

STATE FETISHISM: NEOLIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL IMAGINATION IN MEXICO

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We can define “political imagination” as the human capacity for the creation and dissemination of shared meanings and traditions for the purpose of giving a frame of existence to a world that could be the basis for a *structure* of common subsistence. In order to understand our current political imagination in Mexico, we should consider that its matrix is the modern state, the conceptual schema of the exercise of the legitimate monopoly of power over a determined geographical area, through an administrative apparatus recognized by other states. In the modern political imagination, the state produced cohesion by disseminating a world of shared meaning expressing the “essence” of an imagined community. By many accounts, the “essence” of a modern *mexicanidad* was articulated in an imaginary that linked the Mexican Revolution to national identity and to the welfare state; nationalism was thus expressed in the alleged becoming “citizens” of indigenous peoples who were being slowly incorporated into the material and symbolic structures of the state and overcoming their “premodern underdevelopment” status.

A key aspect of this schema is the imaginary of revolution, which is considered the modern means to correct the aberrations of political power and orient it toward an ideal order. The political imaginary of the revolutionary takeover prevailed from the dismantling of European monarchies until decolonization and independence movements (i.e., urban and rural guerrillas at the end of the Cold War). This political imaginary was nourished by Enlightenment, anti-capitalist, and socialist values. The totalitarian and authoritarian aberrations of modern states with which the Cold War ends, however, opened the way for neoliberal democracy, a means of political organization and imagination to which states aspire in the globalized world. Democracy is constituted by abstracting authority through the process of electing it by means of the direct expression of the people’s will. Beyond the charisma of a successful caudillo or dynastic leader, the premise of neoliberal democracy is against the principle that any political agent has the “natural” right or is predestined to power. By transferring their power to the state through the vote, citizens are the source of sovereignty. One of the most

important principles of democracy, therefore, is to establish institutionalized bounds to power, limited also by antagonism among political parties and by the participation of civil society operating as dissident voices exercising freedom of expression in the mass media and on the streets. Under the structure of the democratic political imaginary, power can thus be bound, reformed and uncorrupted using institutionalized mechanisms provided by the system. In this way, the political imaginary of the revolutionary takeover of power from the outside to emancipate the people was substituted by the principle of the possibility of readjustment or reform from within the system by way of antagonism.

Political Imagination and Neurototalitarianism

In globalized neoliberal democracies, political imagination functions by processing materials within a sensible field of forces constituted by internal and external elements, real facts, and the hegemonic or counter-hegemonic interpretation of these facts. Franco “Bifo” Berardi has termed this sensible field of forces the “infosphere,” which gathers signs, symbols, images, and information circulating in the mass and social media, culture, and the psychosphere—the locus where the mind develops and enters into relations with other minds.¹ As the mass media had already achieved 30 years ago, the infosphere now has a key role in the operative aspect of our contemporary democracies. At the end of the 1980s, Noam Chomsky coined the term “manufactured consent” to describe how mass media under democracy functions differently than totalitarian or authoritarian propaganda. Whereas in totalitarian regimes, the circulation of information works by imposing a single truth from above, censoring and repressing other truths, in democracy, the mass media promote freedom of expression. Chomsky observes that the function of democratic mass media is to manufacture consent by allowing freedom of expression but narrowing debates about critical problems and excluding all information that could bring into question market or state interests, limiting it to the poles of the status quo. Under this scheme, a caste of “experts” and “opinion-makers” come into play to guide the “public opinion” of what Chomsky calls the “bewildered herd.”²

The advent of the Internet and social media have further democratized freedom of expression, extending participation in the mediatized public sphere (or infosphere) to non-professional opinion makers. And because the infosphere now operates directly upon our minds and affects, technology provides even more power to the media to produce consensus. Berardi notes how we spend more and more time existing in the digital sphere as electronic ghosts projecting our mental activity online, which comes back to us in order to imprison, through isolation, standardization, distraction, and saturation of attention, possible alternatives to democratic political imagination.³ Berardi

calls the digitalization of lived experience and its standardized stimulation “neurototalitarianism.” Under neurototalitarianism, manufacturing consent takes a much more sophisticated and intrusive form than in totalitarianism or Chomsky’s regime of “manufactured consent” because it is tailored to the needs and wants of each citizen transformed into user. It is well known that the algorithms of interfaces such as Google and Facebook feed us content that is predetermined by our own beliefs and political sensibilities. Google and Facebook know what we see and know, and therefore, what we need and want to know; this is why they constantly refine the content they feed us in order to best adapt their algorithms to our individual needs. If Chomsky defined the manufacturing of consent as truths that tell us about realities that are artificially limited by the mass media to frameworks that favor power, under neurototalitarianism, partial truths are distributed according to the needs of each user. The power of capitalism—of which neoliberal states have become instruments—thus works by selecting, excluding and disseminating events that structure the present that we perceive, applying one possibility of reality among many possibilities according to each user and rendering the rest invisible. In addition, if manufactured consent treated everyone as a member of a “bewildered herd,” neurototalitarianism takes great pains to prevent the “bewildered herd” from recognizing their collective situation, and thus to organize politically beyond expressing indignation.

