Policing the Environmental Conjuncture: Structural Violence in Mexico and the National Assembly of the Environmentally Affected

Gabriela Méndez Cota

Abstract: In this article, I contextualise the emergence and describe the political processes of a grassroots mobilisation against the structural violence of neoliberalism in Mexico in order to suggest the necessity of re-thinking conjunctural analysis in a posthegemonic direction. The National Assembly of the Environmentally Affected (ANAA) is a nationwide network of Mexican communities and organisations that has operated since 2008. ANAA’s most notorious achievement has been the opening of a Mexican chapter at the Permanent People’s Tribunal, the final verdict of which established the legal responsibility of the Mexican State for structural violence against the Mexican people. My account of ANAA’s intervention in the Mexican conjuncture recovers Stuart Hall’s emphasis on complexity and singularity by narrating, through multiple critical voices, the cultural and political conjuncture in which some of the most environmentally affected groups of the Mexican population have been able to organise and strike alliances with critical academic communities or socially concerned scientists. In terms of theoretical elaboration, I reflect on the limits of conjunctural analysis as a response to the deeper crisis of representation – what I call a ‘disjuncture’ – that concerns the scale of socioenvironmental violence in neoliberal Mexico. In order to think beyond issues of cultural representation, I propose to inform a situated practice of environmentally affected cultural studies with the posthegemonic turn in Latin American thinking of the political.

Keywords: Mexico, neoliberal cosmopolitanism, ANAA, technocratic hegemony, Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal

THE IMMEDIATE TERRAIN

On 19 September 2017 central Mexico experienced a 7.1 magnitude earthquake that killed 228 people in Mexico City and many more in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Puebla and Morelos. From a geological point of view the earthquake was described as unusual for two main reasons: its epicentre was very close to the Mexican capital and it was hypothetically triggered by an anomalous movement, perhaps a fissure, within a tectonic plate. By contrast,
most earthquakes affecting central Mexico usually originate far in the Pacific Coast and are triggered by periodic collisions of tectonic plates. Unlike such more habitual earthquakes, this one was strongly felt in relatively stable areas to the north and south of Mexico City which are regarded as safer than the downtown neighbourhoods. The latter sit on top of a former lakebed and are therefore highly prone to amplified seismic waves, while the supposedly safer areas sit on top of volcanic rock and other hardened remainders of the region’s deep past. However disquieting these geological details might be, a sense of human history repeating quickly took over the narration of the latest seismic disaster, which happened just a couple of hours after a city-wide drill had been performed in commemoration of the much more devastating 8.1 magnitude earthquake that hit Mexico on 19 September 1985. While the 2017 earthquake arrived abruptly, eschewing the alarm system that had been ceremoniously used on that very same day, the coincidence of dates seemed to immediately domesticate the public’s realisation of the terrifying vulnerability of one of the world’s most heavily populated megalopolises. It immediately focused our attention on questions of national ethos, unity versus conflict, hope versus despair, virtues versus vices of the Mexican soul.

The quake activated memories of the legendary ‘emergence of Mexican civil society’ which is conventionally dated on 19 September 1985. It renewed debate about continuity and change, about who and what defined the Mexican nation today that was not, or did not want to identify with the historic authoritarianism of the Mexican state. Barely a week after the event, the market research and political communications company Lexia Insights & Solutions published in its website a classification of narratives it found circulating in social networks.¹ In one of his weekly appearances in the news programme Agenda pública – within a section aptly called Guerra de narrativas or ‘war of narratives’ – Lexia’s vice-president Claudio Flores described six different narratives about the meaning of the earthquake according to social network users.² These were: an apocalyptic or religious narrative about the coming of the end of the world, a more secular narrative that praised spontaneous solidarity among the Mexican people in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, a narrative about the role of social networks themselves in the citizenry’s response to the emergency, a political critique of the government’s actions and rescue operations, an ecological narrative that speculated on environmental causes of the earthquake including human-induced climate change and, finally, a conspiratorial narrative that speculated on a military intervention of the imperial North. Among all these narratives, the one about an exceptional kind of Mexican solidarity in adverse circumstances – and only in such circumstances – was given the most attention, followed by one about a supposedly typical Mexican humour in the face of death which was expressed in real time through creative videos, photographs and memes released into social networks. In his commentary, Claudio Flores presented Mexican solidarity and Mexican humour as the

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objects of two distinct narratives which nevertheless overlapped with the political narrative about the good and the bad, or the heroes and villains of the earthquake emergency. Naturally, the villains were the government officials, whereas voluntary rescue workers and even rescue animals were the heroes. Dismissing the plausibility of any connection between the earthquake and ecological issues such as global warming or clandestine geo-engineering, Lexia’s commentary focused on raising the question of whether Mexicans would take the shock of disaster as an opportunity to at last redefine ourselves culturally and politically in relation to a dysfunctional state apparatus, or whether we would be satisfied with once again temporarily performing as angels and heroes, only to then go back to our usual sleepiness, resignation or comfort.

In the age of algorithms and broken political narratives, a socially-minded private enterprise such as Lexia – which basically sells sentiment analysis to powerful transnational brands in agribusiness, pharmaceuticals, banking and so forth – seemed to be performing the task that in other times and places would have been performed by cultural theorists, namely, that of diagnosing and interpellating the progressive sectors of society to critically engage in a war of position, a struggle for hegemony, in the sense of leadership or persuasion. While listening to Flores in a talk he gave at IBERO University in Mexico City, I was struck by the highly specific ways in which language flowed from the 2017 earthquake, giving, for instance, the name ‘Frida’ both to a girl supposedly buried under a collapsed school who was later discovered to be non-existent (a perverse media smokescreen?) and to a rescue dog that, after helping retrieve dozens of survivors and corpses, appeared in a televised football match alongside the triumphant national team and a dozen of army soldiers. Like the uncanny date coincidence of the two earthquakes, these characters made me think of nothing less than Frida Kahlo’s Two Fridas painting of 1939 which, according to popular interpretation, depicts her heart-breaking divorce from Diego Rivera. ‘Divorce’ was, by the way, one of the terms used by Flores at one point to describe the current relationship between the Mexican state and the Mexican people, a situation that, he suggested, should be transformed through a new ethos of responsible citizenship above and beyond melodramatic nationalism.

