

Lecture 1

Interpretation of the 'Torn Social Fabric'¹

The Question of the 'social fabric.' It is common to attribute Mexico's violence to a 'tear in the social fabric.' At an intuitive level, the image seems adequate, since today's violent routines crush our most entrenched values: kidnappings trample our ideals of liberty; rape violates personal integrity; murder the right to exist; and the deliberate dismemberment of corpses mangles the dignity of those who are defenseless. Finally, the forced disappearance of a person-- and today (November 2021) there are officially over 93,000 disappeared in Mexico, a number that increases daily-- forecloses even the customary and universally espoused right to mourn a loved one. All of these transgressions are routinely suffered in contemporary Mexico, and we lack even a widely shared narrative or epic that is capable of recognizing, processing, and of beginning 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 remedy, and a scapegoat. It is impossible to defeat a thing that is both a poison and a cure, 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 will lead to her own death. To take away the addict's drug is to rob the helpless. For his part, the peasant who grows opium poppies among 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 own collective well-being. The so-called War on Drugs allows Mexican society to set aside the many causes of its many ills.

Given the multiple uses of both drugs and the various actors who are involved in the drug economy, there can be no real war, because there can be neither victor nor vanquished. Mexico is thus entangled in a conflagration that has a ritual purpose, a new edition 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 true champion, 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 no government has asked since) whether the Mexican state, that still fancies itself a democracy, had or has the financial resources required to eradicate the drug economy with measures and means that are consistent with the law. Did Mexico have the policemen, detectives, forensic experts, judges, and well-conditioned prisons that would have been required 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 start of the drug war, had it been raised, the answer would have been a resounding "No." As a result, the state that is waging its 'War on Drugs' is necessarily governed by

something other than the rule of law. And neither did the government have the resources 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 against an economy that, as we have already remarked, produces a commodity that is both a poison and a cure.

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 judges and prosecutors. 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 build brief truces and a brittle peace in their constant strife for territorial control.

The outrages that are routinely perpetrated against familial and communitarian mores have been such that they have left us speechless, and so we blame the morality that is meant to uphold those customs: we say that it has been corrupted, that the social fabric has been torn, and we try to find the hidden springs of our new 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 a final recourse. We have seen some plead to the mothers of the drug-lords, so that they might do their bit to stop their sons' violence, appealing to the most primordial of all communitarian bonds-- the relationship between mother and son-- with the hope that this most sacred talisman might be capable of recovering human decency and of staging a collective return to sanity.² When that strategy failed, we then heard the President of the Republic preach from

his podium-- that pinnacle of patriarchal authority--, calling on the Mexico's wayward youth to straighten themselves out, and reminding them that perhaps they had forgotten their parents' most elemental lessons, and so trying to rescue the distinction between right from wrong with the sort admonishments that Mexican parents use when they speak to an infant: 'Violence is *fuchi*' (it stinks or is disgusting), 'violence, *guácala*' (it makes you want to gag or throw up). These admonitions were spoken by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador after his landslide electoral victory of 2018, when he still believed that he could resolve all matters pertaining to security in a matter of a couple of months.

Like Mexico's president, those who make appeals to morality imagine that the people who perpetrate violent acts have not been properly socialized, or perhaps that they have forgotten their parents' teachings, and so, 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 invocations appeal to that which is most sacred-- they are done in the name of the mother or in the name of the father--, and they thereby sound a desperate call to preserve the very foundation of society: the family. And when that fails-- as it already has 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 for the idea of community, cloth highlights the strength that there is to be found in interdependence, but the metaphor also suggests a kind of fragility of the individual.³ The image of the social fabric invokes mutual aid and reciprocity as the foundational principles of the social, while it also recognizes that, like threads, social connections can easily be cut.

Today in Mexico it is common to say 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 weak. This does not necessarily imply that social relations have been strained because of social inequality. Indeed, according to Max Weber, communitarian relations do not imply equality, but rather the recognition or feeling of being a part of the same thing. This is why members of communities often rely on organic models to describe the nature of their interconnections: the community is like a body, for instance, or like 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 the idea of community relies on complementarity rather than equality-- that communitarian relations develop numerous mechanisms for mediation, compensation, and exchange. The image of community as a 'social fabric' exalts both the strength and the fragility of these mechanisms of mediation, 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, the President of the Republic. Except that this none of this seems to be working.

