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REFLECTIONS ON THE TRANSFORMATION IN MEXICO

This article offers panoramic portrait of Mexican politics since the election victory of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's Morena movement in July 2018. Along its path to overwhelming success, Morena presented a vision of a historic transformation of a thoroughly corrupted Mexican state. Morena's opponents viewed its emergence with anxiety, as a radical, populist, leftist force. But the new regime has been extremely cautious, affirming existing geopolitical and security commitments and pursuing conservative macroeconomic policies. Working within these constraints, the López Obrador government has largely focused on a moral transformation of the state. The context of Morena's victory was the ongoing collapse in the Mexican state's monopoly of force and its historic complicity with criminal and paramilitary violence. The government's post-election approach has included a public reckoning with state crimes, from 1968 to Ayotzinapa. But its primary strategy has been one of ostentatious political asceticism. Rhetorically, this encompasses ideas of 'political love' and 'republican austerity'; in practical terms, it includes campaigns of public frugality and the performative vulnerability of the president himself. In closing, we analyse the proposed National Guard, arguably the centrepiece of Morena's putative state transformation, a policy condemned by some as renewed militarisation in the name of utopian republicanism.

Keywords: Morena; Mexico; AMLO; Fourth Transformation; State; Mexican Politics; Ayotzinapa

> Can the daystar dawn of love,
> Where the flag of war unfurled
> Floats with crimson stain above
> The fabric of a ruined world?
>
> Percy Bysshe Shelley,
> *To the Republicans of North America*, 1812[1]

> A state's place in the world is granted by the extent of its independence; this degree of autonomy also requires all internal relations to be arranged so as to assert the state's own being. This is its supreme law.
>
> Leopold von Ranke, *Politisches Gespräch*, 1836

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1. Introduction

There have already been many attempts to gauge the significance of the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as president of the United States of Mexico in July 2018, and the overwhelming parallel victory of his Morena party.[2] One framework still used is that of the so-called Pink Tide, the rough chronology-typology of left-wing Latin American regimes in recent decades (see Iber et al. 2019).[3] Seen in that context, the Morena victory would seem a late exception to a Latin American Left in crisis, as conservative regimes take power and the USA reasserts hemispheric hegemony. Of course, but for wholesale election fraud by the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) regime in 1988, the wave of progressive Latin American governments might first have appeared in the form of a Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas presidency. As it was, the Mexican Left was forced to wait 30 years, enduring many setbacks and affronts before taking power.

Another conceptual approach, more focused on Mexico's specificity, has been to flesh out the idea of a 'Fourth Transformation', the name given by López Obrador to his renewal of nation and state.[4] Invoked repeatedly by the president (ubiquitously known as 'AMLO') and his supporters, the term identifies Morena's victory as inaugurating the moral re-foundation of a thoroughly corrupted state. The 'Fourth Transformation' would be a successor moment to Mexican independence in the early nineteenth century, liberal reform in the 1850s and 1860s, and the revolutionary decades of the early twentieth century. However, if 'Pink Tide' can be criticised as a blandly homogenising metaphor, 'Transformation' comes with a different problem. As a coinage, it may promote historical reflection, but is also the slogan of a movement and a regime, limiting its usefulness as an analytic lens.

But this *transformation* – to remain for a moment with the term – is now passing from theory to practice, or perhaps better, from hypothesis to experiment. The months since Morena's overwhelming victory have seen the establishment of a new administration with a concrete political programme, and also given early indications of its attitudes to the state and of its culture of governance, clearly distinguishing the new regime from its predecessors. The state, as it were, has been newly inhabited. This concrete transformation encompasses and transcends distinctions between 'policy' and 'presentation', and 'base' and 'superstructure'. All governments and political movements now function within thoroughly spectacularised public and political spheres. Less than ever, in 2018–19, does it seem possible – even heuristically, even simplistically, even jokingly – to separate a more authentic socioeconomic base from a signifying, cognitive, cultural layer. The politics of pipelines is also the politics of the image of pipelines and the politics of the emotions of pipelines, and so on. How could it be otherwise? This is said less in critique of mediated illusion than in partial, grudging, fatalistic acceptance of it. That kind of spectacle – across all media, over the entire map of culture – is now simply the terrain of politics, and so be it.

A word is in order about the transition to power in the Mexican presidential system. As everyone remarks, it is unusually long, with five months from election to inauguration. In practice, this means the president-elect's assumption of power is a negotiation of a prolonged and potentially awkward transregnal period. This year at least, that temporal structure served to illuminate a double aspect of the presidency's power. Doubleness, referring to presidential systems, is sometimes identified as the combination, in a single figure, of ceremonial and executive functions. But AMLO's post-electoral passage to power instead emphasised the difference between a performative, public, communicational power, of a kind López Obrador was confidently exercising long before his inauguration, and the actual constitutional powers vested in him on 1 December 2018. As president-in-waiting, AMLO was already governing, in the form of an impressively energetic flow of public encounters, journeys, initiatives, national plans and legislative proposals, appointments and political decisions. The process intensified, but did not begin, with the reconvening of the Chamber of Deputies in early September, now with a large Morena majority. The actual inauguration thus had something of a Nietzschean quality: when the president, on that long day of public-democratic theatre, assumed formal executive powers to his person, he more or less became what he already was.

Examining the early months of AMLO's presidency (including the striking pre-inaugural accrual of authority) can lend specificity to what this new 'left' Mexican government actually is, does, and wants. Compared to others in the Pink Tide, Morena's political contours have at times been difficult to discern, and not only because of its odd-bedfellows electoral coalition with two smaller formations, one on the religious Right (Partido Encuentro Social), the other on the far Left (Partido del Trabajo). During the 2018 election campaign, AMLO's opponents and enemies on the right were only too keen to dub him 'charismatic and messianic', 'a radical leftist', 'a left-wing firebrand', or 'a hard-left populist', conjuring convenient spectres of Chávez, Morales, Lula, or even Trump. North of the border, op-eds in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* circulated warnings of a dangerous authoritarian populist on the loose; the schtick was toned down when López Obrador's impending victory became obvious. But neither AMLO nor his movement quite fitted any of the templates applied. Even potential confederates were confused: outside of Mexico, many on the left also found his mixture hard to fathom. Was he perhaps, horror of horrors, a *nationalist*? Unlike many Latin American leaders, and unlike a new wave of US activists looking south for inspiration, he did not use the word 'socialist' of himself or his movement, and never would. So what does it mean that he is on 'the left'? The question is closely linked to a somewhat more specific one: what does the new regime want for the Mexican state, as well as the Mexican people?

In important respects, the new government has been deeply cautious. Without much ultimate ado, it recommitted Mexico to a long-term North American alliance. Given the importance of the US relationship for Mexican security and defence policy at all levels, not least the 'war on drugs', this restricted the new government's options in tackling arguably the country's greatest problem: the high and increasing levels of violence permeating life in many parts of the country. The new Morena administration also pledged itself to extremely restrictive fiscal and macroeconomic policies, in what proved a pleasant surprise for domestic and international capital.[5] These two decisions – avoidable or not, laudable or not – imposed tight limits on any putative renewal of the Mexican state. The government promised ambitious new social programmes, and set about delivering them with considerable ingenuity and determination. In narrower terms of state transformation, two main focuses emerged in the first two months of Morena's authority: first, its plan for a new National Guard, to be a hybrid civilian-military agency, and second, from late December on, a concentrated government offensive against organised fuel theft from and within the country's oil industry.