Apart from Lexia, very few other voices dared to interrogate the overwhelmingly melodramatic and narcissistic register of ‘aid’ on the part of socially-networked urbanites, who in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake rushed to provide the victims with loads of tins, bottled water, diapers and other emblematic products of modern urban life. As it quickly became apparent – through social networks as well, which didn’t exist in 1985 – that middle class neighbourhoods in Mexico City were being disproportionately assisted, privileged urban residents guiltily mobilised to re-direct the loads towards more peripheral areas, which in this case included multiple and completely destroyed towns in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca,
Tlaxcala, Puebla, Morelos and Veracruz. While the good intentions and the ‘spontaneous solidarity’ of urban residents cannot be underestimated or dismissed, at the time I could not help asking myself about the underlying structures, repetitions and disavowals behind the spectacle of solidarity, and about my own difficulty at experiencing the 2017 earthquake in a positively refreshing way. My listening to the ‘war of narratives’ so entertainingly described by Lexia, and to the dominant expressions of ‘solidarity’ within my own privileged Facebook bubble, left me with uncomfortable feelings of indifference (and boredom) rather than pushing me into warm social identification and hope. I asked myself why, and exactly what, I could not believe about the whole earthquake experience that could let itself be mobilised beyond melancholia towards a more fruitful engagement with the infinitely complex situation that ‘Mexico’ signifies today. That question inspired my selection of the earthquake and its ‘war of narratives’ aftermath as an entry point into the Mexican conjuncture as ‘a strikingly condensed and contradictory moment of political struggles, victories, defeats, and transformations’.4

In Mexico, a serious academic is not supposed to write much about ‘the conjuncture’, a term informally associated with the short-term and the opportunistic and implicitly opposed to the elaborate objects and time-tested methods of scientific study. Such is the common sense of what counts as serious academic work in a neoliberal society in which cultural studies, as Stuart Hall understood and practised it, has only recently gained institutional recognition as a transdisciplinary field. In other Latin American contexts where cultural studies has made important gains in institutional spaces, committed readers of Stuart Hall such as Colombian anthropologist Eduardo Restrepo insist that the relevance of Hall’s thought in Latin American countries has to do with the neoliberalisation of universities, that is, with their transformation into factories of quantitatively measured research that is increasingly disconnected from the tragic experience of the Latin American majorities.5 The radical contextualism of conjunctural analysis, which is connected with the metaphysical desire of cultural studies to ‘intervene’, is therefore most valuable today in Latin America.6

Jeremy Gilbert has argued that Hall’s approach to the conjuncture – as in The Great Moving Right Show7 – remains indispensable to understanding the current crisis of technocratic hegemony and of its cultural artefact ‘neoliberal cosmopolitanism’, with which the technocrats were able to win the acquiescence of ‘the metropolitan left’ in Britain, the US and some European countries.8 Like Hall’s 1979 essay and Gilbert’s 2017 essay, this contribution seeks to question how a certain ‘we’ (in this case an academic ‘we’) is implicated in the very phenomenon it attempts to critically investigate, namely, the production of hegemony and the current possibilities of destabilising such a production. It can be written only from an experience of a sudden crisis, a seismic experience which at the time of writing –months before the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador – did yet not look like a new conjuncture to me.
In my view, Hall’s early analysis in *The Great Moving Right Show* of how the British right harnessed residual and emergent feelings in order to rearticulate old social forms into a new balance of forces can indeed be ‘applied’ to Mexican neoliberalism in the last two decades of the twentieth century. However, rather than a positive characterisation of a new conjuncture, what I offer first is a reflection on disjuncture, a separation or a profound disconnection between academia, a state-sanctioned place for successful individuals, and the people, an anonymous collective engaged in diverse tactics and strategies for survival in conflict with what they see as a criminal state. In other words, I propose to think through ‘this conjuncture’ not in terms of an analytic or a method to be mechanically applied to Mexican cultural politics, but rather in terms of Stuart Hall’s enduring commitment to specificity and contingency, to radical contextualisation and self-reflective engagement with change.

THE MEXICAN DISJUNCTURE

Our country is not and has never been a democratic-constitutionalist country. Here, patriarchy is rampant, there are all kinds of discrimination, and justice has always been difficult to achieve. Yet for historical reasons it was possible in Mexico to construct, between 1945 and 1976, a semi-Fordist capitalism overseen by a state so strong and autonomous that for many years we called it ‘the perfect dictatorship’. For decades, the Mexican political classes were able to sustain an alliance with the popular classes, and to establish a capitalist regime still based on persons rather than things, with a great potential for industrialisation and a six per cent annual rate of economic growth. That precarious alliance, along with a good part of the Mexican social tissue, was swept away by neoliberalism. There are, according to cultural historian Arthur Schmidt, two main interpretations of Mexico’s transition from an economic model of import-substitution industrialisation (1940-1982) to neoliberalism (1982-present). The once dominant ‘Revolution to Evolution’ interpretation is a narrative of progress that represents Mexico’s economic development as the ultimate success of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921), a civil war that overthrew a liberal dictatorship and replaced it with the 70-year rule by the authoritarian Party of the Institutionalised Revolution (PRI). An alternative ‘Revolution to Demolition’ interpretation emerged in the seventies that read Mexico’s cooperation with US-style ‘development’ formulae as an economic betrayal of revolutionary ideals, i.e. land and freedom. Such an alternative narrative has struggled for hegemony by means of social mobilisation and academic activism against neoliberalism, as illustrated by the above testimony of environmental scientist Raúl García Barrios before the Mexican chapter of the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal (PPT). Contemporary cultural historians of the Mexican nation tend to agree with this ‘Revolution to Demolition’ narrative,
while attempting to rectify its economistic tendencies and their related underestimation of popular agency within capitalism – an example of which would be the state’s revalorisation of indigenous cultures for the purposes of nation-building. Within Mexico, however, the cultural and political dynamics of neoliberalism has received little academic attention compared with the violence and the effects of its imposition as an economic regime. By contrast, political scientists such as Gavin O’Toole point out that a purely economic understanding of neoliberalism in Mexico downplays the complex discursive challenges confronted by Mexican neoliberals as they dismantled a political economy legitimised by a potent nationalist tradition. Because revolutionary nationalism – the ‘Revolution to Evolution’ narrative – had been very effective in creating consensus, neoliberals tried to reconcile nationalism with the neoliberal project by explaining and interpreting globalisation in a certain way. Full entry into global competition was asserted as essential for national survival. Mexico would at last fulfill its revolutionary vision of progress by becoming strongly competitive in a global economy.

