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per una storia delle dottrine



From Ayotzinapa to Tlatelolco: A Memorial of Grievances against the State

Da Ayotzinapa a Tlatelolco:
Memoriale delle rimostranze contro lo Stato

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ABSTRACT

In Mexico, as in the case of the massacre of 1968 in Tlatelolco, there exists a long tradition of writing history in a tragic or traumatic key by starting from its founding moments of violence, as if the repetitive compulsion could be met only by the compulsion to repeat the trauma. And yet, this essay proposes that perhaps we should not forget that the compulsion to respond to the violence of repression with a sorrow song or a memorial of grievances ends up being very much part and parcel of the effect of displaying the spectacle of sovereign power that was being sought after in the first place. Precisely because it is so terribly awe-inspiring, state violence when it is wielded serves not just as a symptom of vulnerability but also as a way of diverting attention away from the utopian dreams and efforts in resistance and self-government that were unfolding on the ground prior to the punctual onslaught of repression. Drawing important lessons from the experience of the disappeared students of Ayotzinapa, the point is not to let ourselves be blinded by the power of repression but to let ourselves be illuminated by the resistance that comes before it.

KEYWORDS: State Violence; Commune; Grievance; Rebellion; Memory; Repression.

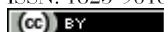
In Messico, come mostra il caso del massacro del 1968 a Tlatelolco, una lunga tradizione impone di scrivere la storia in chiave tragica o traumatica partendo dai suoi momenti fondativi di violenza, come se l'impulso a ripetere potesse essere soddisfatto solo dall'impulso a ripetere il trauma. Questo saggio propone tuttavia di non dimenticare che l'impulso a rispondere alla violenza della repressione con un canto di dolore o un memoriale delle rimostranze diventa parte integrante dell'effetto di smascheramento dello spettacolo del potere sovrano inizialmente perseguito. Proprio perché è così terribilmente impressionante, la violenza dello Stato non solo è un sintomo di vulnerabilità ma è anche un modo per distogliere l'attenzione dai sogni utopici e dagli sforzi di resistenza e di autogoverno in atto prima dell'attacco puntuale della repressione. Traendo importanti insegnamenti dall'esperienza degli studenti scomparsi di Ayotzinapa, il punto non è lasciarci accecare dal potere della repressione, ma lasciarci illuminare dalla resistenza che la precede.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Violenza dello Stato; Comune; Rimostranza; Ribellione; Memoria; Repressione.

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«Welcome to that which has no beginning,
welcome to that which has no end, some call
it stubbornness, we call it hope»¹.

1. *Mexico 1968: A Modern Trauerspiel?*

Tlatelolco, like Ayotzinapa, has been engraved in the minds of people all over the world as a place name – one among many – for the overwhelming power of state repression in Mexico. “Fue el Estado”, the popular slogan or scream with which the disappearance of 43 students from the Rural Teacher’s College Raúl Isidro Burgos situated a few kilometers south of the municipality of Tixtla, Guerrero was met in numerous protests four years ago and repeated many times over since then might as well have been designed to denounce the state’s now well-established criminal responsibility for the massacre that occurred fifty years ago, on October 2, 1968. The Plaza in Tlatelolco, also called the Plaza de las Tres Culturas (Square of the Three Cultures or Civilizations: modern, colonial, and pre-Hispanic), moreover, has the sinister advantage of naming the stage of a cyclical reoccurring of violence, since already in 1521, with the invasion and destruction of Tenochtitlan, it was here that the indiscriminate violence of the Spanish conquest revealed itself in all its naked force and apparent arbitrariness, whereas the appearance of randomness, of simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, should not hide the fact that we are confronted here, as in 1968 or 2014, with what is perhaps the quintessential example of a precision attack, or what in today’s jargon of counter-terrorism would be called a surgical strike. As we can read on one of the modern-day cement blocks that double as imitation stelae at Tlatelolco:

August 13, 1521

Heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc, Tlatelolco fell to the power of Hernán Cortés. It was neither a triumph nor a defeat. It was the painful birth of the mestizo nation that is Mexico today.

On the same archaeological site, right in front of the church of Santiago Tlatelolco, another stone monument was erected on October 2, 1993, which after a minimal list of just nineteen names of *compañeros caídos*, ranging in age from 15 to 68 years old, quotes an excerpt from the famous poem *Memorial of Tlatelolco* by Rosario Castellanos:

Who? How many? Nobody.

The next day just nobody. In the morning the plaza was swept clean;

¹ Phrase attributed to Lucio Cabañas with which he would welcome the incoming students in the Escuela Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos of Ayotzinapa.



The newspapers ran headlines
about the weather.
And on the television, on the radio and at the movies,
there was no change in the program.
No extra announcement.
Not even a moment of silence at the banquet.
(For the banquet went on).

The banquet went on and history continued to turn in circles. Precisely because of this compulsive return to the scene of the crime under then-President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, it was almost unavoidable that shortly after the tragic night of October 2, 1968 the journalist, writer and activist Elena Poniatowska, in the collective testimonies of oral history she gathered under the seemingly neutral but actually highly evocative title *La Noche de Tlatelolco* (translated with a much greater sense of sensationalism in English as *Massacre in Tlatelolco*), should reuse the so-called *canciones tristes* or sad songs from the indigenous accounts of that other fateful night, now almost five hundred years ago, during the conquest of Tenochtitlan:

Worms are crawling through the streets and the squares
and the walls are spattered with brains
The water is red, as though it were dyed,
and when we drink it
it is as though we were drinking water with rock salt in it.
We beat our fists on the adobe walls then
and our inheritance was a line of holes dug in the ground.
.....
There is mourning everywhere now: tears are falling in Tlatelolco.
Where can we go now? Oh, friends! Can it be true?
Mexico City has been abandoned:
there is smoke rising; the mist is spreading.
.....
Broken darts lie in the roads,
our hair is dishevelled.
There are no roofs on the houses,
their walls are red with blood².

