
Narrating the Neoliberal Moment: History, Journalism, Historicity

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Of Tiger's Leaps and Lullabies, and Historical Excess

History, it has been said, is a sign of the modern, and subsistence “without history” or “on the margins of history” was long a metonymic sign of backwardness and a pretext and justification for colonial occupation.¹

A somewhat less noted fact is that an *excess* of historical invocation—or a historical obsession—is a diagnostic sign of failed modernities, and especially of what Wolfgang Schivelbusch has called “the culture of defeat,” that is, the process of mourning and recovery that follows national trauma. To the extent that it is attributed to external forces, economic collapse such as that suffered in Mexico in 1982 and again in 1995, or in Argentina in 2002, can also be assimilated as national trauma and has spurred this kind of historical excess.²

In such contexts, the present all too frequently exposes the wounds of the past and thereby prompts the sort of historical stance that Walter Benjamin favored when he wrote: “The historical materialist approaches a historical object solely and alone where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he cognizes the sign of a messianic zero-hour of events, or put differently, a revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past.”³ Indeed, the messianic historical approach

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1. Nicholas Dirks, “History as a Sign of the Modern,” *Public Culture* 2 (1989): 25–33.

2. Schivelbusch’s phrase “culture of defeat” refers especially to national defeat in war, and he compares the U.S. South after the Civil War to France after its war with Prussia and to Germany after World War I. See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (New York: Henry Holt, 2003).

3. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), number 14.

advocated by Benjamin—the “tiger’s leap” to and from a past moment of possibility as an outburst that ruptures the monotonous lullaby of historical domination—tends to get worn from overuse in contexts of national dependency. There, the “culture of defeat” cannot be redeemed as long as historical invocations appeal only to a national community that is imagined as sovereign but that is in reality dependent.

Indeed, the messianic sensibility advocated by Benjamin is widely present in dependent countries, like many in Latin America and the Middle East, where the combination of frustrated modern projects and Abrahamic religious traditions turns the millenarian horizon into a readily available and seductive source for an alternative political vocabulary. But national liberation in those cases is always tempered by dependency, so history there turns into a kind of neurotic obsession.

Mexico is an interesting example of this phenomenon, having suffered national trauma from civil strife following independence, catastrophic defeat in its war against the United States in 1848, further (though ultimately unsuccessful) European invasions, and numerous internal defeats during its social revolution of 1910–20. Mexico was one of the earliest economic dependencies of the United States in Latin America and has certainly been the most important. More recently, it suffered the spectacular collapse of what had been a successful model of import substitution industrialization and of “mixed economy.” Not surprising, the country is known to have deep historical concerns and, indeed, to have had them from an early date.

Thus, U.S. historian Hubert Bancroft, who came to Mexico in 1883 to collect historical documents, wrote, as one of his first impressions of the country:

I am really astonished at the great number of pamphlets and books for the young relating to the history of this country, almanacs of history, catechisms of history, treatises on history, etc. These together with the numerous historical holidays and celebrations show as deep and demonstrative a love of country as may be found, I venture to assert, any where else on the globe. There is certainly nothing like it in the literature of the United States. Today, the 27th [of September], one hundred years after the event, in this comparatively isolated capital there are two factions on the plaza almost coming to blows over an Iturbide celebration, the priests insisting that they will do honor to his memory, and the government party swearing that they shall not.⁴

4. Hubert Bancroft, *Observations on Mexico*, 1883, unpublished manuscript, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 40–41.

National trauma provided the structure in which Mexico's historical profession has developed from the nineteenth century forward. Indeed, historical framing of day-to-day events was such a significant issue that a number of Mexico's first senior statesmen also became its most prominent historians: José María Luis Mora, Lucas Alamán, Lorenzo de Zavala, and Carlos María de Bustamante all wrote major—and widely diverging—histories of Mexico's independence in order to offer the public credible teleologies in times of national trauma. Needless to say, their scholarly efforts were supplemented by intense and continual engagements with the press.

In times of peace and prosperity, when there has been broad hegemony, historians tend to be perceived as ornamental—acolytes swinging pots of incense as they march behind the priest of high office. They are invited to participate in the press but usually provide a different kind of accompaniment: the text of a panegyric providing a dictator with a lofty lineage; the commemoration of a patriotic date that confirms and updates the terms of the social compact.⁵ The profession as a whole gets represented as an antiquarian's pursuit, and the press is satisfied with having a single august chronicler, usually very much an “insider,” to festoon its pages with commemorations.

Since the 1982 financial crisis, Mexico has not fully returned to such a moment of peace in domination, and historians' interventions have been more numerous, more contentious, and more urgent. The bankruptcy of the Mexican state ushered in neoliberal reforms in a contradictory process that required both a good measure of authoritarianism and a negotiated (and protracted) democratic transition. Reading the tea leaves of history was made interesting precisely by these contradictions. It was in the context of Mexico's twin neoliberal and democratic transitions that I finally came to supplement my work as an academic historian and anthropologist with regular interventions in the press.