If we understand political imagination as the human capacity to create shared meaning to give sense to a common world that can assure the subsistence of all its members, neurototalitarianism has had several important effects on it. First, fragmentation and extreme polarization in the sensible mediascape are manifested, for instance, in trolling. Second, confusion between the horizon of political possibility and the horizon of collective desire, are reflected in, for instance, mottos such as “end corruption,” “call for referendums on projects of resource extraction,” or “take the army off the streets.” Third, it becomes difficult to discern between the mere enunciation of a political stand and real political action. A prime example here is the digital campaign #YoPrefieroElLago [#IPreferTheLake] to end construction on the New Airport in Mexico City (NAICM). This digital campaign was based on the premise that stopping the project would end environmental devastation. In reality, the airport was already 60% completed and irreversible environmental damage through the desiccation of the lake and population displacement had already taken place by the time of the referendum. Thus the campaign to stop the construction was completely disconnected from the facts on the ground. After a poll in which a majority of citizens voted in favor of canceling the airport project, construction was halted. The reasons behind the revocation, as well as the future of the structural work already in place, remain obscure. Fourth, schizophrenia and even more dissociation is operative between personal beliefs, critical dispositions, symbolic gestures,

political stances, and everyday life choices. For example, we denounce hunger in Africa, but we drink coffee at Starbucks and we all use smartphones and laptops made with coltan, the metal that is the main source of violent strife in countries such as Ethiopia and Mozambique; we stand against slavery, but we buy clothing manufactured by slaves in Southeast Asia; we are concerned about global warming, but we buy food at the supermarket; and we request government or private funds in order to produce projects or cultural objects critiquing institutions. Finally, the fragmentation and individualization of the landscape of political imagination brought about by neurototalitarianism creates negative spaces in which radical gestures are invalidated to convey meaning beyond the bubbles that give them a context: art, a discussion in a social media thread, a documentary, ephemeral collectivities. Because these gestures occur in isolation from each other and within the temporality of immediacy, they are meaningless in the short, medium, and long term.

Nostalgia for a “Single Narrative”

Ironically, under neurototalitarian faux-individuation, the collective desire or need for a single narrative of a common political imaginary has not disappeared. In Mexico, narconarratives (closely related to the narrative of the “failed state,” as we will see below) reveal themselves as the matrix of thought or filter for everyday reality. Oswaldo Zavala explains how narconarratives originated in a discursive closeness among official discourse, journalism, and literature (and I would also add art and film) to build a popular imaginary grounded in official sources. According to Zavala,

The Mexican state built a discursive matrix imposing the rules of enunciation of the narrative lexicon and function that invoke the notion of “narco.” In the official narrative, the violence haunting the country for almost two decades, is attributed to non-state agents defying state sovereignty and infrastructure from within invincible globalized criminal empires.⁴

Zavala underscores the gap that actually exists between the symbolic meaning of narcoliterature (that we should all live fearing the danger of the permanent threat of narco violence) in Mexico’s political imaginary, and the actual materiality of the narco; that is to say, between the real reach and power of the cartels and their (weak) capacity to destabilize the Mexican state and its institutions. It goes without saying that this is inscribed within the collusion between the cartels and other institutions and politicians.

According to recent investigations by academics and journalists seeking to dispel the myths created by narconarratives, the forms of violence exercised in Mexico since 2006, rather than attributable to the abstract entities of the “narco” and “organized crime,” in fact constitute a new form of subcontracted

paramilitarism and counterinsurgency that benefit the private sector and transnational corporations. That is to say, criminal organizations like Los Zetas or Guerreros Unidos are the vehicle through which economic, state and corporate interests are being safeguarded.⁵ For instance, according to Dawn Paley, the so-called “War On Drugs” is in reality an intensified form of “shock doctrine” that takes the form of a civil war and forced disappearances.⁶ The war has thus as its purpose generating panic and terror, displacing urban and rural populations, and generating changes in land and property, which in turn facilitate the exploitation of natural resources. Under this logic, violence is not the result of the “War On Drugs,” but is instead generated by armed groups attacking citizens with the goal of reinforcing control over their territories so that they can perpetuate real and imaginary terror while facilitating projects of subcontracted infrastructure and resource extraction by transnational corporations.

