

Enlightened Blindness

Mexico: a Global Tragedy

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Dear colleagues, friends,
to speak before this audience, in a place so much charged with the history of Social Sciences, is an intimidating experience –an unexpected chance I owe to the generosity, that I warmly thank, of Professor Sybille Grosse: I only hope not to let her down, not to let you down with the slight and provisional remarks I am able to make in what follows.

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We live in times of dark, dismal passions and urgent fears. The world has become frightening, and so people everywhere are trying to hide behind walls –as high as possible. It is a melancholic experience to remember the hopeful and exultant mood with which we all

celebrated, only thirty years ago, the fall of the Berlin Wall; almost yesterday and it seems like a lifetime.

Almost everywhere, nationalism is back –and there are reasons for that. Only, it did not have to be like this. Nationalism is back. An especially spiteful ethnic nationalism that is in fact an attempt to run away from the present and look for shelter in an imaginary national past, an aggressive, bitter nationalism that asserts itself against the complex, delicate structure of liberal institutions. To the shame of human dignity and human hopes, we witness everyday the drama of the anger of the rich and the powerful reacting in fear of the wretched of the earth that risk their lives to look for a safe place under the sun.

Much of the same goes for the disoriented and despairing elites in the periphery –be it the Philippines, Brazil, India or Mexico –that are also trying to escape from the present into the mythical national home where everything had its place and everyone was kept in their place.

Of course, there is no way to escape from the present, nor from the fateful future that looms in a very near horizon. Our time is marked by Nature like no other time before: the devastating pollution of earth,

water, air, the extinction of myriads of species, the global warming impart us a monstrous dose of reality –they are testimony of much of what has gone wrong for decades. And our time is marked also by massive migrations that signal a major shift in the human ecology –and the human landscape.

Underneath it all, there is an obscene, wasteful consumption and an equally obscene and wasteful violence. This is the world we have made –the world we share.

The more frantic and belligerent of those frightened nationalist movements rely on the implicit conviction that things cannot get worse –so that anyway they can keep what they have and then have more. The problem, as the poet Antonio Machado once said, the problem is that nothing is “un-worseable” –and however high is the wall, the world is here.

From faraway, people usually look at something like the current violence in Mexico with mixed feelings of fear, disgust and a secret relief derived from the rock-solid conviction that it cannot happen here; and it is true: it cannot happen here –until it does. Only 70 years

ago Europe was submerged in the most devastating conflict the world had ever known, an international conflict that was, in most of the European countries, also a civil war. It can happen here: anywhere. To most of the world, post-war Europe has been a model –it is only the Europeans that seem to have doubts about it.

I am aware that the title I have chosen might seem a gross overstatement. Let me advocate for it.

To begin, let us state one simple fact, just that we know what we are talking about: in the past six months there has been an average of 95 homicides every day in Mexico, that is four homicides every hour – and that is only the most salient and clear indicator of what is happening. Numbers have been similar for over ten years now. That I take to be a tragedy because it is of our own making, to an important extent the result of political arrogance, and it is something that could have been foreseen.

A global tragedy, I say. First, because in part it is the result of a global failure to imagine any workable option to the current drug control policy –and a willing failure, we have to say, because after a

century of prohibition we know better (and we know there are other much more efficient means to regulate dangerous drugs). But that is only one aspect of the problem and not the most important one. It would be a lot easier if it were only a problem of drug traffic and drug cartels.

Mexico's tragedy is also global because of the multiple entanglements and unforeseeable faraway consequences of the crisis. Along the trail of Mexico's violence move the price of oil, the flows of global tourism, the demand of iron and charcoal in China, migration routes and costs and risks, the snacks for the *Superbowl* in the United States and exorbitant, woeful ecological legacies that matter to us all – whether we know it or not. It also happens that in any of the episodes of violence on an ordinary day we find weapons made in Russia or the Czech Republic, maybe smuggled through Colombia, a contest for the sale of Chinese fakes or to export lemons or pineapple to Spain, or the activity of Greenpeace attempting to save the rainforest.

