

Capadocia: The Place Where Women are Buried Alive / Without Forgiveness

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“From the depths I yell out to you, my Lord” (Psalm 129:3)⁻¹

By many accounts, the global prison-industrial complex is an expression of the neoliberal re-articulation of the political economy: under the rhetoric of “safety” and the “War against Drugs,” it is the harbinger of the new authoritarianism. In Mexico, new legislative efforts, and their application by the judicial system, brought about by reforms to penal codes since 1994 have created new criminal figures, punishable behaviours, and augmented conviction lengths. The steady growth of the inmate population (mostly the poor and vulnerable) is also linked to subcontracting the prison system, as corporations take advantage of the considerable amount of labour available: as society pays the bill for its own repression, the reformed prison system oppresses large swaths of society while generating surplus value for private companies.⁻²

The television series Capadocia, produced and written in Mexico and broadcast by HBO, tells the story of women incarcerated at a prison opened under the maximum-security private-penitentiary regime. The series begins at the “Reclusorio Oriente,” an overcrowded, medium-security state prison housed in an old colonial building lacking security, sanitation, and the minimum living conditions, which supposedly leads to an environment of corruption and violence. The series begins when lawyer Teresa Lagos, specializing in humanitarian and criminal law and married to Santiago Marín, Mexico City D.F.’s left-wing governor, is asked to be director of a new jail subcontracted to ECSO, a massive corporation.⁻³ In spite of ECSO’s willingness to bribe state officials, the bill to privatize prisons does not pass in congress, so Federico Cantú—future CEO of Capadocia—incites a jail riot in complicity with La Negra, head of security. The riot marks a change in leadership inside, while nineteen prisoners are killed. The state of exception created by the

1
Written outside
the door of
the solitary
confinement unit
in the jail in the
show Capadocia.

2
Pilar Calveiro,
Violencias de
estado (México
y Buenos Aires:
Siglo XXI, 2012),
17.

3
As we learn as the
story develops,
ECSO diversifies
into mass media,
sweatshop factory
labour, drug
dealing, high-level
pimping, etc.

riot justifies the legalization of prison subcontracting, thus enabling the inauguration of Capadocia, a new, utopian, high-security private jail that will supposedly rebalance the Mexican penal state system. Survivors from the “Reclusorio Oriente” who are considered candidates for rehabilitation and reinsertion are transferred there.

For Lagos, Capadocia is a potential site for rehabilitation, and she governs it according to feminist and humanist principles, while Cantú (Capadocia’s CEO) sees the jail as “a prison with twenty-first-century security but with nineteenth-century living (and working conditions).” Built underneath the ground, with bare cement walls, a transparent semi-circular panoptic tower with surveillance screens, an automated voice giving orders, and general atmosphere of depersonalization and dehumanization, Capadocia is not overcrowded, and the inmates wear fancy blue uniforms, are fed leftover airplane food, and have access to psychiatric and psychological care. Capadocia illustrates how maximum-security prisons are, in Argentinian political scientist Pilar Calveiro’s words, “panoptic and cellular systems” created to regain control of the internal life within the prison, to avoid overcrowding, corruption, and violence. They are characterized by the absolute separation between prison guards and inmates (they address each other only by giving or receiving orders); circulation is restricted except when inmates are accompanied by a guard; contact with the exterior, including phone calls and visits, is limited; communication among prisoners is severely limited, as the inmates have few or no shared activities; and there is high-security technology for surveillance, as well as disproportionate and repressive weaponry. The rigid norms and imprisonment conditions are apparently oriented to prevent emergency situations and maintain order, but they have the purpose of “neutralizing” subjects through intimidation.—⁴