An example of this pattern can be clearly observed in the Cuenca de Burgos zone in Northern Mexico. The Cuenca stretches across the states of Nuevo León, Coahuila, Tamaulipas and the North of Veracruz. It contains the world’s fourth largest known reserve of shale gas and is connected to the Texas reserve. Notably, it is located in a territory that is completely controlled by Los Zetas through extortion, forced disappearances, the creation of ghost towns, and the installation of fracking companies. Journalist Federico Mastrogiovanni points out that many transnational companies extracting fossil fuels globally are using strategies similar to this narco-technique developed in Mexico in an effort to support totalitarian governments by generating high levels of violence and terror that displace populations living on zones rich in resources.⁷ In Mexico, government institutions are responsible for the violence by not intervening and by granting impunity. We only need to type into the search engine “San Miguel de Aquila,” “Valle de Juárez,” “El Porvenir,” “Práxedis,” and “Carrizalillo,” as all the information and testimonial accounts are located there.

We must also consider that another primary function of narconarratives is the privatization of political and economic problems that are, in truth, collective. That is to say, most narconarratives disseminate personal stories of individuals undergoing singularized problems: *La jaula de oro*, *Miss Bala*, *Sabina Rivas*, and *Heli*, for instance.⁸ As a whole, these narratives communicate neoliberal mantras such as “every man for himself” and “scratch your way out with your own fingernails.” They also create a new figure: that of the “victim of state indolence,” a homogeneous, non-differentiated figure in terms of race, gender, or social class that, among other things, invisibilizes the logic of racialization behind state violence. In other words, while the narconarrative seems to be a return to the single narrative of the “herd,” what is actually happening is that the narconarrative is another iteration of neurototalitarian faux-individuation.

Failed State or Gore Capitalism

Considered together, real and symbolic violence disseminated in the sensible regime has served to generate panic and anxiety, depoliticize war, justify militarization of the country, generate a permanent state of exception, and create the figure of the victim of the “failed state.” The main message transmitted by narconarratives is that the state has been overwhelmed by the transnational powers of the narco, has lost sovereignty in its territory, and we are all thus vulnerable to it. But in truth, the “failed state” is nothing other than the rupture of the state–nation machinery with its citizens and its repurposing in the service of capitalist absolutism. As we saw above in the discussion of the “War on Drugs” as a “shock doctrine” tool of the alliance between the neoliberal state and transnational extractive industries, certain populations occupy territories that are worth more than the labor of their inhabitants. Capitalism operates through racialization, making mostly poor and indigenous young people and women vulnerable to exploitation and disappearance. As populations subject to modernization and urbanization projects, they are cataloged as disposable and reconvertible; as they are “modernized,” their life forms and ways of making a living are degraded. The capitalist machinery of dispossession and extraction creates surplus populations, redundant citizens that are either condemned to forced disappearance, massive incarceration, narcoviolence, massacres, migration, or suicide (I am thinking here of the suicide epidemics among the Rarámuri peoples of which we first started hearing in 2016). In this way, precarized, murdered, and disappeared bodies are the raw material for the accumulation of capital.⁹ And because it is a matter of the racialization of certain populations whose territories are worth more than the labor of their inhabitants, we can say that genocide—*limpieza social* [social cleansing]—is underway in contemporary Mexico.

“The State Did It”

The perception that we are governed by a failed state comes from, on the one hand, the collective experience of the progressive dismantling of the welfare state that began with austerity and privatization policies in the 1980s, and on the other hand, from the actuality of systemic corruption of political actors and public institutions in the country. Therefore, we perceive a failed state that squanders public funds, fails to act, and is characterized by corruption, indolence, and conflicts of interest. We can recall that Enrique Peña Nieto’s presidency (2012–2018) was characterized by a ceaseless succession of corruption scandals. Some of the most famous include: the “Casa Blanca” that the presidential couple bought for almost seven million dollars from one of the most important subcontractors for the government; the President’s misconduct toward his wife in public; Ayotzinapa, Tlayaya, and El Chapo’s escape; extravagant spending on a presidential airplane; and government-sponsored