In fact, as Poniatowska notes, this song in which originally a collective chorus alternated with individual laments had already been chosen right after

² Quoted in E. PONIATOWSKA, *Massacre in Tlatelolco* (1971), New York, Viking, 1975, pp. 166-167.

October 2 1968 for a recital by students imprisoned in the Lecumberri prison. It is part of a collection known in Mexico as *La visión de los vencidos* (*The Vision of the Vanquished*, even though the official English translation is titled *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*), edited by Miguel León Portilla and translated from Nahuatl by Ángel María Garibay³. Published for the first time in Spanish in 1959, it was part of an effort, which had greatly benefited from state sponsorship, to offer a vision of Mexico's rich and varied indigenous past as an alternative to the vision of history promoted by the victors – first the Spanish conquerors in figures such as Hernán Cortés and Bernal Díaz del Castillo, then by the Christian evangelizers and theologians such as Bartolomé de las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, and finally by the Creole elite of Spanish descent who continued to rule the country long after the struggle for independence was over.

By collectively reciting the song of lament about the fall of Tenochtitlan in the wake of the massacre in Tlatelolco four and a half centuries later, the students and prisoners in Lecumberri in 1968 thus produced an eerie effect of anachronism and repetition. Bringing the myth of the so-called Mexican miracle of modernization and development to an abrupt standstill, they pulled the emergency brake on the train of progress of which the revolution, according to Marx, was supposed to have been the locomotive. But instead of creating a real state of emergency, in the way Walter Benjamin had hoped would happen when he countered Marx's famous image in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, the nonsynchronous synchronicity between 1521 and 1968 seemed to suggest that the history of Mexico since the Conquest had been dominated by an uninterrupted sense of emergency from beginning to end.

What the repeated use of the sorrow song risks concealing, however, are the efforts at collective rebellion as well as the experiments in communal self-rule that preceded the massacre and may well have been the principal motivation for the attack. The tendency in the chronicling of the events of those somber nights has been to write history in reverse, as it were, looking backwards from the moment of the massacre, which thereby acquires the ominous status of an inescapable if not necessary endpoint. History written backwards thus becomes destiny; contingency turns into teleology; and the traumatic past of the dead never stops weighing like a nightmare on the chest of the living. But to look at the events from the vantage point of the violence that put an abrupt end to them means to let the tears and the blood wash out the joy and the laughter – what Susana Draper in a remarkable study of the Mexican

³ See M.L. PORTILLA (ed), *La visión de los vencidos: relaciones indígenas de la conquista* (1959), Mexico, UNAM, 2003; M.L. PORTILLA (ed), *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico* (1959), Boston, Beacon Press, 2006.



case from a global perspective calls the experimental «constellations of democracy and freedom» – that preceded them⁴. In Mexico in 1968, it means to ignore, or at the very least to look away from the 121 days of the student-popular movement and instead to stare ourselves blind, time and again, on the movement's violent repression by the state. The truth of the situation, then, would shine forth only at the end of the tunnel, as if the state were the burning light that caused our eyes to see dark spots in a modern perversion of Plato's analogy of the Sun. Neither death nor the sun can be looked into the eye. And yet, this is precisely what the official accounts of the events of 1968 in Mexico have continued to try and do. In this attempt, which is both painfully frustrating and yet strangely exhilarating, they follow a longstanding tradition of traumatic and necropolitical fascination.

In Mexico, in effect, there exists a whole tradition of writing history in a tragic or traumatic key by starting from its founding moments of violence, as if the repetitive compulsion could be met only by the compulsion to repeat the trauma, calendar year after calendar year, official commemoration after official commemoration. Together with the sorrow song, or *canción triste*, the dominant subgenre in this mode of history writing thus could be defined as the tradition of the *memorial de agravios*, or the memorial of grievances, in particular grievances against the abusive power of the representatives of the Spanish Crown, the Vice-regal Court or the Catholic Church during the colonial period in New Spain, or grievances against the excessive use of force by the army and special anti-riot police in the case of the post-revolutionary state in Mexico.

Tlatelolco, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Ayotzinapa...: time after time, the well-nigh automatic response to the events associated with these place names has been to compose a memorial of grievances. Even without going back to colonial times, for which petitions of this kind abound, we could think of how the popular uprising in 2006 against the power abuses of then-Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz in the city and state of Oaxaca, for example, is chronicled in an impressive collective publication titled *Memorial de agravios: Oaxaca, México, 2006*; a group of architects also gathered in 2012 and won a national competition organized by the College of Architecture with an ambitious project to build a *Memorial a las víctimas de la violencia en México* on nearly 15,000 square meters in the Bosque de Chapultepec in the center of the Mexican capital. And already in 1985, the Mexican historian Antonio García de León would bring together a wealth of documents and materials going back to co-

⁴ See S. DRAPER, *1968 Mexico: Constellations of Freedom and Democracy*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2018.

lonial and pre-Cortesian times with regard to the tradition of violence and rebellion in the province of Chiapas under the title *Resistencia y utopía: memorial de agravios y crónicas de revueltas y profecías acaecidas en la Provincia de Chiapas durante los últimos quinientos años de su historia*⁵.

