The Aesthetics of State Violence

From Grievance to Revolt

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In the beginning, there was violence. Many national histories and not a few philosophical theories have been written based on such a view of original or radical violence: violence at the root or origin of history itself. The histories and theories of the state are no exception in this regard. Or, rather, they frequently consist of showing the extent to which the modern state is fundamentally rooted in an exceptional yet constitutive act of violence, which subsequently tends to be erased and forgotten from the official record of the dominant history books and annals. Such a view of violence, however, cannot avoid the question of the forms of its presentation and representation, that is, the question of the aesthetics of violence in the broadest possible sense. This is not limited to the literary and artistic realm. For it is not just novels and movies, paintings and poetry that give shape to the aesthetic

forms of violence. The modes of presentation of the social bond as such inevitably entail a series of genre conventions, for example, in terms of narrative structure and rhetorical force, without which a story such as the history and critique of state violence could not even be imagined in the first place. Thus, in what follows, I propose to delve into the archive of one particularly striking and symptomatic case—that of the Mexican state—in order to study the effects of presenting violence as foundational to its history since at least the conquest and destruction of Tenochtitlan, the site of the creation of what would eventually come to be known as Mexico City.

The Case of Mexico: A History of Grievances Against the State

In Mexico, 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 to commit a foundational act of violence in the form of massacring its own people could be met only by the compulsion to repeat the trauma, calendar year after calendar year, official commemoration after official commemoration. From Tlatelolco (repeated site of massacres, on August 13, 1521, and again on October 2, 1968) to Ayotzinapa (site of the rural teacher training college whose students were forcibly made to disappear on the night between September 26 and 27, 2014), the intermittent appearance of violence sponsored or at least allowed by the state thus has punctuated the long history of Mexico, giving a whole series of place names the sad privilege of instant recognizability in the eyes of the international community. This focus on the most spectacular aspects of state violence, however, has taken away the visibility of different forms of rebellion, resistance, and radical experiments in communal self-rule

that in many cases seem to have been at the root of the need, in the optic of the state, for a violent intervention to repress all such efforts and prevent their memory from lingering as an unfilled promise of emancipation. And this effect of rendering invisible the ongoing collective struggles, in turn, raises the question of whether it is possible to move beyond the understandable if also constricting impulse to keep on reproducing the most common forms of the political, historical, juridical, and literary-aesthetic treatments of violence in the long history of Mexico.

Together with the sorrow song, or *canción triste*, the dominant aesthetic form or subgenre in the tragic mode of history writing in Mexico can be defined as the tradition of the *memorial de agravios*, or memorial of grievances—for instance, grievances against the abusive power of representatives of the Spanish Crown, the Viceregal Court, or the Catholic Church during the colonial period in New Spain; against the alleged marginalization of the Creole as opposed to the Spanish-born elite in the government apparatuses of the newly independent nation-state; or against the excessive use of force by the federal army and, more recently, the special anti-riot police in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Thus, time after time, the nearly automatic response to the events associated with those ill-fated place names that are often the only ones—other than the names of famous beach resorts—for which Mexico is known abroad has been to compose a memorial of grievances against the state. To understand this, we could go back to colonial times for which petitions and recriminations of this kind also abound. Fray Bartolomé de las Casas's 1542 *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* (A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies), for example, certainly represents a succinct memorial of grievances as well as a quest for the restoration of justice in the name of the New World's indigenous populations. If we limit ourselves to

Mexico's recent history, we could think of how the popular uprising in 2006 against the power abuses of then-Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz in the state of Oaxaca, is chronicled and depicted in a collective publication titled *Memorial de agravios: Oaxaca, México, 2006* (Memorial of Grievances: Oaxaca, Mexico, 2006); or of how a group of architects 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* (Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico) in the Chapultepec Park in the center of the Mexican capital. And already in 1985, the same year in which a major earthquake in Mexico provoked an extraordinary collective response of solidarity that would be commemorated in *Volver a nacer: Memorial del '85*, the Mexican historian Antonio García de León brought together a wealth of documents and materials going back to pre-Cortesian and colonial times with regard to the tradition of violence and rebellion in 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* (Resistance and Utopia: Memorial of Grievances and Chronicles of Rebellions and Prophesies Occurred in the Province of Chiapas during the Last Five Hundred Years of its History).[1]