In the next minutes I would like to underline another global dimension of the Mexican tragedy and one that matters specially to

you: a certain self-imposed blindness that derives from our most cherished values, our best hopes and our best intentions.

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Allow me to go back and begin again. First of all, I have to apologize for addressing you in English –for English is obviously not my mother tongue, and I gather it is not your mother tongue either. That means that we are below our level of expression and understanding. Of course, it is better than nothing –if there were no alternatives. But this very minor inconvenience points towards a major problem, and one that directly bears on our subject.

Due to the universal diffusion of English we are under the illusion that we have in it a *lingua franca*, as was Latin in the European middle age. It is not. English is the vernacular language of some countries, not a universal, learned, second language. That means that communication in English is inevitably asymmetrical: for most of the world, for most of us, English is a vehicular language, that is a language appropriate for everyday needs, but not for complex expression.

Almost anywhere, we can ask for a cup of coffee in English, and we can maintain a live conversation over a cup of coffee in English – and it is not a minor feat. But when it comes to more complex matters, where an exact and nuanced expression is called for, one can hardly reach his full expressive capacity other than in his mother tongue. One does not have to fully subscribe the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis to accept that there are details, twists, and shades, perspectives that only appear in German, Arabic, Chinese or Spanish.

As it happens, in academic discussions, where English is mandatory, there is a clear asymmetry that even unconsciously inhibits most of the participants and hinders their expression capabilities. However, much more important is the dominance of English, and mainly American academic journals –as if they were truly and fully international. Because it means the dominance of certain views, methods, theories, and a bias in the conversation of the academic community that goes largely unnoticed. Again, we are under the illusion that English, English journals in this case are a universal vehicle and assume that anything important enough will sooner or later appear in English. It does not.

If we take, for example, the ten most relevant social scientists and historians working today in Mexico, it turns out that seven of them have never or almost never published in English. Without their contribution, any conversation about Mexico is seriously impoverished. And with similar certainty the same could be said about social scientists and historians writing in France, in Italy, certainly in Germany and almost anywhere else.

So it happens that numbers of scholars: economists, political scientists, in good faith simply ignore what is being written in languages other than English and they are truly not aware that they are missing something.

I will come back to this in a moment, but a mention can be useful here to stress my point. The academic and public discussion about violence in Mexico in the past ten years has been significantly different in some streaks than the dominant discussion in what we call the international community or the international public opinion –and there are very good reasons for that. However, it is telling that one can find a Ph. D. dissertation of an elite university in the United States, approved and awarded prizes, a dissertation about Mexico’s violence

that does not mention one single text of the Mexican debate published in Spanish.

The bias that matters is not that of language, and it is reproduced and receives an inadvertent feedback through the thousands of students from all over the world that complete their post-graduate studies in American universities. There they learn a way to look at things, they learn methods and theories –and brilliant, persuasive, well crafted theories—that just have some blind spots that might turn out to be of utmost importance. And I mean neo-classical economics or post-colonial, radical, neo-Marxist approaches as well.

The alternative option is quite simple: invest in translation. What we call the Humanities, from the European Renaissance onwards has been basically an enormous project of translation from Latin, Greek, Arabic, as the only way to fathom the human experience –only we have to realize that we need it.

Susan Sontag once said that the globalization of English had had a perceptible effect on the fortunes of literature:

I suspect, she said, that fewer literary works of foreign literature, especially from the languages felt to be less important, are being translated into English than, say, twenty or thirty years ago. But many more books written in English are being translated into foreign languages.

It is absolutely true: we have the numbers. But the effect is even larger on the fortunes of the Social Sciences.

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Looking at the bright side of it, thanks to that universal vehicular English we can have a small conversation over a cup of coffee, and it is not irrelevant.