This essay is a reflection on the relationship between historiography and routine public commentary in the media as it pertains to my experience as an academic historian and anthropologist in New York City and as a newspaper columnist in Mexico City. I begin by summarizing my practice as a writer of op-ed columns, then move to a considered reflection of the interpretative demands that make historical work dynamic in the public sphere. I conclude with a few remarks on historical and journalistic writing. The essay is presented as a field report rather

5. I do not mean to imply that all professional historians conform to this expectation. For example, Daniel Cosío Villegas, who was the dean of Mexico's modern historians, was also a courageous critic of the regime in the press in the 1960s and 1970s.

than as a fuller theorization of the relationship between historical and journalistic writing.

Overview of My Editorial Experience

For the past two years, I have written an editorial column that appears every Monday in *Excelsior*, a Mexico City daily. Although this habit may appear outlandish to my colleagues in the American academy, it is not so very unusual or heroic in Mexico, a country that has quite a developed market for opinion—almost in inverse proportion, I sometimes think, to its support of investigative journalism. Indeed, the lack of a single dominant newspaper in Mexico City—there is no equivalent to the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, or *El País*—means that there is a relatively large number of editorialists in the mainstream press: the newspapers *Reforma*, *La Jornada*, *El Universal*, *Milenio*, *Excelsior*, and *La Crónica* each have their stable of four or five editorialists who rotate on a daily basis in a weekly cycle. Thus, each paper has a stable of twenty or so editorialists. Multiplied by five or six papers, this makes me one of a hundred or more editorial writers. I share this information in order to place my activity in the modest light in which it belongs.

Still, I am a player in Mexico's "Kula ring" of opinion making, a system of production and circulation that according to my observations is based on the practice that editorialists have of reading and taking freely of each other's work. Thus, I have observed on occasion—and always with a small sense of triumph—that a piece that I frame one day in *Excelsior* is picked up (though rarely acknowledged, which is an accepted rule of the game) three days later by a colleague in *El Universal* or *La Jornada* or, better yet, by a beat reporter who follows through with further news, thanks to heightened interest in the topic. And I take from the work of others with equal liberality.

Although the microsociology of exchanges within Mexico's circle of opinion making has yet to be written, it is clear that the high number of editorialists generates a shrewd politics of recognition within the field of opinion, a practice that is linked to hierarchies of status within that field. Liberality at the level of borrowing between writers often goes along with miserliness when it comes to recognition, and acknowledgment of "inferiors" by "superiors" is rare, while at the top a gentlemanly or ladylike etiquette of elaborate obsequiousness is common ("After you"—"No, after you!"). As a result, open debate is as rare as borrowing is common.

Producing an editorial involves scouring the daily news for suitable topics and

reading the work of one's fellow editorialists in order to know what is currently "spinning"—they don't call it "circulation" for nothing. My particular practice involves reading four Mexico City papers every day, plus the *New York Times* and the *Economist*. That is pretty much what is required. The rest—research into specific topics, depth of available references, analysis, and expository style—is supplementary.

Although writing for Latin America from New York has a pedigree that reaches back to the journalistic career of the great Cuban writer José Martí, Latin America's first foreign correspondent, post-Internet practice differs from its nineteenth-century predecessor in that the U.S. media is now available via Internet to any editorial writer in Mexico, just as the Mexico papers are instantly available to me. Writing from a distance is now a way of accompanying Mexican opinion and an excuse for reading the daily papers, and it adds a voice that is inflected by a different quotidian experience and therefore brings a distinctive point of view. The Internet thus changes the shape of the public that may be addressed by the newspaper, extending its reach to select sectors of the Mexican diaspora.

My expertise as a historian and anthropologist and my position as a professor in the American academy are the resources I bring to the circle of exchange that is Mexican editorial production. The newspaper's editor is attentive to this fact. Indeed, he chooses his stable of editorialists based on a variety of factors in order to guarantee that a range of perspectives is brought to the circuit: one editorialist is a party leader, the second a scion of a prominent family, the third a consummate political analyst; others may include a writer, an environmentalist, a TV personality, or a political insider. Because of this composed diversity, the newspaper is free to give us each the liberty to write about whatever comes to our minds. It is tranquil in the security that Mexico's conservative cardinal Norberto Rivera, who writes his editorials for *Excelsior* on Sundays, will say something very different from what I come up with on Monday.

To give a sense of the topical range involved in my practice, in February and March 2007 I wrote pieces on the junk food lobby, obesity, and eating disorders; an article in favor of the legalization of abortion in Mexico City; an environmentalist critique of Mexico's current oil debate; a discussion of secrecy and access to information in Bush's America; a discussion of the way in which Mexico's Forbes 500 billionaires are involved in exploiting Mexican migrants in the United States; global warming's implications for Mexico's knowledge production needs; animal intelligence and animal rights; dehumanization and lack of individuation on the anniversary of a major mining accident in northern Mexico; argumenta-

tion in favor of Mexico's new law on women's rights; a critique of the poverty of the PRD's economic agenda; and a reflection on the significance of Mexico's new filmmakers for that country's intellectual field. This sample illustrates the ample discretion I enjoy.