social media propaganda, or the so-called “peñabots.” Thus, aside from neurototalitarian faux-individuation, our political imaginary is inhabited by the coexistence of the narrative of the narco-threat with the idea that the state is the enemy of its citizens, a melodramatic framework that dates back to the student revolt and state repression in 1968. According to Bruno Bosteels, the ghost of repression in Tlatelolco on October 2, 1968 is the point of departure for a subjective figure of emancipatory politics in Mexico. These events, furthermore, put at the forefront the new political role of the social in politics. Insofar as the students formed a social movement, a new melodramatic antagonism was then established between civil society and the state: the former as intrinsically good and the latter as intrinsically bad.¹⁰ In this regard, one is reminded of the Amazon Prime series released last year, *Un extraño enemigo*, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Tlatelolco student massacre. The series tells the story of how Gustavo Díaz Ordaz’s government planted a counterinsurgency strategy within UNAM to dismantle the student movement through intrigue, propaganda, repression, and torture. Whether because of authoritarianism or corruption, Tlatelolco enshrined the state as the main enemy of Mexican citizens and political action. As Javier Sicilia stated, under Calderón, this shifts the political to “pulling federal officials’ ears, so that they make state institutions work.”¹¹ This premise is likewise shared in the newly released Netflix series *Colosio*, which commemorates the 25th anniversary of the unsolved murder of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio. In these series, the narratives establish a kind of meta-reality—a conspiracy theory—that needs to be revealed, a meta-reality that takes the state as an appendix to, rather than integral with, society. In so doing, they reaffirm the opposition between “good” civil society against the “bad” state and underscore the melodramatic “failed state” narrative.

In this “failed state” narrative, the state becomes an abstract and homogeneous entity responsible for all evils plaguing the country—e.g., forced disappearance crimes, food insecurity, lack of water and fuel, and even the environmental crisis that reaffirms the neoliberal mantra of “each man for himself.” The perception that everything is the fault of the state materialized into the main slogan for the campaign launched to pierce the “historical truth” disseminated by the government blaming organized crime when 43 students from Ayotzinapa disappeared in 2014: “Fue el Estado” [The State Did It].

In order to understand what happened in Ayotzinapa, however, it is crucial to understand the magnitude of the presence and devastation of mining companies in the state of Guerrero and the effects of resource extraction on its populations. To analyze Ayotzinapa, however, we must consider the history of the agrarian commune and rural guerrilla forces in Guerrero as well as the continuity of the struggle of indigenous peoples and *guerrilleros* in the current movements defending territories. Clearly what is behind Ayotzinapa is not

the drug war, but a political conflict. It is the continuation of a struggle to eradicate the threat of popular and communal organization, against which the state responds with violence as it protects private interests that function in the service of capital.

Bearing this in mind, the slogan “The State Did It,” as Bosteels points out, encompasses a moralizing reaction against impunity and corruption and to victimization and political desubjectivation as the only means to sympathize and express solidarity with the normalista students and for them to demand justice or restitution.¹² That is to say, the slogan “The State Did It” bears an accusation that victimizes the disappeared, privatizes their problems, and denies their struggle for the defense of normalista education and for territorial defense in their region and at the national level. Instead of presenting the students as subjects in struggle, the general and accepted perception was that they were “victims of the circumstances.” In this context, empathy is established forcefully because the students (and their parents) fulfill the requirements of true state victimization, thereby confirming their moral purity: whitened and neutralized, they are transformed from being insurgent threats to victims of state violence. The slogan is, moreover, a symptom of what Bosteels calls “state fetishism.”¹³ With this term, Bosteels describes a dynamic that reinforces the central power of the state, which acts on behalf of private and transnational companies’ interests, obviating its policies and indolence, and thus leading to the collective economic, political, social and environmental situation of the country today. For this reason, in addition to the state, we must also consider the effects of the financialization of capital, the automation and digitalization of infrastructure that gives shape to our existence, the destruction of sustainability by agroindustry, and actions taken by a variety of other private actors, including our—and this “us” encompasses all of us, including “citizens” inhabiting urban enclaves of privilege—profound immersion in the global processes of dispossession and destruction.