2. Reconfigurations of organised violence

In one sense, Morena's sweeping victory was a 'normal' democratic transition: a deeply unpopular government was rejected by the voters, exchanged for an opposition bringing fresh ideas and promises of change. Momentous but orderly change was no small thing in a country where power had been closely guarded by a single party for much of the twentieth century. Moreover, for many, formal democratisation after 2000 had been a bitter farce, marked by election fraud and the rapid degeneration of new parties into clientelist factions, most disappointingly the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática), from which López Obrador resigned to found Morena in 2012. But there was more to Morena's victory than a peaceful handover of power. Without wanting to mystify democratic processes of societal negotiation into some apotheosised 'voice of the nation', if any recent political event felt like a collective cry of discontent, a rejection of certain unbearable conditions experienced by much of the people, it was the Mexican elections of 2018.

Mexico remains marked by brutal economic inequality, underpinned by a steeply hierarchical class system, in some respects more akin to a racialised caste system. The middle class has expanded rapidly in recent decades,[6] accompanied by new patterns of consumption, but the overall trend has hardly been towards economic justice.[7] In recent years, this social structure has been overlaid with ubiquitous corruption, a newly intensified version of an old phenomenon. AMLO's basic political message, which found resonance in large parts of the population, was that corruption had metastasised into a wholesale looting of the republic's resources, qualitatively and quantitatively different to the minor street-level *mordida* that often serves as the problem's trivialising emblem. Corruption, López Obrador argued, was destroying civic trust and corroding the nation's institutions from within. It had paved the way for worsening inequality and intensifying violence. A related phenomenon, in its own way worse, was that of 'impunity': the near-certainty that those with political, social, economic or terroristic power would never be held to account. Under such circumstances, to report a crime is at best to enter a hostile bureaucratic labyrinth, at worst to become a target for further state violence.

Today's Mexican state and society cannot be understood without engaging with the country's structural violence. But this does not mean accepting all received wisdom around this problem. At least since the launch of a version of US-sponsored narcowar in late 2006, Mexican society has become synonymous with a particularly performative kind of violence, which the global media – and much local media – has been happy to schematically attribute to drug cartels. Moreover, for various reasons, and to the benefit of different parties, domestic and foreign, this growing violence has often been packaged and labelled as a 'war', often in highly misleading ways.[8]

To question the common analytic framework of violence is not to minimise its reality, largely suffered by the country's weakest, poorest, and most marginal inhabitants. Across the Mexican public sphere, these victims are represented in forms both abstract and all too concrete. They appear as statistics, issued by national and regional authorities, tracking killings year-on-year: 33,341 murder investigations opened in 2018, 33 per cent up on the previous year. League tables rank the country's 32 states in terms of deaths and disappearances: in 2018, Baja California led in murders, Puebla in mass graves. According to local activists and journalists – those closest to the catastrophe – the figures are often a considerable underestimate. Every so often, some new number or incident forces its way to public attention, momentarily re-shocking an inevitably numbed audience.[9] Alongside abstract body counts, gruesome images of the dead are a staple of the popular press.[10] Gripping, vicious ambush footage from security cameras turns up on YouTube, scoring views in the millions. In this way, the dead are made hyper-visible. In other ways, they are rendered invisible, joining the tens of thousands of 'disappeared', whose families are left to search and dig for traces, with little or no help from the state. Finally, in a place somewhere beyond visible and invisible, are the rumours of still worse representations, the whispered ekphrasis of torture and murder videos, apotheosis of an entire terrible genre.

To invoke this violence without attempting to explain it is at best complicit. One general condition, impossible to ignore, is the ongoing collapse in the Mexican state's monopoly of physical force. This is arguably the new government's most overwhelming challenge, as well as a crucial context of its victory. One need not fully buy into Hollywood tales of ambitious *sicarios* and cartel kingpins to acknowledge the dangerous fragmentation of Mexico's landscape of organised violence. Even the briefest survey reveals something of its crowded, chaotic character. To begin with, there are the state's own military forces – army, navy, air force, marines, and, until recently, an 8000-strong presidential guard – as well as the federal police, all of whose formations are heavily armed, with some units explicitly established as paramilitary forces. The hundreds of local and state police forces are often notorious for complicity and corruption, each with specific relations to locally deployed military formations. In addition, there are the country's infamous autonomous criminal organisations, ruthless and well-armed.[11] This is not to mention Mexico's estimated 500,000 private security guards, only around 300,000 of whom are officially registered. In some areas, independent defence groups, the so-called *grupos de autodefensa comunitaria*, have been established to protect local communities, but they are sometimes accused of vigilantism, or collusion with the forces they nominally oppose.

It would be wrong to depict this state of affairs as an undifferentiated slide into anarchy. Rather, the sheer proliferation of organised violent groups has created a largely obscure political landscape – obscure to the average citizen at least – where realities of power and violence are opaque and often deliberately mystified. The darkness of this social and political reality is filled with stories, myths, and rumours of all kinds, including sensationalised fictional and semi-fictional accounts of criminals and cartels. Against this must be set the ongoing efforts at clarification by courageous activists and journalists: hundreds have been tortured and killed as a result of their work.[12] Based on this knowledge, filtering up from the worst-affected regions, one mode of analysis explains the intensifying violence as a trace of the logic of a brutal late capitalism. In this model, heavily armed groups of paramilitary police and criminal soldiers function in cahoots with, or in significant proximity to, extractive corporations and new forms of mobile capital (Paley 2014). However it is interpreted, this is a profoundly dangerous development for any polity. In terms of the state, the kaleidoscope of plausible collusion makes wholehearted trust of state or military institutions both unwise and unlikely, even if some military and police units are less compromised than others.

3. It was the State

The phrase *Fue el Estado* (‘It was the State’) was produced during a wave of social organisation responding to a particularly complex and shocking atrocity. The incident known as ‘Ayotzinapa’ involved the disappearance and presumed murder of 43 rural student teachers, on or around 26 September 2014, when they were attacked by heavily armed groups in Iguala in the state of Guerrero.[13] Some students and bystanders died at the scene of an initial ambush, cut down by intense gunfire from several directions. One early victim was horrifically mutilated. The remaining 43 students were abducted, never to be seen again, presumed massacred at some nearby location. Their bodies may have been dumped at some as-yet-unknown site, and physically annihilated in some way: dismembered, incinerated or dissolved in acid.[14]

In a sense, the exact emergence of the phrase is unimportant. It might best be regarded as the anonymous result of an intense moment of social mobilisation, which released – a side-product of concentrated human intelligence and emotional engagement – living images, memorable phrases, and innovative organisational styles. The words first came to wider notice around 22 October 2014, four weeks after Ayotzinapa. On a day of nationwide campaigning, with supporting actions overseas, a march of protest and memorial was held in Mexico City. It took the traditional route up the city’s central boulevard, Reforma, its name invoking the heyday and legacy of nineteenth-century Mexican liberalism. The march ended at the Zócalo,[15] after dark, where the families of the dead addressed the crowd, calling for the return of the disappeared and the identification of the killers, both individuals and organisations.