And yet, as this last example begins to illustrate, we also perhaps should not forget that this compulsion to respond to the violence of repression with a sorrow song or a memorial of grievances ends up being very much part and parcel of the effect of displaying the spectacle of sovereign power that was being sought after in the first place. Precisely because it is so terribly awe-inspiring, state violence when it is wielded serves not just as a symptom of vulnerability but also as a way of diverting attention away from the utopian dreams and efforts in resistance and self-government that were unfolding on the ground prior to the punctual onslaught of repression. This would provide us with another proof of the cunning of reason--in this case the reason of state, *la razón de Estado*, which is anything but the rule of law as it is commonly translated and perhaps should be rendered as the ubiquity of the state of exception, or the state in which the exception is the rule⁶.

2. *Accumulation by Death Toll*

In a crucial text written in 1984, *El Estado en América Latina*, the Bolivian sociologist René Zavaleta Mercado, who by this time had been living and teaching in Mexico for many years, draws our attention to this capacity of the state to interpellate the population and produce what he calls the substance of the state precisely through acts of cataclysmic violence. In this regard he proposes to speak of «ancestral or arcane constitutive moments», such as the Conquest, the domestication of the landscape in the Andes, or the period of so-called primitive or originary accumulation in Europe, during which times things appear to take on their definitive shape and bear down on the collective body that thereby is made all the more available for exploitation and control. For the modern period, war and violence often perform this function of defining the constitutive moment in the history of state formations:

«Here, as in the case of Mexico and a few others, there can be no doubt that it is important to keep in mind the consequences of provocations of this magnitude. It

⁵ See R. LEYVA (ed), *Memorial de agravios: Oaxaca, México, 2006*, Oaxaca, Marabú, 2008; J. GAETA – L. SPRINGALL – G. AVILÉS – S. PEREZNIETO, *Memorial a las víctimas de la violencia en México*, Mexico City, Gaeta Springall Arquitectos, 2016; A.G. DE LEÓN, *Memorial a las víctimas de la violencia en México. Resistencia y utopía: memorial de agravios y crónicas de revueltas y profecías acaecidas en la Provincia de Chiapas durante los últimos quinientos años de su historia*, Mexico City, Era, 1985.

⁶ See the special dossier I. DEL VALLE – E. TARICA (eds), *Radical Politics and/or the Rule of Law in Mexico*, «Política Común», 7/2015. Available on-line at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/pc/12322227.0007.001/--radical-politics-and-or-the-rule-of-law-in-mexico?rgn=main;view=fulltext>



is evident that there are various forms of availability, but also that the death toll undoubtedly creates social availability, because the livings are readied for the reception of new beliefs which, in the last instance, are the beliefs that result from the event. Violence therefore is a non-mercantile form of creating intersubjectivity, no doubt the most dramatic one. It is not only because of the cult of one's ancestors that the somber memory of those days and hours is cultivated»⁷.

Therein lies the cunning of the state of which our modern heads of nation and army are always quick to learn the unwritten rules:

«The cunning of the state from this moment onward turns into a school or culture and there can be no doubt that the rules were clear from early on in that legitimation is the principal end of the state and political suppression its alternative. In any case, the character of irresistibility is not obtained by mere violence: it must also become obvious that violence has validity at the level of the state, in other words, it must be an irresistibility in relation to certain ends»⁸.

Understanding the cunning of the reason of the state, however, should not make us blind to that which potentially might derail its course. If we exaggerate the violence of the constitutive moment, we unwittingly fall prey to the state's mechanisms for projecting its validity by any and all means necessary, including through the power of the death toll to browbeat and interpellate the people.

Sadly, even the students of Ayotzinapa may have been trapped in this logic. We now know for example that contrary to the «historical truth» callously proclaimed by the Procuraduría General de la República, the students during that night of September 26-27, 2014 were not planning to intervene the event of the mayor's wife in the Zócalo of Iguala in Guerrero. In fact, this event had already finished when after 9 PM the students arrived in the bus terminal of this historic city in Guerrero. Rather, they were trying to collect money, as had been their yearly custom, to finance their plan to participate the following week in the commemorations of October 2 in Mexico City.

History also has its cruel underside of impersonal irony. Impassively, almost mechanically, it repeats time after time the Biblical scene of the slaughter of the innocent. As José Revueltas already wrote, just two days after the massacre of 1968 in Tlatelolco:

«We are suspected of being intruders on this planet. They persecute us for that: for going out, for loving, for moving about without orders or chains. They want to capture our voices, so that there may be nothing left of our hands, of our kisses, of all that which our body loves. It is forbidden for them to watch us. They persecute all

⁷ R.Z. MERCADO, *El Estado en América Latina, Obra completa*, vol. II: *Ensayos 1975-1984*, ed. M.S. Crespo, La Paz, Plural, 2013, p. 633. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Spanish in what follows are my own.

⁸ R.Z. MERCADO, *El Estado en América Latina*, p. 636.

happiness. They are dead and they kill us. The dead are killing us. That is why we will live»⁹.

Revueltas here puts his finger on the pulse of a deadly drive to persecute whatever escapes the reason of the state, at a time when the latter transcends the boundaries of the nation and already has become planetary. The reasons for the massacres, raids, or forced disappearances are not random: they betray a targeted attack on that collective force which here – in tune with the spirit of the times that is so easily mocked as corny, hippy or romantic without realizing that this too is an effect of the persecution – is called love, or happiness, but which elsewhere may go by the name of justice, freedom, equality, and perhaps even socialism or communism. Listening to the always eloquent students of Ayotzinapa, for example, in the documentary *Un día en Ayotzinapa* directed by Rafael Rangel, it is hard not to be deeply moved by the fact that these are the ideals that they were striving to put into practice against all odds in their humble school. And yet, in a symptomatic displacement, what the teacher trainees were attempting to create on the school grounds of the Escuela Normal Rural “Isidro Raúl Burgos” in Ayotzinapa now by force has become conflated with the disappearance of 43 of their classmates during their trip to Iguala.