To begin to undo state fetishism, it may be worthwhile to evoke Michel Foucault’s urgent call in 1978 to rethink the state not as a point irradiating power but as originating in complex power relationships traversing and configuring our ways of understanding the political and everything related to politics. Foucault defines power relationships as extra-legal procedures—such as racialization—that operate adjusting bodies and behaviors according to unspoken norms to make them visible or invisible in certain ways. Bearing this in mind, what occurs when state fetishism prevails is that it feeds the growth of the ghost of the state as central power, impeding us from seeing the real gap between the government apparatus (parties, elections, institutions, technocrats, mass and social media, the experts, etc.) and the actual power relations that govern and give shape to our lives and means of making a living according to capitalist interests. In the current neoliberal and democratic system, moreover, power is no longer lodged in concrete institutions, but

rather hides in infrastructure (highways, supermarkets, software, fiber optic networks, corporate providers of energy and water) and materializes in spatial arrangements, configuring an impersonal and private world of self-regulation within individualized urban and neurototalitarian faux-individuation bubbles in which the political imaginary of state fetishism prevails.

Under state fetishism, to denounce the inefficacy, corruption, and indolence of the government has served as an element of cohesion within civil society, as citizens unite under the frame of democracy to demand that the government apparatus “functions.” The problem is that within the bounds of citizens’ rights in the democratic imaginary, we forget that the political structures in which citizens can operate are *de facto*, completely dissociated from the economic structures. That is to say, although “strong” states are needed to legislate and introduce neoliberal reforms, the area of citizen influence is limited to a narrow public sphere of political information disseminated in the media populated by scandals generating paralysis, shock and indignation and dissociated from legislation, economic processes and decisions. The dissociation between political and economic reality is also due to a double movement in which hegemony covers truths (the economy of the free market and its effects) while it sends repressive and preventive (in)direct threatening messages to the citizenry (as with Ayotzinapa or narconarratives).

Without a doubt, however, autonomous structures of subsistence are being destroyed directly by state policies not because of state malfunction, but because it has been put at the service of capitalism. Therefore, the state contributes to generating redundant populations that lack the possibility of being incorporated into economic, political and social structures as citizens, consumers, workers, debtors or producers, and this is how their territories become more valuable than their labor or consumption power, making them vulnerable to violence.

The “Good” State or Functional Democracy

In the current conjuncture, the prevailing political imagination becomes clear if we note that Enrique Peña Nieto’s presidency could be considered as a failure in strategy in the sense of lack of knowledge about “what the people wanted”: all of Mexico rejected the vulgar president that emerged from the Televisa screen surrounded by an unending sequence of scandals. Fortunately, Peña Nieto was succeeded by a presidency in tune with the ideal of democratic transition: it resulted from the “proper” functioning of the electoral system that finally replaced the PRI’s authoritarian monopoly. That is to say, after four elections, “the candidate we had all voted for finally won,” marking a moment of rupture in which, in our political imaginary, the ascent of MORENA to power meant not only that the failed state would repair itself (because democracy triumphed and above all, the left won), but also

that MORENA's mission became to repair the state. The government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) began establishing policies to eliminate corruption—promoting, for instance, governmental austerity by changing the symbols of power as ostentation, rejecting the official residence and the presidential airplane (subjects of scandal in the previous regime), and promoting an image of “servant of the citizens.”

But while the current political imaginary makes us feel that the triumph of the democratic dream has finally liberated us from the yoke of corruption, we see how the political imagination begins to absorb a Manichean moralism. In a similar way to how after the attacks of September 11, 2001 an “Axis of Evil” was declared to justify the invasion of Iraq, López Obrador's political imaginary is based on a division between good and evil: “chairs” (or lower class left) are good and “fifi” (middle and upper class in general) and the “mafia in power” are evil. Under this melodramatic regime, “good” Mexicans will be rewarded with jobs, grants and incentives; “bad” Mexicans will pay, burning like the 130 people who died on January 18, 2019 in Tlahuelilpan, Hidalgo for siphoning gasoline from a pipeline and “causing severe damage to the national economy.”¹⁴ In this narrative, corrupt Mexicans will be brought to trial, like Mexico's ex-presidents. AMLO is currently seeking to modify one of the articles of the constitution to be able to do justice against the “father of inequality” Carlos Salinas de Gortari; Ernesto Zedillo for the FOBAPROA (Bank Fund for the Protection of Savings); Vicente Fox for nepotism; Felipe Calderón for “hitting the hornet's nest and transforming the country into a cemetery”; and Enrique Peña Nieto for corruption.¹⁵

