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Irmgard Emmelhainz

The Mexican Neoliberal Conversion and Differentiated, Homogenous Lives

> Just as we are accustomed—when not also subjected—to absorbing energy in different forms at home, we will also find it quite easy there to receive or absorb accelerated changes and oscillations which our sensory organs pick up and integrate to form all that we know. I don't know whether philosophers have ever dreamed of a society for the domestic distribution of sensory reality.
> —Friedrich Kittler[1]

> Los blancos han forzado a los indios a (abandonar los valles y a) treparse a los cerros.
> —Erwin Slim Torres[2]

In 1979, the US underwent a second oil crisis and a financial shock. In October of that year, Paul Volcker, Chairman of the US Federal Reserve System, unveiled a new monetary policy aimed at making the American dollar the most sought-after currency in the world, and began forcing interest rates upwards to combat in-flation. Mexico defaulted in 1982 as the "Volcker Shock" was applied, and the US secured rigid repayment and exorbitant fees. Capital flooded out of the country, while the Mexican peso lost 78 percent of its value and kept on devaluating. As a solution to enable repayment, the Reagan administration found a way to assemble the powers of the US treasury and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to roll the debt over in return for neoliberal reforms.[3] President José López Portillo's government cracked under the pressure and submitted the country to draconian austerity measures crafted by the IMF, which encompassed an extensive privatization and deregulation program, as well as a series of reforms liberalizing the Mexican trade regime. Also that year, the final one of López Portillo's presidency, the banks were nationalized as a nationalist measure and as means to solve the problems of speculation and capital flight, as well as a way to impose controls on foreign exchange. In his last presidential address, the President announced the decision, famously bursting into tears and sobbing: "It is now or never. We have been sacked. It is not the end of Mexico. We shall not be sacked again!"[4]

This episode marks the beginning of a severe restructuring of the Mexican economy, inspired by the ideology and operating framework known as neoliberalism,[5] which generally implies a shift away from state-led industrialization and welfare state policies, and a move toward a market-led political economy. The banks were re-privatized between 1991 and 1992 under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, followed by the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, which represented the continuation of Mexico's comprehensive trade liberalization and economic reform programs that began in the early 1980s. Eliminating trade barriers between the US, Canada, and Mexico was publicized as the best way to bring economic development to the southern country. According to Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, politicians and technocrats promised that the trade agreement would finally allow the Third World to become like the First World: "Rich, cultured, and happy"; "We Can Be Like Them" was the mantra leading from underdevelopment to modernization.[6] The treaty covered aspects of investment, labour markets and environmental policies. It was the first free trade treaty signed between advanced countries and a developing economy, creating the world's largest trade area in terms of total gross domestic product (GDP) and the second largest in terms of total trade volume, after the European Union.[7] Ten years after the treaty was signed, the promise of modernization had not yet been fulfilled. Most foreign investment has gone toward maquiladora (assembly) factories, creating an export-oriented manufacturing and assembly-plant economy severed from direct economic development of the rest of the country. Moreover, as China and other regions in Latin America came to be integrated into global trade networks, Mexico began to face competitive pressure from them, and some of the export sector (such as textiles) shifted production elsewhere. Also, large amounts of subsidized US agricultural goods were dumped on the Mexican market, lowering the prices and destroying the livelihood of millions of farmers. In addition to many other well-known problems brought about by the ratification of NAFTA, there has been a negative impact on natural resources and worker's rights; moreover, wages and purchasing power have fallen for most Mexicans over the past 20 years, violating the Mexican constitution that guarantees a living wage.[8] Thirty years of neoliberal reform imposed on Mexico has also resulted in a remodelling of social hierarchies, resulting in an entirely new social landscape. To an already unequal society were added geographically uneven urban and rural development, bringing about the simultaneous homogenization and differentiation of new, potentially politicized subjectivities: migrants, peasants, urban unemployed, ninis,[9] public-school teachers, middle-class and poor victims of organized crime, anarchists, self-armed indigenous defense groups, students of private and public universities, originary peoples fighting against corporate and government megaprojects, miners, narco-insurgents, members of recently dismantled unions, etc.; who drift along side by side, trying to speak out and to survive in a highly fragmented and violent social landscape.

In spite of the damage inflicted on the country and its citizens, subsequent treaties have ensured the continuation and expansion of neoliberal reforms into other regions and institutional domains in Mexico, such as the Puebla-Panama Plan (2001), later renamed the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project (PPP-MIDP) in 2007. This agreement covers "development" projects in the area known as "Mesoamerica," a hotspot rich in resources and biodiversity. There is also the Mundo Maya Project, conceived under Salinas de Gortari's presidency in the 1990s but put into effect in 2011, a touristic development pole in the Southeast and Yucatan peninsula. These projects seek to "promote connectivity and competition in the regions," opening them up to foreign investment and the exploitation of natural, mineral, and cultural riches while at the same time, "integrating their economy with Central and North America."[10] The agreements were designed to advance Mexico's neoliberal economic, social, and political reform program and are currently transforming entire regions, forms of life, and ways of making a living. They follow an integration-fragmentation model based on dismantling small-scale productive activities at the national level in favour of massive foreign-investment, and while they include token production projects and assistance for the affected communities, they have devastated entire communities.[11] This year, Enrique Peña Nieto put forth the Pact for Mexico, a national agreement signed by all three major parties with an ambitious structural and institutional reform agenda furthering neoliberal political rationality: it includes changes to labour laws, taxation, the public education system, the telecommunications industry, and the energy sector—all in favour of giving foreign corporations greater freedom to hire and fire workers, pay extremely low wages in seeking to make the Mexican economy "more competitive," and controversially inviting foreign capital for investment in the oil, energy, and resource industries. As production costs and wages have risen in China, efforts are being made to position Mexico as the new China, or "Aztec Tiger," drawing manufacturing away from Asia, facilitated by the Pact for Mexico's rewriting of the countries 1970 labour laws.[12] Thus, Peña Nieto's Pact, in concert with production innovations such as cloud computing and open-source innovation, is geared toward attracting global investment in cars, aerospace, household goods, and even manufacturing drones for civilian use.[13] From this point of view, the country's growth implies the return of the maquiladoras, as well as the continuation of attendant social policies: large-scale incarceration, mass surveillance, and the permanent presence of the military in some regions of the country under the guise of the "war against crime." These measures ultimately serve as a means of social control, ensuring the smooth traffic of (legal and illegal) goods within the country and toward the North, as well as the means to implement megaprojects in rural areas (wind farms, industrialized agriculture, mines, hydroelectric plants, etc.), which not only have a negative impact on the ways in which people live and make a living, but also destroy the environment.[14]