That night, the words *Fue el Estado* were marked out in large white block capitals on the ground in one corner of the Plaza. A photograph taken from an upper storey of a nearby building captured the scene panoramically: the old presidential palace in the background, the bright platform bearing the bereaved families, the crowds not entirely filling the enormous square, then the phrase itself, an oversized graffito visually emphasised by a protective circle of protestors, drawing a human frame around the collectively coined aphorism. The photograph, which so graphically juxtaposes a political idea with a political scene, spread widely on social media, gaining some aura of iconicity.[16]

The force of the phrase partly resided in the variety of ways it moved its addressees.[17] As a statement, it had a powerful deictic effect: a simple utterance pointing directly at a context of great confusion and (deliberate) obscurity. It was also an accusation: the murders, it said, must not be safely put away in a box labelled ‘crime’, ‘drugs’, or ‘cartels’, which had been the immediate reaction of the attorney general and conservative intellectuals. The specific implication was that the crime was a collaboration, involving not only depraved local politicians and drug gangsters, but municipal police, locally based army units and intelligence services. The state – as organised violence – had directly participated in the murders, or discreetly facilitated them, or tacitly allowed them. The accusation went wider, aimed at the state in a broader sense, as a system of law and government which, while posing as the highest instance of justice, in fact colluded in violence, both direct and structural, usually targeted at the poorest segments of society and at resistant social forces, as with the murdered of Ayotzinapa.

Fue el Estado was also an intellectual cue: within days, several short reflective essays appeared, citing the phrase, showing the picture (see, for example, Merino and Martínez 2014; Fernández 2014). This discursive node, which grew in later weeks and months, reflected on the meaning of ‘state’ in the context of the atrocity. As a prompt to thought, *Fue el Estado* differs from, for example, *Only the state deserves your hate*, the grand old English anarchist saying. The first, pointing towards obscure events and unclarified political constellations, forced deeper inquiry and thought; the second, cut loose from specificity, with its jolly rhyme, is more general and less urgent, more slogan than aphorism. This was reflected in the post-Ayotzinapa theoretical conversation on the state. An ad hoc, well-informed questioning of the political conjuncture, conducted in newspapers, online magazines and Facebook postings, asked the question: what horrendous structural defects in governmental and political culture allowed, even impelled, this massacre? Definitions of the state here varied from the narrow sense of governmental structures, to a wider, Hegelian sense of the term, referring to parts of what now would be called civil society.

But rather than tracing theory, it seems more productive to observe the practice of the wider social movement, as it persisted and developed in the years following the Iguala atrocity. In political terms, the movement for justice was an alliance. It brought together the communities of the victims – families, neighbours, and local activists – with a variety of other social agents: quasi-official human rights institutions, forensic scientists, artists, journalists, and intellectuals. As it developed, the movement produced situations, images, and utterances of considerable ethical force, as well as cultural and political ingenuity. These included the stark aesthetic of the faces and names of the dead, carried on placards at public events concerning the massacre, as well as the ‘anti-monument’ built on Reforma in April 2015, and maintained since. It also includes, less material but not less real, the hope and energy somehow maintained in the face of official obfuscation and lies.[18]

This moral, witness-bearing force of the Ayotzinapa movement was inseparable from its other main function, as an ongoing investigation aiming to reconstruct the facts of the Night of Iguala, and the truth of its relations with Mexico's social and political reality. The mendacity and negligence of state agencies produced, from desperate necessity, a passionate wave of documentary production within Mexican culture. This amounted to a collective civic mobilisation across media, genres, and techniques, including local journalism, long-form narrative reportage, the formal proceedings of civil society and foreign investigators, contemporary modes of television and film documentary, online archives, and visualisation devices (see Cacho 2016; CIDH 2018; Crecko 2015; FA 2017; FA, EAAF and CDHAPJ 2019; García Meza 2018; Hernández 2016; Hernández and Fisher 2015; Mandujano 2018; Robles 2018).

In this way, the Ayotzinapa campaign produced a deeply impressive movement of empirical inquiry. However, although it shed light on the events, moral determination and technical prowess were not enough to fully clarify the situation. As collective production, however, it had another function. In a more complex version of the deictic force of *Fue el Estado*, this documentary wave also served to *point* to a situation, illuminating it, without necessarily fully explaining it. Assembled representations of 26 September 2014 created something like a flash onto the obscurity of actually existing relations of power and violence. It revealed, with sudden clarity, perhaps less for a local audience than a national one, the obscure, brutal configurations of one corner of the polity. *Here*, it seemed to say, *look here* at this particular complicity of state, crime, money, and politics, the dense knot of culpability linking Iguala with the Cocula municipal police, the army's 27th Infantry Battalion, the Guerreros Unidos criminal gang, degenerate remnants of the once-progressive PRD party, and so on and so forth. Then imagine that collusion further, extending across the nation, in all its local varieties and intensities. *Fue el Estado*. *Es el Estado*.

This process of deictic revelation – seen in the phrase *Fue el Estado* and more important, in the social movement that coined it – might be called *dialectical imaging*.[19] 'Dialectical' since it is a collective production of accurate social knowledge and usable resistive emotion. 'Imaging', for its lovely connotations of modern techniques and processes, and as a gerund, to emphasise that this is not a given knowledge, but an image created socially, in the context of historical struggle, from the most general to the most local. Such social imaging is a practical effort, intended to have an effect. And in the context of Mexico in the years before the 2018 elections, one effect was to formulate a demand that the state make a reckoning with its complicity and its own direct crimes. If the state could not or would not achieve that, then the state would have to be changed.

The 2014 Iguala massacre had direct connections with another infamous state crime. The murdered students had been travelling to Mexico City to participate in the annual commemorations of the 1968 massacre at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco. There, in an operation which finally defeated an emancipatory social movement which had troubled the regime for months, state forces gunned down an unknown number of protestors, at least 50, and possibly several hundred. (Even today, many basic details of the event remain uncertain, including the death count.) In the years since Tlatelolco, a culture of commemoration has evolved, but as with the 2014 Iguala incident, and hundreds more like it, commemoration is inseparable from an ongoing effort to uncover the truth.[20] The year 2018 had double valence, marking both the fiftieth anniversary of the killings and an election campaign of historic significance. Over the year, the steady rise of Morena – with its insistence on the moral corruption of the republic's institutions, its focus on impunity and violence – ran parallel with a particularly intense cultural processing of 1968, above all its violent denouement.

The commemoration was striking for its pervasiveness across many media, in variously industrialized cultural forms. Amazon Mexico took advantage of the occasion to release only its second original production, the much-publicized *Un extraño enemigo*, made jointly with Televisa and available on Amazon sites worldwide. Few chances were taken with the eight-episode series: it focused on government intrigues rather than the social movement, centring on a hackneyed anti-hero, a troubled cop confronted with deep-state machinations. An older, more critical film and television series, *Tlatelolco: Verano del 68*, subject to indirect government censorship when first made several years previously, was rereleased on Netflix and YouTube as well as broadcast television. Radio Educación, the public radio service for culture and education, ran extensive programming, including a five-part documentary podcast, *Por los senderos del 68*.

These electronic media formats coexisted with traditional forms of performative political mobilisation – marches and rallies – and newer modes of aestheticised association, closer to relational aesthetics and participative, even therapeutic, performance. The universities had an important role in mediating these events, with much of the participational commemoration focused on the Tlatelolco museum, established by UNAM in 2007. There, the day before the anniversary, the Danza UNAM company organised a site-specific performance for students and local residents, which had moments like an old-fashioned 'die-in'. The happening was one of over one hundred educational and commemorative events, a series branded by UNAM as 'M68'. Comparable performances were staged on the campuses of UAM, Mexico City's public university system, with student performers 'inhabiting' identifiable figures from the 1968 events. The annual International Book Fair in the Zócalo featured a themed event sequence entitled 'Legacies of 1968', with as many as six discussions a day on the meaning of 1968.