The actions AMLO has undertaken from the beginning of his administration have positioned him as a genuinely admirable moral agent acting to implement his intuitions to make the country better. In this particular model of political imagination, AMLO assigns value to a struggle against certain visible forms of evil, presenting to us situations as if they were urgent. One example of this is the closing down of the Islas Marías Federal Penal Colony and its transformation into a center for the arts, culture and environmental knowledge. This federal prison, founded in 1905, is emblematic within the political imaginary of modern Mexico in the sense that its cells were inhabited by prominent communists and *guerrilleros* such as activist and writer José Revueltas (who served a sentence in the 1930s for being a communist) and Ramón Mendoza, one of the great *guerrilleros* from the Chihuahua Mountains imprisoned there in the 1960s and whose story inspired two novels by Carlos Montemayor: *La fuga* (from the Islas Marías) and *Las armas del alba*. As he decreed the shut down of the Penal Colony, AMLO took an abolitionist stand. And yet, if we exercise our memories a bit, we will recall that ex-president Felipe Calderón opened the federal penal system to public-private partnerships. As a result, since 2010 there are more jails, farther from urban centers, and with larger buildings and more inmates serving

longer and more severe sentences. The privatization of the penal system in Mexico has implied that decisions and legislation around prisons and imprisonment, which should be thought of as public policies, are now guided by private economic interests. As a consequence, Mexican jails have ceased to respond to social needs, lack accountability mechanisms, and it has been proven that the ample availability of prison cells has generated an artificial demand.¹⁶ AMLO's simulacrum of abolitionism, created when shutting down the Islas Marías facility, effectively and affectively touched the cultivated left in the country, a gesture that is in sync with the simulacrum of the Bolshevik takeover of Los Pinos (the official residence) by "the people" on December 1, 2018 (the day AMLO came to power).

These gestures touched emotional chords in the educated urban and politicized middle class with a leftist sensibility through neurototalitarian faux-individualized collectivity, as was also the case with the recent scandal of CONACYT (National Council of Science and Technology) appointments. In that case, a controversy emerged when news spread that a young man who had not finished his undergraduate studies was receiving a sizable salary as a bureaucrat in that institution; that a "dressmaker" was named to one of the institution's dependencies; and that a "lingerie saleswoman" got appointed to an administrative post. The scandal centered on possible conflicts of interest or nepotism by having appointed people clearly "not qualified enough" for their jobs. This controversy touched the emotional fibers of the middle class of precarized and badly paid professionals who immediately protested against the appointments.¹⁷ The government immediately removed these people from their posts. In a similar incident a few months ago, activists, intellectuals and civil society vigorously protested against the appointment of the PES (Social Encounter Party, a conservative evangelical party) to the commissions of Health and Culture in the deputy chamber. After just two days, the PES was reassigned to the Sports and Labor commissions. In this manner, the citizens are over and over again confirming the good health of the state's democratic structures through its supposed accountability and self-correction. A declaration in the daily Presidential address from February 18, 2019 alludes to the situation of the CONACYT appointments: "Now, luckily, contracts have expired, there were also people who quit and these institutions that were completely at the service of particular interests will be cleaned up and purified."¹⁸

Purist rhetoric aside, the AMLISTA approach to politics is a simulacrum in which moral beliefs give shape to reality and emotions to facts; the result is inconsistency or schizophrenia in the regime's "moral intuitions." For example, approving megaprojects like the Mayan Train and canceling only one: the New International Mexico City Airport (NAICM). The decisions the government is making allegedly serve the interests of the people, but do they? A truly subversive gesture would be to demand that the rich and powerful obey the laws and pay their taxes but, in truth, the system cannot allow this

because offshore bank accounts and other forms of legal and illegal financial activities are part of global capitalism.

Conclusion

Conservative thinkers and opinionists are concerned with the return in the political imaginary of the figure of the caudillo or totalitarian leader. Denise Dresser compares the daily presidential address/press conference with a priest delivering a sermon before his congregation positioning himself as a “spiritual leader” giving lessons to his people.¹⁹ Enrique Krauze described López Obrador as a “messianic president” who affirms himself to be personally in communion with “his people” and above the laws and the fragile government institutions.²⁰ For both, the president’s messianism is incompatible with democracy as he is putting at a risk the health and efficacy of institutions that guarantee democracy in the country. But beyond the caudillo deliriously haunting his people on a daily basis, endangering democracy with messianism, what concerns me is that one of the regime’s stated goals is to dismantle the “mafia in power.” This means that the political imaginary promoted by the current regime is sustained by a fantasy of a government that aspires (in discourse, at least) to a capitalist state but without a capitalist class. How this could be feasible is not currently clear. My concern also stems from the fact that the true enemy of the people is neither populism, nor messianism, nor the mafia in power, but rather the global order of neoliberal capitalism. In the AMLISTA political imaginary, however, capitalism is not the enemy, as populist technocracy posits neoliberalism as an apparatus of economic precarity and social, economic and symbolic exclusion, a source of social inequality that can be righted by simulating a partial come back of the welfare state. The problem is that this discourse obviates the dynamics of racialization and environmental destruction at play, as well as the extent to which they are legitimate forms of wealth concentration. Alarming enough, the new government is opening up to extractivist projects and capital accumulation precisely where previous governments had failed to do so. Ceremonies to demand permission from Mother Earth proliferate, while AMLO’s government pushes for the controversial Mayan Train project. The passenger train would connect the Yucatan Peninsula and newly built ZEEs (Special Economic Zones) to maquiladoras in Southern Mexico, Central America, and extractivist zones with the transnational flows of the globalized market.²¹