The story or history thus repeats itself: tragically, the *normalistas* who wanted to travel to Mexico City to commemorate the victims of the massacre in Tlatelolco became themselves the victims of forced disappearance in Iguala. But if now we in turn were to limit our focus exclusively to what happened on that night of September 26-27 2014, then by another perverse twist of fate we would in a sense be amplifying the labor of interpellation and concealment that can be attributed to the state.

This lesson is valid in general: in spite of everything, the point is not to let ourselves be blinded by the power of repression but to let ourselves be illuminated by the resistance that comes before it. For the same reason, to proclaim “Fue el Estado” left and right without a doubt is a useful, effective, and necessary guideline for demanding the assignation of criminal responsibilities, but at the same time it tends to blur the political differences and antagonisms in favor of a moral reaction against the state of generalized impunity and corruption. In this sense, beyond the urgent quest for justice for the victims and their families, it is also important not to let oneself be seduced by the all-powerful idolatry of the fetish of the state.

⁹ J. REVUELTAS, *México 68: Juventud y revolución*, ed. Andrea Revueltas and Philippe Cheron, Mexico City, Era, 1996, p. 79. See also the short text “Ezequiel o la matanza de los inocentes”, composed in October 1969 and included in *Material de los sueños*, Mexico City, Era, 1983.



3. *Beyond the Fetishism of the State*

In talking about the idol or fetish of the state, I am referring not only to the familiar phenomenon of the perversion of political power that the Mexican-Argentine philosopher Enrique Dussel describes in the following terms in his *Twenty Theses on Politics*:

«This *originary corruption* of the political, which I will call the *fetishism of power*, consists of the moment in which the political actor (the members of the political community, whether citizens or representatives) believes that power affirms his or her subjectivity or the institution in which he or she functions – as a “functionary”, whether it be as president, representative, judge, governor, soldier, police officer – as the *center* or *source* of power. This is how, for example, the State comes to be affirmed as the sovereign and as the power of last resort, and this represents the fetishism of the power of the State and the *corruption* of all those who seek to exercise State power defined in this way»¹⁰.

Contrary to what this useful definition of state fetishism might suggest, the problem concerns not only the perversion whereby power from being a potentiality based in the political community of the people becomes instead a self-sustaining tool for self-empowerment on behalf of a handful of actors as corrupt public servants. Rather, in order to grasp the enormous force of the fetishism of the state, we must also consider our own role and responsibility as citizens, commentators, or researchers wanting to unravel the intricate functioning of such a phenomenon.

Indeed, was not one of the key lessons of 1968 in Mexico and elsewhere a turn away from the state-centered definition of politics? If so, are we not letting ourselves be seduced by the fetish of the state that was being contested if we remain under the spell of its violent and spectacular displays of power, whether legal or illegal, overt or hidden under the cover of civilians being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Is this not the continued effect of interpretations that even with the best of intentions mistakenly identify “1968 Mexico” with the massacre in Tlatelolco or “Ayotzinapa” with what happened in Iguala? Are these metonymic displacements and metaphorical condensations not all caught in the mesmerizing tautology of the state producing and reproducing more state substance?

In an important text that takes us back to the debates from the 1970s about the presence or absence of a Marxist theory of the state but which only recently was translated in Mexico as part of the slim volume *Antropología del Estado*, the British historian and political sociologist Philip Abrams warned us against the dangers of fetishizing the state. «In sum: the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask

¹⁰ E. DUSSEL, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 3-4.

which prevents our seeing political practice as it is. It is, one could almost say, the mind of a mindless world, the purpose of purposeless conditions, the opium of the citizen»¹¹. Precisely, by making the state in a uniform and abstract sense responsible for the crimes of forced disappearance and murder, whether in Iguala or in Tlatelolco, in Tlatlaya or in Apatzingán, in Chiapas or in Acteal, even when there are good reasons for doing so given the confirmed presence of the federal police, the army, or the corrupt governors and heads of state, we also feed the ghost of the central power of the state and run the risk of concealing the emergent political practices of our time.

The problem does not reside in the accusation that the army or the federal police opened fire against unarmed civilians, repressed a peaceful protest march, or were complicit in the murdering of journalists and human rights activists. In light of courageous forensic and journalistic investigations, for lack of an adequate judicial process, we know that this accusation is often both just and justified. But the issue becomes thornier with the tendency afterwards to remain locked, as if shell-shocked, in the abstraction of the state in its very exceptionalism as the beginning, the means, and the sole end of politics in Mexico. What Abrams illustrates by way of examples from the history of struggles and rebellions throughout the twentieth century, in this sense, deserves to become the topic of serious further reflection today in Mexico:

«Of course what is legitimated is, insofar as it is legitimated, real power. Armies and prisons, the Special Patrol and the deportation orders as well as the whole process of fiscal exaction [...] are all forceful enough. But it is their association with the idea of the state and the invocation of that idea that silences protest, excuses force and convinces almost all of us that the fate of the victims is just and necessary. Only when that association is broken do real hidden powers emerge. And when they do they are not the powers of the state but of armies of liberation or repression, foreign governments, guerilla movements, soviets, juntas, parties, classes. The state for its part never emerges except as a claim to domination – a claim which has become so plausible that it is hardly ever challenged»¹².