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 study 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 force, for instance, or the administration of justice.⁴ Through their rich comparative studies of the figure of the king, Graeber and Sahlins showed that sovereignty has existed in societies that lacked public administration, where there was no

monopoly of the legitimate use of force, and where various other attributes that are usually considered essential features of the state are weak or absent. Indeed these two anthropologists showed that sovereignty is historically prior to the development of the state.

Our authors argued 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' that wield sovereign power over the lives and deaths of the members of the community. In other words, the societies that we sometimes call egalitarian existed in a universe that they 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 multiple sovereigns, and even when society itself lacked such figures: the fate of the people relied on negotiations with 'meta-persons'-- gods and spirits-- that needed to be avoided, appeased, or coaxed, and who might always intervene on their own volition. Often this sort of world-view developed together with a corresponding metaphysical topography, with beings moving between two or more planes or spheres, for instance between one that is terrestrial, another that is subterranean, and a third that is celestial. The figure of the (terrestrial) king is always fashioned in imitation of meta-persons who originate in other spaces, and the intervention of such meta-persons has always preceded the birth of the king and the creation of a kingly line. Graeber and Sahlins thus turned 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.⁵

As a corollary, our authors conclude that amongst humans authority is never truly secular: 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 are gods where there is no state, and there have been kings who have presided over truly squalid administrative structures, with neither a police or an army at their disposal.

These ideas, that are apparently so distant from the concerns of contemporary Mexicans, in fact offer us a useful entry point, because over the past couple of decades, the Mexican state has shed some of its 'classical' attributes. And 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. Furthermore, 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 (FCE), and especially in its extravagant support for the army, whose budget quadrupled between 2013 and 2018, and has frown much more steeply since then, for the navy, who's budget more than doubled in those same years and has also continued to climb, and the National Guard that was created in 2018, and now has around triple the number of officers than the Federal Police that it was created to substitute.⁶ The current 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 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 anywhere being challenged, and they cede more and more responsibilities to the nation's armed forces, even while the military has shown itself to be incapable of effectively

regulating violence on the local level. Indeed, today's state is marked by an excess of sovereignty, and a deficit of administrative capacity. This, in a nutshell, is the nature of Mexico's new state.

The country's Armed Forces routinely experience and suffer from 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, and their work offers many examples of these experiences. One of the soldiers that Rea and Ferri interviewed explained the practice of extra-judicial killings 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 [killed them] because of the people who they had killed."⁷ A bit further into this same interview, the soldier completed his explanation of the nature of his actions: "What I did was justice. Vengeance is personal. This was justice."⁸

For this soldier, then, there is no justice if it is not extra-judicial, executed directly by the army, which is the representative *par excellence* of national sovereignty. Execution at the hands of the Armed Forces is therefore 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 Mexico. Extrajudicial executions are then a symptom of the surfeit of sovereignty, not of its lack: the army is capable of taking justice into its own hands without any real contest-- precisely *because* the state lacks credible institutional ability to administer justice. If the military were to hand the criminals that they catch over to the law, they would be let go. Justice must then be administered extrajudicially, by the sovereign's armies.

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 or too slow in coming."⁹ This soldier's perspective-- which is far from unusual-- reveals some of reasons for the inordinately high 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.¹⁰

Violence and Reciprocity. Although gratuitous acts of violence do exist, violent acts are rarely lacking in either a past or a future that can be 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 be taught to go about clothed and to adopt our customs."¹¹

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. And where there is such 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 drug-lords (*señores*) strive to give shape to a new caste that has prerogatives and attributes that are 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 aggressions, and the two groups embrace in a spiral of violence. According to René Girard, the ancient institution of sacrifice was a remedy precisely 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 ungoverned contagion of reciprocal aggressions.

Normatively, state action is supposed to be geared against the two extremes that we have discussed-- total impunity and reciprocal violence--, and thence to reduce the autonomy of violent actors, gain a monopoly over the administration of justice, and so guarantee that societal violence will go neither unpunished, nor be claimed directly by those closest to its victims. Except that in Mexico the state was able to consolidate such a position, 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 this historical fact.

In consideration of this very 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 against a person or group that does not have the capacity to respond in a proportional manner, and that also has no recourse to the state for protection.¹² Such violent acts are then followed immediately by a small or symbolic gift, or perhaps by some personal consideration or concession that gives way to a longer term relationship of submission. Asymmetrical negative reciprocity is used, then, to establish relationships of domination that originates in acts of violence, but that are then routinized as a relationship that is framed 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 a (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), because all villagers are victims of the violence of the same *cacique*. In Juan Rulfo's fictional village of Comala, everyone is a child of the cacique Pedro Páramo. But the power of the cacique is not the point of origin for a new case as much as the hinge between a weak state and a rural community.