In fact, Mexico was one the first countries to endure the economic policies imposed globally by international financial institutions since the end of the seventies. Following a decade of economic crisis and structural adjustment prescriptions, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect on 1 January, 1994, and became the first experiment in the world with unconditional guarantees for capital investment. Through NAFTA, a relatively powerful manufacturing sector was abruptly replaced with aggressive processes of re-industrialisation, in which assembly operations (maquiladoras) were articulated with a transnational economy rather than fulfilling domestic needs. Food sovereignty was displaced by food imports as subsistence agriculture was replaced with an environmentally destructive export-oriented agriculture catering to the tastes of the US market. Rural support programmes, social programmes in general and the juridical order that sustained them were almost completely dismantled, starting with the constitutional articles that used to protect collective ownership of land (ejidos). To this day, collective owners still holding land are actively resisting the temptation to individualise land titles, yet forced privatisation (land theft) is progressing primarily in central Mexico, and is subordinating land use throughout the country to the interests of strategic new industrial corridors built between the eastern United States and the Pacific basin. Resource extraction by Mexican companies has legally expanded from oil to gas, shale gas, wind and solar energy, intensified mining and highly destructive hydrological extraction led by US oil and gas companies, Spanish electricity companies and Canadian mining companies, all of them supplying the US market. Increasingly deprived, by legal and illegal means, of a subsistence economy that has pushed at least 15.2 million Mexicans to emigrate, an oversupply of labour keeps Mexican wages among the lowest in the world. Especially since the 2006 onset of the ‘war on drugs’, those left behind have become increasingly vulnerable to all
kinds of violence, in a situation in which ranks of the criminal economy are increasingly indistinct from the ranks of the police, the navy and the army. While it became difficult to describe life in contemporary Mexico in terms other than loss – of a national project, of identity and of the state – one can more accurately describe what actually happened as a positive transformation of the state into a facilitator of corporate pillage. In the words of ANAA’s lawyer Raymundo Espinoza, as the neoliberal state ‘has bothered to legalise the violations of the rights of the people, they have recognised and guaranteed the privileges and private interests of a few against the public interest, going as far as ignoring the minimal conditions for the reproduction of social life’.15

It seems indeed very difficult to address the extreme scenarios of postcolonial nations in terms of ideology and cultural practices as opposed to straightforward economic determinations and direct violence, and yet I suggest that ‘we’ must try. According to anthropologist and historian of Mexican nationalism Claudio Lomnitz, the depth and speed of transformation in the last three decades means that we Mexicans no longer know who we are.16 We no longer inhabit, as in the eighties, an economic crisis that may be fixed by international loans, free trade and ‘a democratic transition’, but rather we are lost in a crisis of representation that expresses itself as a profound disconnection between society and its systems of political and media representation.

Throughout his recent collection of essays, La nación desdibujada, Lomnitz points to the more immediate political causes, namely, a failure of the ‘democratic transition’ that accompanied neoliberalism as its friendly face. Between 2000 – the year that marked the end of one-party rule – and 2014, Mexican states received more money from decentralisation policies than Europe received from the Marshall Plan. That money, which came straight from oil revenues rather than taxes, did not prevent or at least temporarily contain the devastating effects of free trade because no corruption control mechanisms were in place. Thus, Mexico saw the emergence of a millionaire political class with no sense of accountability. In the face of multiplying corruption scandals, competition among available political narratives – Anglo-style liberalism versus Catholic conservatism, the rule of law versus the family-based organic community – no longer describes the social processes that accompany the transnationalisation of the Mexican economy. In this particular sense, the current situation is for Lomnitz what I think of as a disjuncture, or a disconnection between Mexican political rituals and the material realities of Mexican subjects. Meanwhile, and not unlike the Marxism with guarantees that Stuart Hall was critical of, the Mexican left, Lomnitz observes, has so far been prone to an underestimation of the scale and the nature of social and cultural change undergone by Mexican society over three decades of ‘free trade’. Difficult as it still may be for the Mexican traditional left to acknowledge the cultural dimension of neoliberalism, individualistic consumerism and global popular culture continue to be influential factors in attaining the acquiescence a growing urban population of Mexicans.17


What to do, at present, with the undeniable cultural force of globalisation, is certainly at stake in the environmental conjuncture.

In Lomnitz’s view, the traditional invocation by the Mexican left of an authentic culture based on an indigenous essence and diametrically opposed to foreign interests is a fantasy as much as the conservative family ideal is a fantasy in a situation profoundly determined by global economic and knowledge flows. In spite of the conservative backlash of a movement such as the Front in Defence of the Family – a conservative movement that fears ‘the end of Mexico’ will result from gay marriage, abortion and contraception – Mexico is no longer culturally owned by the right.\(^\text{18}\) Class-based discrimination, sexism and racism still operate in institutionalised forms in Mexico, yet the critique of those forms of oppression is becoming louder and more visible than ever, while the traditional narratives of the Mexican nation no longer provide a viable political alternative for a country that nowadays exports more manufactured goods than Latin America as a whole, and that is more economically integrated with the United States than any single European country is integrated with the European Community. Hence, a false discussion of cultural essences must give way, Lomnitz argues, to a real discussion of existential possibilities on a daily basis. His argument, throughout La nación desdibujada, suggests to me that under the pressure of a massified violence, a moral transformation is going on, which seems to make this the most appropriate time to raise again the founding questions of cultural studies.