Mexico has been one of the first countries to implement a neoliberal state apparatus and thus its experience—along with other pioneering regions in South East Asia and China—has served as a prime example of the effects of neoliberal structural economic reform. These include experimenting with the precarization of labour and the relocation of dispossessed farmers; its cities have served as laboratories of repression and violence management; its authoritarian State mechanisms have been emulated elsewhere (for example, the sexual harassment of women by police at the protests in Atenco in 2006, as well as at the 2010 G20 protests in Toronto). As well, the experimental militarization of 50 communities in the state of Guerrero is being undertaken as I write this, under the humanitarian guise of Peña Nieto's hunger relief campaign, La Cruzada contra el hambre [The Crusade Against Hunger].[15] Experimental GMO corn crops were approved in the states of Sinaloa and Tamaulipas in 2010, putting at risk the country's important genetic food heritage. Contaminating and destroying the environment, transgenic seeds will soon be commodities patented by a few transnational companies, polluting corn at its source of origin and eradicating the means for the autonomous production of food.[16]

Moreover, neoliberal reorganizational alignments in the past 30 years have meant the mass migration of individuals to the outskirts of cities and to the border, expelling people from their forms of life and ways of making a living, putting them in places where they are not wanted and therefore are most vulnerable. The state manages and excludes portions of the population by selectively ignoring them, without investing or providing, governing using a form of "graded sovereignty,"[17] discussed below in more detail. It is not only that the Mexican State has failed its citizens and that corrupt politicians are to blame. For example, poet Javier Sicilia's "Movement for Peace, Justice and Dignity" is problematically premised on the idea that the government must be held accountable for violence and responsible for containing crime, and is thus centered on an ethical critique of power as a form of politics. But this also echoes the apolitical, conservative, hegemonic opinion:

> We have passed from the certainty of a regimen that built the country based on a framework of interests sustained by corruption, to the incertitude of not knowing where we are headed. [...] The meagreness of the political class that has led the country down unknown roads has impeded the definitive establishment of the rule of law.[18]

And:

> The Mexican political class has tended to fail in definitive moments: when opportunities have clearly been available in order to transform the country and to lead it down the road of self-definition.[19]

Because of Mexico's history of colonization and repression, dispossession and racism are embedded in the country's DNA, and since its inception, Mexico has been ruled by a political culture that disregards laws; neoliberal reforms were thus imposed on the country at very little political cost, facing meek (or effectively repressed) resistance. In this regard, governing as exclusion and exception is not a sign of corruption or failure, but strictly adheres to Bill Clinton's campaign catchphrase: "It's the economy, stupid." Moreover, as Aihwa Ong has argued, the reconfiguration of the relationships between the governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality is integral to the neoliberal project. While the neoliberal state is shrunk or strengthened in certain strategic areas, techniques to exclude or re-engineer citizen-subjects have proliferated.[20] Furthermore, aside from being an economic system, neoliberalism is a *sensibility* that shapes subjectivities, permeates art and culture, differentiates and homogenizes people, moulds lives and desires, mistakes information for knowledge, gives shape to spaces and thus to social relations, and normalizes violence.

Neoliberalism also creates particular ways of seeing the world, reconfigures notions of common sense to justify destruction and dispossession with ideas of progress and development, tries to solve economic precarity with self-help and permanent education. In addition, this features the promotion of health regimes (such as the national campaign to combat diabetes and obesity: Peña Nieto proposed to tax soft drinks and junk food as a regulative measure, a reform that took effect in December 2013), the acquisition of skills (private education institutions endlessly offer expensive *diplomados*, *certificados*, courses, MAs, and even PhDs of dubious academic quality), the development of entrepreneurial ventures (there is a State program geared toward aiding the growth of small and medium entrepreneurial ventures, the PYMES), and other techniques of self-engineering and capital accumulation.[21] Furthermore, since the ratification of NAFTA, Mexican farmers and proletarians have been converted into *maquiladora* workers (virtually as slaves, because they earn below the minimum living wage), *sicarios* [hit men], entrepreneurs, consumers (or handicapped, indebted consumers), criminals, dead bodies, prisoners and members of the permanently unemployed underclass. A term has even been coined to describe the eight million youths excluded from education and work: *ninis* (*ni trabajan ni estudian*, a category of young people who neither work nor study, and depend on their families to support them). Following Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, we should consider it the very success of capitalism to produce unemployment and exclusion from the modernizing projects of capitalism, and that unemployment is in itself the most current form of capitalist exploitation, and thus of domination: "the exploited are not only those who produce or 'create,' but also those who are condemned not to 'create.'"[22] Domination is therefore inscribed in the very structure of the production process, which is why everyone can have personal freedom and equality—but only formal freedom and a graded equality, with many having no access at all to jobs, education, healthcare, housing, and other profit-generating enterprises, services, and goods.