And yet, this last example already should begin to illustrate something else, which is that we also perhaps must not forget that the compulsion to respond to the violence of repression with a sorrow song or a memorial of grievances ends up being part and parcel of the effect of displaying the spectacle of sovereign power that sought to establish itself in the first place. This always works to the detriment of the revolts and prophecies that still demand to be chronicled. Precisely because it is so terribly awe-inspiring, state violence, when it is wielded, serves not just as a symptom of the state's own vulnerability but also as a way of diverting

attention away from the utopian dreams of resistance and efforts in self-government that were unfolding on the ground prior to the punctual onslaught of repression that rarely failed to follow in their wake. This would provide us with further proof of a kind of cunning of reason—in this case, the cunning of 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 exceptional violence presents itself as the rule.[2]

At stake here are questions concerning the presentation and representation of violence, pain, and suffering in a sense that might be considered aesthetic, broadly understood. When, how, and why do certain representations of violence unwittingly feed back into the mechanisms of state oppression that they were meant to protest? In what way can recriminations of state violence come back to bite their own tail, so to speak, augmenting the image of the power of this monstrous Leviathan that is the modern nation-state? How can the desire for freedom, democracy, or autonomy become thwarted and turn back upon its own impulse, only further to aggrandize the oppressive state machinery from which it was supposed to liberate itself? To what extent do all these images of state violence, repression, and death imposed from above perversely replicate the very structure of sovereign power they were intended to unmask and denounce?

As long as history is written in a tragic or traumatic key, it continues to be centered on the cyclical commemoration of past injuries as its principal obsession and the painful expression of grievances aimed at the ruling government as its only hope. Mexico, in this sense, will continue to live out the twisted logic of aggrieved identity and unredeemed rage that, admittedly in a very different context, the political theorist Wendy Brown described in terms of the Nietzschean understanding of *ressentiment* in an important study from the mid-1990s, *States of Injury:*

Power and Freedom in Late Modernity (recently translated into Spanish under the wholly appropriate title *Estados del agravio: Poder y libertad en la modernidad tardía*). Even though she refers mainly, if not exclusively, to the phenomenon of identity politics or what she prefers to describe as "politicized identities" in the era of neoliberalism in the US, Brown's analysis can be extended to a much broader scale and projected onto a longer historical arc. As I suggested in the case of Mexico, for example, we could consider the frequent expression of grievances with which already the conquered, colonized, Indigenous and Creole populations of the New World sought to attract the attention of the Spanish Crown; and how this attitude of self-identification through the expression of injuries suffered continues well into the present age.

Brown casts doubt on the emancipatory nature of identity politics because rather than an actual subversion, there would be a traumatized repetition at work in protesting the various exclusions suffered by marginalized or underrepresented populations in terms of the typical mantra of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Giving renewed actuality to the terms quoted from Nietzsche's account in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, she concludes:

> In its emergence as a protest against marginalization or subordination, politicized identity thus becomes attached to its own exclusion both because it is premised on this exclusion for its existence as identity and because the formation of identity at the site of exclusion, as exclusion, augments or "alters the direction of the suffering" entailed in subordination or marginalization by finding a site of blame for it. But in so doing, it installs its pain over its unredeemed history in the very foundation of its political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity. In locating a site of blame for its powerlessness over its past—a past of injury, a past as a hurt will—and locating a "reason" for the "unendurable

> pain" of social powerlessness in the present, it converts this reasoning into an ethicizing politics, a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it, discursively codifies it. Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future—for itself or others—that triumphs over this pain. The loss of historical direction, and with it the loss of futurity characteristic of the late modern age, is thus homologically refigured in the figure of desire of the dominant political expression of the age: identity politics.[3]

To base the definition of politics on the expression of aggrieved identities, in other words, involves a peculiar logic of resentful self-identification combined with recriminations of the violence that always belongs to another.