THE STATE DID IT

The 1968 Mexican student movement inaugurated the possibility of cultural and political democratisation, and its bloody repression by the Mexican state brought about a long-lasting alliance between the intellectual middle classes and the popular demand for political participation. In order to erode this alliance throughout the seventies the PRI – the ‘Party of the Institutionalised Revolution’ – which became synonymous with ‘the State’ in Mexican parlance – combined a ‘dirty war’ strategy against political dissidents with a neo-nationalist rhetoric aimed at domesticating the middle classes. An expansion of university infrastructure, research stimuli, and state sponsorship of culture backed the neo-nationalist rhetoric, while the growth of cities became the stage for new social movements to acquire concrete organisational forms in the poorest neighbourhoods. The ‘urban-popular movement’ of Mexico City, for instance, started in the mid-seventies when landless farmers, construction workers and other people who earned less than the minimum wage set up assemblies and autonomous networks of social care; in different ways they provided themselves with education, water supply, security, green spaces, health and territorial defence against government-backed urban developers. Cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis observes that these forms of organisation did not initially create structured proposals for a new society.\(^\text{19}\) For many years, they

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refused articulation, and frequently paid for it with internal fracturing and dilution. Things changed, however, on 19 September 1985, when a massive earthquake materialised the social belief that the Mexican citizenry would do better than the Mexican state in rescuing survivors and burying the dead, in caring for each other and reconstructing a destroyed city.

Only three years after the earthquake came the neoliberal effort to attune the energies of ‘civil society’ to the project of ‘joining the First World’. Besides signing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) gave the name of ‘National Programme of Solidarity’ to social reforms that substituted individualising, cash-based, media-enhanced ‘participation’ in the national economy for state responsibility and collective duties to universal care. The Zapatista rebellion, which made its international appearance on the same day of NAFTA’s inception, promptly denounced the destructive consequences of such measures, not to mention their deep roots in colonial history. Yet, and despite the virtually instantaneous global success of Zapatismo as a counterhegemonic narrative of humanity, three decades of free trade have led Mexico, quite inexorably, from economic destruction to violent social decomposition and unimaginable environmental devastation, as I started recounting in the previous section. Such is the context in which Mexican social movements position themselves radically against ‘the State’. 20

On 26 September 2014, the abduction of forty-three students from the rural teachers’ school of Ayotzinapa, in the state of Guerrero sparked the massive outcry and mobilisation of a wide spectrum of Mexican society. 21 In the following weeks, after a government official pronounced as a ‘historical truth’ that the students had been murdered by narcotraffickers and their burnt remains had been thrown down a river, thousands of Mexicans took to the streets shouting the accusation that the real culprit of the forced disappearance had been the Mexican state. In Lomnitz’s diagnosis, Ayotzinapa signalled a crisis deeper than 1968 or 1994. 22 At any other time the historic link between the students of Ayotzinapa and the guerrilla movements of the seventies would have facilitated their criminalisation and the justification of their forced disappearance. But after eight years of massive bloodshed all too easily attributed to a national story of police and thieves – which in many regions were in fact heavily-armed marines and narcogangsters – the Mexican state’s readiness to close down the Ayotzinapa case led to an irreversible public recognition the structural nature of the violence in Mexico. Such a banalising attitude on the face of tens of thousands of relatives of disappeared persons also exposed the psychological disjuncture in which ‘the war on drugs’ has installed the nation: the fact that ‘we’ no longer recognise ourselves as we go about our daily business on top of massive clandestine graves. Thus, unlike the student movement of 1968 and of the Zapatista insurgency of 1994, the social protest against the state’s handling of the Ayotzinapa case gained the support of all the social classes.


One evening in October 2014, I found myself in the Ayotzinapa protests in Mexico City. I was standing with my partner on the Zócalo, in the large main public square of Mexico City, in the middle of a crowd of thousands overseen by drones and helicopters. As we dispersed, big men on motorcycles looked menacingly at us from all four corners of the Zócalo; they seemed to be taking photographs and videos. The memory of 1968, and the fear of state repression, could be felt in the air. Another evening as I walked home, which at the time was only a few blocks away from the Zócalo, I got caught in a tight, agitated crowd. Suddenly, the relatives and friends of the disappeared students of Ayotzinapa appeared before my eyes. They were leaving the Zócalo and held hands, forming a circle of protection around the parents, as they advanced through the crowd. One of them was screaming so powerfully – ‘Ayotzi vive, la lucha sigue’ – that the windows of the surrounding buildings seemed about to shatter. I will never forget the vibrations of that scream, nor how from that same corner of the Zócalo I also witnessed, some days earlier or later, the symbolic end of a historic political career, that of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Back in 1988 I had accompanied my mother to the voting booths, and had indiscreetly announced to everybody that we were there to vote for Cuauhtémoc. This candidate was the son of Lázaro Cárdenas, Mexico’s figure of revolutionary nationalism who had expropriated oil companies in 1936. He was one of the founders of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and did not win the presidential election, but remained the moral leader of the reformist left. Three decades later, in 2014, after one of the massive protests against corruption and impunity, a crowd violently insulted and threw food at Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Some of the direct perpetrators of the Ayotzinapa disappearance had been PRD representatives in the state of Guerrero. The PRD and, with it, the whole party system, was forever discredited.

According to Lomnitz, among others, Ayotzinapa made it evident that Mexico has nothing – no functional institutions – but massive grassroots mobilisation and repudiation as a means to reclaim justice. In his view, the number of missing persons in Mexico, which is unknown but is estimated as tens of thousands, guarantees a continuing demand for justice through organised and better-communicated relatives. The question is now whether those people, most of which belong to very vulnerable sectors of the Mexican majority, will be able to renovate the political apparatus from outside of the rotten party system. Since 2006, the magnitude of the Mexican tragedy has seen a splintering of Zapatismo and social movements more generally, between sectors demanding radical autonomy from a criminal state and other sectors more open to striking alliances with the less illegitimate forces in the Mexican political class.