Most newspapers and magazines produced some kind of special issue. Images of the movement were more ubiquitous than ever; at times, their re-presentation felt like a running battle against de-auraticisation. For the fourth time in 30 years, the influential magazine *Proceso* produced a special issue, the photographs of Manuel Gutierrez Paredes reproduced within retro-styled page design. The 'open galleries' of Chapultepec Park ('Rejas de Chapultepec') had something comparable, exhibiting Héctor García's dramatic black-and-white photographs of 1968 in large poster-size on the external fences of the park. Individually, there was little to object to in any of this cultural acknowledgement. The sheer ubiquity, however, inevitably raised questions whether a threshold had been passed, turning commemoration into diffuse monumentalisation. (Nothing as invisible as a monument, wrote Robert Musil.) A key scene in *Roma* featured another, lesser-known historical killing – the El Halconazo massacre of 1971, when a US-trained army unit killed over one hundred protestors in Mexico City (Cuarón 2018). Coming towards the end of a wave of hyper-memorialisation, this choice – whatever its specific narrative justification – felt like cultural innovation, almost product differentiation.

As a historical phenomenon, 2 October 1968 has been incorporated into several competing national narratives. In one, the dead of Tlatelolco are read as precursors and, in a more complex way, martyrs, of a historic process of democratisation, as early de-legitimisers of authoritarianism. The lineage is traced through the civilian mobilisation after the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, the electoral reform of the 1990s, the advent of a meaningfully multiparty system, and the displacement of authoritarian paternalism by some form of genuinely agonistic democracy. But this is not the only account. Others saw the slaughter of 1968 as the eternal return of the perpetrator state, repeated in a sequence encompassing the Dirty War of the early 1970s, political assassinations, and ultimately the militarised drug war campaigns launched by the Mexican and US-American governments in 2006.

Over five decades, the position of the Mexican state on 1968 gradually but radically shifted. Immediately afterward, the murders were obscured, partly by the noise of spectacle – above all, the Olympic Games themselves – partly through systematic slander of the victims as 'terrorists' and 'communist conspirators'. Eventually this gave way to halting and incomplete incorporation of the event within state institutions, rituals, and epistemic production (above all, school textbooks). The process accelerated with the defeat of the PRI at the federal level in 2000, with the autonomous, directly elected Mexico City government playing an important role from the late 1990s on. In a significant moment, Luis Echeverría – interior minister in 1968, later president – was prosecuted for genocide, an important moment in the state's reckoning with its historical violence, despite his ultimate acquittal. Lasting from 2006 to 2009, the trial also ran in parallel with the accelerated militarisation of the country's internal affairs.

The fiftieth anniversary of 1968 saw numerous ostentatious political gestures, some of them significant. In September, in a culminating moment of recognition, the newly elected Chamber of Deputies voted to add the 'Movimiento Estudantil de 1968' to its Wall of Honour, a rare late twentieth-century extension of the official list. This parliamentary monument eclectically conjoins erstwhile enemies, its catalogue of approved national signifiers principally succeeding in a bland erasure of historical difference. But the fact that it paid tribute to the movement, not its terminal mass murder, was a minor point in its favour. In September, the head of CEAV (Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención a Víctimas) – the state agency supporting victims of human rights abuses – drew headlines by calling Tlatelolco a 'state crime'. Although the observation had no legal force, this explicit utterance, even from the margins of the archipelago of state institutions, was not nothing. In December, on her first day in office, Mexico City's new Morena mayor Claudia Sheinbaum announced the abolition of the city's tactical police corps, the 'granaderos'. The move was emphatically symbolic: precisely this abolition had been a key demand of the 1968 movement.

On the day of the anniversary, López Obrador, speaking at the main Tlatelolco ceremony, assured the public that there would be no repeat of state violence. His precise form of words, widely reported, was: 'Jamás daré la orden para reprimir al pueblo de México' ('I will never give the order to repress the Mexican people'). The phrase seemed curiously overdetermined. Although hardly meant as such, it could be read as a carefully worded acknowledgement that state violence contains dynamics and structures far beyond the will of any president. A cynic might also observe that explicit orders from the top are comparatively rare in such situations.

But the new regime did show some seriousness in reckoning with state crimes. After years of brazen official lies and evasions – an approach spearheaded by the federal interior ministry and attorney general's office – AMLO, soon after taking office, confirmed the establishment of a truth commission to determine what happened on the Night of Iguala.[21] In late September, the president-elect publicly met with families of the missing forty-three. The incoming government instituted a new cabinet-level department, the Secretariat of Security and Civilian Protection, which organised 'Listening Forums' ('Foros Escucha'): formal encounters between government representatives and the families of the dead and disappeared. López Obrador attended the first of the sequence, held in Ciudad Juárez, a city indelibly associated with the violence and impunity of the last two decades. A total of 16 hearings were held across the country.[22] But the initiative ended prematurely in early October, on grounds that its findings had to be synthesised into overall policy initiatives. Some saw the move as suspicious, particularly when, over the following weeks, the government seemed to shift its position on state security. This included the announcement of a new National Guard under military command, as well as comments by López Obrador appearing to minimise the army's role in past atrocities.

4. Two theatres

The day of the presidential inauguration really was a full *day*, with events programmed from early morning – when López Obrador left his house, accompanied by a volunteer civilian motorcycle escort – until late at night. Considered as political theatre, the inauguration combined several themes and moods. Running through the occasion was a sense of a newly authentic encounter between people and state, both symbolised and instantiated by the opening of previously closed spaces, ceremonies, and institutions. The programme of events felt well-paced; the schedule was not overcrowded. No practical problems occurred in the course of the day. It felt like an ambitious modern piece of political choreography, a composite event, intelligently open to popular participation, well executed on a modest budget by global standards. Judged in that sense, it could technically be compared, although clearly the differences are great, with something like the opening ceremony of the Beijing or London Olympic Games.

Seen as a national event, López Obrador's inauguration was novel and highly significant, breaking radically with previous versions of the inauguration. These were, of course, performative constitutional events and in that sense *public*. But they had taken place indoors, in parliament, tightly focused on the swearing-in ceremony – in 2006, Felipe Calderon's inauguration was completed in four minutes. This underlined the impression of a closed political caste. For recent inaugurals, simmering public anger would in any case make open events risky. The 1st of December 2018 differed from these predecessor events in its public participation, but also in its novel urban scenography. This largely focused on Mexico City's historic centre, but included an important outlier: in Chapultepec Park, Los Pinos, the presidential palace since 1934, was repurposed and opened to the public. Literally from one day to the next, it was converted from a presidential residence to a genuine public space. On inauguration day, it was visited by an estimated 30,000 citizens. Over the coming weeks, the building would host several screenings of Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma*, including one outdoors, on the former presidential helipad.

Aside from the swearing-in, the day centred on two presidential speeches, one before parliament in the morning, one in the afternoon in the Zócalo, attended by around 160,000 people. The two were linked by a relatively informal procession from the parliamentary buildings to the Zócalo. There were military vehicles, but they carried only cadet officers; the route was lined with people, but the famous *tianguis* of the district were open, and inaugural crowds mingled with Saturday shoppers. AMLO's speeches were in effect two halves of a single address. The parliamentary portion presented a historical overview, emphasising the decades-long failure of Mexico's economic system to provide popular prosperity. Among other things, there was an economic-historic thesis to be proven: neo-liberalism was a 'disaster', and had failed Mexico on its own terms, delivering weak growth since 1982. A subsidiary argument framed this in terms of political culture: in Mexico, went the argument, neo-liberalism meant privatisation, a powerful vector for corruption, the corrosion of civic morality, and the undermining of institutions.

