

Lecture 1 Interpretation of the 'Torn Social Fabric'

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El Colegio Nacional inaugural lecture
Delivered on March 5, 2021

The Question of the 'social fabric.' It is common to attribute Mexico's current violence to a 'tear in the social fabric.' At an intuitive level, the image seems adequate, since today's everyday violence tramples our most entrenched values: kidnappings taint our ideals of liberty; rape violates personal integrity; murder the right to exist; and the deliberate dismemberment of corpses tramples the dignity of those who are defenseless. Finally, the forced disappearance of a person-- and today there are officially over 93,000 disappeared in Mexico, a number that increases daily-- forecloses even the customary and universally espoused right to mourn. All of these forms of violence are routinely felt in contemporary Mexico, and we lack even a narrative or an epic that can recognize, process, and begin the work of putting an end to these outrages.

Sometimes we characterize what is happening as a 'war on drugs,' but it is not exactly that. The Trojan War had an end: the capture of Helen and the sacking of Troy, or the defeat of the Achaeans. The so-called War on Drugs, on the other hand, has no real finality, because drugs are powerful substances that, like the famous *pharmakon* of the ancients, is at once a poison, a cure, and a scapegoat. It is impossible to defeat a thing that is both a poison and a remedy, and much less to vanquish an enemy who serves the useful role of the scapegoat. The addict sees heroin as a cure for her pain, though she knows that her addiction leads toward her own death. To take away the addict's drug is to rob the helpless. For his part, the peasant who grows opium poppies in his cornfields also knows of the danger that this crop brings with it, but he understands, too, that it is only thanks to it that he and his family can scrape through the year. Like heroin for the addict, the farmer's poppies too are both a problem and a solution, a poison and a cure. And since our good society seems convinced that criminality emanates from drugs and the drug trade, the imprisonment or killing of producers, addicts and distributors becomes an expiatory act

for a society that doesn't know how to secure its collective well-being. The so-called War on Drugs allows Mexican society to ignore the causes of its many ills.

Given this widespread ambivalence and the multiple uses of both drugs and the various actors who are involved in the drug economy, because there can be no real war, there is neither victor nor vanquished. Mexico is thus entangled in a conflagration that has a ritual purpose, a new version of the Aztec's "Flowery War," perhaps, whose captives are served up as sacrificial victims. More than a war, Mexico's current violence is a way of life, and it has as its counterpart a new State that still doesn't know what to call itself, or how to tell the story of its own origin. We are witnessing the Flowery War of a people that has not yet invented its tutelary god, of an empire that has not yet named its tutelary god, that has not yet invented its Huitzilopochtli.

I say that it is a State that does not know what to call itself because when, in 2006, the Calderón government launched its War on Drugs, it did not ask (and was not asked since) whether the Mexican state, that fancies itself a democracy, had the financial resources required to eradicate the drug economy with measures and means that were consistent with the law. Did Mexico have the policemen, detectives, forensic experts, judges, and well-conditioned prisons that would have been needed in order to capture and legally process the delinquents who were involved in the drug economy? As I said, this question has not been raised in the 15 years since the drug war began, but if it had been raised, the answer would have been a resounding "No." Thus, the State that is waging its 'war on crime' is governed by something other than the rule of law. Neither did the government have resources at its disposal that might be mobilized to build up alternative economies for the peasants, ranchers, low-level drug dealers, scouts, couriers and hit-men who work in the drug economy. Nevertheless, the government loosed a military offensive in these conditions, and against an economy that, as we have already remarked, produces a commodity that is both a poison and a medicine.

That decision generated a brutal increase in violence, not only because there were now many more armed confrontations between delinquents and soldiers, but also because Mexico's Armed Forces over-rode the work of mediation that had until then been carried out by the *ancien régime's* poorly funded but always present police and justice apparatus. As the old mechanisms for regulating illicit acts fell by the wayside, morality itself became a

tactical objective; the everyday customs of various communities, together with the ideas about right and wrong to which they were attached, attracted the strategic attention of armed groups that could only offer brief truces and a brittle order in their constant strife for territorial control.