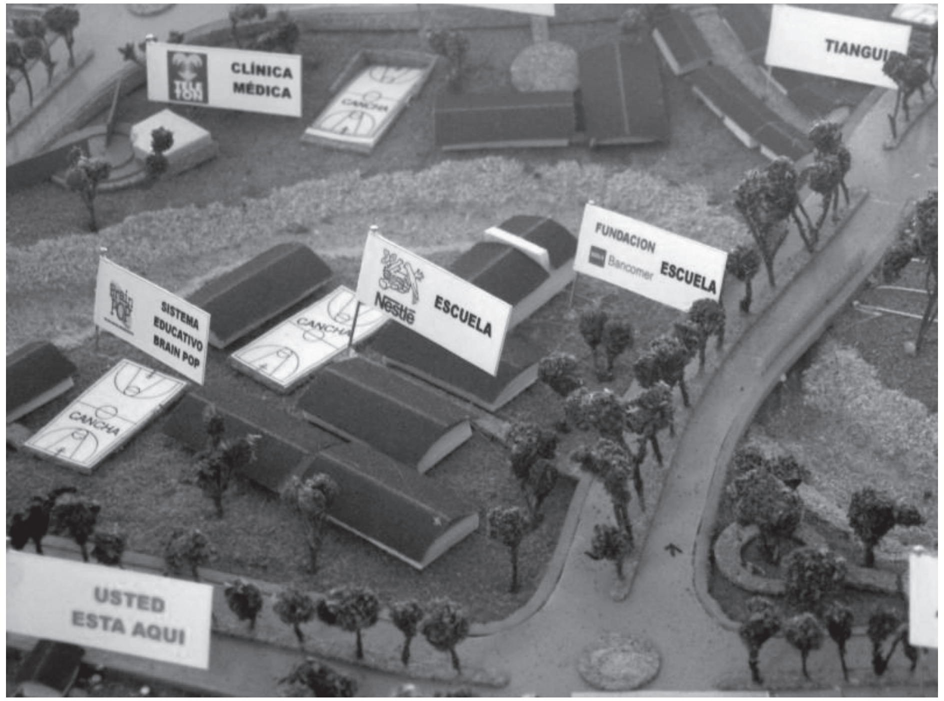
One of the main consequences of the implementation of neoliberalism in Mexico has been that life and death are now part of the economy, manifesting as a culture of violence, which both denigrates and gives life.[23] The fact that more women have joined the labour market in places like Ciudad Juárez, where the *maquiladora* industry dominates, is understood as the reason why more and more women are being murdered there, and why this kind of death has been normalized and expanded to the rest of the country: women's newly gained economic independence is perceived by the dominant masculine culture as a threat.[24] Following Sayak Valencia Triana and Subhabrata Banerjee, the current period of neoliberal globalization can be characterized as *capitalismo gore* [slasher capitalism], or "necrocapitalism." In this regard, financial growth and economic accumulation are inseparable from the increase of the worldwide production of death.[25] Parallel to the incorporation of death into the machinery of surplus-value production, dissent has been legally criminalized and demonized in the mass media. For example, in an article for the *Letras Libres*' blog, right-wing historian Enrique Krauze joined the media lynching of the recent Public Schools Teachers Union (CNTE) protests. In Krauze's view, insofar as the Union blocked the airport and main arteries connecting Mexico City in August and September 2013, they "abused their constitutional right to manifest freely" because their protests affected the City's inhabitants and the CNTE acted as if "they represented not only their guild but the whole country."[26] In this regard, the massive repression and incarceration of protesters is widely supported by the citizenry. The lack of support for and even the media's criticism of the Teacher's Union could thus be understood as class warfare. In short, the Mexican neoliberal experience shows what life looks like when the political economy operates through institutional, material and sensible forms of power, and allow transnational enterprises to control health, housing, agriculture, and the means of life in general. Neoliberalism has created injurious forms of dependency on the State and corporations, which in turn thrive on unprecedented levels of marginalization, violence, exploitation, displacement, dispossession, poverty, and death.

Neoliberal Mexico: Failed State or Exemplary Emerging Economy?

Thirty years of Washington consensus policies and market liberalization in Mexico have brought about a general apocalyptic perception that we live in a dangerous country plunged in a loop of violence, and that things are only getting worse. This perception coexists with a view of a nation that, although unable to fully overcome its poverty, was untouched by the 2008–2009 global financial crisis and is gradually becoming a middle-class nation. In the media and the collective global imaginary, the country oscillates between a "failed state" and an exemplary emerging economy. The former implies that urgent corrective action is necessary, as a "failed" nation is:

> Utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community [due to] civil strife, government breakdown and economic privation. […] [Failed] states descend into violence and anarchy, imperilling their own citizens and threatening their neighbours through refugee flows, political instability, and random warfare.[27]

The perception of Mexico as a "failed state" materializes in areas of the country in which the government has suspended sovereignty, illustrating what Aihwa Ong has called "graded sovereignty." According to Ong, neoliberal governments treat populations differentially, creating a diversity of zones with regimes of exception. That is, there are some areas in which the State is very strong and protective, while in others it is nearly absent. This mechanism has the purpose of enabling areas to be either flexible with regards to markets—at the risk of rendering them structurally irrelevant[28]—or an obstacle for the free flow of (legal and illegal) merchandise, money, and people. For example, the six Mexican states bordering the United States are immersed in anarchy, in a war amongst the cartels seeking to control the passage routes for illegal goods. Moreover, gangs charge extortion and protection fees to citizens, and force illegal immigrants deported from the US to work for them. In addition to controlling smuggling routes, regional kingpins continue to hold sway over local business and governments. The *maquiladora* industry, however, has neither been affected by violence nor threatened by the gangs: in 2011, 10,000 jobs were created at 19 factories in Ciudad Juárez. Forty more opened in subsequent months. Despite the violence, foreign investment is pouring in, especially to the automobile industry.[29] The government's strategy has been to militarize the North,



Model for the Sustainable Rural City Nuevo Juan Grijalva in Chiapas

disregard the real social problems, and treat the violence created by the gangs and the army as collateral damage that is ignored—or capitalized on—by the media. Another example is the case of the states of Guerrero and Michoacán, where *policías comunitarias* [community police squadrons] have been created to defend themselves against criminal organizations like the Zetas. Interestingly enough, these are states with a heavy military presence and where the government is developing megaprojects. Of course, there has been organized resistance against these projects, most notably, the 10-year-old struggle against the construction of the hydroelectric plant of La Parota, in Guerrero, or the failed struggle to impede Grupo Carso from exploiting a mine in Salaverna, Zacatecas. This mine is located beneath a village, and the corporation, in cahoots with the government, forced its inhabitants to relocate to the suburban development known as Nueva Salaverna. There is also the case of the Comité de Reordenamiento Territorial [Territorial Reorganizing Committee][30] in Cuetzalan, in the northern mountains of Puebla, which in 2011, impeded the construction of a Walmart that sought to capture the 500 million pesos that flow yearly into the region to sustain its autonomous economy. Areas in which the rule of law and State institutions are nearly absent, or act against the resistance to transnational megaprojects, contrast with first-world luxury enclaves protected by state-of-the-art private security technologies, and that have access to high-end (private) services, jobs, entertainment, healthcare, and education. In a recent *New York Times* editorial, Thomas Friedman frivolously and superficially wrote that Mexico is likely to become a dominant economic power in the twenty-first century, reporting that corruption, crime, the weak rule of law, and drug-related violence are seen as a condition to be lived with and fought, but not something that defines neither the country nor its economy. [31] As I mentioned above, NAFTA promised to fulfill “a desire for development,” and 20 years ago, megalopolises in the South were the “great cities of the North viewed through a warped mirror.” That is, before NAFTA was signed, modernization in Mexico was perceived as a distorted version of developed countries: dirty, full of smoke, noise, and toxic fumes, a place where walking around the streets was perceived as risky.[32] Nowadays, fortified buildings and gated communities still prevail, and some of the more affluent areas such as Polanco, Anzures, Cuauhtémoc, Condesa and Roma in Mexico City—with their enhanced surveillance, gentrification, and social cleansing—have even become pedestrian-friendly. In these neighbourhoods, the City’s collective transportation system now includes bike lanes, as in some European and North American cities. Santa Fe, an urban hub for corporate headquarters, office buildings, and luxury residential housing, conveys the impression of living in a North American city, or somewhere in Southeast Asia—if one overlooks the intermittent areas of extreme poverty. And San Pedro Garza García, the richest district of Latin America, in Monterrey, Nuevo León, resembles a wealthy Texan suburb, although it is surrounded by buffering hills and accessed via a tunnel, thus isolated from the violence ruling the northern region of the country.[33] Between 2009-2012, the city’s mayor famously created an intelligence body financed by the rich inhabitants with the purpose of combatting and defending themselves from organized crime. As part of his public safety politics, he created a controversial database of the domestic employee’s of the whole district, as a preventive measure for kidnappings and thefts. Today, some areas of the city and of the country remind inhabitants and visitors alike of European and American cities, similar to how at the turn of the nineteenth century, Bucarelli Street and Reforma Avenue did. In this regard, contemporary urban planning and architecture, as we will further see below, are geared toward isolating elites from the poor, conveying the false impression—fuelled by writers like Friedman—that they live in a homogenous city within a prosperous country.