The Zócalo speech was more detailed and future-directed, its long list of numbered points veering from declarations of principle to detailed policy elements. Many were couched as explicit promises. This is a favourite AMLO rhetorical device: during the campaign, he sometimes had 50 items, now it was 100. The very first promised 'special attention for the indigenous peoples of Mexico', an idea underlined by the visibility of indigenous elements during the afternoon, including a ritual cleansing of the new president and his spouse. By his final points, López Obrador was invoking a grand national project of education and enlightenment, the cultivation of 'well-being of the soul' to accompany material prosperity. The speech ended more or less at dusk, an intelligent use of the site, since one of the Zócalo's main features, both as *mise en scène* and as *lieu de mémoire*, is the radical difference between its diurnal and nocturnal moods. The air was unusually clear; from a point hundreds of metres above, Santiago Arau, the country's best-known drone photographer, captured footage of the scene. In his images and gifs, the Zócalo's political theatre is shown from a high angle, backdropped by a wide sunlit segment of the enormous city, its emblematic volcanoes unusually visible on an almost smogless day. They are beautiful pictures, with an easily legible semiotic of national unity and renewal, and were shared tens of thousands of times on social media (Arau 2018a and 2018b).

AMLO, as a politician, has known failures in public performance, from the fizzling out of his great constitutional refusal of 2006, to his painfully weak television debates of 2018. But the day of his inauguration was overwhelmingly judged a success. Even long-standing sceptics of the new president, for example in the business media, acknowledged it to be an impressive event on a national and even international scale. The inauguration, whatever one made of its political content, also underlined the dubiousness of rote claims, sometimes still made, that AMLO is a 'charismatic' or even 'messianic' leader. The sites of his public appearances may sometimes run to the gigantesque – stadia and public plazas – but what personal charisma he possesses feels limited and understated, more teacherly than sacerdotal. People say he can be charming in private, but *magnetic* is not a word used. Of contemporary political leaders, his rhetorical style sometimes seems closest to Angela Merkel, with her assiduous command of detail and serenely delivered bullet points. In his inaugural speech in parliament, AMLO offered his own complex comparison with other political positions, couched in an entirely Mexican historical vocabulary: 'Just as I am a Juarista and a Cardenista, I am also a Maderista.'[23] A combination of liberal republicanism with an indigenous face, state command of national production, and a fatally hesitant constitutionalism? For the anti-statist Left, there was a tiny, condescending consolation prize: the name of Emiliano Zapata, it was announced at the Zócalo, would feature on government stationery throughout 2019, the centenary of his assassination.[24]

The events of 1 December cannot be properly understood without casting an eye backwards, a single day, to another great national ceremony for the Mexican republic. This one was held, however, not in the capital of Moctezuma II, Porfirio Díaz, and López Obrador, but in a medium-sized function room in the Costa Salguero Convention Centre, a waterfront development in the Recoleta district of Buenos Aires. Here, in a hastily organised side-event to the 2018 G20 summit, the leaders of the United States, Canada, and Mexico signed the successor agreement to the North American Free Trade Agreement, originally dating to 1994. The details of the occasion were both telling and richly comic. The American president was unmistakably the master of ceremonies, thanking the attendees, in particular his fellow leaders, for coming to his event at short notice. Trudeau was sullen throughout, barely polite, unsurprising given the diplomatic battering undergone by Canada in the negotiation process. Peña Nieto was a bathetically reduced figure. His media presentation had always been wooden, his voice an annoying authoritarian sing-song, but he had at least been *soigné*, with a clean sash and well-combed hair. Here, he looked dishevelled, almost sick.

Trump's speech made not the slightest effort to conceal US-American primacy. He clearly felt, with some accuracy, that the NAFTA negotiations, whatever their twists and turns, had ultimately affirmed his nation's natural continental hegemony. Previous US presidents would have taken greater care of the feelings of subordinate neighbouring allies, but that is hardly Trump's style. The three-podium visual arrangement – gold, silver, and bronze, Trump victorious in the middle – intensified the impression. The unscripted dialogue was abundantly allegorical. At one point, the US president leaned forward, looked to his right to Peña Nieto, thanked him, then turned to the room, observing that this was *Enrique's very last day in office, everybody! <Looks at Trudeau> Justin, it's his last day! <Trudeau begins to clap, Trump looks back to Peña Nieto> … and signing a deal as important as this …. On your last day, huh? Enrique!* Peña Nieto maintained his perfect rictus, but it was an excruciating moment, both for viewers and surely also for the outgoing president of Mexico.

Trump had hammed up his unhappiness with NAFTA for almost two full years as president, threatening to impose new tariffs (35% on Mexican exports, he warned), actually imposing new tariffs on aluminium and steel, and generally whining about the injustices of the 1994 deal. In the end, little more than a few tweaks were made to the existing agreement – tighter intellectual property rules, altered definitions of 'national origin' for car-makers, more market access for US farmers – most of which benefited the United States. To all intents and purposes, Trump signed something very close to the continental pact he had so long decried. Of course, after years proclaiming NAFTA intolerable, the US president now insisted, in almost every sentence, that *this* deal was 'brand new' or 'brand new and better'. Hence too the need for a new name: the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. In October, Chuck Grassley, a senior Republican US senator, frankly acknowledged the sham of 'newness', telling reporters that: '95 percent of what we will be voting on is the same as NAFTA'. For their parts, Trudeau and Peña Nieto praised the agreement, respectively, as 'modernised' and 'renewed'.

In theory USMCA is simply a trade deal, although the disappearance of 'free trade' from the new name should at least give pause for thought. In practice, the agreement is the centrepiece of a more comprehensive, discrete North American alliance, identifiable even if largely tacit. The absence of official American military bases in its two contiguous allies is a sign of the closeness of the three states' relations, not the contrary. In any case, as with all trade agreements, in USMCA, the strictly 'economic' bleeds easily into political and geopolitical questions.[25] Certainly, throughout 2017 and 2018 the US military and defence establishment had been extremely eager for Trump to hurry up and get the main deal sealed, whatever about his dangerous pantomime with walls and caravans.[26]

The ghost at the USMCA feast was López Obrador. He could hardly be in two places at once of course. But it was clear that Peña Nieto could only have finalised and signed the agreement with AMLO's approval.[27] This was a transparent, unconcealed political move by the president-to-be. Soon after the election, he made sure to smooth over relations with Trump with a warm exchange of letters. Trump, always easily flattered, was easily flattered. Soon after, Mexico and the United States agreed on a new bilateral accord, which was eventually opened up to Canada some weeks later (ergo Trudeau's irritation in Buenos Aires).[28] Throughout the negotiations, Mexico tried to develop other trade deals, for example, an upgraded agreement with the European Union signed in March 2018. Minor diversification measures were given outsized publicity, in an unconvincing attempt to suggest increasing commercial autonomy from the United States. But despite all efforts to diversify the country's economic relations, little changed in Mexico's basic situation. In 2014, 80.3 per cent of Mexican exports went to the United States. In 2017, the figure was 79.9 per cent. In short, although allowed a certain diplomatic leeway – toleration of the Estrada Doctrine, for example[29] – Mexico remains tightly bound to the United States in economic, political, and military terms. Perhaps it was with hopes of one day increasing Mexican autonomy, even autarky, but in mid-2018 AMLO accepted this continental relationship as the cost of assuming the Mexican presidency.