The outrages that are routinely perpetrated against communitarian mores have been such that it has left us without words, and so we blame the morality that is meant to uphold those customs, and we say that it has been corrupted and that the social fabric has been torn, and we seek the most concealed springs of violence in that tear. Stunned by the daily atrocities that resonate daily in the public sphere, we reach back to the old pillars of communitarian morality as if they were a final recourse that might stop so much profanation. We have seen some plead to the mothers of the drug-lords, so that they might do their bit to stop their sons' violence, making claims on the most primordial of all communitarian bonds-- the relationship between mother and son-- as if it were a talisman that might be capable of recovering human decency and of staging a return to sanity.¹ And when that strategy didn't work, we then heard the voice of the President of the Republic preaching from his podium-- that pinnacle of patriarchal authority--, calling on the misled youth to straighten itself out, and reminding them that perhaps they have forgotten their parents' most elemental lessons, and trying to rescue right from wrong with admonishments that Mexican parents use when they speak to very young children: 'Violence is *fuchi*' (it stinks or is disgusting), 'violence, *guácala*' (it makes you want to gag or throw up).

Those who make appeals to morality thus imagine that the people who perpetrate violent acts have not been properly socialized, or that perhaps they have forgotten their parents' teachings, and that, maybe now, they might hear the chiding that comes from the lips of someone who is looking out for them, and is willing to take the place of the absent father: the President of the Republic. Those admonitions appeal to that which is most sacred-- they are done for the sake of the mother or in the name of the father--, and they

¹ See, for a sociological argument, Sarah Sefchovic, *¡Atrévete! Propuesta hereje para disminuir la violencia en México*, Ciudad de México, Penguin-Random House, 2014; in the public sphere, President López Obrador has made various pleads to Mexico's *narcos* to think of their mothers and of their families, and stop the violence.

make a desperate call to preserve the very foundation of society: the family. And when that fails-- as it has already failed-- we then claim that there is a tear in the social fabric.

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

Today (in Mexico) it is common to assert that there is a tear in the social fabric. This claim is founded in the idea that the most intimate forms of interdependence have broken down; family values are routinely ignored, communities are feeble. This does not imply that social relations have been weakened because of social inequality though. According to Max Weber, communitarian relations do not imply equality, but rather a sense of being a part of the same thing. Indeed, members of communities often rely on organic models to describe the nature of their interconnections: the community is like a body, for instance, or an organism, and its parts are as different from one another as the head is different from the heart or the arm. And it is precisely for this reason-- because community relies on complementarity rather than equality-- that communitarian relations develop numerous mechanisms for mediation, compensation, and exchange. The image of community as 'social fabric' exalts both the strength and the fragility of these mechanisms, but when-- as today-- we don't understand why communities have become so enfeebled, we make appeals not so much to those mechanisms of mediation and compensation, as to the bonds that are thought to be most sacred: we appeal to the mothers, or to the sacred tenets of the Church, or we rely on the persuasive force of the Great Patriarch. Except this none of that seems to be working.

² Annette Weiner y Jane Schneider (compiladoras), *Cloth and Human Experience*, Washington DC, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989.

Sovereignty versus State. In a recent book on the anthropology of kings and kingship, David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins suggested the utility of separating the analysis of sovereignty from the many other attributes that are frequently attached to the idea of the state, such as the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence, for instance, or the administration of justice.³ Through their rich comparative study of the figure of the king, Graeber and Sahlins show that sovereignty has existed in societies that lacked public administration, where there was no monopoly of the legitimate use of force, and various other attributes that are usually considered essential features of the state, and indeed they show that sovereignty is historically prior to the development of the state.

Thus, our authors argue that, from a cultural point of view, there never was such a thing as an egalitarian society, because even those societies without internal stratification inhabit social worlds in which humans co-exist with spirits or gods who are, in the words of Graeber and Sahlins, 'meta-persons' who wield power over the lives and deaths of the members of the community. In other words, the societies that we sometimes call egalitarian operated within a universe that they themselves recognized as hierarchical.