Let us not become addicted to the opium of the citizen, swallowing without knowing it the fetish of state domination precisely at a moment when we may have sufficient proof to put the real culprits on the stand and bring them to justice. Let us not become the accomplices in the concealment of emergent collective subjectivities. Behind the mask that in Mexico is the corrupt narcostate, which kills and disappears not only the social activists who struggle for justice, equality, and human rights but also the journalists and human rights watchdogs devoted to making public their true actions, aims, and dreams, let us ask what are the hidden forces of rebellion and the communal forms of

¹¹ P. ABRAMS, *Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State* (1977), «Journal of Historical Sociology», 1/1988, pp. 58-89, quoted p. 82.

¹² P. ABRAMS, *Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State*, p. 77.



self-government that attempted to go against the grain of actually existing power structures, in Guerrero as much as in Chiapas, in Michoacán no less than in Oaxaca.

We might find a surprising source of inspiration for such an endeavor to write history against the grain if we return to another of those indigenous accounts of the destruction of Tenochtitlan. In a particularly cruel episode, the massacre in the Templo Mayor, chronicled in Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España (Códice Florentino)* and later excerpted and re-translated from the Nahuatl version in *La visión de los vencidos (The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico)*, we can already hear foretold the whole subsequent history of colonization as an ongoing process of destruction of the commons or of the commune—provided that we translate the Nahuatl term *calpulco*, not as *templos* or *parroquias*, as Sahagún originally did in good Christian fashion, but as «communal houses», the buildings reserved for the gathering or assembly – whether religious or not – of the *calpulli*, which in its turn, instead of as «ward» or «neighbourhood», as *barrio* or as *vecindario*, we might risk understanding as *comuna* – the real or mythical birth place of so many future *comunero* revolts and uprisings:

«Some attempted to force their way out, but the Spaniards murdered them at the gates. Others climbed the walls, but they could not save themselves. Those who ran into the communal houses were safe there for a while; so were those who lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead. But if they stood up again, the Spaniards saw them and killed them.

The blood of the warriors flowed like water and gathered into pools. The pools widened, and the stench of blood and entrails filled the air. The Spaniards ran into the communal houses to kill those who were hiding. They ran everywhere and searched everywhere; they invaded every room, hunting and killing»¹³.

In light of passages such as these, as I have tried to suggest elsewhere, the history of Mexico could be rewritten as the underground history of the intermittent destruction and insurrection of the commune¹⁴. But even before invoking cases such as the Commune of Morelos of the first Zapatistas in 1914-1915 or the Commune of Oaxaca, which almost a century later in 2006 could be said to have inaugurated the recent age of insurrections, we should recall that in 1520-21 the uprising of the *comunidades* of Castile back in Spain was strictly contemporary with the conquest and destruction of Tenochtitlan, with

¹³ See M.L. PORTILLA, *La matanza del Templo Mayor (Códice Florentino)*, in M.L. PORTILLA, *La visión de los vencidos*, p. 92; M.L. PORTILLA, *The Broken Spears*, p. 74. See also L. REYES GARCÍA, *El término calpulli en documentos del siglo XVI*, in L. REYES GARCÍA ET AL., *Documentos nauas de la Ciudad de México del siglo XVI*, Mexico, Archivo General de la Nación, 1996, pp. 21-68.

¹⁴ See B. BOSTEELS, *The Mexican Commune*, in S.K. BRINCAT (ed), *The Future of Communism: Social Movements, Economic Crisis, and the Re-imagination of Communism*, vol. III, *Communism in the 21st Century*, Santa Barbara, Praeger, 2013, pp. 161-189.

the result that *comunidades* for Don Quixote but also later for the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* will have as one of its meanings that of *levantamientos* or “uprisings”, the kind that the Spanish conquerors of Tlatelolco and other parts of Tenochtitlan wanted to avoid at all cost.

During the massacre of October 2, 1968, several people who were caught in the midst of the army’s attack on the Plaza de las Tres Culturas also lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead. This time around there were no communal houses to escape to. The colonial church of Santiago Tlatelolco infamously closed its massive doors to the fleeing crowd and ignored the cries for help. However, as in the case of the account of Sahagún’s indigenous witnesses, we today should at least have the dignity to go looking for the meaning of those collective efforts that created, if not a safe haven, at least a space for communal gathering. Instead of focusing on the massacre, therefore, I propose that we try to write the history of those communes and communities that rose up against the power of the modern or colonial state machine. This would be, I hope, a dignified way not so much to commemorate the massacre but rather to celebrate the days of collective transformation and joy buried under the weight of trauma: to write the history of the commune against the state, beyond the state, or at a distance from the state but also hopefully in favor of another state, or a non-state state, in which the sovereign exception with its heavy death toll no longer would be the rule.

On a more anecdotal level, then, perhaps there is also a future lying in wait for those houses that had no more roofs after the invasion and destruction of Tenochtitlan according to the sorrow songs of indigenous accounts. After all, as *The Guardian* recently reported, one of the oldest houses in Mexico City, located on 25 Manzanares Street in the neighbourhood of La Merced, was given a new life in a concerted effort from architects, archaeologists, and community activists. Most striking, if we take into account Sahagún’s description and accompanying depiction, is the fact that this building has been linked to the model of the *calpulco* or communal house of the *calpulli*. «This house is laid out on a pre-Hispanic plan known as a “calpolli”, a sort of extended family that formed the basic building block of Aztec society», said Mariano Leyva, the director of the Historic Downtown Trust, «which is restoring the building for use as a community center», as the Associated Press reported for US edition of *The Guardian*. «Today, the house is getting new roofs, and the centuries-old paving stones are being re-laid in the courtyard»¹⁵.

