Introducing the embodiment of political evil

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Luis Echeverría, the president of Mexico from 1970 to 1976, was serving as interior minister when the massacre of student demonstrators took place at Tlatelolco in 1968. Under the presidency of Vincente Fox (2000-2006), an enquiry was launched into the cover-up of the massacre by Echeverría and the subsequent president José Lopez-Portillo (1976-1982). Here, sociologist Alejandro Cervantes-Carson describes his efforts to obtain an interview with the man his generation grew up thinking of as "the embodiment of political evil". The bureaucratic hurdles he encountered led him to reflect on the processes by which political crime can be both overlooked and brought to justice.

In August of 2003 I conducted a three-hour interview with former Mexican President Luis Echeverría. The central purpose was to explore the paradigmatic changes that so profoundly transformed population policies during his term in office (1970-1976). While this was the central topic, the interview was crisscrossed with multiple sub-topics that linked our conversation with historical memory and biography, violence and authoritarianism, and, of course, politics, power, and democratization. These sub-topics were all condensed under the metaphor of Tlatelolco – the Mexico City student massacre of 2 October 1968.

William Canak and Laura Swanson describe the events and their historical impact:

In 1968, a series of large-scale student demonstrations demanding free and mass education erupted in Mexico City. As the protest expanded to include workers, peasants, and unions, ideas of democracy and redistribution of wealth were adopted. The student movement was significant for several reasons. First, participation in the demonstrations included approximately 400 000 people [...] Second, the student march to Tlatelolco Plaza in Mexico City ended violently with the Mexican police and army attacking the [unarmed and peaceful] group: 325 protesters were killed and thousands were injured [...] Third, a number of students involved in the 1968 student movement influenced or became leaders of the urban popular movements in the early 1970s. [1]
For many analysts, this was a political watershed in Mexican contemporary history. “The student movement of 1968 and the brutal government repression that brought it to an abrupt end deeply disturbed the Mexican people. A political, social, and moral crisis ensued that has not yet been resolved.” [2] Not only was the repressive state reaction excessive and unwarranted, but the systematic cover-up and official denial of the amount of people dead and injured came to signify the beginning of a political crisis of state legitimacy, which did not end until the elections of 2000, when the one-party system was defeated in the presidential elections.

More than three decades later, Tlatelolco hung as a spectre over our interview. Echeverría was being investigated by a special prosecutor for his alleged involvement in these crimes as government secretary (interior minister) and later as president. My generation had grown up scarred by these events and thought of him as the embodiment of political evil. Here, I would like to reconstruct these sub-topics ethnographically and offer interpretations of their political and moral meaning.

**Gaze upon the gaze, or: Scrutinizing is a two-way street**

“I want to thank you, most sincerely”, I said while making a gesture to gauge the time on my watch, “for devoting three hours of your time to us. You have been most kind and generous. Plus, I want especially to thank you for the lavish breakfast you arranged for us. I very much enjoyed it.” I was not exaggerating; it had been a five-course breakfast in one of the dining rooms of his house – not his office, but his private home.

“You’re welcome,” he said, with a pause that suggested something to follow. “But I noticed you did not finish your chilaquiles!” [3] There was a very subtle smile on his face.

“You’re absolutely right”, I replied with no hesitation. And then we both engaged in a pause that, in my mind, lasted an eternity. It was obvious that I could not but feel obligated to follow that statement with a minor revelation as to why I had not finished the dish. But my thoughts were elsewhere. He had noticed that I had not finished that particular dish, one of five. One detail among many, among thousands that happened during three hours, had caught his attention. He had noticed that my plate of chilaquiles had enough food on it to warrant a mental note, to warrant the filing of a comment.

“They were delicious,” I offered with honesty. “But you have to understand that I was concerned about the interview. In fact, to be frank, I was a bit nervous about the outcome. It’s not everyday that I get to interview a president of Mexico!” His reply was unmistakably ambiguous: he smiled.

I had also noticed the “state” of his plates: he had not left a bit on any of them. And I had also made a mental note: “At age 85”, I thought, “that is one healthy appetite”. So, why was I surprised about his observations?

This was not the first time in an interview that my sense of curiosity had been reciprocated by an interviewee, but this was beyond that experience. It was not that he was curious to know who I was or my level of sincere engagement with the interview process. What was at stake here was the degree of control over the entire interview
process. The gaze at the observed, it is true, had been turned upon the observer, that is,
upon me. More importantly though, I believe, this was his way of making two points.
First, that I had been constantly under his gaze, systematically scrutinized, and he
wanted me to know this. Second, that ultimately he had control over the whole interview
process. Let me be clear here, it is not that there had been any doubt about that: he had
controlled the pace, the transitions, the timing, and the dynamics; he also had full control
over his team of six advisors that for the first hour tested my knowledge, and my
intellectual stamina, until he called them off; plus it had taken me one full year to
negotiate the interview and the conditions under which it would happen.