Every Sunday morning I get up, read the day's papers, and compose my 5,000-character editorial. I compare writing these pieces to doing origami, because they involve making figures out of papers of a fixed size—5,000 characters, or, actually, between 4,900 and 5,100 characters. The editorial is a closed poetic form, like a haiku.

I e-mail my piece to the paper before 4 p.m., and it appears the next morning. There is no back-and-forth with the editorial office, either on Sunday or at any other time. In the editorial relationship, it is ironically the case that no news (from the editor) is good news: if they keep you on, they must have their reasons. So far, I have not been censored. Basically, it is a Julian affair: I write, I send, and it is published. Instant gratification, instant regret. It is easy to understand the giddiness of the Hearsts and Pulitzers who orchestrate these interventions.

How and Why I Got into This

I have reason to suppose that invitations to join the ranks of Mexico's bloated "commentocracy" might not have materialized had I not earned a level of notoriety for authoring an unforgiving review of historian Enrique Krauze's book *Mexico: A Biography of Power* and participating in the debate that followed its translation into Spanish in 1998.⁶

At that point historians had achieved some prominence in Mexican cultural affairs: the editors of the journals that represented the capital's two most powerful intellectual groups were historians—Héctor Aguilar Camín and Enrique Krauze—and historians occupied a number of prestigious positions in public life.

In my critique I had argued that Krauze's *Biography of Power* was a fitting

6. The book I criticized was the English-language version of a set of books that Krauze had published in Mexico over the years (Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power* [New York: HarperCollins, 1997]). The review was first published in English, where it prompted no debate, but it was then translated some months later by the weekly news journal *Milenio*, where it was presented as a public scandal (splashed all over the full-color cover of the magazine) and where it became the springboard for a mud-slinging debate between Krauze and myself. See Lomnitz, "An Intellectual's Stock in the Factory of Mexican Ruins: Enrique Krauze's 'Biography of Power,'" *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1998): 1052–65. The Spanish version of my review and the subsequent debate appeared in *Milenio* during April and May 1998.

example of the accomplishments of the much-trumpeted privatization of culture and the depreciation of the academy. After the 1982 debt crisis, the Mexican government reduced its support for universities, but it directed subsidies and support to a select firmament of intellectual “stars,” who set up independent operations, especially in publishing and eventually in connection with television. The value of the culture being generated by these new impresarios, I argued, should be judged by the quality of their products. I then set out to demonstrate that Krauze’s magnum opus, a prime product of the new privatized system, ended up being little more than a Whiggish history that was plagued by inconsistencies and rarely strayed from the commonplace banalities of received prejudice. Mexico, Krauze argued, was heir to authoritarian traditions on both the Aztec and the Spanish sides, and as a result its leaders were generally autocratic and rambunctious caudillos or somber and autocratic *tlatoanis* whose infantile frustrations and adolescent obsessions were transferred directly onto their presidencies and thus onto “power” writ large. This authoritarian trend, which had been combated by liberals since the nineteenth century, culminated in the “imperial presidencies” of the 1960s and 1970s but finally began to break down thanks to democratic opposition, notably from Krauze’s own (1968) generation. So the story went.

Although it is by no means certain that I “won” the debate that ensued—having been vigorously denounced by Krauze as “*Mister Lomnitz*” and having stood rightly accused of mangling the Spanish language—the spectacle of a public joust with a powerful public intellectual who was held in high esteem was sufficiently remarkable for me to receive an almost immediate invitation to write a weekly column for the Mexican daily *El Universal*—an invitation that I declined for fear of having little to say on such a regular basis. The staying power of this intervention seems to have been sufficient, however, for the offer to be renewed six year later, when *Excelsior* acquired a new editor, and this time I accepted it.

These were the immediate circumstances of my recruitment into the ephemeral art of editorializing, but they beg the question of why my discussion with Krauze was deemed to be of sufficient interest for two separate dailies to ask (yet another) historian to write in regularly. Answering that question involves understanding why I saw Krauze’s writing as “Whiggish history,” whereas he viewed his interventions as deeply critical of the regime.

The gladiatorial dimension of our debate hinged on the qualities and shortcomings of Krauze’s scholarship, on my own basis of authority, and on our oratorical flourish, but the vitality of the event stemmed from two basic questions: the credibility of the neoliberal teleology that Krauze championed, and the accomplishments and failures of a cultural policy that had favored a small media-oriented

intelligentsia while relinquishing commitments to the lumbering bureaucratic apparatus of the university and its attendant academy. In the end, the debate about teleology (Whiggish versus critical history), the polemical and rhetorical defense of alternative genealogies of the present, was what made each of our perspectives attractive to the media.