5. Innovations in political asceticism

Seeking to assemble and inspire a broad coalition, Morena's outline for republican transformation featured many overlapping concepts, with key terms resonating in mutual connotation. Alongside invocations of the 'Fourth Transformation' came references to a *República Amorosa*, translated as 'Republic of Love', or in more banalised versions, 'Benevolent Republic'. The term was coined prior to the 2012 election, when Morena was only a movement, not yet a party. In the run-up to the 2018 election, AMLO's best-selling books illustrated the concept with eclectic religious epigrams, stressing individual probity and benevolent love as the only basis for sustainable political reform.[30] For self-consciously hard-headed political commentators, possibly also for a swathe of the electorate, this was all rather embarrassing. They perhaps hoped that, in office, AMLO might abandon the holy fool act. But in pragmatic terms, the choice of word was hardly stupid: 'love' is a popular concept, something understood by religious leaders, songwriters, and greeting card companies. Some version of it was not a bad addition to an electoral vocabulary, particularly in a country with a deep layer of religiosity.

Moreover, to take the concept seriously is to admit to the possibility that love, through its association with morality and the common good, is not the property of religion, but the basis of politics itself, as proposed by heterogeneous traditions in political theory reaching from Plato and Spinoza to Marx and Ernst Bloch. In a Mexican context, we might cite the political thought of Alfonso Reyes, and indeed the movements of the 1960s, now hailed in gold letters on the wall of the Mexican parliament.[31] Reflecting on the 'republic of love' concept, theorist Enrique Dussel pointed out that Mexico's historical experience of the political has overwhelmingly been as cynical self-interested farce, with politics reduced to 'fetishized bureaucratic actions, carried out for the sake of self-love, corrupting the public and the common' (Dussel 2012). In this context, an insistence on love as a political category does more than simply recuperate a metaphor. It also serves to ground specific ideas, including amnesty, austerity, and the corruption of the state.[32]

In this way, 'republican austerity', a more immediately political term, accompanied 'love' in the López-Obradorian lexicon. As a Mexican political concept, *austerity* lacks the connotations it has accrued elsewhere. In the Eurozone area, the word has become a euphemism for 'sado-monetarist' cuts enforced by the European Union on state spending. In the United Kingdom, the term referred both to fiscal retrenchment and to the nostalgia for wartime stoicism used as ideological flavouring for the policy. In his inaugural speech before parliament, the new president directly alluded to this European political vocabulary, the better to distinguish his own Mexican usage. In the Mexican context, 'austerity' harked back to nineteenth-century politics, above all to Benito Juárez, whose 'republican austerity' served as counterpoint to the lavish style of the conservative aristocracy.

Morena's revival of the term not only condemned excess, venality, corruption, self-seeking, and carelessness with public resources, it impugned those behaviours as fundamentally unpatriotic.

In practical terms, the campaign for austerity broadly meant two things. First, an ostentatious campaign of public frugality, beginning with the most powerful, well-rewarded individuals. ('We clean from top to bottom, like sweeping the stairs', was a favourite campaign simile.) Early on, the new government abolished the lavish lifetime pensions paid to already wealthy ex-presidents, a practice instituted in 1987, in a country with no universal pension system. The new parliament also passed a new law making the president's salary the upper limit for public salaries, including employees of quangos and state-owned companies. With AMLO taking a voluntary 40 per cent salary cut, many in the upper echelons of state enterprises found themselves worse off. (Supreme Court justices intervened by temporarily suspending the law to protect their own salaries.) The campaign for governmental frugality shaded into a much larger campaign against public corruption, which the government suggested would raise enough money to pay for its planned social programmes. It would have to: while Morena intended to audit and redistribute public expenditure, focusing investment and transfers on the poor, it had no plans for redistribution by taxation, nor, less directly, by some form of deficit-led reflation. Accumulated wealth would remain largely untouched. The state would have to tighten its belt and clean up its act; the rich, on the whole, would not.

On austerity, AMLO led from the front, as he had as Mexico City mayor between 2000 and 2005. López Obrador's personal frugality is a crucial element of his political persona; as the guarantee of his probity, its role in his political success should not be underestimated. One early target of the new regime was the presidential jet, a Boeing 787 bought two years earlier for US $218 million: opponents claimed the sale would lose 'up to US $137 million'. Exhibited briefly to the public to underline the decadence of the *ancien régime*, the plane was conveyed to southern California for immediate sale, to be joined eventually by 60 other aeroplanes and 70 helicopters from the government's fleet.

The image of a president boarding a commercial flight has an undeniable egalitarian frisson: he shares public space with his constituents, relatively unsegregated, relatively alone. The situation also has comic potential, illustrated in April 2018, when a viral video showed former president Vicente Fox squirming while a fellow passenger harangued him about his pension. Taking commercial flights after the election and the inauguration, AMLO was regularly approached by long lines of well-wishers and selfie-seekers. But López Obrador's other transportation sacrifice was arguably a more powerful symbol. Abjuring a limousine and motorcade, he opted to retain his 2013 Volkswagen Jetta, neither bulletproof nor with tinted windows, in which he was driven several kilometres to work every morning from his private residence. To understand the measure of the gesture, it is necessary to grasp the centrality of traffic to Mexican urban life, and the hours spent daily by millions on crowded, polluted commutes.[33] While a car and driver is a privilege not granted to those crammed into *peseros* and *trolebuses*, for the president to voluntarily enter in the bonds of aggressive 14-lane gridlock is a convincing act of personal solidarity. López Obrador begins his working day with a cabinet meeting at 6 a.m. In a way, this is yet another aspect of his political asceticism. But in the circumstances, it is also the only way to beat the traffic.[34]

The president's third, and most serious, gesture of personal sacrifice was the radical scaling back of his personal security arrangements. As Mexico City mayor, López Obrador was protected by a team of armed civilian guards, all women, known as *gacelas* ('gazelles'). But as candidate and president, his security has been almost non-existent, justified with his notorious observation: 'the people will protect me, he who fights for justice has nothing to fear'. The crush of enthusiastic crowds eventually prompted the creation of group of 20 unarmed *ayudantías* (helpers), who remain primarily responsible for the president's safety. On the day he took office, the new president dissolved the Estado Mayor Presidencial (Presidential Guard), which had traditionally provided security. This also meant a refusal of intelligence, which would ordinarily predict and frustrate plans against the president's person. The refusal of special arrangements for his protection is regarded by many, including within his party, as unconscionable recklessness.

With the end of the revolutionary era, political assassination went into steep decline in Mexico, although there were exceptions, like the 1994 murder of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio. The drug war has changed this as so much else. The 2018 elections saw the murder of no less than 48 candidates, almost all at local and regional level, along with 84 party workers. Each of these murders had its own savage local logic, but there is no reason to suppose that political violence cannot, at some point, spill back to the capital, and upwards to higher government echelons. Foregoing security in this situation is no empty gesture. It is hardly hyperbolic to see AMLO and his associates positioning themselves as public hostages for the pacification of Mexico, in a reversal or transfiguration of the state's 'high value target' strategy.[35] It would be obscene to speculate on the odds of the president surviving his six-year term. But it is difficult not to.