As the long history of Mexico should indicate, this logic of aggrieved identification with the very same political power whose exclusion and oppression one suffers and decries is by no means limited to the moment of triumphant neoliberalism and the loss of a socialist alternative. In fact, the memorial of grievances is a constant in the political history of the Mexican nation, from colonial times via the post-revolutionary period all the way to the present. This is indicative of the fact that the need to alter the direction of one's suffering and find, if not a culprit, at least a reason for the unendurable pain by accusing the state of one's continued powerlessness is much more widespread than the phenomenon of identity politics in the postmodern or late modern condition that Brown has foremost in her mind. Mexico offers merely a pre-eminent case of the entwinement of violence and desire that makes "states of injury," or *Estados del agravio*, of most if not all modern nation-states.

Does this mean that the sorrow songs and memorials of grievances have no collective emancipatory valence whatsoever,

either in Mexico or in other parts of the world? Not at all: As should be evident, for example, from the role of the *cahiers de doléances*, that is, the books of complaints or memorials of grievances from each of the three Estates in the lead-up to the French Revolution, the collective voicing of grievances and demands certainly can have a pre-revolutionary value. If we can still take Alexis de Tocqueville's word for it, King Louis XVI by ordering such a massive compilation of grievances before convening the Estates General of 1789 unwittingly would have contributed to the revolutionary education of the people and laid much of the groundwork for the overthrow of the *Ancien régime*: "The old regime furnished the Revolution with many of its forms; the latter merely added the atrocity of its genius."[4] And yet, insofar as they produce demands for which first only the King and then the newly-born revolutionary state seemed capable of providing an answer, even such books of complaints or registers of grievances ultimately contributed to the centralization of power and sovereignty rather than truly giving voice to and collectively organizing the rebellious masses at the bottom of society. (This would explain, incidentally, why even as conservative a figure as the current President of France, Emmanuel Macron, in response to the protest actions of the *Gilets jaunes* or "yellow vests" in France, thought that to reinstate the practice of the *cahiers de doléances* could be a way to calm the crisis by channeling it back to the centralized state.) And when the grievances and complaints predominantly include the uses and abuses of violence on the part of the Spanish Crown, the Catholic Church, or the modern state, as in the case of the numerous *memoriales de agravios* in Mexico, it would indeed seem that far from opening a horizon of futurity the cyclical commemoration of injuries both past and present, with their unendurable death toll, only further adds to the perverse aura and augments the overpowering effect of the sovereign state.

Accumulation by Death Toll

In a crucial text written in 1984, "El Estado en América Latina" ("The State in Latin America"), the Bolivian sociologist René Zavaleta Mercado, who by this time had already been living and teaching in Mexico for several 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," moments such as the Conquest of America, the domestication of the landscape in the Andes, or the period of primitive or originary so-called 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 moments 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 is evident that there are various forms of availability, but also that the death toll undoubtedly creates social availability, because the living 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.[5]

Therein lies the somber "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.[6]

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 own 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 under then-President Enrique Peña Nieto, the students on the night of September 26–27, 2014, were not planning to intervene in the event of the mayor's wife in the Zócalo of Iguala in Guerrero. In fact, this event had already finished when the students arrived after 9 PM 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 the massacre of October 2, 1968, in Mexico City.

History also has its cruel underside of impersonal irony. Impassively, almost mechanically, it time after time repeats the biblical scene of the slaughter of the innocent. As José Revueltas already wrote, just two days after the massacre of 1968 in Tlatelolco that would put an end to the student-popular

movement of which he had been an active member and, according to the federal prosecutor who would jail him for this reason, an intellectual instigator:

> 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 happiness. They are dead and they kill us. The dead are killing us. That is why we will live.[7]

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" (*desapariciones forzadas*) 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* (One Day in Ayotzinapa) directed by the Mexican filmmaker Rafael Rangel, it is impossible 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 paradoxically comes before it. For the same reason, to proclaim "Fue el Estado" (The State is the Culprit) 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 moralistic 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 ourselves be seduced by the all-powerful idolatry of the fetish of the state.