The negotiation of the interview established two things: the theme and the boundaries
within which I could enquire. It was out of the question to address anything that was
related to the prosecutor’s case, which meant nothing that had a connection to the
Tlatelolco massacre or to the unacknowledged “dirty war” of the 1970s. Yet I was at no
point restricted in the questions I could ask, as long as I worked within the general issues
of population policy. Via the negotiations, I had formally empowered myself for the
interview, yet in the same move I had relinquished the power to surprise him; in a sense I
had relinquished the real power of the interviewer. But had I had an alternative?

“Well, make yourself at home,” he said, effectively ending our interview. “If you happen
to need anything, Juan is here to assist you.” He left the room and in his wake a guard,
perhaps a bodyguard, stood in silence and followed attentively our every move. Juan
became our shadow for the next hour; a shadow that I noticed when, as I tried to go to
the toilet, it became a body that blocked my way.

The interview had ended. The film crew was gathering the video material. I stood in the
middle of the room trying to find my balance. What had happened, exactly? Had I just
interviewed President Echeverría, the “embodiment of political evil”? Yes, no doubt, my
collaborators and friends could confirm that. All the same, I could not believe it. The
question was less about the empirical reality of the interview and more about the
morality of the experience. I stood there, silently in awe: had I really interviewed the
“embodiment of political evil”? I will come back to this question later, hopefully with an
answer.

Bureaucracy, rituals, and politics

One of the campaign promises of Vicente Fox when he was running for president was to
prosecute those responsible for having perpetrated crimes against humanity in previous
administrations. When he won the elections, Fox became the first candidate from the
opposition to be sworn in as president; the Institutional Revolutionary Party had ruled
Mexico for almost 75 years. Of course, he was very interested in appearing as a
candidate that promoted justice and opposed authoritarian politics. He was not to be
associated with the past. His administration was to be one of the future and of a different
Mexico. Campaigns can never be equated with governing, we all know that.
Nevertheless, when in office, Fox felt obliged to honour that particular promise; he
appointed a prosecutor to look into Mexico’s tainted past. That was the same year that I
started my negotiations for the interview.

It was late on a Sunday night. Sitting in my dining room, I was thinking about the amount
of phone calls invested, the faxes sent, the contacts mobilized, the time that had passed, the number of questions formulated. I was honestly a bit tired: one year, one full year of negotiating!

Yet there I was, dialling the number once again, just to follow the trail, just to be consistent, just to have a story to share with my friends, just to have a narrative to tell in the very likely case of not getting a damn thing! And then the concert of clicks began.

“Hello, hello?” I heard on the other side.

“Hello. This is Dr. Cervantes calling. I was wondering if we could talk about setting a date for the interview.” Even when one ignores the threshold, there is a degree of familiarity that develops after repeated phone calls. Many phone calls back I had dropped the introductions and explanations. One way or the other, in my mind, it was time to define the issue. I needed a date or else a flat out rejection.

“Yes of course. Let me try to reach his personal secretary. Can you hold for a second?”

“In many ways”, I thought, “one can read bureaucratic procedures as modern rituals and bureaucratic institutions as modern temples. It was the first time I had gained enough distance to have a surprising lightness about bureaucracies. I was no longer tied to an angry or impatient reaction. Mexico has always been full of institutions that ritualize all sorts of procedures.

Click, click. Click and click. “Dr. Cervantes? How can I help you?”

“Well, I am trying to set a date and time for an interview with President Echeverría.” In the lingo of government and politics, once a president always a president.

“Yes. Can you hold a second?” Click, click, and click.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the State was the largest employer of the nation. While on hold, I could imagine hundreds of thousands of people engaging in all kinds of rituals, repeating the same procedures over and over again, delaying and complicating processes, scolding people for not knowing the precise documents to bring or treating them like human garbage. But I no longer saw them as mean-spirited or small-minded people out to get the ordinary citizen. Now they appeared as members of congregations poised to engage in rituals and to follow them from beginning to end. These were not fanatics, they were bureaucrats.

Click, click. “Dr. Cervantes? I am going to transfer your call to the person that manages his appointments.”

“Great, thank you.”

To the extent that their rituals are experienced as jobs, bureaucrats see themselves as problem solvers, as satisfiers of requirements, as followers of orders. Bureaucrats, efficient or not, are modern subjects. They all participate in complex organizations that
rationalize different dimensions of social life, dimensions that are indispensable for the functioning of societies. In this sense, it is impossible for bureaucrats to see their activities as rituals. It would make the narrative of the traditional past equivalent to that of the modern present; narratives that are not meant to collapse into one other.

“Dr. Cervantes? Sorry for keeping you on hold. We have received approval for the interview. All that is left is to arrange an appointment.”

“That’s good news,” I said. “Let’s schedule the appointment.”

“Oh, no, I still need to transfer you to the person that manages his appointments.”

“Really? Okay then.” Click, click, click, and the silence on the other side made me wonder if I was still connected.

Modern rituals? Within a rudimentary binary system of thought that opposes the traditional to the modern, rituals belong to a pre-modern past, and bureaucracies are by no means seen as sites of tradition. Sure, they are not as efficient as they should be, but without them modern subjects would not know how to survive. True, this was no ordinary bureaucratic procedure I was negotiating. It wasn’t a driver’s license or a copy of a birth certificate but an interview with a president. Nonetheless, the rituals were all there. Each fax and phone call was like a tiny rite of passage, small steps in a one-year journey to the top of the bureaucratic mountain, towards gaining access to the high priest, in fact, to the highest of all priests.