Put another way, small-scale human societies seem always to have imagined themselves as existing in a world that has been populated by sovereigns, and even when society itself lacked such figures: the fate of the people was still subjected to negotiations with 'meta-persons'-- gods and spirits-- that needed to be avoided, appeased, or coaxed, and who might always intervene on their own account. Often this view has been developed alongside a complicated topography, with beings moving between two or more planes or spheres, for instance between one that is terrestrial, another that subterranean, and a third that is celestial. Consequently, the figure of the (terrestrial) king is always fashioned in imitation of meta-persons who originate in another space, and the intervention of such meta-persons always precedes the birth of the king or the creation of a kingly line. This is why Graeber and Sahlins turn the classical sociological idea that the divine world imitated the human world on its head: historically, kings have imitated gods, and not the other way around.⁴

³ David Graeber y Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

As a corollary, our authors conclude that amongst humans authority is never truly secular, and that, as an idea, sovereignty always has a foreign, outworldly, origin. Because of this, although kings are gods of sorts, the gods always transcend the personality of any one king. A second corollary, which is important to us here, is that sovereignty does not need perforce to go hand-in-hand with that bundle of attributes that is usually associated to the State. There have been kings where there is no State, and there have also been kings who presided over squalid administrative structures, with neither a police or an army at their disposal.

These ideas, that are apparently so distant from realities such as that of contemporary Mexico, in fact offer a useful entry point for us, because over the past couple of decades, the Mexican State has shed some of its 'classical' attributes. For this reason, we sometimes imagine the violence that has emerged as a symptom of a "failed State," when in fact we might think of it as an attribute of a new kind of State. Moreover, the (mistaken) idea that we're just a small step away from state failure has gone hand in hand with an obsession to recover Mexico's sovereignty-- an obsession that is expressed in the current government's outlandish, even ruinous, subsidies for the national oil company (PEMEX) and the national electric company (CFE), and especially in its lavish support for the army, whose budget quadrupled between 2013 and 2018, and has risen more steeply since then, the navy, whose budget more than doubled in those same years and has also continued to rise, and the National Guard, which was created in 2018, and now has around triple the number of officers than the Federal Police, which it was created to substitute, had.⁵ This obsession with the 'recovery of our sovereignty' is in fact unnecessary, because one of the few attributes that the Mexican State has *not* shed is, precisely, its demonstrated ability to perform sovereign acts. Thus, even though the Mexican State has utterly failed its duty to administer justice in criminal matters, its presidents still speak in the name of the nation without being contradicted, and they give orders to the nation's armed forces, even while they seem incapable of effectively regulating violence on the local level. Today's State is characterized by an excess of sovereignty, and a deficit of administrative capacity.

⁵ Ricardo Raphael, "En México, todo el presupuesto al poder militar." Washington Post (Spanish Edition), July 27, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/es/post-opinion/2021/07/27/aumenta-presupuesto-militar-guardia-nacional-mexico-amlo/>

The country's Armed Forces intimately suffer and inhabit this combination of heightened sovereignty and diminished administrative capacity. Journalists Daniela Rea and Pablo Ferri have documented the extrajudicial killings by the military in its War against Drugs. One of the soldiers that they interviewed explained the practice as follows: Even if you take them [captured drug-lords or gang-leaders] to the judge with confessions, and with their hands and bodies covered in blood, they let them go. We did this [kill them] because of the people who they had killed."⁶ A bit further into this same interview, the soldier completed his explanation: "What I did was justice. Vengeance is personal. This was justice."⁷

For this soldier, there is no justice if it is not extra-judicial justice, executed by the army, who presents itself as the representative *par excellence* of national sovereignty. Execution at the hands of the Armed Forces is not personal vengeance or any other kind of abuse of power, but rather an act of justice, done in the name of the people of México. What we have, then, is a surfeit of sovereignty-- the Armed Forces are capable of taking justice into their own hands without any real contest-- precisely because the State lacks credible institutional ability to administer justice. If the military were to hand criminals over to the law, they will be let go.