In a beautiful, vibrant essay, George Steiner argued that Europe is made of cafes –and that through the map of the coffeehouses we can grasp one of the distinct markers of the idea of Europe. The coffeehouse is a place for dates, meetings and conspiracies, for intellectual debates and for gossip, for the *flâneur* and the poet with his notebook. It is a place to work and to dream, it is a spiritual club, a

cultural institution that supports a specific form of sociability –based on civil conversation, open discussion, reliance on reason and tolerance.

It is a very suggestive argument: one can easily imagine Mr. D’Alembert and Mr. Diderot chatting over a cup of coffee at Le Procope, for example. However, Steiner might be missing something. He fails to mention that D’Alembert and Diderot sweeten their coffee with sugar – sugar brought from the French colonial possessions in the Caribbean, raised in plantations, with slave labor, with slaves kidnapped in Africa. And there is the world in Europe, in that quintessentially European institution.

Of course, this does not mean that Mr. D’Alembert and Diderot, or their coffee, or their conversation have anything to do with slavery – although they might. But it means that the most ethereal cultural institutions are embedded in material and social realities, and cannot be fully understood without taking into account those realities.

I do not dispute Steiner’s assertion: the idea of Europe is very much in the coffeehouse. What matters to me now is what happens

when someone captivated by the same yearning tries to set up the very same coffeehouse in Santo Domingo or Martinique or Yaoundé. If we partake of the ideals of Mr. Steiner, as I do, we on the periphery seem to be placed on the impossible alternative of being European (which we cannot) or despair of ever being civilized (which we should not).

I will not take the argument much further. I just want to underline the complicated linkages between civilization and violence.

In a disquieting essay, Susan Buck-Morse has noted that the chains of slavery are one of the favorite metaphors of the *philosophes* of the Eighteenth Century: there are the chains of ignorance, the chains of prejudice, and thus begins *The Social Contract*: “man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains”. But they are always metaphors –the *philosophes* almost never refer to the actual chains of actual slaves.

That does not diminish the value of reason or the ideals of the enlightenment that remains one of the most admirable collective efforts in modern history. Only, it happens to have a shadow. To keep with Steiner’s image, there are coffeehouses in Yaoundé and Mexico (and markets, and State, and the rule of law and the ideals of equality and liberty), but not just like the ones in Paris: not insignificant, not in

any way inauthentic, but different, and if we fail to see the importance of the sugar we fail to see the meaning of the difference.

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It might look like I am wandering around –that is because I am. A straight line is surely the shortest distance between two points, but we might as well prefer a longer one, that can also have its advantages.

So let me recapitulate. We have a coffeehouse, the enlightenment, the importance of English and a painful and seemingly endless count of deaths in Mexico –and maybe also a hint of a certain kind of blindness and an idea of its relevance.

Now I would like to add a very modest hypothesis to move ahead: some of the features of the current Mexican crisis are not specifically Mexican, but we could say are symptoms of the age – indications of the troubled ending of a period that for the sake of simplicity we might call the long European Post-war. It is a seventy-year period characterized by a movement of progressive global integration: an intensification of commercial and productive ties; the

development of several projects of regional integration; the building of a large system of global, multi-lateral institutions, and the correlative development of international law. Although barred by all sorts of obstacles and diversions, that is the general trend of the long post-war.

Within that period there are two clearly different moments. The first one, reaching from 1945 to roughly 1975, could be called with moderate inaccuracy the Keynesian moment. It was characterized in most of the world by three main features: a mixed economy, public-private, an expanding Welfare State, and a large public sector –traits that in the periphery acquired the tones and color of decolonization and developmentalism. It goes without saying that the basic, say structural condition that rendered it possible was the Cold War: the threatening presence of the Soviet Union and the existence of a socialist option. Inequality was largely class-based, for disparities in income, education, health, etcetera, usually clustered together –and called for public remedies. Given that framework, politics was organized in more or less liberal, representative or authoritarian varieties, but normally structured through political parties situated in an ideological continuum from left to right.