In July 2018 a representative of the autonomous National Indigenous Congress, María de Jesús Patricio Martínez (Marichuy) competed for the electorate’s attention with the presidential candidate (now president elect) Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), from the party Morena.
did not succeed in earning enough votes to become an independent candidate in the presidential race, but her stated purpose was not to win such an independent candidacy. Rather, it was to express an increasing distancing from traditional politics on the grounds of an increasing frequency and violence of the attacks indigenous peoples are being subjected to on the part of criminals and paramilitaries often employed by extractive companies protected by the state. Meanwhile AMLO gained traction and ultimately won the election by striking alliances with religious and corporate sectors. At least he will stop the killing, some seemed to think, by changing the government’s strategy against narco-violence. Soon after his election, however, AMLO started rectifying over what had seemed like the most decisive of promises that led him to victory. At any rate, his election also seems to confirm Lomnitz’s appreciation of cultural and political change in Mexican society as a result of three decades of neoliberal globalisation, precipitated by the spiral of uncontrollable violence that has devastated the country for the last ten to twelve years. In the following section I examine the role of grassroots environmental politics in such a process of change, and I argue that not only are grassroots socioenvironmental struggles crucial to the future – if there is any – of Mexican democracy, but also that the environmental conjuncture calls for a reflection, on the part of contemporary cultural struggles, that goes far deeper than strategic analysis, into the philosophical infrastructure of cultural and political narratives in Latin America and the globalised West.

THEY WANTED TO BURY US: THEY DID NOT KNOW THAT WE WERE SEEDS

Problems accumulate until they become institutions of a sponsored apocalypse. Ideas developed in other countries (the thesis of planetary unity, ecospirituality, the idea of the Earth as an organism that must be respected as a whole) are minimised or ignored in Mexico, and nuclear disasters such as Three Miles Island and Chernobyl barely resonate in Latin America. The distance from planetary commitments is the ultimate tribute to isolationism. So how do you persuade people to become involved at some level with the environment?

Cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis described the foreign quality of environmental sensibilities in Mexican cultural politics. Whereas the developmental imaginaries of the postwar period in Latin America had little to say about planetary limits, neoliberal extractivism and its speculative management of environmental disaster came to reinforce the marginality of ecological education, discussion and action in mainstream Mexican society: the one that lives in cities, has access to public and private services, and is attuned to global media. A symptom of this was the 1993 emergence of the ‘Green Ecological Party of Mexico’ or Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVM), which


is best described as a family-run business that attaches the word ‘green’ to any number of rightwing causes including the death penalty, and is well-known for its opportunistic involvement in straightforward ecocide through, for example, the development of tourist resorts in highly fragile coastal areas.\(^2\)

The fact that, despite having been explicitly rejected by green organisations at the international level, PVM continues to exist and to do violence to the language of ecology is a good introduction to the environmental aspect of the Mexican disjuncture. But it is also just one side of the story; the other side must be searched for as one searches for the disappeared. Indeed, Mexican green politics must be placed in the context of the extreme difficulties posed by state violence which, as Monsiváis also often emphasised, has conditioned the seeming political apathy of mainstream Mexican society. What I want to argue now is that the environmental dimension of structural violence in Mexico has its own as yet unacknowledged role in a political crisis that might have led to an emerging ‘conjuncture’ marked by the electoral triumph of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO).\(^2\)

With this hypothesis in mind I look in this section at the work of articulation undertaken by some of the legatees of 1968, 1985 and 1994.

Since the seventies the field of political ecology has been linking a minority of Mexican scientists to rural and urban grassroots movements. A longstanding and influential voice in that field, Víctor Toledo argues in his recent collection of essays, Ecocidio en México, that the neoliberal destruction of Mexico signals ‘the terminal phase of industrial civilisation and its individual, social and ecological contradictions’.\(^3\) The entire world is going through a civilisational crisis that demands, in Toledo’s view, the global reconfiguration of the modern way of life, a radical change of scientific paradigms, and the invention of new ways of interpreting and analysing reality. Like a good utopian radical and a representative of the communitarian left alluded to by Lomnitz above, Toledo believes in a ‘golden age of the human species’ in which benign collectivities thrived all over the world on the basis of cooperation and solidarity. He asserts that such a harmony or natural balance was catastrophically interrupted by the modern civilisation that is now, he thinks, in its terminal phase. Notwithstanding this prophetic and unduly pessimistic tone in Toledo’s discourse, it undeniably and positively resonates with so many other anti-capitalist movements in the world that aspire to transcend the individualism, rationalism and pragmatism of \textit{homo oeconomicus} in order to construct social power as the only exit from planetary collapse. For Toledo such an exit is not, moreover, a philosophical issue, but an urgent call for a new scientific praxis, a political ecology that restores the link between social care and environmental care. Thus, when he writes about recuperating ‘indigenous values’ such as reciprocity and respect for nature, he points to the hundreds of really existing cooperatives and local initiatives in Mexico that nurture collective wellbeing through non-extractive environmental management. When he writes about cultivating complex thinking as ‘species consciousness’, he points to the growing networks of


\(^3\) Democracy Now, ‘Mexico’s leftist president-elect AMLO promises sweeping changes on corruption, poverty, drug war’, \textit{Democracy Now}, 3 July 2018, online: https://www.democracynow.org/2018/7/3/mexicos_leftist_president_elect_amlo_promises

\(^3\) Víctor Toledo, \textit{Ecocidio en México}. La batalla final es por la vida, México, Grijalbo, 2015, p20.
concrete struggles, to the increasing articulation of social actions in concrete territories to be defended from the criminal state-industrial complex. ‘The final battle’, he says, ‘is a battle for life’. In recent years Mexican activists close to or sympathetic with Toledo’s utopian vision have performed astonishing political interventions that help to imagine and invite to seriously consider an emerging environmental conjuncture that starts with an international recognition of the dimensions and implications of Mexico’s suffering in the last thirty years.31 Their story adds another layer of meaning to a phrase often used by those who protested, and continue to protest the criminality of the Mexican state, namely: ‘they wanted to bury us; they did not know that we were seeds’.