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. Today's violence in Mexico can be better understood if we analyze it in reference to the different kinds of negative reciprocity that are then used to articulate a complex economic geography. I illustrate this notion with a couple of cases so that the idea becomes clearer.

My first example concerns 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 to the prototype of what historian Eric Hobsbawm had famously called 'social bandits,' that is popular figures who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Certainly the image of drug-lords as benefactors has some resonance, but the complex geography of the illicit economies that they articulate in fact precludes any stable characterization of their connection either to 'the people' or to 'the poor.'

Take, for instance, the well-known case of Rafael Caro Quintero, a 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 various urban services. From this vantage point, then, Caro Quintero fits the type 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 by DEA agent Kiki Camarena and his associate, the cessna pilot Alfredo Zavala, and as a result they were both kidnapped, tortured, and murdered. In response, 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 several hundred of peasant captives, who had been lured there from distant states under false pretenses, and now lived and worked under the watch

of armed guards, that forced them to work and did not allow them to leave the ranch. In this example, then, 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 complex 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 them-- and particularly their component cliques (known in Spanglish as *clicas*) as cuasi-families that operate with an ideology that one early ethnographer dubbed 'democratic anarchy,' where there are no fixed leaders nor any internal chain of command.¹³ Rather, violence is organized around *jales* (jobs, adventures) that are adhered to more or less spontaneously, and in voluntary fashion.

The quasi-familial nature of these gangs in the 1990s made it imperative for members to go out in defense of any other member, and also to defend the gang's home neighborhood. Indeed, the relationship between gang and neighborhood was very important, and gangs generally tried to stop their own members from stealing or raping people from the neighborhood. In short, these gangs drew sharp distinctions between an inside and an outside, and that was relevant both for gang and neighborhood identity.

Gang members say that they lead *la vida loca* (the crazy life), which is a life-style that involves a kind of 'deep hanging out,' wherein leisure is punctuated by occasional *jales* (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. Until the point when a gang got tied financially to a 'cartel,' had operated as an informal organization that offered *clica* members a sense of belonging and free access to *la vida loca*, as well as protection to their neighborhood or ethnic group (recall that *Salvatrucha* is actually an injunction that translates 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 special connection to the neighborhood.

Here again we see two contrasting ideologies of reciprocity co-existing: 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.' As a result, a mara can be at once the defender and the aggressor of the "social fabric" of its own neighborhood. And there are examples of the sort of articulations that we have to describe in order to develop a geography of violence, and through it to 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, and it requires more careful elaboration.

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 then use to contrast with two more contemporary modalities. In order to understand what is at stake, though, we need to linger for a moment on the marriage practices that served as the framework that originally gave meaning and purpose to bride-theft.

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 usually entered 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 trend that has long been a factor in the formation of male and female subjectivities in rural Mexico.

In addition, because weddings were relatively expensive, young couples began their married lives indebted either to the parents of the groom or to those of the bride or to both, or, sometimes, to a patron who paid the cost of the wedding. For instance, in late-nineteenth century Yucatan, hemp-growing landowners routinely paid for their workers' traditional Maya wedding ceremonies. Freighted with that debt, the young married couples then settled 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 who eloped could live together without 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 thus 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 recognition and prestige that went 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 brought a mediator along, 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 *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.¹⁴ 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 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 might suggest to the wider community that perhaps the parents did not have the money to pay for the wedding, and that they secretly approved the young couple's transgression of the local norm.¹⁵

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 and 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 (often at gun-point), take her to the house of one of his kinsmen, and rape her. After that, just as in the cases of consensual 'bride theft,' the feat 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 often indispensable to calm the animus of the parents of the "bride," and to reduce the likelihood of violence breaking out between the families. Because of the signal importance of mediators in such cases, the parents of the "groom"/rapist often had to pay the mediator money. Both in the Tarascan case described by Paul Friedrich and among the Nahuatl 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 husband and wife.