The second part, from the late seventies onwards, can be called the neo-liberal moment. Its onset was the oil crisis of 1973, the downfall of the international monetary system and the apparently intractable phenomenon of stagflation. The dynamics of the following years is very well known: a vast privatization program, the reduction of the Welfare State, and an expansion of market economy. Inequality has increased, but also, to use the expression of François Dubet, the *regime of inequality* has changed: differences in income, wealth, patrimony, education, ethnicity, save in the extremes, no longer cluster together, differences in education do not correspond to differences in income or job stability –resulting in a variety of situations whereby inequality is lived as an individual experience, and all the more unfair for that reason.

As a consequence, the basic cleavages of society get distorted and it is harder to find a meaningful political representation. All the more so since the ideological and cultural success of neo-liberalism in the nineties weakened the traditional opposition of right and left.

Much of what had been built in the Keynesian moment was dismantled in the decades that followed, and many of its institutions

have been discredited, from political parties and labor unions to the system of the United Nations. Nevertheless, the fundamental orientation of the period towards a more intense global integration was maintained and even reinforced –until 2008, when everything that was solid seemed to melt in the air.

There is currently no economic, cultural or institutional alternative to neo-liberalism, but the malfunctioning and the undesirable side effects of the system are plain to anyone. That is the cause of the air of disoriented and capricious willfulness that have in common the new political options from Trumpism to the Brexit or Mexican obradorism.

Let us move one step down, because the crisis of the neoliberal moment has a different appearance seen from the periphery.

In Mexico, the neoliberal progression of the eighties meant the slow decline of the revolutionary regime that had lasted for the most part of the century, and the dismantling of its core institutions. It was a regime that depended on a particular equilibrium of a weak State and a strong political class. The key feature was the existence of a system of

parasitic mediation of a large set of political intermediaries or political brokers whose position depended on their capacity to negotiate a selective infringement of the law on behalf of their clientele.

Systems of similar working existed in several other countries. What was peculiar in Mexico was the institutionalization of that mediation system through the official party and a network of other minor organizations.

The manner of modernization of Mexican economy and Mexican society in the Twentieth Century resulted in the formation of a myriad of what have been called *institutional residues* crimped or embedded into the State apparatus: corporations, guilds, unions, commissions of mixed, private-public status and indeterminate and changing functions that served mainly to organize the political negotiation of almost anything, from minimum wages and land reform to labor strikes, interest rates, tax exemptions, public policies or the administration of natural resources. It was a huge, mixed universe of associative forms that ranged from the quasi official to the blatant illegal.

Those bodies served to impose a political logic upon almost all markets and many institutional, administrative and legal decisions, so as to temper some of the consequences of modernization and uphold stability in an otherwise extremely unequal society. In the early seventies, the late Rafael Segovia noted that those institutional residues were so encrusted into the State, so embedded into bureaucratic routines that they could hardly if at all be eliminated – although it was plain that many of them had outlived their original purpose and they hindered the normal, let us say modern functioning of the State. Using a happy metaphor, he said that the attempt to eliminate them would be like trying to eradicate the climbing plants, the vines and creepers that have covered a building so completely as to end being its true structure.

However, the attempt was made. When economic development stalled and the legitimacy of the regime was seriously eroded in the early eighties, those institutional residues appeared as a dead weight, an unjustifiable obstacle to the normal functioning of the market, the political system and the State: among the fundamental aims of the neoliberal transition in Mexico was the suppression of those climbing plants.

In the last decades of the Twentieth Century there emerged a new consensus among the Mexican elites –including much of the national political class. The revolutionary or post-revolutionary system appeared as an obsolete and out dated *Ancien Regime* fatally loaded by political corruption, authoritarianism and economic stagnation. Among the most visible culprits of it all were the institutional residues that politicized everything. So they were deprived of their political, legal and financial resources, they were either dissolved or cut out from the public budget and much of their functions disappeared as markets were systematically liberalized and deregulated, and rigorous, transparent, neutral institutions guaranteed free elections and peaceful alternation in government.