These opposing perceptions of neoliberal Mexico cannot be reduced to President Peña Nieto’s recent efforts to change the image of Mexico from “Drug War Zone” to “Free Trade Poster Child,”[34] but should rather be attributed to the differentiated reality of the country. The refrain “the world has never been better” is not exclusive to a one-sided view of Mexico. As Žižek notes, such a view of the world has invaded the (right-wing) mass media and finance publications worldwide, and is an example of the unevenness of neoliberal development and progress.[35] “Progress,” in turn, appears as the incomplete realization of a social project. In the case of Mexico, a token of progress—as well as the obstacle to political and economic progress—is perceived to be the presence of the middle class. In September 2012, as his term was about to come to an end, President Felipe Calderón stated that Mexico had become a middle-class nation: “Mexican families have bettered their access to housing, cars, goods like computers and electronics, health and education and entertainment services—basic products that characterize the middle class worldwide.”[36] Calderón’s statement was echoed by an online World Bank publication, which reported that from 2003 to 2009, the middle class (defined here as people who are neither poor or vulnerable, but not rich, and who have been schooled up to 12 years of age) grew by 50 percent. This means that supposedly, 17 percent of the Mexican population joined the middle class in the past decade.[37] But the new members of the middle class evoked by Calderón and the World Bank are people who were incorporated into the economy primarily as consumers—and debtors. This is highlighted by Calderón’s definition of the middle class: to be middle class means to have access to housing, all kinds of goods, (private) education, and healthcare. Following Aditya Nigam, development implies a “global hypermodernity” as a plentiful utopia of shopping malls, casinos, and super-highways, where consumption and debt are the rule.[38] Thus, in neoliberal societies, there is an elaborate network of systems, processes, apparatuses, and relations[39] that work to produce individuals as middle-class consumers (albeit, nominally) by forming their desiring subjectivities in the Western image—and Mexico is no exception.

As I mentioned above, in the official Mexican narrative, progress is embodied in, and yet hampered by, the very middle class of newly indebted consumers that the state boasts of having created through neoliberal policies. In his 2011 book *Mañana Forever? Mexico and the Mexicans*, right-wing intellectual Jorge G. Castañeda attempts to answer a question that has intrigued Mexican thinkers from José Vasconcelos, Alfonso Reyes, and Octavio Paz, to Samuel Ramos and Carlos Monsiváis: the nature of the Mexican national character. Based on interviews, polls, and statistics, Castañeda explores the "nature" of the nation's middle class and concludes by defining the essential traits of Mexicans: an aversion to market liberalization, corruption, and the incapability of participating in community action. Moreover, he argues that the Mexican middle class despises conflict and suffers from a dysfunctional anti-American individualism that ignores social participation and likes to negotiate behind closed doors, as opposed to seeking consensus. These tendencies, according to Castañeda, clash with the pressing need to open up the economy to the globalized world, and impede the consolidation of a plentiful and effective democracy. Mexico's main obstacle, in his view, is therefore, the national, inborn aversion to conflict and competition. For Castañeda, the problem is that the middle class believes in protectionism and subsidies, while demonizing privatization. Therefore, while the middle class has benefited from economic liberalization, they are averse to the open market, private initiative and foreign investment; in Castañeda's view, this is the result of citizens having cultivated an irrational and anachronistic character.[40]

In this context, official intellectuals and academics have argued that, because of Mexicans' "love" of stagnation, a Deng Xiaoping figure is needed to direct the country toward development, carrying out necessary reforms in order to assure growth. Thus, after 30 years of neoliberal reforms, Mexican technocrats, official intellectuals, and the corporate class envision and promote a Mexican version of "Capitalism with Asian Values"—defined by Žižek as a dynamic and efficient capitalism functioning within an authoritarian state[41]—for the supposed sake of the country's prosperity.[42] Official intellectuals' assessment and critique of "Mexican backwardness" (posited as the incapacity to undertake the changes required to grow economically due to the rejection of institutional reforms that would assure those changes) at the turn of the twenty-first century echo not only the prescriptive recommendations of the IMF and World Bank—as a surreptitious infiltration of market-driven truths into the domains of culture and the media[43]—but also the late-eighteenth century Bourbon Reforms of Mexico City. In late Colonial Mexico, revisions were imposed on the municipal framework in the name of improving health and welfare for all city residents. Back then, however, the problems faced by the population were somewhat different: disease, waste and garbage, limited access to water, poorly paved and flooded streets, and dirty markets. The renovations program carried out by city officials, according to Sharon Bailey Blasco, reflected the anxieties of the emerging elite surrounding the fact that rich and poor coexisted intimately and that there was no separation between the public and private spheres. In this context, the reforms were geared toward reshaping plebeian culture, as the elite blamed the ills of the city on the "unruly and polluting activities of the lower classes," such as public drunkenness and nudity, defecating on the streets, and a lack of personal hygiene. Therefore, the city's reorganization project was inseparable from a re-education of the urban poor, changing their "traditional" or backward behaviour, into "modern" behaviour, both productive and nonthreatening.[44]