Click, click. Click, click, and click. “Hello.” The voice was unmistakable, it was him, it was Echeverría! But how on earth was he on the phone? Nobody had warned me that I would actually be talking to him today. “So, tell me, why would you be interested in interviewing me?” And there he was, putting me through my last rite of passage before the final approval of the interview.

**Demonizing subjects and hiding complicities, or: The political games of blame displacement**

The simple yet profoundly thoughtful design of the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa has always interested me. The idea that entire nations need to live through a collective process of confronting and recognizing the horrors of their social and political past is in and of itself a very powerful idea that has (I believe) ramifications beyond the obvious. [4]

However, what I find most brilliant is the counterintuitive decision to give the Commission and the process no prosecutorial and legal consequences. It places – correctly I believe – the societal experience of coping with injustices (especially those committed in the name of the state, a collective enterprise, or a national project) in the public realm, in the realm of collective consciousness. Lifting the burden of prosecution, trial, and punishment from the Commission created a collective and public space with the mission and capacity to cope with the complexities of the pain and suffering of social and political injustice. Mexico, unfortunately, is still far from that place and process.
I would never argue or defend the idea that this is enough to heal such deep societal wounds; the claim that I am making is that a process that seeks only legal prosecution misses the central point of collective coping. Collective coping cannot happen, nor can wounds be healed, through classical judicial procedures. The central reason is that in liberal law, justice is defined in individual terms. Justice is reached between individuals through the mediation of courts. But liberal frameworks are ineffective in awarding justice to groups and collective organizations.

Who we are and what we do socially are inevitably linked to the ways in which we cope with experiences we feel break our moral and political sense of being or belonging. One cannot identify with a society that severs our moral sense of being. And this can only be healed by way of a symbolically reciprocal process. That is, a social and public process in which social injustices become acknowledged and part of the landscape of collective consciousness, however complex and imperfect this process might be.

Appointing a special prosecutor to investigate state-sponsored human rights violations was the boldest political move that Mexico has witnessed in three decades. However, as much as the appointment represents an initiation of a most needed process, it also hides serious flaws. I fear that targeting prosecution will prompt Mexico to skip the most important part of the process: a public and collective recognition of the horrors of the past, and most importantly of the intricate network of complicities that allowed the massacre of Tlatelolco to remain in the dark, unacknowledged.

The massacre was heinous. But the cover-up required a silent and systematic intervention of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people, both civilians and bureaucrats. There were more than 300 hundred bodies that needed to be disposed of, immediately; there were hundreds of disappearances that became “paranoid stories” and millions of authoritarian actions that were explained away or tolerated by bystanders. The most important process that Mexico needs to go through – in my mind – is the recognition of the intricate and multilayered complicities that society had with the authoritarian regime that ruled the nation for the greater part of the twentieth century.

In February of 2006 (just two weeks before presenting this paper), a report prepared by a team of researchers from the special prosecutor’s office was leaked to an academic in the US. As a director of the Mexico Project at the National Security Archive, [5] Kate Doyle decided to make the report available to the public by posting it on the Internet. In 800 pages, the report makes the crucial argument that the massacre of Tlatelolco was followed in the 1970s and 1980s by a dirty war orchestrated by two consecutive administrations: that of Echeverría (1970-1976) and of José Lopez-Portillo (1976-1982). The dimension of the atrocities and numbers of victims cannot not be compared to those of El Salvador or Guatemala or to those in Argentina and Chile, but the intention to erase political dissidence was the same. The Tlatelolco massacre was just the beginning of a systematic war against a politically critical and democratically active civil society, and the costs need to be accounted for.

“Nothing more than to think what we are doing”, is how Hanna Arendt described her book in the introduction of The Human Condition. As a way of explaining the continuity of her work and the internal substantive connections of her thought before and leading to the report on the “Banality of Evil”, Bernard Bergen offers a reformulation of her
intellectual intentions: “To think what we are doing by thinking over from the very beginning everything we ever thought we were doing.” [6]

I will start with my part, with my responsibility. I did not expect to find a kind and generous man, but I did the day of the interview. I was not confronting the embodiment of political evil, yet at the same time, in the same space, but under a different narrative, I was. In this same sense, during the interview I was also an embodiment of the politically critical and democratically active in Mexico, and simultaneously, I was an embodiment of the silent and the complicit.

A first, shorter version of this text was presented at the 7th Global Conference on Evil and Human Wickedness, Inter-Disciplinary.Net, Salzburg, Austria, March 2006.

Footnotes


3. There are many regional variations of this dish in Mexico, yet it basically consists of corn tortilla strips slightly fried and mixed with a cooked hot sauce (chile, tomato or tomatillo, onion, and spices) and meats (chicken, mostly), vegetables, or eggs (scrambled or fried) on top.


5. George Washington University, Washington D.C.


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