evidence of Capullo's twenty years of service in the municipal graveyard. Despite their inefficacy, bureaucrats can be punctilious about other people's records. Without that ledger, Capullo is no longer eligible to collect his pension. Now that the whole of San Fernando is a graveyard, its gravedigger has been condemned to remain on the job for life. ●

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1. See Benjamin Smith, *The Dope: The Real History of the Mexican Drug Trade* (Norton, 2021). On the adoption of Colombian lingo by the Mexican press, see Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, *El crimen como realidad y representación* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2012). ↵
2. Rafael Prieto-Curiel, Gian Maria Campedelli, and Alejandro Hope, "Reducing Cartel Recruitment is the Only Way to Lower Violence in Mexico," *Science* 381 (6644), 2023. ↵
3. See, for instance, the three reports by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights' Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts on the case of the missing Ayotzinapa students; the Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda de Personas' report *Análisis de Contexto: Informe sobre las Acciones Urgentes Caso Nayarit* (2021); and the International Crisis Group's report *The General's Labyrinth: Crime and the Military in Mexico* (2024). ↵
4. The experiences of such minors, many of whom were trained as hit men, were the subject of an earlier nationwide study, done in juvenile detention centers by the anthropologist Elena Azaola. See *Nuestros niños sicarios* (Mexico City: Fontanamara, 2016). ↵
5. See Beatriz Guillén, "El 'caso Lagos de Moreno': el secuestro de cinco jóvenes en Jalisco y el video que lo destrozó todo," *El País*, August 20, 2023. ↵
6. Randal C. Archibald, "Victims of Massacre in Mexico Said to be Migrants," *The New York Times*, August 25, 2010. For some of the social and artistic movements that sprang up around this event,

see Laura Tillman, “A Vale of Terror, Transcended,” *The New York Times*, January 2, 2014. [←](#)

7. See Natalie Kitroeff and Ronen Bergman, “Why Did a Drug Gang Kill 43 Students? Text Messages Hold Clues,” *The New York Times*, September 2, 2023. [←](#)