The new model was designed with the best intentions, guided by the most sound scientific policy instruments and was founded upon a cosmopolitan moral commitment with democracy, market economy and the rule of law –a moral framework for which we have no alternative. The problem is that it depended on abstract ideas somewhat hard to accommodate with Mexican realities –all the more so, since nobody really made that effort.

Democratic elections as we imagine them can effectively represent the opinion of individuals that rationally weigh ideological options. But in practical reality political representation is usually built through much longer and localized processes, which alone can breed confidence, and that was one of the functions of the residues of the Old Regime: to give substance to representation.

The market, on the other hand, can hardly solve the problems posed by the numberless asymmetries, obstacles, deficits and inequalities of Mexican society. Just to mention the most salient trait, the functioning of the Mexican market depends on an informal economy that amounts to over 60 per cent of the Gross National Product –an economy that needs (and breeds) all kinds of intermediaries, all kinds of climbing plants.

Finally, the rule of law is the cornerstone of the whole model. The difficulties begin when it is assumed that there is always a clear-cut alternative between observing and not observing the law, between obedience and disobedience, and that it is always possible to simply and directly apply the law. Clearly that is not the case in Mexico (I

could argue that it is not the case anywhere else either, but that would take us in another direction). Gross inequalities, regional, productive and demographic disparities, cultural differences, the distance between aspiration and resources, all of it makes it necessary a system of nuanced, political mediation instead of the mechanical rule of law. The problem is that from our cultural standpoint it cannot be seen as anything other than corruption, and is of course unacceptable.

Let me state it in starkly paradoxical terms. The *model of democracy, market economy and the rule of law* is the only one morally acceptable to us. It has only one flaw –it does not work in Mexico. At least, it has not worked.

The laws, institutions, policies imagined in the past thirty years have been defined by the knowledge of the best minds of two generations of Mexicans that studied in the best international universities --therein lies part of our problem today. In line with the prevailing academic mainstream, their ideas derive from a Social Science that aims at a general, say universally valid knowledge, abstracted from any specific context and apt to embody the most abstract, clear and simple principles: freedom, equal opportunities,

rule of law. That is one of the motives of my discomfort with the academic funnel of English: in the current mood of the Social Sciences, as a rule, we are missing the context –and you can hardly find in academic discussion or in consultant firms or the advisory of legislative bodies another kind of Social Science, rich in context.

It would be difficult to argue for other values and other principles –and I contend that we should not. The problem does not lie in our commitment with the Enlightenment, but in the ways in which it can blind us in such a way that when we see the real market, the real political representation, the real social order in Mexico we can only see corruption, backwardness and incivility. To avoid misunderstandings, let me be clear: this does not mean that a guided economy would be better or that an authoritarian government would be better, or that we can except us from the idea of the rule of law. This is not a moral argument. All I am saying is that in order to understand, more context is better than no context, and that is how we can look for a way out.

In the past 30 years Mexico has gone through a massive economic transition that included the privatization of numberless public companies, the liberalization of almost every market, a severe

control of public deficit, the autonomy of the Central Bank and the North American Trade Agreement. The market, as it should, has increased inequalities (in particular, notable regional inequalities) – because that is what markets do.

It has also gone through a political transition into a system of free, competitive elections, alternating governments and changing majorities. Again: as it should, the democratic system left the institutional residues with no resources –for they were not needed in the same way, they were not anymore the guarantors of political stability. With their demise, the federal government lost political resources and transmission bands, but many of them acquired a new life, with increased autonomy –labor unions, corporations, and informal protection organizations. The general result was a weaker State and a less cohesive political class.

That was the general situation at the time when president Felipe Calderón made a forceful attempt to impose the rule of law in the most direct and definite way –and to expropriate the resources for violence of several social groupings. And thus began a crisis that had been long in the making. But this needs a little explaining.