The Asamblea Nacional de Afectados Ambientales (ANAA) is a nationwide network of environmental struggles that took shape between 2006 and 2014. It describes itself as a popular and pacific organised response to the global environmental crisis, an embodiment of the Mexican people’s increasing awareness of environmental devastation, and a living space for the encounter of neighbourhoods, towns, communities, organisations and movements that for years or even decades have been fighting against degradation, destruction and expropriation of their water, air, land, woods, biodiversity, seeds, health and conviviality. ANAA’s founder, Andrés Barreda Marín, is a professor of Political Economy at Mexico’s National Autonomous University (UNAM) and a long-standing left-wing activist with a history of direct participation as a political strategist in the Zapatista mobilisation since 1994. In 2006 Barreda took distance from Zapatista politics and went on to organise several independent, grassroots initiatives of environmental monitoring (focusing especially on water pollution and privatisation in Central Mexico) and popular education. In 2007, he founded both the National Assembly of the Environmentally Affected and, together with genetic scientist Elena Álvarez-Buylla, the Union of Concerned Scientists of Mexico (UCCS). ANAA and UCCS have collaborated in several ways throughout the years on a variety of environmental issues, first and foremost on the risk posed by GMOs to Mexican agriculture and biodiversity. While this has become the UCCS’s signature issue, ANAA has developed into a thematically complex and comprehensive network of regional, national and international alliances. The point, Barreda said to me in interview, is not to become yet another thematic NGO but rather to act as an articulator and a trend-setter in the social movement scene. That is, ‘the environment’ is for ANAA not a single topic to be informing about, but rather it is a matter of placing socioenvironmental awareness firmly on the agenda of Mexican and Latin American social movements.32

According to Barreda ANAA’s aim regarding an environmental consciousness has involved extremely hard work. In Latin America, he observes, ‘the social debt chokes the environmental debt’. ANAA has had to ‘break’ multiple forms of isolation related to the social debt, which keeps struggles apart from and ignorant of each other. There is geographic isolation,


32. I thank Andrés Barreda for generously sharing his testimony with me in a conversation that took place in January 2018 in the Green Corner Café at Miguel Ángel de Quevedo, Mexico City.
since Mexico is huge and the environmentally affected are territorially dispersed, culturally diverse and often do not have resources for travelling and communication. There is conceptual isolation of environmental issues from social and political issues. ANAA intervenes through popular education, and it is hard to describe the amount of time and energy that popular education involves in a country as large, diverse and socially indebted as Mexico. Finally, and most important for my focus in this article, there is the isolation between academic knowledge producers and the impoverished majorities outside academia, the latter being people whose knowledges are systematically undervalued (and policed) by mainstream society. ANAA conceptualises itself as a strategy for breaking all these forms of isolation, for allowing people to encounter one another and thereby discover, by themselves, that everything is interconnected.

Unlike the political ecologist Toledo, the political economist Barreda does not believe that capitalism is going to end. As an experienced strategist, he cautions against overestimating the forces of vulnerable groups, and against fostering unrealistic expectations. Rather, he advises strengthening and articulating concrete struggles on the basis on what the people themselves can actually do within their own contexts. The first gathering of ANAA in 2007 was improvised, an appendix to other mobilisations in Mexico City, and its memoir – which is found among many other documents in ANAA’s website highlights the lack of a collective perception of the country’s environmental collapse.33 The relatively few people who took part in it, however, started seeing links among their struggles and drew the first lines of environmental solidarity between the country and the city, as well as among the diverse regions of the country. A communication strategy was key, they realised, in order to make ANAA grow. After three more gatherings in 2008, the Assembly started to describe itself as the qualitative project of placing human-nature relationships on the agenda of national problems. Environmental management, the Assembly agreed, should be designed by ‘the communities themselves’, which needed a space to reflect together around key problematics: a) the centrality of biodiversity to the global process of accumulation; b) the political nature of environmental management; c) the debate around legality and institutions; d) the expressions of the global at the microsocial level; e) the problems faced by the communities as they establish their own relations with nature.

ANAA has evolved into a national space for the political education and interlocution of the environmentally affected throughout Mexico. Until 2014, it offered a series of workshops to all its members, literally thousands of communities from all over the republic, which were designed to share and multiply successful strategies in a horizontal manner. One of those workshops invited people to reflect around the connections between environmental devastation and the crisis of health, and to explore autonomous courses of action against environmental toxicity. ANAA activists frequently resorted

33. http://www.affectedosambientales.org/documentos-de-la-asamblea/
to ‘toxitours’, while medical and scientific professionals accompanied the workshops and contributed to promoting organic food networks, developing water and garbage treatment processes, exchanging native seeds, and so forth. Another workshop, titled ‘The new green capitalism’, was intended to warn the communities about the governmental drive to make money out of climate crisis, as opposed to stopping environmental devastation. The point was to get them prepared for new environmental policies that had been operating in isolated fashion but, the ANAA foresaw, would become integrated into ‘an aggressive totality against the survival of our communities and our ecosystems (geoengineering, privatisation of environmental services, biological corridors, intellectual property, REDD+, etc.)’. Finally, there was a workshop against juridical naiveté, based on the fact that social movements often make political mistakes that invite state repression and send them into burnout. By 2010, and having by its sixth edition gathered 500 community representatives, ninety organisations and 1,135 visitors from several Mexican states, the Assembly had made a clear connection between concrete environmental problems and the politics of free trade. Case by case, ANAA constructed a vision of systematic violations of the law on the part of the State and the transnational companies, and concluded that the situation could not be tackled by denouncing individual cases, since there is a crisis of the rule of law which means literally that the law is against the people. On the basis of this position, ANAA became the main promoter of the Mexican chapter of the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal (PPT), an international human rights tribunal founded in Italy in 1979.