Nuevo Juan del Grijalva, Chiapas

Nuevo Juan de Grijalva, Chiapas

Specifically, Castañeda's description of the backwardness of the Mexican middle class—potentially remediable, as he points out—resonates with the Colonial elite's perception of the poor and the discursive aspects of the reforms they imposed on them (attended by physical punishment if they were non-compliant). Nowadays, notions of democracy, development, betterment, security, efficiency, sustainability, design, autonomy, creativity, green urbanism, and self-sufficiency are the excuses used to model new ways of life, and imply a similar behavioural "correction"; the results, as I mentioned above, include (self-) exploitation, slavery, and death. These concepts, moreover, revolve around, first, the surreptitious privatization of government services and functions; and second, the systemic and ongoing nation-wide process of displacement and dispossession. The reason why Castañeda chose to posit the middle class as a token for Mexican identity is twofold: it implies that the middle class comprises the majority of the country (which is clearly not the case, despite his, Calderón's, and the World Bank's assessments), and it makes sense in this age of social control, by way of what Gabriel Tarde and Maurizio Lazzarato call "the public(s)." For them, as public opinion is increasingly fabricated by the corporate media and addressed to the middle class, the receptors bear the potential to influence other minds; the fundamental problem here is the creation of consensual subjectivities, acting upon one another. For example, I have often heard the following description of people from Oaxaca: "They like their old ways, they do not like progress, they are not interested in modernity, they are backward." In this sense, "improvement" and "development" are measures serving to both lubricate the system and the perfect means to condition citizens as subjects aspiring to become middle-class (and indebted) consumers.[45] As Lazzarato furthermore argues, debt is a form of social control of both individuals and nations.[46] In a society in which privilege is inherited, moreover, the gaps between the poor, the "middle class" and the rich are wider than ever, to the point that the rich live in a social and material universe entirely distinct from the rest, rendering redundant notions of equality and democratic access. Indeed, many have defined neoliberalism as a form of class warfare, and the on-going assault on organized labour in Mexico—including the dismantling of the National Electricity Company's Union in 2010, the Mining Union Section 65 in Cananea in 2013, and the current President's efforts to destroy the Public School Teacher's Union—is the result of the systemic drive to segregate the working class from the rest of society, and the economy.

Neoliberal Mexico (City): Zones of Graded Sovereignty

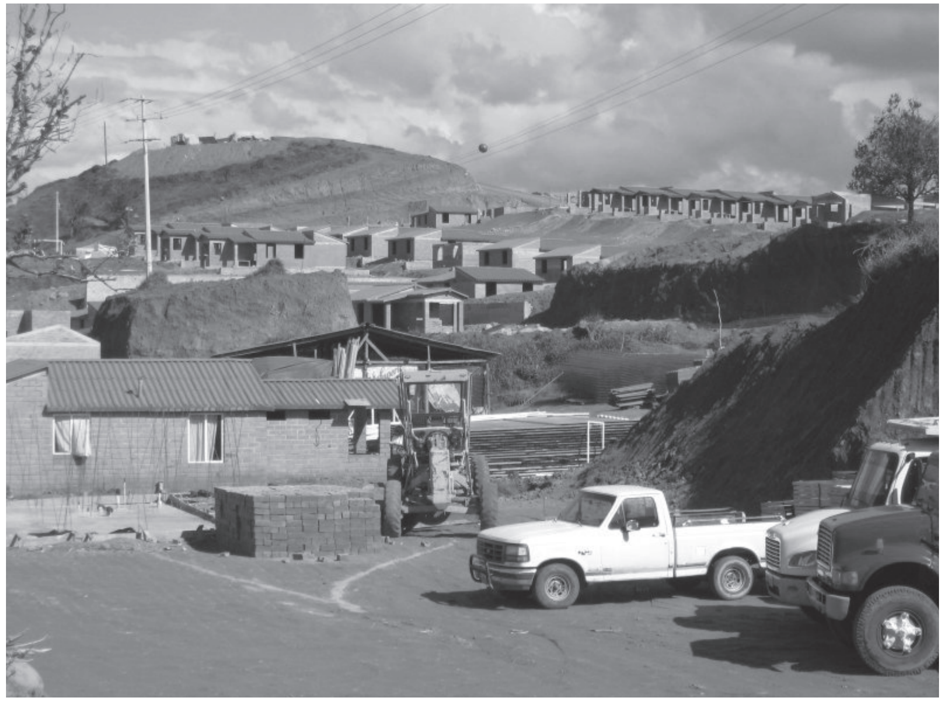
Despite the fact that with the introduction of neoliberal policies, Mexican industry began shifting its centre of gravity away from the historic centre of the country, the Federal District (or DF) is still the political, media, cultural, and educational core of the country. The past 30 years of neoliberal reforms have influenced its politics, society, and culture industry, giving the city new sites that accurately represent such reforms, for instance, by optimizing the conditions most suitable for the easy flow of goods and money. At the same time, the reforms have translated neoliberal logic into spatial and sensible terms. This expresses itself in the organization of everyday life, by way of exclusion and exception disguised as policies of optimization, development, and betterment. For example, leftist mayors (Manuel López Obrador and Marcelo Ebrard) have implemented apparently progressive city policies such as gay marriage and populist urban attractions, like the massive free ice-skating rinks in the Zócalo and three of the city's districts, artificial beaches during Spring Break in poor districts of the city, bike lanes, and affordable bike rentals as a supplement to public transportation in affluent areas. But these policies have merely served to whitewash or hide the fact that urban space has become an object of massive surveillance, restriction, displacement, and social cleansing; As one example a private superhighway was built on forcibly expropriated land to the detriment of a much-needed expansion of the public transportation system. Other examples include the developer-driven megaprojects that are changing the fabric of Mexico City with upscale mixed-use areas, housing complexes, and entertainment areas.[47] Many of these new urban projects are being built by subcontracted or private companies, justified by the presupposition—pushed forward by corporations, private interests, and official intellectuals—that the government is too overwhelmed to be able to manage and supply Mexico City, and that the aid of civil society and private investment is thus necessary.

According to Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, in the past two decades, cities have become incubators for the major political and ideological strategies that have helped maintain neoliberal dominance.[48] As Mexico City has become globalized, some of its areas have been transformed into strategic economic spaces concentrating material and immaterial flows necessary to global processes of production, creation, and exchange—for example, as providers of services needed by corporations, such as insurance or accounting. In this regard, the transnationalization of corporations has meant the homogenization of the city through the creation of office districts (Santa Fe, the Reforma Financial Corridor, Cuicuilco), residential spaces (Nuevo Polanco, Interlomas, Casas Geo), as well as spaces for entertainment and consumption (from Tlalpan, Satélite, and Cuauhtémoc to Ecatepec, Las Águilas, Tacubaya, Chalco, and Mixcoac). The historical downtown has been rebuilt and partially gentrified, and the Condesa, Colonia Roma, San Miguel Chapultepec, and San Rafael boroughs, which may be considered the city's "creative zones,"[49] have undergone processes of intense gentrification. These transformations simply mirror similar processes—as well as modern and minimalist architectural styles—that have materialized in other parts of the world over the past two decades.

Inhabitant of El Agüita in San Andrés de la Cañada, Ecatepec, Mexico State.