The vitality of the historical debate stemmed, in other words, from the interpretive historical framings that were prompted by the (slow) collapse of revolutionary nationalism as official ideology. I now turn to those historical frames, which first emerged around the 1982 crisis, in order to conclude with a reflection on the relationship between historical framing and quotidian editorial intervention.

Chronotopes of the Neoliberal Era

The financial crisis of 1982 that prompted Mexico's economic reforms was part of a global phenomenon: the collapse of the import substitution industrialization model and its replacement with an open economy model, made possible by a technological revolution. Nevertheless, public opinion is always intent on pinning local calamities on local culprits, and public intellectuals in Mexico tend to favor the view that the nation is the author of its own history rather than a character in somebody else's play. As a result, the 1982 debt crisis was construed in the first instance as a *national* crisis that demanded an internal explanation. It was because of his success in providing a liberal historical framing device that Enrique Krauze acquired such centrality.

Renewal of Revolutionary Time

The first reaction to the violent crash of the Mexican economy was naturally a reassertion of Mexican revolutionary time—that is, of the temporal framework that legitimated Mexico's ruling party as the product and heir of the Mexican Revolution (1910–20). This reaction was led by the president of Mexico himself when he announced the government's bankruptcy.

In his memorable presidential address of September 1, 1982, José López Portillo wept in front of the cameras and the national assembly and railed that Mexico had been looted by unfaithful Mexicans (*sacadólares*) who had transferred their money abroad in a run on the peso. He then surprised the entire country with a decree to nationalize the banks.

Former president Luis Echeverría's immediate reaction to the speech suggests that López Portillo's framing strategy was instantly recognizable as an asser-

tion of his party's revolutionary teleology: "This is a moment that proves what a revolutionary, and what a Mexican President López Portillo is. I've said so. That myopic oligarchy! Those greedy men [*ambiciosos*]! Men of money. People without spirit! That's why there was so much debate in my administration. You are all witnesses. I have come to say to José López Portillo: 'Mr. President, *Arriba y Adelante!*'"⁷

Indeed, López Portillo himself framed the financial collapse first as a crisis of nationality: "This is where the road parts. On our side is the majority that demands justice, and demands the values of our nationality; on the other side, are those who want to leave [the country] with their beloved treasure."⁸ According to the president, the crisis had been produced by a class of "denaturalized" Mexicans. The only viable response was a return to the values of the revolution in their purest state, represented in the national conscience by President Lázaro Cárdenas's 1938 nationalization of oil. By nationalizing the banks, López Portillo momentarily transformed the announcement of the catastrophic failure of the peso into a popular commemoration and celebration of the Mexican Revolution.

Most public intellectuals at the time agreed with López Portillo's notion that the crisis was produced by a lack of patriotism and that the president's reaction was a justified renewal of the revolutionary program. For instance, historian Héctor Aguilar Camín, who would become one of the most powerful intellectuals of the neoliberal transition but who at this time was still a voice of the Left, wrote: "It is perhaps a historian's bias [*una deformación profesional*] that leads me to state that the nationalization of the banks is for us Mexicans a genuine *return of history*, the unexpected actualization of powerful legal and political traditions."⁹

This "return of history" was, no doubt, the return of Cardenismo and, with it, the return of the dilemma of collaboration with the official party that the Mexican Left had buried long before. Aguilar Camín openly toyed with this question: "Looked at objectively, the coherent (though also impossible) position at this time would be to join the PRI *en masse* and to form a real current within it."¹⁰

He then tried to steer a rather vague intermediate course between absorption

7. Claudio Pérez Gayosso, "I/IX/82: El día menos pensado," *Nexos*, October 1982, 4; *Arriba y Adelante!* was Echeverría's own campaign motto. Here the former president was, in passing, using López Portillo's act to justify his own administration's policies.

8. Antonio Sáborit, "El Zócalo Nacional," *Nexos*, October 1982, 6.

9. Héctor Aguilar Camín, "Memorias de una expropiación," *Nexos*, October 1982, 22, original emphasis.

10. Camín, "Memorias de una expropiación," 27.

and independence: “It all sounds *lombardiano*,¹¹ *allendiano*,¹² well worn and passé. However, thinking it over, in all seriousness, it may be the only road that the left can take and still avoid going back either to the sterile pride of clandestine marginality or to an unconditional alliance with the state like the Partido Popular Socialista did.” Moreover, Aguilar also saw the renovation of revolutionary time as the PRI’s only salvation:

Seen in the proper light, the nationalization of the banks will be to Miguel de la Madrid’s presidency what the providential new oil discoveries were to José López Portillo. . . . Above all, the nationalization of the banks provides the state with the possibility of developing a truly viable economic policy, and to move to meet the key challenge of the De la Madrid project—which is also the central problem of Mexico’s entire history—social inequality, without financial or economic resistance.¹³