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

⁶ Daniela Rea y Pablo Ferri, *La tropa: Por qué mata un soldado*, México, Aguilar, 2018,. p. 537.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 537-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 447

⁹ Calatina Pérez Correa, Carlos Silva Forné y Rodrigo Gutiérrez Rivas, "Índice de letalidad. Menos enfrentamientos, más opacidad". *Nexos* 1 de julio 2015 y Javier Treviño Rangel, Raúl Bejarano Romero, Laura Atuesta, y Sara Velázquez Moreno, "La letalidad del Ejército", *Nexos* 1 febrero 2020.

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

So, to recall one historical instance of this, Christopher Columbus described the inhabitants of the islands that he discovered in the following terms:

"They have no weapons, and they go about naked, and have no ingenuity with regard to arms, and are very cowardly, so that one-thousand of them would not stand up to three [of ours], and so they are well suited to be commanded and made to work, to plant, and to do whatever else might be needed, and to build towns, and to be taught to go about clothed and to adopt our customs."¹⁰

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

For now, it is worth under-striking that impunity on this scale is infrequent, and that in the majority of cases violence gets inscribed in a logic of reciprocity or, to be more precise, in a type of reciprocal relationship that anthropologists have called 'negative reciprocity.' The paradigmatic form of this sort of reciprocity is the feud, where one assassination leads the kin of the victim to seek blood compensation. When there is no State that is capable of performing that duty, the brethren of the victim take the matter into their own hands, and kill either the murderer or one of his kinsmen. This counter-assassination then provokes a new round of aggression, and the two groups enter into a

¹⁰ Cristóbal Colón, Relación del primer viaje de descubrimiento, en *Relaciones y cartas*, Madrid, Librería de la viuda de Hernando y C^a, 1892, p. 105 (my translation).

spiral of violence. According to René Girard, the ancient institution of sacrifice was a remedy against this sort of spiraling violence; the scapegoat distracted aggressions away from the heart of society and toward a weaker third party, thereby avoiding the tendency toward an ungoverned contagion of reciprocal aggressions.

State action is normatively supposed to occupy a space in-between the two extremes that we have discussed-- total impunity and reciprocal violence--, and from that position it works to reduce the autonomy of violent actors, gain the monopoly over the administration of justice, and with it guarantee that societal violence will neither go unpunished, nor be claimed directly by those closest to its victims. Except that in Mexico the State never consolidated that function, and the institution known as *caciquismo*, in which the State deposits the local administration of justice and regulation of violence in the hands of an intermediary who is not a bureaucrat, is a symptom of that historical fact.

And in consideration of this fact, a few years ago I proposed a second modality of negative reciprocity that is distinct from the symmetry that characterizes feuds, that I called 'asymmetrical negative reciprocity,' and that describes a form of exchange that is initiated with an act of violence-- a rape, a beating, or a murder, for instance-- that is performed on a person who does not have the capacity to respond in a proportional manner, and who also has no recourse to the State for protection.¹¹ This violent act is then followed almost immediately by a small or symbolic gift, or perhaps by some personal consideration or concession that then gives way to a longer term relationship of submission. Asymmetrical negative reciprocity is used, then, to establish relationships of domination that have an act of violence in their origin, but that are then routinized as a relationship that is governed by debt (represented by the small gift or concession that follows the violent act). This sort of violence generally does not lead to the formation of a new caste, because it is limited in its sphere of action both by the (weak, but still present) State, and by local competition, but it does serve to build local hierarchies. It is the world of novelist Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, where the entire village is symbolically related (kin),

¹¹ Claudio Lomnitz, *Acerca de la reciprocidad negativa*. *Revista de Antropología Social* (Madrid), 2005, 14: 311-339.

because all villagers are victims of the violence of the same *cacique*. In the fictional village of Comala, all are children of the cacique Pedro Páramo.