Washington consensus policies of graded government intervention and trade expansion have not only transformed how Mexico City looks and functions, but also the ways in which people live and work. As in other global cities, urban planning and design have become important spatial practices: while they materialize and furnish spaces for neoliberalism to thrive in, they create ready-to-consume modes and forms of life inseparable from signs circulating in the sensible regime that have materialized in the hypermodern global utopia of consumption. The homogenization of the environment brought about by corporatization coexists with spatial differentiation, as urban space is more and more polarized, introducing new spatial legibilities and regimes of exception: slums and illegal settlements, or "misery belts," in Ciudad Neza, Chalco, Santa Fe, Ecatepec, Jaltenco; hyper-securitized luxury enclaves for the rich in Interlomas, Lomas de Chapultepec, Valle Escondido, Bosques de las Lomas; for the upper-middle and middle-classes, Coyoacán, Tepepan, San Jerónimo; and for the working class what I call "subcontracted mass social housing," conceived as city dormitories and named after the companies that build them: Casas Geo, Urbi, Ara, Sare, Homex, etc. Mexico City's public version of this kind of housing is called Ciudades Bicentenario [Bicentennial Cities].

Paradoxically, in its spatial differentiation the city has barely changed since the nineteenth century. According to Michael Johns, by 1890, Mexico City had acquired the principal geographic feature that defines it to this day: a division into rich west and poor east.[50] Fragmenting even further the landscape of civil society, those governed as citizens coexist



Sustainable Rural City Nuevo Juan Grijalva, Chiapas, being built.

with the underclass, who are governed as non-citizens with a different set of rights and possibilities for access. This, alongside the proliferation of physical barriers, surveillance, and the exclusion of the majority, has further fragmented the landscape of civil society, while allowing for the emergence of new types of apolitical, insurgent actors, for example, the recent figure of the "narco-insurgent."[51]

Unevenness, as we have seen, is highly endemic to the kind of development brought about by neoliberal policies, which have not only given shape to how people live and work, but also to the ways in which people are being actively dispossessed and rendered precarious. The socio-spatial differentiation that characterizes Mexico City is mirrored in urban and rural regions in the rest of the country, where new development areas have been created, enhancing the "natural economic vocation" of distinct regions that have different roles to play in the Mexican economy. By means of treaties such as NAFTA, the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project (PPP-MIDP), and the Pact for Mexico, the national economy is being further fragmented into urban and regional industrial systems.[52] The multiplication of differentiated zones of economic production, as well as variegated governance policies across the national territory, promotes the differential regulation of populations, who can either be connected or disconnected from the global circuits of capital. Moreover, certain regions are characterized by being flexibly managed, so that corporations can have strong indirect influence over the political conditions of citizens.[53]

For example, the "economic and industrial vocation" of Mexico City has been said to be the creative economy, which implies exploiting human capital by developing talent to trigger productive and living activities that would attract applied technology.[54] Another instance of "economic vocation" can be found in the six northern states: the fact they share a border with the US, the area's semi-arid climate with limited water resources (which restricts other productive activities), and the availability of cheap labour make *maquiladora* industrialization the "natural economic vocation" of the North. Similar to the urban conglomerate constituted by Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong, in which the first two cities are devoted to production, and the latter to high-end services such as logistics, finances, legal, design and marketing services, and distribution, there are several emerging, binational conurbations, such as San Diego-Tijuana, El Paso-Ciudad Juárez, and Matamoros-Brownsville along the Rio Grande-Bravo. Some 3,700 *maquiladoras* have mushroomed on the Mexican side under the regime of Export Processing Zones, characterized by federal law exemptions regarding taxes, quotas, and labour in order to make the goods produced there globally competitive.[55] As mentioned above, anarchy and lawlessness often reign in these areas—but without affecting *maquiladora* production. Moreover, the violence is not simply a result of war among narco-cartels, but is intrinsically tied to the fact that in the past decade Mexico lost competiveness to Asia, and thousands of workers lost their jobs, forcing them into the circuits of narco-capitalism. This was the true cause of the explosion of violence.[56] In Juárez a combination of volatility and precarity prevails, and the cartels and the *maquiladoras* both follow the same free-market business logic. As Charles Bowden has pointed out, Juárez is the "laboratory of the future": not a breakdown of the social order, but the new order in which massive unemployment and violence co-exist within the fragile *maquiladora* economy.[57]

In contrast, Special Controlled Development Zones (ZEDEC in Spanish) have been created for the rich: corporate, residential luxury zones exemplified by Santa Fe and Atizapán, west and north of Mexico City, respectively, but also by Interlomas (north of Santa Fe), Puerta de Hierro in Zapopan, Jalisco and Lomas in Puebla, and the entire district of San Pedro Garza García in Monterrey. The ZEDECs are zones of high real-estate development that embody an upper-class utopia where the poor are rendered invisible. A kind of exurbs, they are modeled after the small cluster of cities that constitute Orange County in California, and their design seeks to convey a sense of the highest efficiency, safety, and the idea that "it's good business to live here." For instance, Zona Esmeralda in Atizapán is considered to be the "safest zone in Mexico City," and together with Lomas del Valle and Lomas del Valle Escondido, they constitute a cluster of upper-middle and upper-class housing developments (16 gated communities in total), which include shopping, entertainment, and educational complexes, along with an ecological reserve, two golf courses, and an airport. This and other privileged zones of Mexico City constitute concentric zones traversed by a hierarchical division of labour and degrees of access to services: Atizapán, the former village whose arable lands were expropriated to build this housing cluster, has now expanded into a small city that lacks everything a city usually has. More like a misery belt, it largely houses the cheap domestic labour employed in the gated communities to the west. A newspaper ad for Lomas in Puebla expresses, and/or constructs, people's desire to live in such isolated, homogenous, urban conglomerates:

> To live in Lomas means that you, your children and your parents will recover your freedom; it means that you will be able to go out to the streets without a worry, that you will know that your children are playing in the park, safely riding their bikes on the bicycle path; it means coming home and listening to their stories about their adventures in Lomas. It means that you will be able to relax on a Sunday morning, listening to the sound of water falling, the laughter of people, knowing that you are surrounded by nature, that a coffee is within walking distance, or that you can go shopping without leaving Lomas. It means that you will be able to go jogging or walking at any time of the day you desire, so you can take a break; it means that you will know that you live in a unique place in Puebla.