¹⁵ See ASSOCIATED PRESS IN MEXICO CITY, *A New Life for Mexico City’s Oldest House as Restoration begins*, «The Guardian (US edition)», 12 September 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/12/mexico-city-oldest-home-restoration-25-manzanares-street>



4. *Under the Paving Stones, the Commune?*

If in this light we also asked ourselves what lies underneath or behind Ayotzinapa, would we not similarly have to turn our attention away from the tragic events in Iguala so as to focus on the communal projects that guided and inspired the students of the Escuela Normal Rural and continue to do so to this day? *Todos somos Ayotzinapa* (*We are all Ayotzinapa*), people kept on saying in 2014 just as in 1968 Revueltas wrote in his diary: «Todos somos Tlatelolco» («We are all Tlatelolco»). But historically, politically and ideologically speaking, aside from the urgent questions of what happened and who is responsible, either by commission or by omission, for the crimes of that night in September 2014, can we really know what this name means?

What lies behind Ayotzinapa? Many people in Mexico will answer this question somewhat precipitously by referring to two broad phenomena, which, no matter how familiar they may have become, continue to terrorize on a daily basis the lives of large sectors of the population. On one hand, we have the return to state authoritarianism, or what also has been called a form of neo-authoritarianism, the immediate predecessor of which sends us back to the era of Díaz Ordaz: the same President who incidentally was responsible for the closure of many of the Escuelas Normales Rurales like Ayotzinapa, as well as for the massacre of more than 240 students and civilians on October 2, 1968 in Tlatelolco. On the other hand, we have the dizzying rise of organized crime in the drug trafficking trade, now grown exponentially thanks to the lucrative business of extortions, kidnappings, the infiltration of police, army, and even the guerrilla, as well as the entrance of several cartels in the areas of social work, sometimes with megalomaniac ambitions such as those of the Knights Templar in Michoacán who claim to be the brotherhood of the true redeemers of the people – all factors which, by an unstoppable trickling-up effect, contribute to the effect of the state's neo-authoritarianism, inaugurated under the Presidency of Felipe Calderón and continued, if possible with ever more disastrous consequences, by President Enrique Peña Nieto.

Without diminishing the gravity and sorrow caused by these criminal events, there is something that we risk losing sight of when the discussion about Ayotzinapa returns time and again to the collusion between the world of organized crime and the authoritarian state. There can be no doubt that Mexico is witnessing the effects of the consolidation of a criminal and corrupt, if not terrorist, neoliberal state. “Fue el Estado” sums up this denunciation of what we could also call a rogue state, directed by a «narco-government» – as many of the banners would read during protest marches – that includes all

three of the main political parties: PRI, PAN, and PRD. Thus, too, in a communiqué sent from the school in Ayotzinapa, it was declared: «Communities, villages, cities and the different states of the Republic are in solidarity with our pain and we are organizing ourselves to demand the ceasing of government functions in Guerrero and to dilute the Mexican narco-State that has generated such violence in our communities»¹⁶.

However, while the violence and the corruption have reached never-before-seen heights of cruelty in Mexico, it is also true that an exclusive focus on the collusion between the factual powers of the drug cartels and all levels – municipal, state, and federal – of the government, loses sight of many other elements that might help us understand the symbolic value that on an international scale has accrued to the name of Ayotzinapa. One of these elements is the political and ideological role of the Escuelas Normales Rurales, formed in the 1920s but given strength especially beginning with the official proposals for socialist education under President Lázaro Cárdenas. As Adolfo Gilly writes in his book *El cardenismo: una utopía mexicana*:

«What thus entered in Cardenas's discourse would become one of the central figures of his communitarian projects based on the *ejido* [a structure of communal landownership revived and institutionalized during the Mexican Revolution]: the figure of the revolutionary teacher as the enlightened organizer of the peasants and, in fact, as a counter-figure to the Catholic priest. Not from Cárdenas's brain but from the history of agrarian struggle in Mexico had emerged the rural teacher as organic intellectual of the peasantry, in the same way that under the old regime of the haciendas the village priests played this role»¹⁷.

Even if subsequent Presidents such as Manuel Ávila Camacho or Díaz Ordaz would do everything possible to close down these schools or else to let them die a slow natural death for lack of resources, this image of the rural teacher as ideological leader never stops appearing as a motif and a motivation when we listen to interviews with survivors or family members of the slain and disappeared in Iguala. «Those who enter here», said already a student on the occasion of a previous conflict with the Governor of Guerrero, in 2011, which led to the death of two students and one gas station employee, «we know that we have to go wherever they need us. Unlike those who graduate from Normales that are not Rural, we do not want to go to the cities where everything comes easy. Here we learn that we have to “*ser pueblo, hacer pueblo y estar con el pueblo*” (“be the people, make the people, and take the side of

¹⁶ Quoted in M. SÁNCHEZ, “*Nomás dos días les damos*”: *padres al gobierno; iluminan Zócalo: Fue el Estado*”, «Sin Embargo», 22 octubre 2014. <http://www.sinembargo.mx/22-10-2014/1149726>

¹⁷ A. GILLY, *El cardenismo: una utopía mexicana*, Mexico City, Era, 2013, p. 326.



the people”»¹⁸. This slogan can also be found repeated on the wall of the House of the Activist on the school grounds of Ayotzinapa.