The discourse of paradigm change in production and development that sustains AMLO’s project is cultural and sustainable tourism and “good life.” This discourse, however, is a direct continuation of President Felipe Calderón’s pro-capitalist environmental agenda. As Dierdra Reber recalls, in 2007 Felipe Calderón launched a “Plan Nacional de Desarrollo” (National Development Plan) in which one of the points was “sustentabilidad ambiental”

(environmental sustainability); in a presidential address a year later, Calderón underscored the notion of development as “living better,” which is to say, protecting environmental resources and creating jobs.²² This rhetoric of privileging people and environmental sustainability above profit moves away from the cultural signification of “progress” as capitalist accumulation. The discourse of “environmental development” justifying megaprojects, moreover, obviates the migration dynamics and the region’s status as potential producer of surplus population. The racist/colonialist neoliberal project is legitimized by the narrative of incorporating more people into the market as consumers and offering laborers the possibility of living “better lives.” Finally, under the frame of populist technocracy, corruption, organized crime and environmental damage are considered to be secondary effects of privatization and globalization as well as “state failures” that can be corrected, as opposed to the (legislative, operative through militarization) basis of territorial and bodily dispossession at a global level.

In Mexico, the status quo that we are governed by a “failed state” is the consequence of the paralysis of political imagination by neurototalitarian faux-individuation and its colonization by populist technocratic thinking. That is why, in the current conjuncture, what needs to bring civil society together is not indignation against the government, but knowledge that the outcomes of the model of developmentalist capitalism are civil wars and the irreversibility of climate change. Civil society should be unified by the knowledge that the collateral damage of the present economic model comes to us in the form of hundreds of bodies circulating in refrigerated trailers; in the form of the privatization of fossil fuel extraction (by white collar and poor people); and in the form of murdering or imprisoning dozens of indigenous leaders for organizing against megaprojects.

It is thus our responsibility to ensure that political action be grounded on awareness that every megaproject represents an environmental as well as a social catastrophe originated in genocidal dispossession of the territory in continuity with the massive dismantlement of the Mexican agricultural economy. That the global neoliberal order is a machinery that generates forms of extreme urbanization rooted in the single goal of generating surplus value. That violence in the country must be understood through the lens of continuity with the dirty war against guerrilla movements in Mexico since the 1960s in Michoacán, Guerrero, and Chihuahua. That this continuity now includes methods to maximize terror as decapitation, dismemberment, mass kidnapping, car bombs, blockages, executions, and the chemical dissolution of bodies.

In order to flee from the political imaginaries of the populist technocratic state and of the failed state, we must understand that our moralizing democracy is a mirror image of the disintegration of a shared ethical basis of our lives, and that there are no frames to produce collective meaning beyond the reproduction of private hedonism. That hedonism is making us cynical and

the cult of winners prevails in our civilization, as those who are considered to be gods are celebrities and entrepreneurs—the caste of the “successful.” And it is perhaps because we do not see to what extent we are profoundly immersed in the global processes of dispossession, we are still paying taxes and are incapable of actively investing as politicized agents defending the territory. This is partly due to the fact that in our political imagination, there is no project beyond “demanding that the government function,” although the existence of the redundant populations is real, as it is real that there are humans who have no need to consume or produce within the capitalist system and who are creating autonomous infrastructure.

We are living in the cadaver of capitalism that is beginning to rot. Hegemonies are broken. Indigenous peoples who are deserting the nation-project and organizing autonomies, arming themselves against state violence with “communal policing” exist for real. The current opposition in Mexico is not expressed online but materializes in reality as “Consejo Nacional Indígena,” “Consejo Regional de Pueblos Originarios en Defensa del Territorio de Puebla e Hidalgo,” “Prisioneros políticos indígenas por defender sus territorios.” A transformation will come from the imminent collapse of capitalism and this is why I want to make an urgent call for utopian speculation, fantasy, and radical political imagination that is, above all, anti-technocratic and against capitalism. The most valuable forms of political imagination will be those that depend on empathy and on our capacity to foresee concrete changes to the present situation, substituting the direct moral relationship with the superficial qualities of the events we consume in the media/infosphere and in the sensible regime of state and private-sponsored industrialized cultural production.

