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Sovereignty and Extortion

A New State Form in Mexico

Claudio Lomnitz

The 2021 Lectures at El Colegio Nacional

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Preamble

This book brings together the six lectures that I delivered in my first year as a member of Mexico's El Colegio Nacional (2021). My aim in these lectures was to use ideas and concepts from social anthropology to offer a structural interpretation of the extreme violence that Mexico is currently suffering. The book's thesis is that a new type of state has been developing in Mexico. It began to take shape during the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, then consolidated with the start of the war on drugs launched by the government of Felipe Calderón in 2006, and has continued to develop in the current, post-neoliberal moment. The true nature of this new state contrasts with both of the two master narratives that dominate Mexican public discussion: the story of the "democratic transition," on the one hand, and Andrés Manuel López Obrador's tale of a so-called Fourth Transformation, which paints the current popular-authoritarian turn as the culmination of Mexico's centuries-long struggle for sovereignty, on the other. Each of these historical frameworks presumes the existence of a state that is altogether different from the one that actually ex-

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ists. Specifically, they share the precept that the Mexican state is capable of administering justice—and, in particular, criminal justice—within a legal framework. They also subscribe to the notion that the Mexican state is capable of regaining the monopoly of the legitimate use of force. Finally, both narratives assume that the violence that plagues the country is merely an interlude—it is a “war on drugs,” for instance, or a side effect of the inequality induced by neoliberal reform—that will conclude with the reestablishment of a peace that shall be similar to the one that once existed.

x My starting point, on the contrary, is that what is happening in Mexico is not a confrontation that can end with a winner and a loser. It is not a war against crime that the state can either win or lose. Rather, we are facing a new way of governing. A new way of life.

The analysis that develops throughout the chapters of this book oscillates between a focus on this new state and a probe of the social breakdown that is characteristic of the era. This social breakdown is frequently attributed to a moral crisis, to the unravelling of community and of family mutuality. This is the so-called torn social fabric. In order to understand the conditions of both moral revolt and dissolution, I have tried to define the relevant changes in economics, authority, and public safety that are the foundation of our contemporary mores, and of the values that go with them.

Because this book brings into print a cycle of public lectures, its style diverges from the density that is typical of texts written for a readership of specialists. I wrote these texts with the aim of enriching public discussion, albeit always from an anthropo-

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logical vantage point. Given this objective, I kept allusions to the academic debates that are relevant to each of the topics to a minimum, retaining only the references that I found indispensable to build a line of argumentation.

During the eleven months of work that is condensed in these chapters, I was privileged to consult with colleagues who know much more than I about many of the subjects that I cover. I am especially grateful to Elena Azaola, Naor Ben-Yehoyada, José Ramón Cossío, Fernando Escalante, Alejandro Madrazo, Salvador Maldonado, and Fernando Montero. This book also benefited from discussions in the Violence and New Mores Workshop that I led at Columbia University's Center for Mexican Studies in 2020–21, as well as from the presentation of Alejandra Azuero at the Evasion Workshop co-organized by the Universities of Toronto, Michigan, Columbia, and Princeton, whose ideas about *hedging* as a modality of evasion provided a clue that led to one of the ideas presented in my sixth lecture.

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge the generosity of El Colegio Nacional, which has provided me with the platform and audience required to pursue my long-held commitment to deploy the instruments of my discipline to further our understanding of the pressing issues of our public life.

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