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

Toward a Geography of Negative Reciprocity. I believe that today's violence in Mexico can be better understood if we analyze it in reference to different kinds of negative reciprocity that are then used to articulate a complex economic geography. I begin by offering a couple of cases so that this idea becomes clearer.

My first example relates to a discussion that transpired in the 1990s scholarly literature, regarding the question of whether the heroes of the so-called *narco-corridos* (narco ballads) conformed or not to the prototype of what historian Eric Hobsbawm had famously called 'social bandits,' that is popular criminals who robbed the rich and gave to the poor. Certainly the image of drug-lords as benefactors does have some resonance, but the complex geography of the illicit economies that they participate in precludes any univocal or prototypical characterization of their connection either to 'the people' or to 'the poor.'

Take, for instance, the well-known case of Rafael Caro Quintero, a very prominent drug-lord who was the protagonist of many narco-ballads and had a reputation as a benefactor in his home community of La Noria, as well as in the municipal seat of Badiraguato, Sinaloa, where he paid for roads, funded schools, and introduced urban services. So far, Caro Quintero seemed to fit the bill of the 'social bandit,' but Caro was also the owner of a 544-hectare plantation known as El Búfalo, in the nearby state of Chihuahua, where he planted marihuana with the connivance of both the Federal Police and the Mexican army. That ranch was eventually discovered and denounced by DEA agent Kiki Camarena and his associate, the pilot Alfredo Zavala, who as a result were kidnapped, tortured, and murdered. In response to this, the DEA pressured the Mexican army to take possession of El Búfalo ranch, and when that happened, the public learned that it was run

with the labor of literally hundreds of peasant captives, who had been hired in distant states under false pretenses, and now lived and worked under the watch of armed men, that compelled them to work and did not allow them to leave the ranch. In this example, then, we observe a differentiated geography wherein Caro Quintero engaged in patron-client ties in his home turf, where he operated as something like a 'social bandit,' while he was a slave-owner in a more distant territory.

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

Studies of the gangs known as *maras* in Los Angeles (California) have described those gangs-- and particularly their component cliques (known in Spanglish as *clicas*) as quasi-families that operate with an ideology that one ethnographer dubbed 'democratic anarchy,' where there are no fixed leaders nor any internal chain of command.¹² Rather, violence is organized around *jales* (tasks, adventures) that take shape and are adhered to more or less spontaneously, and in consensual fashion.

The quasi-familial nature of these gangs makes it imperative to go out in defense of any member, and also to defend the gang's home neighborhood. Indeed, the relationship between gang and neighborhood is very important, and gangs generally try to stop their own members from stealing or raping people from the neighborhood. In short, these gangs draw sharp distinctions between an inside and an outside, and this is relevant both for the gang and for its neighborhood.

Gang members say that they lead *la vida loca* (the crazy life), which is a kind lifestyle that involves a kind of 'deep hanging out,' wherein leisure is punctuated by occasional *jales* (tasks, joint ventures-- often involving illegal activity), violent episodes and public displays of valor. However, gang-members can also do work for other, more disciplined and hierarchical organizations, like that of Caro Quintero, in his time. For this reason, there are gangs and gang-members who end up obeying instructions from bosses in relationships that are neither democratic nor anarchic in nature. Perhaps until that time the gang had

¹² Thomas Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders: An Ethnography of a Salvadoran Street Gang*, Nueva York, Oxford University Press, 2013.

been an informal organization that offered belonging and access to *la vida loca* to its members, as well as protection to its neighborhood or to its ethnic group (recall that *Salvatrucha* is an injunction that means something like 'Heads' up, Salvadoran!'), and it becomes, instead, an instrument of control over the barrio, that is exercised, in the last instance, by actors who have no connection to the neighborhood.

And here we find, again, the co-existence of two contrasting ideologies of reciprocity: the reciprocal ties of brotherhood within the gang, and the transactional business ethos fostered by transnational criminal organizations of the sorts that are known today as 'cartels.' Thus, a mara can be at once the defender and the aggressor of the "social fabric" of its own neighborhood. This is an example of the sort of articulation that we have to describe in order to develop a geography of violence, and so understand the complex connections that exist between various kinds of violent acts and 'the social fabric.'