To this role of the rural teacher as ideologue of and for the people we should add another element that is no less important in the formation of the ideological identity of the students of Ayotzinapa. This is the fact that this Escuela Normal, in particular, was also the place from where the mythic figures of the guerrilla of the 1960s and 1970s emerged such as Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez, leaders whose portraits accompany images of Lenin and Che Guevara on the walls of the Raúl Isidro Burgos school. This affinity also finds expression in the continued presence in the school of the country’s oldest student organization, the semi-clandestine Federación de Estudiantes Campesinos Socialistas de México (FECSM), of which Cabañas once was the general secretary. Here, incidentally, we may add that in view of the public character of the Escuelas Normales, we can say “Fue el Estado” only in the tragic sense of a state which acts like an impotent and postmodern Chronos or Saturn who devours his own children, as in Goya’s painting that also serves as the poster for Rangel’s documentary: Ayotzinapa also *is* the state. «This state, the same one that created these schools, now persecutes them, represses them, and assassinates them for executing the same function it assigned to them: to lead the peasants», concludes Salvador “El Pino” Martínez della Roca in his study *Estado, educación y hegemonía en México*, referring to the activism of rural teachers in the seventies. And this ex-leader of the 1968 student movement adds: «It is no coincidence that the leaders of the Mexican rural guerrilla, Genaro Vázquez, Lucio Cabañas, doctor Pablo Gómez, Arturo Gámiz, Rubén Jaramillo, José Bracho, Arturo Miranda and others were all graduates from this type of school: the *escuela normal rural*»¹⁹.

In fact, the historical force of the guerrilla in Guerrero also explains why it is in this state that forced disappearance became a privileged military strategy of counter-insurgency, as Roberto González Villarreal reminds us in his book *Ayotzinapa: la rabia y la esperanza*:

«Guerrero is the state of disappearances. It is here that the technology of disappearance was forged and developed in the seventies. In the war of counter-insurgency, against the guerrillas of the Asociación Cívica Nacional Revolucionaria (ACNR) [for a long time led by Genaro Vázquez] and the Partido de los Pobres (PDLP) [founded by Lucio Cabañas], the army and security agencies developed a particular form of repression that consists in actively disappearing the adversaries. Not punishing the enemies, not even murdering, torturing, or humiliating them,

¹⁸ See Z. CAMACHO, *Ayotzinapa en la mira*, «Revista Contralínea», 70, 1 enero 2007, http://www.contralinea.com.mx/archivo/2007/enero/htm/ayotzinapa_mira.htm.

¹⁹ S.M. DELLA ROCCA, *Estado, educación y hegemonía en México*, Mexico City, Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2012, p. 309.

but something more: disappearing them, erasing their traces, negating their existence. Both individual and political. Theirs and that of their struggle»²⁰.

This last point is worth stressing: the aim of forced disappearance as a political technology consists in erasing the traces not only of the individual or collective enemies but also of their struggles, their dreams, and their commitments.

Finally, a third element that can be found hidden behind the tragedy rightly or wrongly associated with the place name of Ayotzinapa is the construction of possible links of solidarity and sympathy on the part of the students with political phenomena that this time are in fact relatively new such as the *autodefensas* or communal police, which are also on the rise in the state of Guerrero following the model of the self-defense groups created in Michoacán by the medical doctor José Manuel Mireles, who spent three years in prison until the recent dismissal of his case in federal court. Here, though, the situation becomes increasingly complex because one the strategies adopted by Peña Nieto's government, as has been documented in the investigations of the journalist José Gil Olmos for the weekly *Proceso* collected in his book *Batallas de Michoacán: Autodefensas, el proyecto colombiano de Peña Nieto*, was to arm some of these groups of communitarian police and turning them into a Rural Force, not only to combat the cartels but also, and perhaps above all, to deactivate and control the initiatives of communal self-defense and self-government on the part of civilians.

«Just as in the movement of '68 the subject of change was embodied in the figure of the student and in 1994, with the Zapatista insurgency, in the indigenous, in the trend of social protest from the last years the self-defense groups took on this role, but especially the *rancheros* who, as social group, had not manifested themselves»²¹.

And we could add that due to the links of solidarity that exist between the *normalistas* and the *autodefensas* in Guerrero, the threat of a new armed social movement was no doubt another element in play behind the violence that came crushing down on the students of Ayotzinapa.

In the proper names of Cárdenas, Cabañas, and Mireles we could pinpoint three references for what lies in wait in terms of old and new emergent subjectivities behind the place name of Ayotzinapa. These are some of the trees that cannot be seen for the forest of the narco-state supposedly controlled from inside the presidential residence of Los Pinos. They represent struggles, initiatives, desires, and commitments whose collective force has

²⁰ R.G. VILLARREAL, *Ayotzinapa: la rabia y la esperanza*, Mexico City, Terracota, 2015, p. 42. See also, from the same author, *Historia de la desaparición: Nacimiento de una tecnología represiva*, Mexico City, Terracota, 2012.

²¹ J.G. OLMOS, *Batallas de Michoacán: Autodefensas, el proyecto colombiano de Peña Nieto*, Mexico City, Proceso, 2015, pp. 253 and 272.



been targeted in repeated attempts to erase the last remaining traces of their active presence in Mexico. But when in the face of tragedy commentators and academics once again focus exclusively on the image of the repressive state, these referents risk being forgotten or overshadowed by the events of the night of September 26-27, 2014. A book like González Villarreal's, for example, offers wide-ranging documentation about the attacks of that night as well as about the network of protests that gradually entered into new phases with the shift in attention from the local to the international, but aside from a brief reference to the prehistory of the technology of forced disappearance in Guerrero, to which Villarreal had dedicated a previous study, the focus by and large remains set on the tragedy that occurred in Iguala.