For intellectual José Steinsleger, these developments are "Bantustans for the rich," comparable to recent projects in Guatemala and Honduras, which he posits as cities "without God, State or law," administered by magnates, and ruled by the principle of "security." In Guatemala, there is Paseo de Cayalá, which represents the new, gated urbanism; like the North American suburbs that many of these projects tend to emulate, Paseo de Cayalá is characterized by New Urbanism's nostalgia for village life with its pedestrian-friendly streets. While it offers a cosmopolitan lifestyle, the National Guatemalan Police need a warrant to enter the city, and all the community's problems are dealt with by an "Owner's Association," who make decisions inside a building inspired by the Lincoln Monument in Washington and the Parthenon.[58] Like Paseo de Cayalá, Mexico City's Santa Fe district is also premised on modifications of the law. It emerged as part of a larger project under Salinas de Gortari, who established ZEDECs as a legal tool to regulate land use and allow for partnerships between the city's government and private investors and real-estate developers. In this regard, urban planning has legitimized the imposition of controls and decisions to the exclusive benefit of the residential and corporate enclave—to the detriment of most citizens' needs.[59] These new developments have greatly exacerbated mechanisms of social exclusion, as populations live under the illusion of existing in a homogenous society.[60]

A more recent development of the ZEDECs is Miguel Mancera's (current mayor of Mexico City) project of "Economic Development Zones," or ZODEs. This project of "strategic urbanism," implies the creation of thematic neighbourhoods, and involves a partnership between the government, civil society, corporations, and academia. Based on this project, areas of the city will be "redesigned," repopulated, and rehabilitated according to five specific economic "vocations" and themes, anchored in specific buildings: Future Technology City, Creative or Cultural City, Agribusiness City, Government or Administrative City, and Health Care City. World-renowned architects Herzog & de Meuron have been hired to design the project, and will be creating spaces where people will be able to live, hang out, study, work, and have access to culture and entertainment in specific areas—without having to go to other parts of the city.

Furthering the tendency to segregate and homogenize the population through urban planning, the working-class equivalent of the ZEDECs is what I referred to above as "subcontracted mass social housing." Under Salinas de Gortari, throughout Mexico a portion of the working-class population began to be transferred to small boxes isolated from big city neighbourhoods. The prize for easy access to a mortgage was a long commute. Built quickly on cheap land with inappropriate materials, these projects are the result of a basic drive for profit, as contractors and sub-contractors built cities that began immediately to fall apart, that were far away and lacked basic infrastructure and services. They are essentially unlivable and have become a national social problem; indeed, in the past few years, five million such homes have been abandoned by their owners.[61] If luxury enclaves promote cosmopolitan hyper-consumer lifestyles, neoliberal mass housing, aside from being a machine for the extraction of money from the poor, clearly reveals an underlying mechanism of domination: the lifestyle prescribed for the poor is a lack of public spaces and access to services, less than the minimum space for living, exhaustion from commuting, alienation, and illness.

As I mentioned above, the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project (PPP-MIDP), is a treaty geared towards transforming the southern part of Mexico (and extending to Central America, the Dominican Republic and Colombia), into a region of megaprojects devoted to tourism, agribusiness, the production of biofuel, hydroelectric plants, and resource-extraction. The treaty's purpose is to better the already existing infrastructure (highways, ports, electricity infrastructure, etc.) in the region, which would allow for the smooth and quick flow of goods and services throughout and toward strategic centres—all within a "competitive" framework. Along with the Plan Mérida (a US-led counter-narco-insurgency plan modeled on the Plan Colombia), the treaty takes into account regional security, and implies territorial reordering in order to "liberate" strategic zones so that transnational corporations can develop their megaprojects, thus displacing farmers, peasants, resisting communities, and drug dealers. It also involves changes in land use, financed by governments and private and transnational entities such as the World Bank.[62] What the PPP-MIDP envisions for the population is their transfer to "Rural Cities," suburban-like villages where dispossessed farmers and peasants are (with partial success) being relocated, starting in the States of Chiapas and Puebla. The Rural Cities program is also an experiment in "co-participation" between the public and the private sectors, comparable to the "Prawer Plan," according to which Israel is seeking to relocate 40,000 Bedouins from the Negev into townships with few municipal facilities. Similarly, the Mexican State intends to concentrate members of isolated communities scattered throughout rural areas, promoting their relocation under the discourse of "access to services" and "quality of life." However, the motivation behind the Rural Cities Program is not social but evidently economic, and the proposed network of rural integration centres has the ultimate purpose of achieving more efficient territorial organization by expropriating land from farmers. Once living in Rural Cities, farmers will cease to grow crops for their own consumption, and be forced to work for the mining, agribusiness, or biofuel industries.

The "productive conversion" of the program implies that entire communities will be obliged to change their forms of life and ways of making a living, lose control over their mode of production, and shift from a position of autonomy to one of dependency on corporations and the State; the suspicious participation of Elektra, Banco Azteca, and BrainPOP education in the program makes it evident that the plan for the inhabitants of rural areas is to incorporate them to the upcoming national "middle class" of indebted consumers. The Rural Cities Program has a counterinsurgency objective as well, echoing Guatemalan "Model Towns" from the 1980s,

House in Valle Escondido, Atizapán de Zaragoza, Mexico State which relocated communities displaced by the civil war to so-called "development poles."[63] Rural Cities are merely another chapter in the ongoing history of the dispossession of indigenous communities; while in the past they were expelled from valleys and fertile lands and pushed to arid mountains, now they are being forced to relocate because their lands are rich in mineral resources, oil, and water.[64] The first Rural Cities were built in Chiapas, and two more have been planned for the Sierra Norte in Puebla, but many of them have not been built at all, or, like the "Casas Geo," they have been abandoned or are falling apart.

Projects such as Export Processing Zones, Rural Cities, and "Casas Geo" (as well as housing developments geared to more affluent populations) are social laboratories that normalize the violence embedded in these spaces by determining citizens' terms of subjectivity, survival, and liveability; subjection, after Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, here implies a sensible subjectivation and a distribution of vulnerability.[65] The application of neoliberal policies in Mexico, therefore, implies that citizens are not only being dispossessed of their traditional modes of life, but are also being subjected to injurious State and corporate dependency and other modes of sensible subjugation. Moreover, these zoning projects are evidence of the government's policy of selectively reinforcing institutions at the national and local levels, adjusting political space to the demands of global capital, and ensure their total regulation of spaces only partially linked to or severed from global markets.[66] The articulation of different socio-economic zones driven by global production and financial markets in Mexico are examples of how the spatialization of capital subjects populations and communities to political, military, legal and criminal violence, forcing them into new forms of life ("productive conversion"). Their forms of life, as well as the sensorial and affective perception of the places they inhabit are thus shaped by corporate interests and values, tending toward both architectural homogenization and socio-economic differentiation.