The third example of complex geographies of violence that I wish to consider concerns stealing women.

Historical Arc of Stealing Women in Mexico. We do not yet have a proper history of the practice of stealing women in Mexico. My considerations here are limited to a few examples from the 20th century, that reveal a 'traditional' set of practices that I shall use to contrast with two more contemporary modalities. In order to comprehend what is at stake, though, we need to linger a moment on the marriage practices that served as the framework that originally gave meaning and purpose to these practices.

One common formula for normatively sanctioned marriages in rural 19th and 20th century Mexico had the following characteristics: first off, weddings were expensive, and they required resources from both the parents of the bride and the parents of the groom. After the marriage, the newly-weds preferentially established residence in the same plot as the groom's parents (virilocal residence), and hoped one day to inherit from them a plot where they might build their own house. These customs meant that brides normally entered the matrimonial life as subordinates of their mothers-in-law, and there was much competition between daughter-in-law and mother-in-law for the groom's favor, a competition that has long been a factor in the formation of male and female subjectivities in rural Mexico.

In addition to this, because weddings were expensive, young married couples started their lives together indebted either to the parents of the groom or to those of the bride or to both, or, sometimes, to a patron that paid the cost of the wedding. So, for instance, in late-nineteenth century Yucatan, hemp-growing landowners routinely paid the expenses attached to the traditional Maya wedding ceremonies of their workers. Freighted with that debt, the young couple then moved in together and lived on the land of the plantation owner, as bonded laborers. In such cases, the landowner took the place of the father of the groom, and the plantation became the place to which the young couple would devote its life's work.

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

Since the aggrieved party was the parents of the bride (and not the bride herself), the parents of the groom frequently took it upon themselves to visit the parents of the bride after their daughter's theft, and begged them to forgive their children, and to accept them as man and wife. Sometimes, the groom's parents took a mediator with them, who was usually a kinsman of both of the families or, as in a case described in depth by anthropologist Paul Friedrich in the Tarascan region of Michoacán during the late 1950s, the mediator might be a local cacique, who was recognized by all as a force in the local order, and who often was also well-versed in elaborate local formulas of courtesy and tact.¹³ In those same years, anthropologist Hugo Nutini described marriage practices in a nahua-speaking village in Tlaxcala where bride-theft was frequently practiced. There, both

¹³ Paul Friedrich, *Princes of Naranja: An Essay in Ethnohistorical Method*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

the parents of the groom and the parents of the bride were expected to make a show of anger when a bride was "stolen," since anything short of such formal expressions of displeasure would suggest to the wider community that perhaps the parents did not have the money to pay for the wedding, and were secretly in connivance with the young couple's transgression of the local norm.¹⁴

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

This second kind of bride-theft began with a young man eyeing a young woman who was not interested in him; the young man would then organize a kidnapping party, forcefully abduct the woman (very often at gun-point), take her to the house of one of his kinsmen, and immediately rape her. After that, as in the cases of consensual 'bride theft,' the fact was made public, so that the entire community knew about the theft, making it an established fact. In cases of this nature, the presence of a mediator was usually indispensable to calm the animus of the parents of the "bride," and to reduce the likelihood of violence between the families. Because of the signal importance of mediators in such cases, the parents of the "groom"/rapist very often had to pay the mediator money. Both in the Tarascan case described by Paul Friedrich and among the Nahua peasants described by Nutini the parents of these unfortunate young women tended in the end to be appeased and to recognize the young couple as a marriage.

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

The reason why two such contrasting situations could be lumped together into a single formula (*robo de novia*) was, as I said, that the victims of the theft were thought to be

¹⁴ Hugo Nutini, *San Bernardino Contla: Marriage and Family Structure in a Tlacalan Municipio*. Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh University Press, 1968, p. 268.

the parents of the young woman, and not the woman. It was for this reason that the parents needed to be appeased much more urgently than the "bride" herself, since she presumably could later be made to comply forcefully to her new situation, by her new husband. The community as a whole was mobilized in order to calm the feelings of the parents of the bride; the groom's parents' persuasive ability in this regard leaned on the ways in which the two families were informally networked-- either through indirect family ties, or by way of the local political boss or *cacique*. In other words, the "social fabric" was used to get the parents of the girl, and eventually the girl herself, into line.