Interestingly, the denunciation of the *sacadólares* was also supported in quarters that were not so thrilled by the nationalization of the banks, or by the reassertion of revolutionary time. It seemed difficult at that juncture to propose any political program—even an “antirevolutionary” program—without joining in the nationalist reaction against the invisible traitors, the *sacadólares*. So, for instance, Enrique Krauze, who authored the only article on the debt crisis and the nationalization of the banks to appear in Octavio Paz’s liberal magazine *Vuelta*, pondered the figure of the *sacadólares* and concluded that Mexico had been deserted by a whole group of its citizens. “Mexico’s experience during the López Portillo presidency was not so much pillage: it was a national desertion. . . . Every Mexican had the ethical opportunity to bet on his country.”¹⁴ The people who did not do the ethical thing were disdainfully referred to by Krauze, following an expression coined by José Vasconcelos, as *Metecos en yanquilandia*; *metecos* were “colonials and foreigners who arrive to the imperial center [*metrópoli*] in order to append themselves to its mores, to imitate its tastes, but without producing original values of their own that might enrich culture.”¹⁵

For this disciple of Octavio Paz, the Americanized bourgeoisie had turned its back on its own culture and yet added nothing to its culture of adoption.

11. The reference is to Vicente Lombardo Toledano, Mexico’s great socialist and labor leader, whose Partido Popular Socialista eventually became an appendage of the official party.

12. The reference is to Chilean socialist Salvador Allende.

13. Camín, “Memorias de una expropiación,” 28.

14. Krauze, “México: El timón y la tormenta,” *Vuelta* 71 (October 1982): 15–16.

15. Krauze, “México: El timón y la tormenta,” 15.

Mexico's *sacadólares* were therefore *metecos*, a word that was adapted by Vasconcelos from the racist term *mètèque*, used pejoratively in twentieth-century France against North African residents.¹⁶ Unlike its French counterpart, which is directed against (colonized) foreign immigrants, *metecos en yanquilandia* is an expression used to denigrate nationals who prefer the colonial metropole to their native country. In its Mexicanized form, then, the term resonates with the classist term *naco*, used to identify the vulgarity of the urbanized Indian. Like the *naco*, the *meteco* has turned his back on his noble native culture for the sake of cheap material benefits; like the *naco*, the marks of his "race" are visible despite any attempt to "pass" in another milieu. As a result, the bourgeois *meteco*, like the lower-class *naco*, has become vulgar.

A Divergent Strategy for the Mexican Left

There were a very few notable exceptions to the alignment of the Left with López Portillo's "revolutionary" framing. In an article that was written to try to shape the spirit of the new Mexican Left—which had been built by disbanding several parties, including the Mexican Communist Party, and shaping a new party, the PSUM—Roger Bartra had argued that the whole of the history of the Mexican Left, and especially of the Communist Party, could be imagined as a dialectic between two symbolic figures, Vicente Lombardo Toledano and José Revueltas. Lombardo, a great builder of unions and of party structures, a Stalinist and finally an ally of Mexico's official party who died reproaching the students of 1968, was more often criticized than the martyred figure of writer José Revueltas, but he was also, and perhaps in the same measure, more influential at the level of institution building. Revueltas, who was much more of a purist, much more of a rebel and a thinker, quickly landed himself in jail, where he imagined for the first time that perhaps the proletariat didn't really need a vanguard, but he died before he could complete his book on the subject. "For twenty years the oldest and largest organization of the left, the Mexican Communist Party, was torn between a Hamlet-Revueltas, interrogating himself before the specter of the proletarian cranium, and the security of a Saint Thomas Aquinas-Lombardo who, with his index-finger of fire, traced the official circle of the proletarian Leviathan."¹⁷ For Bartra, the

16. The distant origin of the term *mètèque* is the Greek *metoikos*, which refers to a person domiciled in a city that is not his or her own. I am grateful to Judy Friedlander for suggesting the connection between *meteco* and *mètèque*.

17. Roger Bartra, "¿Lombardo o Revueltas?" *Nexos*, June 1982, 15.

time had come to transcend this impasse by making a serious commitment to democracy, in all its plurality. Not surprising, the crisis of September 1982 presented Bartra with a real-life test, and his reaction was more cautious than that of those most intellectuals on the Left:

The crisis is here, at last. The crisis! Feared, announced, deferred or controlled, but which for years had been invisible, slippery, amorphous or hidden. The crisis arrives today dressed up in the most spectacular garments. The nationalization of the banks and the announcement of currency controls were the surprising policies announced by the President on September 1 1982 who, not without sobs and anguishes, announced the deepest economic and political crisis that Mexico has lived in the past 50 years.