This radical gesture is the most concentrated example of what might be called López Obrador's innovation in political asceticism. To essay yet another international comparison, AMLO's political style, now his governmental style, bears comparison to Mahatma Gandhi. The comparison is meant in political-technical, not hagiographical terms; nor should it be taken as an exaggeration of the Mexican leader's historical significance. There are clear similarities: both politicians engage in performative image politics on a national scale, linking their personal physical commitment to the economic and moral fabric of the nation.[36] Both have done so, on occasion, with great tactical acumen and theatrical flair. In both cases, too, the self-performance indexes a commitment, a 'truth' which uses (in the spirit of the Method) the mortal body of the actor as collateral for the transformed world he projects. More intensely than with other leaders, this particular political style runs the risk of ridicule, as well as defeat and failure. This performative vulnerability – which AMLO surely felt acutely at the end of his protests against the illegitimate 2006 election – seems linked to something genuinely pacifist, or at least profoundly *civilian*, about López Obrador and the Morena movement.[37]

6. Civilianisation

Ultimately, neither *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the state's crimes) nor a politics of asceticism would be enough to confront the problem of violence, the corruption of public institutions, and the proliferation of armed groups in the country. The 'Republic of Love' – the term used not in mockery but in all seriousness – would also need to command and control the resources of the state *as a state*. In other words, the new government, to transform the state and repair the nation, would have to devise plans of action and strategies of institutional reform, but without defaulting to the failed policy of violent escalation, the disastrous meeting of fire with fire. During the election campaign, Morena's approach to the security question had insisted on the need to reframe the problem, to look more deeply into the roots of the crisis. López Obrador's slogans (*abrazos no balazos*: 'hugs not bullets') and his idea of an amnesty were frequently derided as trite, utopian or ill-considered, but they at least attempted to bring underlying socio-economic, even socio-psychological, issues to the fore.[38]

Immediately after the election, the prospective government strongly hinted that its policy would centre on demilitarisation, changing a strategic focus that had dominated for at least 12 years. In short, taking troops off the streets. But when the six-year National Plan for Peace and Security was finally released on 14 November 2018, the new regime seemed to have radically changed direction, for whatever reason – the military or the Americans, some speculated. The plan contained ideas for combatting corruption, moral improvement, even drug legalisation, but its centrepiece, its core as an *executive* document, lay in the proposed establishment of a National Guard.

The new organisation was to be a hybrid police-military force, initially 80,000 strong, a number to be achieved by subsuming the Federal Police, while also incorporating tens of thousands of soldiers and marines. (The former Presidential Guard, now without a function, would likewise be absorbed.) The National Guard would have a civilian leader, and some civilian management, but operational control would remain in the hands of military officers. National Guardsmen – in effect, soldiers and paramilitary police in new uniforms – would patrol the streets in some areas and make arrests, although it was emphasised they would operate under civil, not military law. Finally, over the next three to six years, so went the plan, the institution would directly recruit 50,000 new personnel, gradually weaning the institution away from its military origins, giving it an identity of its own.

For many, the new plan amounted to a disastrous misstep. Human rights NGOs, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, expressed alarm at what they regarded as unchanged militarisation. On the Left, there was grim I-told-you-so satisfaction that Morena had revealed its true colours, offering old drug-war wine in new bottles. In fact, went their argument, this was *worse*: where previous administrations had given the military an operational and strategic role, López Obrador was now granting an ongoing, quasi-constitutional function to a fundamentally tainted institution, guilty of atrocities, complicit with criminal gangs, allied with American drug warriors. Others, including those on the centre and right of the political spectrum, focused their critique on institutional reform, or rather on its failure. They regarded the Federal Police, although perhaps deformed by paramilitarism, as a civilian institution, and a possible kernel of change. Now it was to be recklessly, permanently subordinated to military culture and command. Yet another critique of the plan claimed, in exasperation, that it simply repeated what *every* recent Mexican president had done: wastefully establish a new federal force, squandering time and money and energy, botching institutional reform every time.

There was a curious abstraction to the National Guard proposal and to the political debate it triggered. At times, it felt less like a proposal to reconstitute actual units and forces, more like a collective attempt at organisational hypothesis. The vagueness allowed for quite contradictory analyses: where critics saw a pernicious 'militarisation of the nation', the government presented it as precisely the opposite. In the words of Alfonso Durazo, Minister for Security and Civilian Protection, it would in fact lead to a 'police-isation of the military'. For the government, the institution of the National Guard is a genuine, plausible attempt at demilitarisation. The plan itself makes precisely that claim. For its opponents, this was simply Orwellian: War is Peace, Militarisation is Demilitarisation.

Utopianism is both the great strength and great weakness of AMLO and the Morena movement. To challenge the entrenched cynicism and brutality of Mexico's contemporary political culture, it invoked – and believed in – radically novel possibilities, beyond the paradigms that only led deeper into crisis. Hence the call for the Republic of Love, for moral regeneration, for the great Transformation. At times the National Guard plan seems less like a policy document and more like a brilliant work of utopian imagination, its optimism and slightly delirious formalism reminiscent of Fourier's phalanxes. Even the proposed combination of different state forces reads like a concoction of organisational tinctures, a mixture of *policeness*, *militariness*, and *civilianness*.

The National Security Plan proposes to do many things at once. It is a policy proposal – for better or worse – to reorganise state forces in response to an urgent, very real problem of violence and security. But it also seeks to address profound underlying problems. These include the social and economic issues alluded to by AMLO throughout his campaign, but also the fragmentation and proliferation of organised violence in the country, including the corruption and collusion of the state's forces. Finally, at a level both symbolic and literal, the National Guard aims to address a fundamental problem, crucial to any renewal of the republic, namely the blurring of the distinction between civilian and military force.[39]

As imagined by the new regime, the National Guard would be both school and exemplar of republican virtue, while also serving as a key element of the country's security architecture. For some, this was a promising paradox, for others, a disastrous contradiction. Reading between the lines of its organigrams and flow charts, the National Guard is intended not as a civilian institution, but as a *civilianising* one, to be placed, as such, at the very heart of the republic's armed powers. With every passing year, the new National Guard would grow less military, in a process of transformation both organisational and moral. The form that republican virtue would take, between 2018 and 2024, would be the gradual civilianisation of the conflict, and eventually the country. We can only hope it succeeds.

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Notes

1. Shelley wrote the poem in February 1812, after reading accounts of the rebellion of Hidalgo and Morelos. It was later retitled 'The Mexican Revolution' by Shelley's editor, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In the first line, 'dawn' is a verb (Holmes 2003, 176–177).
2. Founded in 2011 as a political movement, the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) became a political party in 2014, with the slogan 'The Hope of Mexico'. In Spanish, the acronym MORENA also means 'brown-skinned woman'.
3. Originally coined by a *New York Times* reporter, the widely used term has been questioned, not least for its tendency to erase important differences between countries and political movements (see Isbester 2011).
4. The approach taken at 'La transformación histórica del régimen mexicano en el contexto global: los retos para el próximo sexenio', a conference held at UNAM on 7–9 November 2018. For a critical reading of López Obrador's own historicism, by the doyen of Mexico's public historians, see Krauze 2019.
5. López Obrador asserted repeatedly that he would raise neither the national debt nor income taxes, nor the indirect gasoline tax which is a particularly sensitive social point, easily liable to cause trouble. The government's first budget, in December 2018, promised a primary surplus of 1.0 per cent in 2019, up from 0.8 per cent the year previously. The assembled ministers of the Eurogroup would approve: this is around the current level of Germany and Denmark.
6. On the growth of the middle class, see Castañeda (2011), a compelling, partisan account from a right-wing politician and intellectual.
7. Estimates vary, but Mexico is generally ranked among the 10 or 15 most unequal countries in the world, with a Gini coefficient around 0.5. The current minimum wage is about US$5.40 per day; this includes a 16 per cent increase introduced by the new government. In 2018, the richest 16 Mexicans were worth around US$141 billion, up 21 per cent on the previous year.
8. A single egregious example: in 2017, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, a supposedly respectable British thinktank, issued a report which tendentiously suggested Mexico was undergoing 'the second deadliest conflict in the world, after Syria'. Rapidly sluiced into the global epistemosphere, the claim became received wisdom. It was later often cited by Donald Trump, and is still ubiquitous online.