NOTES

- ¹ Franco Berardi, "Schizo-Economy," *SubStance* 36, no. 1 (2007), 76.
- ² Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 32.
- ³ Franco Berardi, *Neuro-totalitarianism in Technomaya Goog-Colonization of the Experience and Neuro-Plastic Alternative* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 7.
- ⁴ Oswaldo Zavala, *Los cárteles no existen* (Mexico City: Malpaso, 2018), 18.
- ⁵ Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy and Civil War in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 27.
- ⁶ See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2007) and Dawn Paley, *Drug War Capitalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014).
- ⁷ Federico Mastrogiovanni, *Ni vivos ni muertos* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2014).
- ⁸ See also Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, "Máquinas de precarización: afectos y violencias de la cultura neoliberal" in *Precariedades, exclusiones y emergencias: Necropolítica y sociedad civil en América Latina*, eds. Mabel Moraña and José Manuel Valenzuela, 167-195 (Mexico City: UAM Iztapalapa / Gedisa, 2018).
- ⁹ See Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2018).
- ¹⁰ Bruno Bosteels, *Marx and Freud in Latin America: Politics, Psychoanalysis, and Religion in Times of Terror* (London: Verso, 2012), 169.
- ¹¹ Carlos Ramírez, "Sicilia secuestra la república," *Indicador Político, El Financiero*, May 10, 2011, <http://www.indicadorpolitico.mx/?p=1778>.
- ¹² Normales rurales are rural teacher's colleges instituted by the Mexican government in the 1920s to spread public education throughout the nation and to educate community leaders. They are considered to be the bastion of modern Mexico as well as sites of indigenous politicization.
- ¹³ Bruno Bosteels, "De la violencia a la comuna: viejos y nuevos sujetos emergentes en México" in *Precariedades, exclusiones y emergencias: Necropolítica y sociedad civil en América Latina*, eds. Mabel Moraña and José Manuel Valenzuela (Mexico City: UAM Iztapalapa / Gedisa, 2018), 78.
- ¹⁴ For more on the melodramatic imagination, see Bosteels, *Marx and Freud*; Gareth Williams, *The Mexican Exception: Sovereignty, Police and Democracy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and Samuel Steinberg, *Photopoetics at Tlatelolco: Afterimages of Mexico, 1968* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016).
- ¹⁵ Daniela Barragán, "López Obrador atiza más fuego contra Salinas, Zedillo, Fox, Calderón y Peña por 'el pillaje,'" *SinEmbargo*, February 21, 2019, <https://www.sinembargo.mx/21-02-2019/3539894>.
- ¹⁶ Susana Plouganou Boiza and Josué Francisco Hernández Ramírez, *Privatización del sistema penitenciario en México* (Mexico City: Documenta: Análisis y Acción para la Justicia Social A.C., 2016), 32, <http://www.documenta.org.mx/layout/archivos/2016-agosto-privatizacion-del-sistema-penitenciario-en-mexico.pdf>.

¹⁷ See Pilar Villela, “Colibritany en el país de los transgénicos,” *A penas llega* (blog), February 15, 2019, <https://apenasllega.home.blog/2019/02/15/colibritany-en-el-pais-de-los-transgenicos/>.

¹⁸ “Ahora, por suerte, se fueron venciendo los plazos o hubo renunciaciones y se van a limpiar y purificar estas instancias que estaban totalmente al servicio de intereses particulares.” For a transcription of Manuel López Obrador's morning address from February 18, 2019, see: <http://www.info7.mx/nacional/la-mananera-de-amlo-del-18-de-febrero-del-2019/2442838>.

¹⁹ Denise Dresser, “El presidente predicador,” *Proceso*, February 10, 2019, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/571136/el-presidente-predicador>.

²⁰ Enrique Krauze, *El pueblo soy yo* (Mexico City: Debate, 2018), 3.

²¹ See Salomé Cabrera and Sergio Prieto Díaz, “Mas allá del Tren y lo Maya: el neoextractivismo con ‘rostro humano,’” *Contralínea*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.contralinea.com.mx/archivo-revista/2019/01/14/mas-alla-del-tren-y-lo-maya-el-neoextractivismo-con-rostro-humano>.

²² Dierdra Reber, *Coming to Our Senses: Affect and an Order of Things For Global Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 102.