All of a sudden the matters that were most debated by the left—the state, democracy, socialism—acquire a real, dramatic, conjunctural and tangible dimension. And against all expectations, the treatment that the government has decreed come from the left's medicine cabinet. . . . Never before has the Mexican left experienced this singular mixture of extreme power and extreme weakness: power of ideas, political weakness.¹⁸

In other words, Bartra's advice was to proceed cautiously, since the strength of the Left was conjunctural, based on the influence of its ideas, not on political muscle. Moreover, Bartra was deeply suspicious of any program that sought to reconcile the state and the people:

They start from the thesis that the state "represents" the nation: that the state is the organized social force that can mobilize the human and economic potential to develop the country, and therefore that it is necessary to strengthen the "alliances" between the state and the workers and peasants' movement. . . . No doubt this political formulation had its rationale fifty years ago, but revising it today is indispensable: it is very likely that Mexico is on the cusp of a new era, in which the axis of the expanded state and the incorporated popular movement can no longer be the motor of a "national project" that prepares the way for a democratic and socialist process.¹⁹

Thus, the Left should seek to separate civil society from the state and should support popular movements in their own right.

All of this debate within the Left has had lasting aftershocks, despite the fact that it was prompted into existence by what turned out to be a grotesque farce:

18. Bartra, "El reto de la izquierda," *Nexos*, October 1982, 15.

19. Bartra, "El reto de la izquierda," 20.

the nationalization of the banks. López Portillo had issued the nationalization decree as a lame duck president and having made no prior agreement either with his elected successor—Miguel de la Madrid—or with the international banking agencies that had to approve the restructuring of the national debt. As soon as the new president came into office, reprivatization of the banks began, alongside the broad program of structural change that we label with the convenient shorthand term *neoliberalism*.

As in the case of Chile, where neoliberal reform was implemented with no democratic representation, Mexico relied on the authoritarian structure of its one-party system to push reform through. Unlike the Chilean process, however, Mexican neoliberal reform immediately prompted a calibrated set of democratic concessions.

In this context, the official party lost its iron grip over its revolutionary credentials and over “revolutionary time,” that is, the teleology that had been so potently reaffirmed by López Portillo. The ownership of the Mexican revolution gradually migrated to a new left opposition, which is today fractured between a corporativist and a social democratic Left, with the corporativist and “neorevolutionary” option dominating the electoral field. At the same time, the protracted utility of the corporate and authoritarian structure of the old PRI, which remained in power until the year 2000, meant that an alternative, properly liberal genealogy of the “crisis” had a role to play in the political field and that it could make some claim to be an oppositional discourse. It is here that Enrique Krauze’s writings made their deepest mark, and it is around these issues that our debate hinged, since by the time of the debate, Krauze and Héctor Aguilar Camín occupied positions of great prominence and authority, while maintaining, or trying to maintain, the prestige of having authored a kind of Velvet Revolution Redux.

Working Out a New Genealogy for the Mexican State

The entire spectrum of the Left greeted the return of revolutionary time as the resurgence of a long-repressed truth. Even Carlos Monsiváis, one of the rare leading intellectuals who tended to be suspicious of nationalist discourse, explained the initial stunned reaction of the Mexican Left to the nationalization of the banks with an oblique reference to the connection between revolution and truth: “We all reacted badly [to the expropriation] because it is a real decision in a country of farces and half-fictions.”²⁰

20. Cited in “Memorias de una expropiación,” 25.

It was against the knee-jerk reassertion of the teleology of the Mexican Revolution that Enrique Krauze made his most successful intervention. As we have seen, Krauze joined in López Portillo's nationalist reaction and blamed the *sacadólares* for not doing the patriotic thing. However, he disagreed with López Portillo's historical framing of the crisis: "Some prophets see a return to the true Mexico in the great mobilizations that came on the heels of his decrees. The truth is a bit different: it was President López Portillo, and not Mexico, who returned to his origin."²¹

At the same time, Krauze took care not to insult the president and so not to disturb the courtly relationship between public intellectuals and PRI presidents that was so characteristic of the period. Instead, he preferred the stratagem of flogging a dead horse (in this case, former president Luis Echeverría): "I never doubted the sincerity of the President nor the internal consistency of his acts. He is not duplicitous. He is not a Mexican-style politician like Echeverría."²²

Krauze sarcastically referred to the intellectuals who saw the bank expropriation as a return to revolutionary time as "prophets," and he went on to provide his own (equally prophetic) version of the Mexican past that had brought forth the crisis. The source of the strength and wisdom with which to find the true keys to the past and from which to project and construct the future was, for Krauze as for the others, the silent majority that had been excluded from political representation. By giving voice to the people, Mexicans would find the strength and wisdom needed to find their way: "It is our source of wisdom. If we know how to recognize it, we will find it today, in the street, in the culture and identity of millions of Mexicans who have no voice. We cannot build anything solid without them, without listening to them."