In any society there is always people that makes a living of the use of force, professionals of the use of force, because in one way or another, at one time or another, force might be necessary –a group more or less large, depending on the nature and extent of those situations that call for the use of force. They can be military or policemen, but also members of private security companies, doormen at nightclubs and also hit men, bandits, bodyguards, smugglers, guerrilla, elements of a community police force or white guards (and they can be alternately or successively any of them).

Ideally, the only legitimate force is that of the State and the only occasions that call for the use of force are those of clear and present danger or serious crimes. In fact, it is more complicated than that. It is not only “the criminals” that recur to violence and only for their immediate particular gain. The level of violence in a society is not just an indicator of criminality, but also an index of the situations in which different social actors require the use of force or the credible threat of the use of force –by private means.

In Mexico, *private protection systems* have been bred by the relative uncertainty of rural property rights, the insecurity of informal and illegal activities like unlicensed logging, unauthorized mining, by the risks of almost any informal market or street vending, or the volatile power networks in the most important labor unions, the unlikely enforcement of judicial sentences, and of course the setting of illegal markets including drugs and undocumented migration. Those private protection systems have always been halfway between a market relationships and pure extortion, and they have always worked under a more or less stable, more or less defensible, more or less criminal arrangement with local police and local authorities –and in the post-revolutionary regime they were if not bounded at least constrained by the official party.

In the neoliberal transition those private protection ventures were let loose, and a way was opened to an unbounded, uncontrolled use of those resources by local political actors.

In December of 2006, although the scene was far from clear, Felipe Calderón in fact decided to eradicate many of those groups and expropriate their resources for violence. It was initially framed as a

law and order, almost routine effort, but within a couple of months it was a wholesale campaign in large parts of the country aimed at breaking the complicity ties that supported those groups, dismantling in the way much local police forces, and setting the army to patrol the territory. In a word, he was trying to assert the authority of the State by drawing a line, in the most drastic and definitive way, to demarcate criminal from lawful use of force –with no ambiguity and no room for tolerance.

As could have been expected, the disappearance of local police forces, the presence of the army, the heightened pressure on local authorities, the onslaught against illegal markets, all of it contributed to an increase in insecurity in many places, it made it riskier and more expensive any informal activity, and radically transformed the market for private violence.

The routine presence of over 40,000 military in large parts of the territory only emphasized the lack of cohesion of the political class and political institutions, and terminated what was left of old local arrangements. As Natalia Mendoza has argued, that process favored a progressive privatization of spaces, markets, roads, mines, etcetera.

The public or semi-public system of parasitic mediation that had allowed for illegal mining or illegal logging, the transport of undocumented migrants or the sell of fakes, contraband and piracy goods, was substituted by private protection rackets that fed on the insecurity bred by the presence of the army –protection rackets that become each day more predatory, exploiting every possible use of violence, as their links with local population and local institutions are severed.

I feel I have to repeat that mine is not a moral argument nor a policy oriented argument. I am only devoted to explain what happened. The attempt to reinforce the State as rule of law, the attempt to create State from the top down, through the army, imposing an uncontested authority, has failed –maybe because one of the things an army cannot produce is trust, and the rule of law and the efficiency of police forces ultimately depend on trust. The alternative option might possibly be a reconstruction of the State from the bottom up – although we do not have a clear image, nor even a blurred image of what that would look like.

Similar patterns of indirect private government have appeared elsewhere, for it is only the aftermath of the optimistic neoliberal stance that swirled the world by the end of the century. Weak states weakened further by the very attempt to strengthen them, misshapen markets, a new extractive economy and a political class dislocated by a pervasive violence.

I cannot find the slightest shred of evidence that would allow me to be optimistic in the short term about Mexico. But for the sake of future generations, we are not allowed to despair.

Ever since I started working on the notes for these words, some phrases kept coming into my mind, a half remembered, half reconstructed paragraph by Dickens –one that you also know by heart—that might very well serve to summarize what I have been saying: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was an epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

We could say: very much like any other time.