As in David Huerta's poem *Ayotzinapa*, already translated into more than twenty languages and for months painted in white letters on the blackened walls in the patio of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo in Oaxaca, we can undoubtedly stay transfixed by the image of Mexico as the land of corruption and violence, the country of anonymous mass graves and skinned faces:

This is the country of mass graves
Ladies and gentlemen
This is the country of howling
The country of children in flames
The country of tormented women
The country that yesterday barely existed
And now is all but lost.

But the poet does not stay stuck in a mere elegy for the dead and the martyred. He also invites the reader to recapture and extend the life that still emanates from this tragedy, so as not to disappear the disappeared a second time around:

Whoever reads this must also know
That despite everything
The dead have not departed
Nor have they been disappeared

That the magic of the dead
Lives in the dawn and in a spoon
In our footfall and our fields of corn
In the trace of a pencil or a river

Let us give to this magic

The tempered silver
Of the breeze

Let us deliver to the dead
To our young dead
The bread of heaven
The ear of the waters
The splendor of all sadness
The milk of our damnation
The oblivion of the world
And the shattered memory
Of all those living²².

Memory here does not let itself be fascinated by the current regime of death and neoliberal necropolitics. No matter how shattered, it does not end up proclaiming to the four winds: “Fue el Estado”. But, in a free paraphrase of the Zapatista saying «Detrás de la máscara estamos ustedes», it seems to want to whisper into our ear: «Detrás de los muertos estamos ustedes» («Behind the dead, we are you»).

Instead of speaking about a homogeneously criminal regime of the state, as when one talks in the abstract about the national-popular state or about the evils of hegemony, which is only another night in which all the cats are black, perhaps we should consider that Mexico currently is traversing another situation of dual power, one hundred years after the one created by the first Zapatistas with their radical experiment in self-government and self-defense that Gilly in his book *La revolución interrumpida* calls the Morelos Commune: «In their home territory, the Zapatistas created an egalitarian society with communal roots (very different from the individualist utopia of “rural democracy”), and they maintained it until they finally lost power»²³. Today no doubt presents us with a very different situation, because instead of emerging from a revolutionary impulse the situation of dual power depends on a decision that harkens back to the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari according to which a neoliberal state could give up many of the more traditional functions of a federal government in favor of private, local, or municipal initiatives. Especially in the last decade, however, the cartels such as the Knights Templar are the ones who have come to fill the void of these spaces conceded or abandoned by the neoliberal state. And Calderón, by launching the war against drugs, beginning in his home state of Michoacán, mistakenly would

²² D. HUERTA, *Ayotzinapa*, available on-line in multiple languages in *Asymptote*. <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2014/11/18/say-ayotzinapa/#>

²³ A. GILLY, *The Mexican Revolution* (1971), New York, The New Press, 2006, p. 254.



have believed that he could still recuperate those functions and those spaces, something that turned out to be clearly impossible during the presidency of Peña Nieto.

The impasse inherited by President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador – the first one to return to the site of the Tlatelolco massacre on October 2, 2018 with the promise of going all the way until the end of the investigations and attending to the causes that produced this civil war in the first place – could be summarized as the illusion in which the Mexican state was caught of believing that it could control or manipulate for its own benefits a situation of dual power gone awry. And when I now say Mexican state, let us not fall in the trap of personalizing an ensemble of functions, apparatuses, or *de facto* powers, identifying them with the government or, still more maladroitly, with the stupidity or cleverness of the person who happens to occupy the presidential seat. The factual existence of a situation of dual power, split between the excrescence of the state and the promise of the commune, also means that all such denunciations of the ineptitude, corruption, or downright foolishness of our heads of state do not bring us an inch closer if our goal is to understand the present and often they merely serve to confirm the fears or conspiracy theories of the moral majority. By contrast, what remains to be written is the history of the dual power struggles between state and commune in Mexico, from Morelos in 1914 to Guerrero in 2014, via the utopia of Lázaro Cárdenas whose effort consisted in relaunching the revolutionary impulse at the level of the entire nation in an attempt to give a country-wide projection to the communal and ejidal initiatives. And if we recall the central role assigned in this project to the Escuelas Normales Rurales, we will also better understand why the new situation of dual power recently experienced in Mexico includes at the same time an attempt politically and ideologically to liquidate all those projects of both territorial autonomy in the style of Zapata and national integration in the style of Cárdenas.

What lies behind Ayotzinapa, then, is not only the narco-war or the neo-authoritarianism but a potential conflict in which the threat or promise of popular and communal self-organization was met with the crushing weight of state-sponsored or at least state-allowed violence. And what is at stake, both in everyday practice and at the level of political analysis, amounts to seeking out which emergent processes are hidden behind the massacres and forced disappearances. Only in this way can we do justice to the victims: not in order to create a pantheon of martyrs but to see in what way an emergent form of collective subjectivity sought to evade both the excesses of state power and the immediate demands of this or that particular community. If “commune” can

serve as a generic name for such an emergent subjectivity, sitting uncomfortably astride between community and state, then what is at stake is a change of perspective from the trauma of violence to the building of the commune in order to recapture what lies hidden behind the crooked path that leads from Tlatelolco to Ayotzinapa.