The movement between "we" (the reading public, which is presumably also susceptible to identifying itself as "the people") and "they" (the silent masses that are the classical site of "the popular") sets the stage for effecting what Slavoj Žižek calls "interpassivity," a kind of activity in which a subject's reaction is anticipated and mimed by the emissary of the original message. As a vocal defender of the "silent masses," Krauze anticipates them and speaks for them.²³ The intellectual as somatic popular representative was a recognizable strategy of many of the intellectuals of this authoritarian period, on the left and the right, and indeed it

21. Krauze, "México: El timón y la tormenta," 21.

22. Krauze, "México: El timón y la tormenta," 19.

23. See Slavoj Žižek, "Cyberspace, or, How to Traverse the Fantasy in the Age of the Retreat of the Big Other," *Public Culture* 10 (1998): 483–513.

was a key of their remarkable prominence. Moreover, this strategy in itself helps explain the prominence of history as the indispensable supplement to the intellectuals' interpretation of the "true sentiments" of the people.

In this case, Krauze invoked a distinctly liberal historical frame to explain the contemporary impasse: "If Mexico has had one historic fall it is that of corruption. Today no one remembers the republican morality that the [nineteenth-century] liberals preached, not with their words but with their example."²⁴ Further, the modern history of corruption was in fact to a large degree isomorphic with the history of the revolution itself. Krauze even took what at the time was the bold step of partly rehabilitating the prerevolutionary dictatorship: "One can say a lot of things against Porfirio Díaz, but one cannot accuse him of being corrupt. True that he gave concessions to the *científicos* and that he fostered a barbarous accumulation and pillaging of lands. . . . But he did these things, at least in part, for the same ideological reasons that guided the liberals."²⁵

The story that Krauze told had a different point of departure than either López Portillo or the Mexican Left, and this was the so-called Restored Republic (1867–76), a period that he and other liberal historians, most notably Daniel Cosío Villegas, had represented as democratic, relatively free of governmental corruption, and with a responsible and free press.²⁶ The Fall, in this story, began during the revolution itself, though not with its democratic martyr Francisco Madero—not with the initiator, but rather with Venustiano Carranza. In other words, the corruption that eventually bankrupted Mexico had begun with the consolidation of the revolutionary state.

From that point on, so the story went, corruption increased slowly, though some heroes, notably Cárdenas, were tactfully spared close inspection, while Krauze's villains, especially former president Echeverría, bore the brunt of the blame. In short, Krauze proposed an interpretation of the crisis that placed the beginning of Mexico's Fall in the construction of the revolutionary state, and the point to which the country should return in an idealized Restored Republic. The solution, in short, was with liberalism rather than revolutionary nationalism.

After decades of one-party rule, Mexico's history had become a repertoire of stock images that provided a simplified moral and doctrinal vocabulary for the

24. Krauze, "México: El timón y la tormenta," 18.

25. Krauze, "México: El timón y la tormenta," 18–19.

26. Krauze's simplified version of Cosío Villegas's position leaned on that great historian's widely recognized academic accomplishments and also reaped the prestige of Cosío's oppositional politics. Cosío Villegas's liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s confronted harsh authoritarian governments and therefore required personal courage.

public. These images were condensed in the figures of universally vilified villains and of those that were dangerous to defile. Indeed, the earliest attempt by a historian to bring down one of these heroes, Francisco Bulnes's 1904 demolition of Benito Juárez, was met with such a storm of public indignation that its author seriously considered going into exile.²⁷ Krauze was therefore strategic in his choices: attacking Carranza, rather than Emiliano Zapata, as corrupt, or pointing to Echeverría rather than to Cárdenas. Relying on this well-sedimented nationalist idiom, Krauze called for reform based on a thoroughly idealized image of Juárez and Madero and their respective parties.

History: National and Transnational

Mexico's democratic transition and its neoliberal transition were joined at the hip but were not identical processes. The implementation of the key neoliberal reforms occurred between 1983 and 1992 and relied on the force of the old revolutionary party. Yet the state's shortage of resources and its limited and well-targeted aims for reform meant that its principal negotiating chip during this painful reorganization of the economy was a calibrated democratic transition, a process that was completed between 1994 and 2000, fully eighteen years after the breakdown of the earlier model.

Given the prominent role that intellectuals played in this transition, it is not surprising that a kind of "excess of history" marked the period as a whole or that a number of professional historians were drafted by the press or by television. As we have seen, history had become the principal source of stock images in Mexico's public discourse. It provided politicians and public intellectuals with a succinct and abbreviated moral vocabulary and with a set of images that could handily stand in for long-standing arguments or even for entire doctrines. The ardent rivalry between alternative historical teleologies in the 1980s and 1990s made the field of historical interpretation more demanding, precisely because it was the site of such contention.