According to Barreda, the Mexican chapter of the PPT started as early as 2009 with his own search for at least fifty organisations and activist personalities that could be interested in collaboratively writing the petitions that would be required once the Mexican chapter was admitted by in Rome. Not without much insistence on the part of Barreda and his collaborators, Rome accepted the chapter in 2011, by which time almost 300 organisations had joined the project. The process began then with the presentation of charges against the state at a public session on 21 October, 2011 at UNAM and continued through seven thematic and three multi-thematic hearings systematically exploring the complex, dramatic spectrum of violations of the fundamental rights of peoples which have occurred throughout the specific period examined in the PPT proceedings: 1982-2014. In the Mexican chapter as in other chapters of the PPT, thousands of documents were reviewed and thousands of witness statements were presented, resulting in a sentence that accuses all levels of the Mexican State apparatus of committing ‘abuse of power’ against the Mexican population in collusion with transnational capital, the policies of the United States of America and even with the operation and interests of a large number of criminal organisations. A total of 211 complaints were made to the PPT relating to environmental issues, but similar numbers were achieved by other ‘thematic sections’: ‘dirty war’,

34. Quoted from the website: http://www.affectadosambientales.org/talleres-de-formacion-para-miembros-de-la-asamblea/ Last access 29 November 2018

35. Most PPT Sessions are similar to courtroom proceedings in which complainants bring an action against a government or a private party for these to be judged against legal standards. In each session a panel of judges is usually comprised of five to eleven members, about half of whom are experts in international human rights law and about half of whom are other highly respected members of civil society. The judges hear testimony from victims, witnesses and experts in various fields, hear arguments from prosecuting and defense attorneys, deliberate and in time issue findings and recommended remedies. See: http://permanentpeoplestribunal.org/?lang=en
migration, femicides, labour rights, violence against communicators, and environmental devastation. Rather than summarising each thematic sections – which would be impossible in an article like this – I want to draw attention to particular sections of the final verdict of the PPT, those in which the tribunal highlights a ‘striking disconnection’ between Mexico’s image abroad and the actual horrors that the Mexican people have been going through since 1994, and increasingly since 2006.36 The authors of the verdict underscore how enormously challenging it is to understand the scale of violence against Mexicans. Partly due to Mexico’s diplomatic history of welcoming refugees, refusing to support armed intervention in other countries, and ratifying all kinds of international human rights agreements, the world lives in ‘shocking ignorance’ about the routine use of extreme forms of violence (murder, forced disappearance, torture) against those in Mexico who resist neoliberal state policies, particularly on the environmental front. Hence, the sentence reads, ‘the world must be told that the Mexican Government has a sunny face for the outside world and another one at home’.

In the decade following the 1968 student massacre in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, state violence had political opposition as its main target, and the most radical forces were concentrated in rural states of the country such as Chiapas and Guerrero – home of student leader and guerrilla fighter Lucio Cabañas, who trained at the teachers’ school of Ayotzinapa. Throughout the seventies the policing strategy was counterinsurgency led by paramilitaries. Today, however, as the PPT points out, direct violence is exerted on a massive scale, and policing operates more than ever at the level of representation. What in previous decades happened in other Latin American countries – the silence and the denial of forced disappearances and unexplained murders – has been spreading in Mexico and has become a mechanism of enforced passivity. The crisis of representation that Lomnitz diagnoses and that the PPT documents materialises in the fact that ‘there are no reliable records, no information about the data which refer to more than a million people internally displaced, nor proper treatment of victims, their testimonies or the situation their allegations reveal’. The existence of tight information control through direct violence (abduction, torture, murder) and indirect violence (threats, fear, impunity) make the PPT conclude that the Mexican government is thoroughly implicated in multiple cases and that, as Lomnitz also argues:

It has fallen to countless Mexican social movements to shoulder the burden not only of the many forms of suffering described in the tribunal’s proceedings, but also the difficult task of drawing back the cloak of silence and forgetting which surrounds the present situation, of documenting, classifying, analysing and also understanding the enormity, complexity and gravity of the State crimes carried out in Mexico between 1982 and 2014, and tracing their origins back to earlier massacres and processes of repression such as those of 1968 and 1971. That Herculean task, often...
performed alone, faced with the silence and indifference of international institutions, most governments, the vast majority of international and national media and even most grassroots organisations in other countries, has nevertheless been turned into an enriching space thanks to its capacity to coordinate social movements.

These were the seeds that the Mexican state buried, and they were cared for by the National Assembly of the Environmentally Affected. By the Final Hearing of the PPT, in 2014, and only a few weeks after the events of Ayotzinapa, the number of organisations involved in the trials had risen to 2356. While the PPT has no power to translate its rulings into practical punitive decisions, it derives its legitimacy from its ability to guarantee effective representation for ‘peoples’ orphaned of their rights and victims lacking any hope of recognition or remedy. The effects of such a representation and recognition should not be underestimated, and they should instead be acknowledged as a testimony of the social capacity, even in the most extreme circumstances, to break isolation and mobilise through solidarity. The Mexican organisers took as their direct inspiration the Colombian chapter of the PPT, which is important, Barreda writes in the Spanish version of the Final Hearing, because the Colombian chapter made the process itself, rather than its results, its main goal. He explains:

...it was certainly in the process of listening to each other that we repeatedly found the opportunity of an encounter, or a new encounter, among all kinds of organisations and all kinds of purposes. It was there that we had the chance of breaking the moulds, the sectarisms and atavic prejudices, that isolated our territorially dispersed resistances, clearing the way for us to set about reconstructing our communitarian tissues. And it has been in this process that we have put on the table new opportunities for critical reflection and for a profound re-organisation of our society.37

Although Barreda is a Marxist scientist that actively refuses to talk about ‘culture’ – too complex an issue, he told me in interview – a New Leftish streak shows through after all in his appreciation of ANAA’s success with the PPT. He describes ANAA’s strategy in very subtle aesthetic terms as the invention of a more virtuous relationship between academia and the people outside academia, in a context where mistrust and mutual suspicion tend to prevail. By attacking the disjuncture, in this case the isolation between potentially progressive social forces, ANAA created something that rarely sees the chance to emerge in neoliberalised universities. Indeed, one cannot underestimate the subjective effects, at the community level, of getting organised to do research on what actually happens to ‘us’ and to present it formally to professional researchers who seriously listen. For the academics involved in such a process it means the opportunity of understanding how much their

commitment is needed in the current social and environmental catastrophe. I would therefore like to suggest that ANAA’s story may be signaling the emergence of an environmental conjuncture not only in the sense of pushing for a centrality or hierarchy of environmental issues in the political agenda, but in the sense of a radical displacement of the framework that isolates environmental issues from all other issues and deals with them in a purely instrumental, representational way. ANAA does not just engage in a ‘war of narratives’, but rather it performs an intervention into the very framework that reduces politics to a war of narratives. It creates space for thinking something else – perhaps through a novel awareness of the material precariousness of subject formation – without guarantees. By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that rethinking cultural studies in Latin America through the de-essentialising work of infrapolitical deconstruction may radicalise an engagement with the environmental conjuncture, including cultural and political phenomena such as the National Assembly of the Environmentally Affected (ANAA).