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.[8]

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 the movement 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, once again, by the fetish of the state that precisely was being contested at the time 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 allegedly 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 only recently was translated in Mexico as part of the slim volume *Antropología del Estado* (Anthropology of the State), 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 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."[9] Precisely, by making the state in a uniform and abstract sense responsible for the crimes of "forced disappearance" and murder, whether in Iguala or Tlatelolco, in Tlatlaya or Apatzingán, in Chiapas or Acteal, even when there are good reasons for doing so given the confirmed presence of the federal police, the army, or 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 afterward to remain locked, as if shell-shocked, in the abstraction of the state in its 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. He writes:

> 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.[10]

Let us not become addicted to the opium of the citizen, unknowingly swallowing 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 accomplices in the concealment of emergent collective subjectivities. Behind the mask that in Mexico is the corrupt narco-state, 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 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.

From Traumatic Violence to Communal Rebellion

We might find a surprising source of inspiration for such an endeavor for writing history that is *à rebours* or against the grain, if we return to another of those indigenous accounts of

the destruction of Tenochtitlan, aside from the famous *canciones tristes* that Elena Poniatowska in 1968 would recycle in *La noche de Tlatelolco* (somewhat more sensationalistically translated in English as *Massacre in Mexico*). I am referring to a particularly cruel episode of the original event, the massacre in the Templo Mayor, as chronicled by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún on the basis of indigenous accounts, transcribed and translated in his *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España* (*Códice Florentino*) (General History of the Things of New Spain) and later excerpted and re-translated from the Nahua version in *La visión de los vencidos* (translated as *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*). In this episode, we can already hear foretold the whole subsequent history of colonization as an ongoing process of destruction of the commons or of the commune. To see this, we must translate the Nahua term *calpulco*, not as *templos* or *capillas*, as Sahagún originally did in good Christian fashion, but as "communal houses," the buildings reserved for gathering or assembly—whether religious or not—of the *calpulli*, which in its turn, instead of as "parish," "ward" or "neighborhood," as *parroquia*, *barrio* or *vecindario*, we might risk understanding as *comuna*—the real or mythical birth place of so many future *comunero* revolts and uprisings. Indeed, this is how twentieth-century specialists re-translated the Nahua account copied by Sahagún:

> 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.[11]

In light of passages such as these, as I have tried to suggest elsewhere, the history of Mexico could be rewritten as an underground history of the intermittent destruction and insurrection of the commune.[12] Thus, as part of this underground history, we could invoke 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 around the globe. But, long before these more recent events, we should also 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 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," precisely 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 armed attack on the Plaza de las Tres Culturas also lay down among the victims and pretended to be dead. This time around, though, 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 their 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 exactly a safe haven, at least a space for communal gathering. Instead of focusing on the massacres that cyclically seem to occur in places such as Tlatelolco, therefore, I

propose that we try to write the history of those communes and communities that rose up against the violent power of the modern or colonial state machine. This would be, I hope, a dignified way not only to commemorate the massacre but also 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.

Theorizing Revolt in the Place of Violence

However, it is one thing to argue for the possibility of such an underground history of communal revolt and self-government based on the wealth of materials already available in chronicles or testimonies, and quite another to ground this possibility at the level of theory or philosophy. How, I want to ask in a final set of reflections, should we think of this proposed displacement from violence to rebellion, from grievance to revolt, or from trauma and injury to utopia and resistance, when contemporary theory and philosophy seem wholly devoted to the effort to place violence firmly and irredeemably at the origin of the social bond as such? In other words, can we also find theoretical resources to accompany such a displacement as the one proposed in these pages, or does the trend in contemporary critical theory run completely counter to this project, which, as a result, might even be seen as merely a case of wishful thinking?

In an earlier essay, "Critique of Originary Violence," I took issue with the trend common in radical political theory and philosophy today to situate violence at the origin of history.[13] Theoretically speaking, there are at least two noteworthy traditions at

work behind this trend: the first, psychoanalytical, hearkening back to Sigmund Freud's so-called collective or social works, from *Totem and Taboo* to *Civilization and Its Discontents*; and the second, more strictly philosophical, returning to Martin Heidegger's interrogation, starting with *Being and Time*, of history and historicity from the point of view of the question of being. What these parallel and sometimes overlapping traditions share is a desire to locate an inaugural or originary kind of violence: violence *at* and *as* the origin of history itself. Thus, for Freud, the history of civilization famously begins with an act of original violence, that is, the killing of the primordial father by the fraternal alliance or band of brothers. And, for Heidegger, it is ultimately being itself that "is" war and discord, with the result that the copula would have to be crossed out, placed under erasure, or struck through with an X. As Jacques Derrida would go on to discuss in his recently published lecture course for the academic year 1964–1965, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, the author of *Being and Time* not only is not ignorant of questions of labor, death, and war or struggle, as Alexandre Kojève had claimed in the 1930s in his famous lecture course on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to Derrida, Heidegger actually raises such questions at a far more radical, more fundamental, or more originary level than any Marxist, Hegelian, or Christian-existentialist account ever could:

> In describing *Mitsein*, Heidegger is trying to get to a stratum of ek-sistence that is absolutely originary with regard to any modification of relations with the other—for example in the form of war and peace, domination or slavery, the recognition of consciousnesses especially—because *Mitsein* and in a general way all the structures of *Dasein*'s ek-sistence are anterior and inferior, so to speak, deeper than the strata of *knowledge* and *consciousness*, of *Wissen*, of *erkennen*, of *anerkennen*, of *Bewusstsein*, and of

> *Selbstbewusstsein*. It is on the ontological basis of the existential structure of *Mitsein* that all the *phenomena* described, for example, by Hegel by the name of "struggle for recognition" can possibly come about, come about in a history, or produce a history that will thus be the modification of a deeper historicity.[14]

There is an irrefutable move of radicalization at work in this treatment of questions of struggle and violence. If Heidegger's thinking is to be situated at this originary level, anterior and inferior, so to speak, to all other ways of describing relations with the other, the philosophers working in this vein can always claim in advance to have enveloped and outflanked all existing modes of tackling questions of violence and conflict in history, morals, politics, and so on. Time and again, these questions will be subjected to the unforgiving method of hypostasis, in which all such "merely" ontic or socio-historical considerations must be referred back to an ontological interrogation, which first reveals the extent to which struggle or discord "is" being.

In effect, in this Heideggerian critique of violence, notions such as war, discord, or strife not only are not ignored, they are actually radicalized to the point of irrefutability as their characteristics are pushed to the extreme and transposed onto being itself—both onto the history of the question of being and onto the event of being as the condition for raising the question of historicity at this most radical or original level. "Heidegger is so little negligent of struggle and war in the essential movement of historicity that more and more he has come to emphasize that *logos* was *polemos* [war] and *eris* [discord] and that the revelation of being was *violence*," Derrida adds in a final rebuke of Kojève's objections, referring his audience to well-known passages about Heraclitus in Heidegger's later texts for proof. "*Polemos*, then, means this unity of unconcealment and dissimulation as the movement of history itself. This is why, for example, in the

'Letter on Humanism,' Heidegger says that 'being itself is the polemical, the conflictual' [*das Sein selber das Strittige ist*]."[15] When it is nothing less than being itself that is polemical, when *logos* is *polemos*, and when historicity as such is the violent unity of revelation and dissimulation in their inner discord, any specific attempt to enter into this or that socio-historical or ethico-political debate with the thinking of being and violence becomes pedestrian at best and futile at worst. At the same time, the reality of violence, war, and strife thereby becomes hypostatized as an incontrovertible condition of being itself, which can be neither changed nor avoided, except at the cost of the worst violence and hypocrisy.

From within the Heideggerian framework, therefore, I do not think there is any way to go back to a specific, historical, or political treatment of different forms of violence. And in the Freudian psychoanalytical approach, too, it is tempting to turn violence and death into an unshakeable given of human existence. Freud's notion of the death drive, in particular, tends to be used in this way to bolster a view of violence as a quasi-ontological condition that cannot be altered but must be coped with as such. And yet, unlike what is the case with Heidegger and his followers, it may also be possible to retrieve a different understanding of violence from Freud's thinking, one that may further help us in rewriting the history of state violence, including in the Americas.