Postscript

I now know, like tens of thousands of other Mexicans, what it is like to undergo the tragedy of losing a dear one to "crime." My maternal uncle was brutally murdered on 26 September 2013. He put his van for sale up on a website, and a couple interested in buying it contacted him to see it. They met, and the next day, told him they had decided to buy it. They then lured him to their home where they killed him with a hammer; then they dumped the body in the van, and drove it over 500 km north to San Luis Potosí, where they hid at a relative's house. Neighbours complained of the stench coming from the van, as a search continued in Puebla, where he lived. Three days after he disappeared, his body was found in the van. We still have many questions that remain unanswered. The only certainties are that neoliberalism is class warfare being waged in the name of the free market, and that few of those involved in it have any choice—or are even aware that they are taking part in this war.

Notes

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[1] Friedrich Kittler, "The City is a Medium," *New Literary History* 27, no. 4 (1996): 717–729.

[2] "Whites have forced the native peoples to (abandon the valleys and to) settle in the hills." Erwin Slim.

[3] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29.

[4] Gloria Leticia Díaz, "Quiso, no pudo… y se pudrió", *Proceso*, 19 February 2004, http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/mexico/portillo-pudrio.htm.

[5] Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, "Neoliberalizing Space" *Antipode* 34, no. 3 (July 2002): 392.

[6] Eduardo Galeano, "To Be Like Them," in *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*, ed. Charles Bowden (New York: Aperture, 1998), 121.

[7] M. Ayhan Kose, Guy M. Meredith, and Christopher M. Towe, "How Has NAFTA Affected the Mexican Economy? Review and Evidence," IMF Working Paper, WP/04/59 (April 2004), http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2004/wp0459.pdf.

[8] See "NAFTA's Impact on Mexico," *Sierra Club*, http://www.sierraclub.org/trade/downloads/nafta-and-mexico.pdf.

[9] I will discuss this term below.

[10] Judith Amador Tello, "El proyecto Mundo Maya, 'salvajemente neoliberal,'" *Proceso* 1813, 30 July 2011, http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=277485.

[11] Laura Carlsen, "Plan Puebla-Panama Advances: New Name, Same Game," *Americas Program*, 10 September 2009, http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/1834.

[12] Paul Imison, "The Ultimate Mexican Hype Machine: The Myth of the Aztec Tiger," *Counterpunch*, 29–31 March 2013, http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/03/29/the-myth-of-the-aztec-tiger.

[13] Chris Anderson, "Mexico: The New China," *The New York Times*, 26 January 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/opinion/sunday/the-tijuana-connection-a-template-for-growth.html.

[14] See Pilar Calveiro, *Violencias de Estado* (Mexico and Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2012).

[15] Marcela Turati, "Militarización disfrazada de Cruzada contra el Hambre," *Proceso* 1922, 31 August 2013, http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=351609.

[16] Silvia Ribeiro, "Químicamente tóxico," *La Jornada*, 12 February 2012, http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2012/02/11/index.php?section=opinion&article=029a1eco.

[17] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Duke University Press, 2006), 96.

[18] Alejandro Rosas and Ricardo Cayuela Gally, *El México que nos duele: Crónica de un país sin rumbo* (México: Planeta, 2011), 47.

[19] Ibid., 75.

[20] Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 2, 14.

[21] Ibid., 6.

[22] Slavoj Žižek, "Capitalism Can No Longer Afford Freedom," *ABC Religion and Ethics*, May 2012, http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/05/25/3511327.htm.

[23] See Sayak Valencia Triana, *Capitalismo Gore* (Madrid: Melusina, 2010).

[24] See Sergio González Rodríguez, *The Femicide Machine* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2011).

[25] Subhabrata Banerjee, "Necrocapitalism," *Organization Studies* 29.12 (2008), pp. 1541-1563, quoted in Marko Stamenkovic, "Radical Withdrawal: Necropolitics, *Capitalismo Gore* and Other Kinds of Life," *The Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism* 6, http://jwtc.org.za/volume_6/marko_stamenkovic.htm.

[26] Enrique Krauze, "Las enseñanzas del maestro Othón" *Letras Libres*, 2 September 2013, http://www.letraslibres.com/blogs/blog-de-la-redaccion/las-ensenanzas-del-maestro-othon

[27] Gerald B. Herlman, Steven R. Ratner, "Saving Failed States," originally published in the Winter 1992–1993 issue of *Foreign Policy*, and republished online on June 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/21/saving_failed_states.

[28] Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 96.

[29] "Violencia cierra pequeños negocios, pero no afecta a maquilas en Ciudad Juárez," *Milenio Jalisco*, 27 July 2011,

[30] The Committee is a legal tool crafted by activist Erwin Slim Torres and approved at the municipal level which enables civilians, as well as civil, social, and political organizations, to partake in any decisions that the government may make concerning territorial arrangements in the region.

[31] Thomas Friedman, "How Mexico Got Back into the Game," *New York Times*, 23 February 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/24/opinion/sunday/friedman-how-mexico-got-back-in-the-game.html?_r=0.

[32] Galeano, "To Be Like Them."

[33] According to David J. Danelo, instability in and around Monterrey is much more politically significant than the chaos in Juárez, and thus Mexico City cannot permit terror to rule Monterrey. The Zetas exploited this vulnerability between 2010 and 2012, but now tranquility reigns, at least in this part of the city. See David Danelo, "Toward a US-Mexico Security Strategy: The Geopolitics of Northern Mexico and the Implications for U.S. Policy," *The Program of National Security at the Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 2011, https://www.fpri.org/docs/Toward_a_US_Mexico_Security_Strategy_Danelo.pdf.

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Livia Corona Benjamin

From the Series *Two Million Homes for Mexico (2006–present)*

In 2000, Mexican presidential candidate Vicente Fox Quesada proposed an unprecedented plan to build two million low-income homes throughout the country during his six year term. On the eve of his election, Fox proclaimed, "My presidency will be remembered as the era of public housing." To enact this initiative, the federal government agency INFONAVIT ceded the construction of low-income housing to a small group of private real estate investors. Then, almost overnight, grids 20 to 80,000 identical homes sprouted up, and they continue to spread in remote agrarian territory throughout the country. To encounter these developments by land, by air, or even via satellite imagery, evokes a rare sensation. These are not the neighborhoods of a "Home Sweet Home" dream fulfilled, but are ubiquitous grids of ecological and social intervention on a scale and of consequences that are difficult to grasp. In these places, urbanization is reduced to the mere construction of housing. There are nearly no public amenities—such as schools, parks, and transportation systems. There are few commercial structures—such as banks and grocery stores. Yet demand for these low-income homes continues to increase and developers continue to provide them with extreme efficiency. During Fox's six-year presidency, 2,350,000 homes were built, at a rate of 2,500 homes per day, and this trend is set to continue.