In spite of Lagos’s efforts to ensure the best living and working conditions for the inmates, Cantú introduces drugs into Capadocia, and a sweatshop to produce *Cautiva* (captive) lingerie. The undergarments are marketed with a discourse of social responsibility, rehabilitation, and a revealing yet problematic poster—in terms of how women are seen in Mexico—showing the headless figure of a woman with the slogan: “The woman that you

are.” The first inmate to enter Capadocia is Lorena, an upper-middle-class chemist who confesses to murdering her best friend after finding her in bed with her husband. A corrupt judge—the victim’s father—ensures that Lorena will serve a long sentence. With Lagos’s help, Lorena’s sentence is revoked the same day that she murders fellow inmate La Bambi; she is again doomed to serve time while she becomes queen of Capadocia. Lorena assures her a position of power upon discovering that the fillings of the bras manufactured in Capadocia contain a designer drug that will be smuggled to Spain. Unable to denounce ECSO’s criminal activities, Lorena and Lagos decide to hide the drugs inside the prison. Cantú is then held accountable for the loss of the drugs by the (American) dealer, who beheads his boss.

Because Cantú is in charge of carrying out ECSO’s interests in Capadocia, he is always caught between the corporation’s interests and paying for his subjects’ misdeeds; in other words, while he is in charge of corrupting and extorting everyone beneath him, he is also held responsible for their mistakes and betrayals. Through the figure of Cantú, the narrative reveals the mechanism of power inherent in the Mexican authoritarian logic: there is always someone higher up to be feared and obeyed, and someone below to be oppressed; thus, in varying degrees, everyone is both master and slave at the same time. This authoritarian logic has been sustained for 500 years by the Christian idea (which appears surreptitiously in the narrative of Capadocia) that one needs to first suffer in order to be saved.

Lagos’s perspective of Capadocia is extremely important in the narrative, although she overlooks how crime is bred from within the prison itself and believes too much in “rehabilitation” from within prison as the solution to the inmates’ problems. Insofar as she is a feminist, she enables spectators to see how the prison system exploits and thrives on the binary notions of gender in society at large. Lagos’s perspective also enables spectators to see the connections between personal tragedy, the political, and how the institutional affects the private realm. For instance, Ignacia is an indigenous woman who works as a servant at a home in which the couple are estranged: he is gay and busy with his lovers, while she gambles until she loses everything. Ignacia is caught up in a fight between them, and

gets blamed for the murder of her *patrona*. Because she is not fluent in Spanish, she cannot defend herself and it takes months before she is appointed a translator. Her case becomes an example of how racial and class prejudice and abuse are embedded not only in (colonial) work relationships but also in institutions, evidencing how both are sites of political struggle. While providing a raw and reliable general perspective on the Mexican situation, *Capadocia* focuses on the feminization of oppression showing how neoliberal power is geared toward expropriating prisoners' bodies. Moreover, the series evidences how oppression in this context creates specific forms of vulnerability (extortion, illness, exploitation) through a complex network of invisible punishments for women and their families, which leads to violence and the disintegration of the social fabric. Moreover, we see how the neoliberal logic of productive conversion works: the prison guard becomes foreman and pimp, as the prisoner is converted to slave and prostitute (inmates are smuggled out of Capadocia to have sex with ECSO's executives and associates).

The first two seasons of *Capadocia* (broadcast in 2010-11) exude "PANista" (from PAN, the right wing National Action Party in power between 2000-2012) sensibilities in terms of political context and discourse: humanitarianism and social responsibility are inextricable from privatization, and fighting on behalf of those below was the order of the day (within the newly privatized conditions), especially in large urban centres. In this context, Lagos and Marín embody Christian and leftist political values (which are not always at odds with the right wing's privatization efforts and its "security" discourses as an excuse to oppress). Lagos and Marín are both well-intended and honest government functionaries who want to serve the people, but the prevailing corruption hinders their good intentions and actions in a regime in which politics, corporations, and the legal system are intertwined in an omnipresent network of crime, extortion, and exploitation.