In short, 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 were lumped together into a single formula (*robo de novia*) was, as I said, that the victims of the theft were thought to be the parents of the young woman, and not the woman herself. It was for this reason that the parents needed to be appeased much more urgently than the "bride," presumably she would later be made to comply by her new husband. The community as a whole was mobilized in order to assuage the feelings of the parents of the bride; since the groom's parents' persuasive ability leaned on the informal connections that existed between the two families -- either through indirect family ties or due to pressure from 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 bride-theft let loose 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 their shared village membership. The 'social fabric' that we are sometimes so very nostalgic about today has not always been as kindly as we

imagine, and it has frequently exhibited 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 a girl and a boy who wish to marry or live together 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 quite restricted until the early 1980s-- but also to the fact that today farming tends to provide only an income supplement, rather than a full family income.¹⁶

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. 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 tempting. 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 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.¹⁷

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 made 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 protect the commercialization of their product (opium gum).

Blázquez shows that geographic isolation is a key resource for this dominant class of caciques, who meld financial capital, coercive force, and the networks and ability to negotiate with municipal and state authorities, as well as with the Armed Forces. Violence is an instrument that serves to build and 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 deliberately cultivated geography of fear that has attached risks to traveling to Badiraguato. Similar strategies 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 subject to invasion and even to the eviction of local communities. The *pesados* and their gunmen have a role defending those *ranchos*, with which they are 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 confined in a community is more difficult than it used to be, and because neither the women nor the men of those communities have easy recourse to government mediators, because 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 sort 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 a complex and violently enforced economic geography.

Disappearances. I 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 creation of a conjugal tie or a household. Both old-school bride theft and the neo-traditional practice as discussed for Badiraguato are stratagems designed to anchor a young woman 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, disappearance is an act that precedes either murder or enslavement, and so the communitarian relations of the stolen women's families generally become deeply strained, rather than reinforced, with disappearances.

We still have not assimilated the social implications 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). In practical terms, a disappearance means that there can be no mourning of the victim, and without mourning 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 the husband's 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 conversation and produces discomfort. Disappearance produces deeply troubling uncertainties-- the disappeared person is neither ascertainably alive nor dead-- and as such it produces a kind awkwardness and unease. Friends and acquaintances can neither offer condolences nor easily suggest a change of subject. And so the family members of the disappeared begin to feel like they themselves are disappearing from their dwindling social world, which becomes trite and formal.

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 anchoring young women in marriage, and to rooting young couples in a community. The 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 shall fail to comprehend the political dimensions of our contemporary violence.

Conclusion. In this first lecture I presented the theme with which I shall be occupied during my conference cycle this year's cycle, 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, by focusing on the connection between reciprocity and violence within complex economic geographies.

I argued, first, that today's explosion of violence cannot be understood through any 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, so that 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 generally with 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 local 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.

My next point was to note that today's 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 thus 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 more ample economic geography.

I then closed with a few ideas regarding the theft of women and forced disappearance. I showed that bride theft, which had been part of the traditional repertoire of available strategies leading to marriage, was a strategy that leaned and depended on the 'good health' of the social

fabric, whereas bride theft in the deliberately isolated territories of today's drug economy imply an intensification of violence. And I concluded with a few thoughts on the ways in which both traditional and neo-traditional forms of bride theft contrast with today's staggering figures of disappearance, noting that whereas bride theft was geared to rooting women in families and communities, forced disappearance destroys families and weakens their social networks.

The rise of the new state and the geography of the crisis of communitarian mores shall be the subject of my Colegio Nacional lectures this year.

¹ Delivered on March 5, 2021.

² See, for a sociological argument, Sefchovic, *¡Atrévete! Propuesta hereje para disminuir la violencia en México*; in the public sphere, President López Obrador has made various pleas to Mexico's *narcos* to think of their mothers and of their families, and stop the violence.

³ Weiner and Jane Schneider (Eds.), *Cloth and Human Experience*.

⁴ Graeber and Sahlins, *On Kings*.

⁵ Graeber and Sahlins, 3.

⁶ Ricardo Raphael, "En México, todo el presupuesto al poder militar."

⁷ Rea and Ferri, *La tropa*, 537.

⁸ Rea and Ferri, 537-8.

⁹ Rea and Ferri, 447

¹⁰ Calatina Pérez Correa, Carlos Silva Forné y Rodrigo Gutiérrez Rivas, "Índice de letalidad."

¹¹ Cristóbal Colón, *Relación del primer viaje de descubrimiento*, 105 (my translation).

¹² Lomnitz, "Acerca de la reciprocidad negativa."

¹³ Ward, *Gangsters Without Borders*.

¹⁴ Friedrich, *Princes of Naranja*.

¹⁵ Nutini, *San Bernardino Contla*, 268.

¹⁶ See Arias, *Del arraigo a la diáspora*.

¹⁷ Adele Blázquez, "The Continuum of Women's Abduction in Mexico."