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

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

On the other hand, if a man kidnaps a young woman and rapes her with the intention of living with her, it remains to be seen whether community relations would be strong enough to enforce the union. Moreover, the injured woman or her parents would also be more likely either to flee the community altogether and emigrate, or to bring the case to court.

¹⁵ See Patricia Arias, *Del arraigo a la diáspora: Dilemas de la familia rural*, Mexico City, Miguel Angel Porrúa, 2009.

Today, if an abducted woman manages to escape from her assailant, she can succeed to a salary much more easily than in the contexts described by Friedrich or Nutini for the mid-20th century. On the other hand, if a young couple seeks to live together without their parents' consent, the role of rural inheritance has declined sufficiently to make this step relatively simple. Finally, the consolidation of the Mexican state and the rise of women's rights has made it easier for a woman or for her parents to initiate prosecutions, so that the young rapist might easily find himself having to flee his village or face possible imprisonment.

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

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

Blázquez's study explores precisely these issues. Like all of the poppy-growing regions of Mexico (that are erroneously imagined as the point where organized crime originates), Badiraguato is part of a zone wherein difficulty of access has been deliberately transformed into an economic resource. This resource is mainly exploited by a class of merchant-caciques, known locally as *pesados* (men of weight), who have enough money to finance peasant poppy growers and the strength of arms that is needed to defend their distant ranches, and to protect the commercialization of their product (opium gum).

Blázquez shows that geographic isolation is a key resource for this dominant class of caciques that melds financial capital, coercive force, and the networks and ability to

¹⁶ Adele Blázquez, *The Continuum of Women's Abduction in Mexico. Porosities between Sexual and Armed Violence in a Drug-Producing Area (Badiraguato, Sinaloa)*. *Dialectical Anthropology* 45, pps. 233-251 (2021).

negotiate with municipal and state authorities, as well as with the Armed Forces. Violence is an instrument that serves to build, guarantee, and even accentuate the physical remoteness or isolation that poppy growing peasants and their *pesado* bosses both rely on. Indeed, the region's isolation is the combined result of physical distance and of a cultivated geography of fear that has attached risks to traveling to Badiraguato. Similar processes of heightening distance by violent means have developed in other drug-producing regions, such as Michoacán's Tierra Caliente or the mountains of Guerrero, as well as in a number of urban areas where illicit economies need to interrupt ease of access.

Alongside this politics of isolation, the territories in Badiraguato are fragmented around the boundaries of various hamlets (*ranchos*); these boundaries are always contentious and can be subject to invasion and the eviction of local communities. The *pesados* and their gunmen have a role defending those communities, with which they are deeply identified. In a context like that, stealing women again becomes not only viable, but in fact much more violent than it had been in the Mexican countryside 50 or 60 years ago, because keeping a woman in a community is more difficult than it was, and because neither the women nor the men of those communities have easy recourse to government mediators, since they all live off of an illicit economy. As a result, a kind of neo-traditional marriage has developed, that is locally referred to as la *Ley del Monte* ('Mountain Law' or 'Law of the Wild'). Frequently, this kind of marriage is marked by the use of violence in the abduction of women, and it might be thought of as a neo- or pseudo-traditionalist form of marriage that is facilitated by the economic geography of violence.

Disappearances. I'd like to conclude today's lecture with a few remarks concerning the forced disappearance of women in today's Mexico. As opposed to the practice of bride-theft, the disappearance of women does not lead to the formation of a conjugal couple or of a household. Both the forms of old-school bride theft and the neo-traditional practice as discussed for Badiraguato were stratagems designed to anchor young women into a family; the phenomenon of forced disappearance, on the other hand, does not build on social interdependence the way that old-style bride-theft did. Rather, rather disappearance is a step in the direction either of murder or enslavement, and the communitarian connections of the stolen women's families generally become deeply strained, rather than reinforced.