ENVIRONMENTAL POSTHEGEMONY: ARTICULATION IN DECONSTRUCTION

In 2011, Hall wrote that ‘the present situation is a crisis, another unresolved rupture of that conjuncture which we can define as the long march of the neoliberal revolution’. He seemed to recognise that conjunctural analysis may have been, since the seventies, barely scratching the surface of that ‘chaotic abstraction’ which goes by the name of neoliberalism and that each time must be rendered concrete, given content, focus and a cutting edge through radically specific accounts from across the geopolitical spectrum. The magnitude of Mexico’s socioenvironmental crisis can be only faintly symbolised by last year’s earthquake and its narrative outpouring. Yet the earthquake can also be read as the prefiguration of a partial rearrangement, a crack through which grassroots voices may finally enter a phase of hegemonic struggle while, at the same time calling into question the framework of hegemony as such. As Gareth Williams suggests:

The modern nomos has entered into a state of collapse and we are living times of total economic mobilisation and spatial de-structuration characterised by the ultra-violence of narco-accumulation and the rampant extraction of resources not only in Latin America –in which the so-called leftist governments of the marea rosada have been key players too, of course – but in any space virtually anywhere on the planet deemed available for extraction and value. This is the time of spatial and political de-containment, and posthegemony is the sign and diagnosis of its peculiar, post-developmentalist epochality.

Posthegemony, Williams explains, is the question of time and of ‘our’ time.
In his critical account of the history of subalternism in Latin America, he presents Latin Americanists with two main options. Either we stay with a ‘passive acceptance of the laws of the given [by] conceiving of the political as reformist shifts in pre-existing social policy and systems of representation,’ or we undertake a ‘detour’ away from ‘positive reflection’ ‘in the name of an alternative interpretative regime for the thinking of the political (p80).’ The latter option is posthegemony, which emerged in the early 2000s as ‘a democratic thought and practice that sought to deconstruct the determination of the political in the name of freedom’ (p90). In my reading of Williams’s argument, posthegemony is no capricious libertarianism, but a distinctively self-reflective response to globalisation understood as a temporal de-structuration of the modern apparatus of development, an emergent war of all against all, and a de-structuration of modern political space. It is a rigorous and situated engagement with the disjuncture, the ‘chaotically abstract’ deeper layer as well or the philosophical infrastructure of the extreme violence of neoliberalism, against which ANAA continues to fight. Thus, by contrast with the decolonial variant of Latin American subalternism, posthegemony or ‘second-order Latin Americanism’ undertakes a detour from ‘positive reflection’ so as to effectively perform ‘a deviation or a divergence toward a difference from the nihilist world of the technologically given and the all-encompassing will to power of the modern subject (p81)’. Only such a deviation, Williams suggests, can materialise the posthegemonic wager ‘that politics does not have to exhaust itself within a hegemony-subalternity relation that always works against the subaltern (p90).’

When in 2006 I started my postgraduate education in London and discovered the possibility of translating my humanities background into a practice of cultural studies, Stuart Hall’s accounts of the crisis of the humanities and the emergence of cultural studies were of the greatest interest to me. Through their vivid description of uncertainty regarding what was going on with the culture, and their lucid acknowledgment of the conflicts and hostilities faced by the effort to construct novel theoretical frameworks, Hall’s writings constituted a model of thoughtful writing for me. Perhaps some of his enduring insights – his textual emphasis on the dynamism and indetermination of concrete social formations, and his democratic insistence on the notion that resistance is a process without guarantees – can be fruitfully articulated through the posthegemonic project now called ‘infrapolitical deconstruction’. A novel articulation would indeed be necessary because in the late 1990s, some practitioners of U.S.-based Latin American Studies realised that, having been initially useful to them as an escape from disciplinary constrictions, the cultural studies paradigm had become unproductive. In the context of ‘an intensification of political salvation through academic work’, such practitioners came to perceive cultural studies as ‘mechanical and dogmatic’ and as an obstacle to the critique of the history of the Latin American left (p15). Indeed, through an ascending hegemony of subalternism
and decoloniality, Latin American cultural studies seemed to be more invested in a repetition of the left’s history than in a reflection on that history’s implication in the metaphysical will to power, with its exterminative drive [Subalternist turn, p80-81]. A refusal of such a repetition started to organise under the name of ‘infrapolitics’, or a reflection on existence beyond political demand. Infrapolitics, Alberto Moreiras writes, ‘is the impolitical politicity that suspends and questions every apparent politicisation, every instance of political emergence’ (Infrapolitics, p14). This is also to refuse a politics as a closed space, which in the Latin American context may lead to ‘wholly other politics whose effective possibility we lose nothing for exploring’.

As a radical alternative to policing the environmental conjuncture, a rethinking of Hall’s legacy for Latin America through the work of infrapolitics may help to open up a singular approach to concrete processes of resistance such as the National Assembly of the Environmentally Affected (ANAA). As a space for encounter and recognition of society as such, ANAA is contributing to reconstitute the definition of society through a real discussion of existential possibilities on a daily basis. Yet like infrapolitics, and beyond the contemporary emphasis on substantial community, ANAA seems to enact a practice of alliance on the materially precarious grounds of radical equality rather than abstract filiation, representation, and liberation. I read it thus as an inventive practice of becoming with ‘both Indians and non-Indians, that is, everyone, and precisely everyone’, since we are all environmentally affected.

A processual, deconstructively material understanding of environmental affectation calls for further inventive interventions which refuse to settle into yet another mechanism for representation. In Mexico, the environmental conjuncture may thus harbor the invention of a deconstructive kind of cultural studies in which strategic analysis of national conjunctures opens up a space for radical democratic engagement with the deeper layers and the most painful experiences of the planetary disjuncture.

**Gabriela Méndez Cota** is a full-time academic in the Philosophy Department at Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México. Her work has explored biotechnological controversies in Mexico through some of the philosophical perspectives that inform cultural studies, including deconstruction, post-Marxism, and feminism. Her current research interests are queer theory, ecological thought, and environmental violence in Mexico.