27. Patriotic acts of repudiation of Bulnes and of redress for Juárez occurred in state legislatures and municipal governments all over the country. For a sense of their tone: "The Patriotic Popular Junta Juarista of Ciudad Camargo, Chihuahua, echoing the protest that the Mexican Nation raises against Mr. Francisco Bulnes, author of the book titled *The Real Juárez*, because of its anti-patriotic and defamatory concepts against the Heroe and against the Fatherland, will not allow this filthy outrage that has been heaped on National Democracy from the desk of the alleged 'scientific history' of this odd sage to go unnoticed." *Protesta patriótica levantada por el pueblo camarguense contra el libro intitulado "El Verdadero Juárez," de que es autor el Sr. Ingeniero Don Francisco Bulnes*, Ciudad Camargo, 1904, Latin American Pamphlet Collection, Yale University, New Haven, Conn., 7.

In that context, the internal power relations in Mexico City's intellectual field became more important and more constraining. Indeed, what I had denounced as the "privatization of culture" was to a significant degree a state-sponsored policy: privatization from the viewpoint of the traditional academy (whose flag I had taken up), but certainly not a withdrawal of the state from the cultural field.

The financial crisis of 1982 inaugurated a prolonged period of economic hardship for the middle classes, followed closely by the concentration of power within the cultural field. In that context, staging a successful polemical intervention in the field of history was not an easily available option for most academics. My status as an émigré was in some ways reassuring in this respect: tenure at a U.S. university provided me with a measure of both protection and credibility, though it also made me vulnerable to attacks as a member of the middle classes who had abandoned Mexico (*Mister Lomnitz*, as Krauze put it), and potentially as a latter-day intellectual equivalent of a *sacadólares* or, I shudder to think, a *meteco*.

The fact that the new transnational connections that were fostered by Mexico's aperture had been used by the intelligentsia almost since the beginning of the crisis was, I think, a factor that inhibited my full excommunication from the national public sphere. Indeed, the bulk of the Mexican intelligentsia, including many figures of the Left who would never have come to the United States in the 1970s, had since made pilgrimages there and had used U.S. connections very profitably to reshape Mexico's political and intellectual field. I was by no means alone in that respect, though my position was unusual because I had taken a permanent position in the United States in 1988, also as an effect of the crisis.

Conclusion

At the dawn of the "American Century," the journalists of the yellow press were proud of the mettle of their editors, proud of men like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst and of the organizations that they had created. Reporter James Creelman phrased the matter well in his 1901 memoirs: "I was sent to the negro republic by a great American newspaper, whose proprietor believed that the Haytians must some day become a part of the United States; and I bore a message to President Hyppolite—one of those curious communications which New York journalism occasionally addresses to small nations when news is scarce; *for the modern editor is seldom contented unless he feels that he is making history as well as writing it.*"²⁸

28. James Creelman, *The Wanderings and Adventures of a Special Correspondent* (Boston: Lothrop Publishing Company, 1901), 358, my emphasis.

This expression captures the well-known ambiguity of the term *history*, which refers at once to events of the past and to their telling. Nowhere is this duality more patent than in journalism. The timeliness of journalistic writing makes it a part of the political process as much as its trace; it is a performative reflection of “the facts,” creating news even as it reports on them.

It is indeed for this reason that historians, with their reliance on distance and their skeptical stance toward sources, eye journalism with suspicion: “History,” they like to say, “begins yesterday,” while “making history,” in Creelman’s sense, means intervening in the present in order to make a mark on the future, a practice that leaves little room for objectivity and even less for detachment. Yet historians cannot ignore the fact that history as writing is always staked in the future. The critical historian rejects the meddling manipulation of the progressive imperialists of Pulitzer’s day but is also suspicious of the historicist’s unrelenting desire to inhabit the past. Rather, she or he seeks the sort of “untimely intervention” that Nietzsche favored: writing that runs against the grain of the homogenized ephemera smudging the fingers of newspaper readers and that instead calls forth bolder ideas. For such an effect, the book, the reflective essay, or even the scientific article is the best medium.

Yet at times the historians’ “untimely interventions” make them into public figures who are called on to “accompany events” or, more precisely, to accompany their public with commentaries on daily events. They are, in other words, called on to be “timely” in their interpretations, especially insofar as their appearances are regularly patterned by media packaging. In such cases, access to a broader public is regarded as a mark of success. But the communicative practice that emerges from this “success” develops squarely in the territory that Creelman identified: it is certainly no longer a form of expression that is well attuned to a subtle reconstruction of the past; it is as provocative as it is reflective. In such a frame the tension between history as a morality play and history as a resource for criticism is always latent, and often manifest.

This tension can be productive both for historical research and for historical interventions in occasional, journalistic writing. Just as the past is re-created daily in the news, so too is the present, with its concrete disturbances, easily abstracted out of the historical treatise. Yet it is in the dialectic between these modes of intervention, and their attendant historicities, that historical work most pungently comes to life. In the case that I have related here, the combination of epochal shift and daily event that is cavalierly labeled with the term *neoliberalism* generated historical discussions that brought an entire generation into public life.