We still have not assimilated the social implications of the phenomenon of disappearance, which has reached such tragic proportions today in Mexico (with around 95,000 people disappeared and not found, either alive or dead, according to the official count in November, 2021). From the viewpoint of friends and family members, a disappearance means, in practical terms, that there can be no mourning of the victim, and without a mourning process the line between life and death gets blurred. For this reason, the family members of a disappeared person cannot return to what had up until that point been normality.

There are many consequences of a situation of this kind, and all of them affect the social fabric: there are husbands who leave their wives because they are daily reminders of their son or daughters' disappearance, and of their impotence and inability to recover them. Often, the mother or the father or the sister or brother of someone who has been disappeared begins slowly to feel invisible herself. She feels that she cannot talk about what she has done during the day (seek out her disappeared love one, for example, or be submerged in depression, or trying to lose herself within her own mind) because the subject of their loved one's absence makes itself present in the conversation and produces uneasiness and discomfort in her interlocutors. Disappearance produces deeply troubling uncertainties-- the disappeared person is neither ascertainably alive nor dead, for starters-- and as such it produces social discomfort and unease. Friends and acquaintances can neither offer condolences nor suggest a change of subject. And so the family members of the disappeared begin to feel like they themselves are disappearing from their social world, which becomes trite and formal, or dwindles outright.

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

The various traditional or neo-traditional practices of stealing women that we have reviewed thus far were all geared to rooting young women into marriage, and to rooting young couples into a community. Forced disappearance of women, on the other hand, uses violent means to generate expansive holes in families and to leave them suspended in a

limbo between life and death. As in the case of Caro Quintero, who was a benefactor in his ranch in Badiraguato and a slave owner in neighboring Chihuahua, violent social organizations can steal women in order to consolidate families in some instances, and steal them in order to destroy families and communities in others. And if we do not make an effort to describe, study and understand how these contrasting logics relate to the complex geography of illicit economies, we will fail to comprehend the political dimensions of our contemporary violence.

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

To summarize, I argued, first, that today's explosion of violence cannot be understood by way of a narrative that hinges on a tale of a War on Drugs, because drugs are both poison and medicine-- and so they can never be eradicated-- and because as drugs are also thought to be the cause of all crime, the people involved in the drug economy easily serve as scapegoats. I argued, too, that our contemporary surge in violence is a symptom of the consolidation of a new type of State, for which we still do not have a name, but that is no longer an instance of a (developing) welfare state, and that can be characterized by the formula "Much sovereignty, little administration of justice."

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

The next step in my talk was to note that illicit economies frequently rely on the articulation of distant territories, and that this multi-local quality goes hand-in-hand with a

differentiated set of strategies, particularly in regard to the connection between reciprocity and violence. I showed why it is that the same bosses who operate as 'social bandits' in their home communities can be slavers somewhere else, or simple businessmen in yet other places. They can steal a woman to live with her, or disappear a woman in order to destroy her family forever. In a different example, an urban gang that identifies with its neighborhood can become a predator of that same neighborhood, if it is articulated to a different sort of crime organization, and through it, to a different economic geography.

Finally, I closed my lecture with a few ideas regarding the theft of women and forced disappearance. I showed that bride theft, which had traditionally been part of the repertoire of available strategies leading toward marriage, was a strategy that leaned on-- depended on the 'good health'-- of the social fabric, whereas bride theft in the deliberately isolated territories of today's drug economy imply a greater reliance on coercion.

I concluded with a few thoughts on the ways in which both traditional and neo-traditional forms of bride theft contrast with today's forced disappearance crisis, noting that whereas bride theft was geared to rooting women in families and communities, forced disappearance is a practice that destroys families and debilitates their social network. The rise of the new state and the geography of the crisis of communitarian mores shall the subject of my Colegio Nacional lectures this year.