The third season (2012) turns into a sci-fi cop narrative when Lagos and Marín are deprived of their power and freedom, and they find themselves not fighting on behalf of the oppressed, but for their lives and against power embodied in a "sect." Known as "La Confederación" (a hierarchical organization made up of narcos, high-

ranking army officers, politicians, corporate heads, and members of the elite), the sect is scheming to take over power in Mexico with a discourse of racial superiority and by making the population kill each other, in a kind of manufactured self-genocide of the poor. Capadocia is not only a site of exploitation and abuse, but has become a site for drug experimentation in order to manipulate inmates. Developments in this season mirror the return of the PRI to power (the Institutional Revolutionary Party) in 2012, which has resulted in the use of PANista social responsibility and security discourses as cover for even more privatization, violence, militarization, and oppression. In this regard, “La Confederación” is the doppelganger of the “Grupo Atlalcomulco,” an organization with rules, leadership and a formal hierarchy made up of old and new members of the PRI, suspected of ruling the country from behind the scenes since the 1940s. Federico Cantú is current Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto’s double as he becomes a presidential candidate supported by “La Confederación”; Emma Luisa Delgado, a *santera* and all-powerful leader of the teachers’ union who falls from grace in the new regime, ends up in Capadocia (her double in real life, teachers’ union leader Elba Esther Gordillo, ended up in jail a year later). Parading inside Capadocia we see the character La Mataviejititas (the old women’s assassin, whom in real life terrorized Mexico City’s imaginary in 2006) and Montserrat Olmos, wife of El Nuro, the doppelgangers of Emma Coronado and powerful drug cartel leader el Chapo Guzmán, respectively. There are also fictional characters like Diane Brighton, head of a finance bank based in New York who is murdered doing business with the cartels, and La Colombiana, a woman doomed by her beauty to be a sex object, especially in prison. There is also a *mara* member, a high-end pimp accused of human trafficking who gets off easy, a kidnaper, an emerald smuggler, a psychotic fallen star and murderer, a fraudulent transsexual, an autistic woman who performs miracles, an avenger of child rapists, a neurotic middle-class mother, etc.

Capadocia evidently obeys a commercial mandate, and thus some of its shortcomings are due to market and consumer desire. Obvious silences (like the cases of Florence Cassez, Brenda Cruz Quevedo or Juana Hilda González Lomelí)⁻⁵ make it at times a *telenovela*, sensationalist and even propagandist. Overall,

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Florence Cassez is a French citizen imprisoned for seven years on false kidnaping charges; her case had an international political dimension, and led to a fallout between Felipe Calderón’s and Nicolas Sarkozy’s governments; Brenda Cruz Quevedo and Juana Hilda González Lomelí are known to have been falsely accused in 2006 of kidnaping and murdering Hugo Wallace, son of Miranda de Wallace who took up the task of finding her disappeared son (eventually she became Official Human Rights spokeswoman under Calderón and the PAN’s candidate for Mayor of Mexico D.F.). Cruz Quevedo and González Lomelí denounced having been incriminated through torture, and were routinely tortured in prison. Cassez was freed a month after Peña Nieto came to power in 2012.

the narrative does not explicitly denounce the urgency of the current socio-political situation in Mexico reflected in the increased imprisonment of women (and men), though it does convey the force of neoliberal power mechanisms with the intensity of affect and shock through voyeuristic scenarios. In spite of its limitations, the series makes evident that the conditions of exception and corruption inside prisons reproduce instead of prevent crime, and that the political decisions the state has made in terms of penal justice reforms serve only neoliberal reorganization and its agenda of oppression. Finally, if we compare Capadocia to Orange Is the New Black, the Netflix series by Jenji Kohan, what comes across is that while the former crafts drama from historico-political reality with a politicized (feminist and humanist) sensibility geared at showing the mechanisms of the neoliberal criminal apparatus, the latter narrates a bourgeois liberal narrative from the personal experience of a white American woman, which is then turned into sensational comedy by exploiting gender and race stereotypes.