Thus, according to the Argentinean philosopher León Rozitchner, Freud's late so-called "social" or "collective" works, in particular, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, might open up a theoretical path from questions of violence to forms of collective rebellion in which they are embedded or on which they are based. After all, why does psychoanalysis place a foundational act of violence such as the murder of the primordial father at the origin of the history of civilization? As Rozitchner explains in

Freud and the Limits of Bourgeois Individualism, this proposal is merely what we might call a necessary retroactive fiction, a "scientific myth" or "just-so story," as Freud himself admits, that we must posit in the remote past if we want to understand the undeniable amount of discontent in the present:

> Something important took place in the beginning of history, Freud would be telling us, and this transition that led from nature to culture even now continues to realize itself, except that it is hidden for the human subjects who accomplish it. We, therefore, need to go back and awaken this first signification, that of the first social act, so as to include it in the understanding of that other, present-day act which necessarily continues to repeat itself in the renewed access of human beings to the world of culture or civilization. Freud thus tries to understand the basic presuppositions that lie at the beginning of history. For this, he has recourse to an initial hypothesis, which attempts to recreate the conditions without which this transition from nature to culture would not have been able to realize itself. And he does so starting from the current forms. In the same way, Marx, in "Economic Forms that Precede Capitalism," must show on the basis of the "natural" family the historical process that led to the development of the later forms. In both cases, it is a question of understanding what had to happen so that the *first step*, which opens up history, could be taken. This first step, which can be enunciated in science only as a hypothesis ("scientific myth," Freud says), but deduced from the terminal form of which we are part, is the only one that holds up as being necessarily in the beginning.[16]

What is more, the goal of returning to this origin or first step, far from facilitating an ontologization of originary violence of the kind we frequently obtain in the Heideggerian philosophical orientation, is actually meant to undo the fatalism we so often

associate with the psychoanalytic notion of the death drive. Thus, still according to Rozitchner's reading of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud's aim would have been to lay bare the event-like nature of that which we otherwise take to be the ironclad necessity of the structure of our psychic life in general:

> Thus, in the originary drama there lies hidden the structural meaning of the ground of every human being: there where event (the murder) and structure (the transition from natural individuality to cultural individuation through the fraternal alliance) constitute the originary point from which all human rationality was produced. In the relation of individual to individual (between father and son), the mediating third was a collective being: the fraternal alliance. This initial moment is crucial because it is from this first opposition that, in the ambiguity of love and hatred toward the father, the point of insertion of the cultural dialectic takes shape—that is, of reason that supports itself in the flesh of the other but at the same time in the common body sketched out by the brothers, as a necessary process for one's own coming-into-being.[17]

Instead of compulsively returning to the traumatic act of foundational violence that lies at the origin of civilization, we are thereby invited to interrogate the coming-into-being of the world of culture or civilization on the basis of the moment of collective rebellion. If, in retrospect, this were the lesson to be drawn from the necessary fiction of the primitive horde in its relation to the primordial father, this would mean that the structure of our psychic life is also still open to change. Far from having to accept violence and come to terms with the death drive as an unalterable human condition, this would mean that we might entertain the hope that the point of our insertion into the existing cultural dialectic is also the point of its alteration. We

would then no longer be stuck in the cyclical commemoration of past grievances but perhaps become open to an unpredictable horizon of emancipatory futurity. In the case of Mexico, this would mean that we cease invoking massacre after massacre as tragic confirmations of a death drive that would be constitutive of the nation since at least the Conquest if not before, as an unconscious inheritance of the sacrificial past of pre-Cortesian times. To reopen the history books, then, could mean to look beyond or behind the violent traumas in order to investigate the radical experiments in collective rebellion and communal self-rule that were also ongoing and continue to this day.

Notes

1. See Rubén Leyva, ed., *Memorial de agravios: Oaxaca, México, 2006* (Oaxaca: Marabú, 2008); Julio Gaeta, Luby Springall, Gustavo Avilés, and Sandra Pereznieto, *Memorial a las víctimas de la violencia en México* (Mexico City: Gaeta Springall Arquitectos, 2016); Daniel Cazés, ed., *Volver a nacer: Memorial del '85* (Mexico City: La Jornada, 1995); Antonio García 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).
2. See the special dossier "Radical Politics and/or the Rule of Law in Mexico," ed. Ivonne del Valle and Estelle Tarica, *Política Común* 7 (2015).
3. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 73–74.
4. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. John Bonner (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1856), 233. This premonitory reading of the *Cahiers de doléances* in function of the French Revolution has come under scrutiny in the latter half of the twentieth century. See, among others, George V.