9. For example, the September 2018 discovery of a mass grave containing 168 human skulls in the state of Veracruz. Similar shock value came two months later with a report detailing more than 2000 such grave sites found in the country in the past 11 years.
10. The grisly aesthetic of Mexico's mass-market newspapers is not a simple phenomenon; the *nota roja* has a long and complex cultural history. Among contemporary publications, the vile, witty, brilliant *Pásala* – half sports paper, half death porn – deserves to be ranked among the world's great tabloid newspapers.
11. In July 2018, even after 12 years of drug war violence, there was genuine shock at the appearance of 'La caravana del CJNG, por la sierra de Nayarit', a YouTube video appearing to show a Jalisco New Generation Cartel convoy with hundreds of heavily armed men, acting with complete nonchalance, in broad daylight.
12. The National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) estimates that 138 journalists have been killed in Mexico since 2000. Some contend that this figure is too low because of an overly restrictive definition of journalism.
13. Although the ambush and kidnappings took place in the city of Iguala, the missing students came from Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College and the incident is often referred to as 'Ayotzinapa'. For a cultural-historical analysis of some aspects of the incident, see Noble (2015).
14. On principle, the families of the 43 students do not accept their death, and insist they should be regarded as 'disappeared', since this more appropriately reflects the specific pain inflicted on themselves and their loved ones. This is expressed in the other ubiquitous slogan of the movement: *vivos los llevaron, vivos los queremos* ('They were taken alive, we want them alive').
15. The central 'Plaza de la Constitución', universally known as the 'Zócalo', has a long history as Mexico City's main square, a venue for official ceremonies and a key location for popular celebrations and protests.
16. On contemporary photographic iconicity, see Stallabrass (2017).
17. As a political phrase created at a moment of tension and danger, *Fue el Estado* is comparable to the 1989 East German opposition slogan *Wir sind das Volk* (*We are the people*, or perhaps better *We are the people*), emerging from a specific context but also a cue to general reflection and understanding.
18. The statement of purpose of the anti-monument: '+43 es un Antimonumento porque está destinado a ser retirado el día que el Estado esclarezca los más de 150 mil homicidios y presente con vida a las y los más de 30 mil +43 desaparecidos' (Parents of the Ayotzinapa students and Comisión +43 2015).
19. This term is a version of Walter Benjamin's famous concept of the 'dialectical image', primarily associated with his *Arcades Project*. Today, maybe more than any other term in Benjamin's oeuvre, the 'dialectical image' has been obscured by scholastics and metaphysicians, sealed off from Benjamin's own cheerful, vernacular idea of Enlightenment. By now, the process seems so advanced that the term seems best used only indirectly, in creatively distorted fashion. Benjamin's most famous passage on the dialectical image can be found in 'Convolute N' of the *Arcades Project*; see Benjamin (2002, 462–463); see also Pensky (2004), Buck-Morss (1989), Friedlander (2012).
20. For a wide-ranging and thoughtful overview of this process, see Allier-Montaño (2016).
21. For the official decree see DOF (2018). The decision to establish the commission was initially prompted by a June 2018 court decision, which condemned the government investigation into the case as completely inadequate, effectively ordering a complete reinvestigation.

22. For a complete list, see CNFE (2018).
23. 'Por último, así como soy juarista y cardenista, también soy maderista y partidario del sufragio efectivo y de la no reelección' (López Obrador 2018b). AMLO is referring to Benito Juárez (1806–1872), nineteenth-century reformist president and national hero, Lázaro Cárdenas (1895–1970), the last of Mexico's revolutionary presidents, who nationalised the oil industry in 1938, and Francisco Madero (1873–1913), the first, moderate leader of the revolt that became the Mexican Revolution.
24. The EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, also known as 'the Zapatistas') and associated indigenous groups are López Obrador's longest-standing and most trenchant opponents on the left. They regard the new president as just as bad as the right wing, claiming that he drapes a near-identical statist and developmentalist agenda in the language of democracy, renewal, and indigeneity. The enmity did not cool with AMLO's election victory: on 1 January 2019, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the 1994 Chiapas uprising, the Zapatistas issued an emphatic critique of government plans for the industrial development of the southern states. Supporters of the government responded, accusing the EZLN of dogmatism and irrelevance. For a sense of this important debate, see: Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés (2019), Ackerman (2019), Villamil (2019), Hernández Navarro (2019), and Gil (2018).
25. See for example, debate in Canada on the so-called 'China clause'.
26. In March 2018, for example, an open letter to Trump from all recent commanders of Southcom and Northcom (US military regions covering the Western hemisphere) implored the president to rapidly renew NAFTA, lest delay 'weaken our ability to confront security challenges'. Hawkish institutions were equally keen to reaffirm the status quo, for example the neo-conservative American Enterprise Institute urging quick ratification in December 2018.
27. Previously, above all in the 2006 presidential campaign, when he ran as a candidate for the PRD party, López Obrador was a vocal opponent of NAFTA, particularly the devastation he said it wrought on Mexican small farmers. By the 2018 election campaign, he had considerably watered down his opposition, with Carlos Urzúa, his future finance minister, publicly reassuring business interests in April 2018 that the deal would be safe under Morena.
28. For Mexico, as ever, a key question was the oil sector, which the previous administration opened up to foreign investment, granting contracts to several non-Mexican companies. USCMA included a special clause making those Mexican oil and gas contracts subject to corporate-dominated arbitration, meaning any renegotiation would require massive compensation.
29. A key traditional component of Mexican foreign policy, the Estrada Doctrine enshrines principles of self-determination and non-intervention in international affairs. In 2019, it was cited as the basis for Mexico's neutral stance towards the Venezuelan crisis.
30. Usefully collated by Telesur in September 2018, these include: the Bible ('Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'), Confucius ('To put the world in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must first put the family in order; to put the family in order; we must first cultivate our personal life; we must first set our hearts right'), Buddha ('If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts, happiness follows them like a never-departing shadow'), and Aristotle ('Political science spends most of its efforts on making the citizens to be of a certain character, that is, good and capable of noble acts').
31. For a reading of AMLO's political project as a recuperation of Alfonso Reyes's *Cartilla Moral*, pertinent in the context of 'moral bankruptcy', see López Cáffagi (2018).

32. For critiques of the concept, see Sicilia (2011) and Rueda Monreal (2018).
33. For an excellent evocation of the delirious qualities of Mexico City traffic, see Goldman (2015). Its scale and density make European or US-American uses of gridlock as philosophical metaphor seem quaintly inadequate (e.g. Godard's *Weekend*, or Peter Sloterdijk's figuration of high summer *Autobahn* congestion: Sloterdijk 1989, 43).
34. Later, criticism grew of the measure's waste (of time), for example when AMLO took several hours to reach the scene of the pipeline explosion at Tlahuelilpan in January 2019.
35. The strategy sought to capture or kill 'kingpin' commanders of so-called drug cartels, which helped boost the celebrity of living and dead criminal leaders, the likes of El Chapo.
36. It is no coincidence that one of AMLO's great political claims is to have personally visited every local authority region in all of Mexico's 32 states. This completism has something of a pilgrimage about it, but also a kind of political performance art.
37. Late in January 2019, one private citizen even attempted to take out a legal injunction against the president, forcing him to adopt adequate security, but it was not granted.
38. The proposal for amnesties for low-level drug war criminals was regarded with some suspicion, not least by victims, as dangerously resembling a further extension of impunity.
39. This is related to, but not the same as, the proliferation of forces of organised violence. The United States of America, for example, acutely suffers from one – the blurring of military and civilian force – but much less from the other.

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