Taylor, "Revolutionary and Nonrevolutionary Content in the *Cahiers* of 1789: An Interim Report," *French Historical Studies* 7, no. 4 (1972): 479–502; and Roger Chartier, "Cultures, Lumières, doléances: Les Cahiers de 1789," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 28, no. 1 (1981).

5. René Zavaleta Mercado, "El Estado en América Latina," *Obra completa*, vol. II: *Ensayos 1975–1984*, ed. Mauricio Souza Crespo (La Paz: Plural, 2013), 633. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Spanish in what follows are my own.
6. Zavaleta, "El Estado en América Latina," 636.
7. José Revueltas, *México 68: Juventud y revolución,* ed. Andrea Revueltas and Philippe Cheron (Mexico City: Era, 1996), 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). I discuss 1968 in Mexico in Chapter 6, "The Melancholy Left," in Bruno Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis and Religion in Times of Terror* (London: Verso, 2012), 159–193.
8. Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics*, trans. George Ciccariello-Maher (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3–4.
9. Philip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977)," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1 (1988): 58–89, quoted 82. For a short development of the argument I am presenting here, see also Irmgard Emmelhainz, "State Fetishism: Neoliberal Democracy and Political Imagination in Mexico," *Forma* 1, no. 1 (2019): 1–16.
10. Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," 77.
11. See "La matanza del Templo Mayor (Códice Florentino)," in *La visión de los vencidos: relaciones indígenas de la conquista*, ed. Miguel León-Portilla (Mexico City: UNAM, 2003), 92; in English, *The Broken Spears: Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, ed. Miguel León-Portilla, trans. from Nahuatl into Spanish by Angel María Garibay, and English translation by Lysander Kemp, foreword Jorge Klor de Alva (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 74. In another English version, *calpulco* is retranslated from the Nahuatl original as "calpulli temples," in *We People Here: Nahuatl Accounts of the Conquest of Mexico*, ed. and trans. James Lockhart (Berkeley: University of California

Press, 1991), 134, 136. See also Luis Reyes García, "El término *calpulli* en documentos del siglo XVI," in *Documentos nauas de la Ciudad de México del siglo XVI* (Mexico: Archivo General de la Nación, 1996), 21–68.

12. See Bruno Bosteels, "The Mexican Commune," in *The Future of Communism: Social Movements, Economic Crisis, and the Re-imagination of Communism*, vol. III, *Communism in the 21st Century*, ed. Shannon K. Brincat (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013), 161–189; and "La comuna americana," in Horacio González, Franco "Bifo" Berardi, et al., *Lecciones de la comuna* (Vicente López: Mariano Ariel Pennisi, 2019), 63–52.
13. See Bruno Bosteels, "Critique of Originary Violence: Freud, Heidegger, Derrida," *The Undecidable Unconscious: A Journal of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis* 4 (2017): 27–66.
14. Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 197 (translation slightly modified). For further analyses of the question of violence in this seminar, see Michael Naas, "Violence and Historicity: Derrida's Early Readings of Heidegger," *Research in Phenomenology* 45 (2015): 191–213; and compare with David Farrell Krell, "From Cruelty to *Grausamkeit*: Derrida's Death Penalty Seminar," *Research in Phenomenology* 47 (2017): 263–296.
15. Derrida, *Heidegger*, 198–199 (translation modified). In "Force of Law," Derrida draws a parallel in this regard between Benjamin and Heidegger: "The words *Walten* and *Gewalt* play a decisive role in a few texts by Martin Heidegger—where one cannot simply translate them as either *force* or *violence*—and in a context, where Heidegger will try to show that, for Heraclitus, for example, *Dikė* (justice, right, trial, penalty or punishment, vengeance, and so forth) is *eris* (conflict, *Streit*, discord, *pólemos* or *Kampf*); that is, it is *adikia*, injustice, as well," in "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 234. Compare with Robert Bernasconi, "'The Misinterpretation of Violence': Heidegger's Reading of Hegel and Schmitt on *Gewalt*," *Research in Phenomenology* 45 (2015): 214–236.
16. León Rozitchner, *Freud y los límites del individualismo burgués*

(first edition, Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1972; reedition, Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Nacional, 2013), 567.

17. Rozitchner, *Freud*, 301–302.

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