

Disappearing in Mexico: from chance to
causality

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Federico Mastrogiovanni (2014), *Ni vivos ni muertos, la desaparición forzada en México como estrategia de terror*, Mexico: Grijalbo, 215 pp. ISBN: 978-607-312-216-0.

Although the phenomenon of disappearance of persons in Mexico has held an important place in the public agenda in recent years, few are the academic products published in this respect. Conversely, abundant are the journalistic works that have made it visible the human tragedy produced by people disappearance, letting us learn by means of the victims' voices the details of these experience.

The book by Federico Mastrogiovanni is an example of this kind of work, however it goes beyond the item of news or the reportage, taking the risk of putting forward an explanation of the phenomenon of disappearance on the basis of his observations. This risk implies opening a relevant and necessary discussion at a time when the routes to understand this phenomenon are quite uncertain.

In the first place, Mastrogiovanni recovers the concept of forced disappearance that has been marginalized in recent discourses in the public sphere do to its historic and political significance, and updates it stressing its potentiality to explain that currently occurs in Mexico. This way, he invites the reader to challenge the symbolical forms with which we have become used to calling disappearance recently under euphemisms such as “levantón” (a snatch), or within categories as insufficient as mere kidnapping or missing person or illegal deprivation of liberty: “Many a case are dealt with as simple kidnapping or missing person or illegal deprivation of liberty, when in reality they are cases of forced disappearance, due to direct or indirect intervention, by action or acquiesce of public functionaries” (pp. 27-28).

Recovering this concept implies an epistemological stance to understand disappearance, but also a political positioning. By placing this topic in the framework of the existing legislation on forced disappearances, which Mexico is subscribed to (Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons, 1994), the author states the responsibility of the Mexican State in the “new sort of disappearances” most frequently experienced as of 2007.

This position unveils a fundamental issue to understand the disappearance of persons in Mexico: the continuity of certain social and political processes that frame violence. In the eyes of a distracted and imbued in a political discourse observer, “war on drugs” and Dirty War seem to be discontinuous and fragmented events. However, Mastrogiovanni invites to consider that in reality there is continuity in the mechanisms and techniques to disappear persons, as well as certain ruptures in the exercise of violence, even though the geopolitical conditions have changed and the interests and reasons underlying repression are different.

The book opens with a prologue by journalist Jaime Avilés, who underscores the clarifying contribution of the book to overcome the inaccuracy of terms with which disappearance is normally called in the political and journalistic discourse:

“what lies beneath each snatch is called forced disappearance of people. When these words incorporate into the Federal Penal Code and are printed in the newspapers, Mexico will probably begin to reconfigure as the country it has ceased to be” (p. 22).

This prologue is followed by an introduction by the author, in which he challenges “the casualness of disappearances” advancing toward their possible own causality. Mastrogiovanni exposes that disappearances occurred massively as of 2007 cannot be considered chance or a random phenomenon, they are rather a social construction fruit from a strategy that finds in violence the best way to protect new interests. To defend his stance he offers argumentations from a geopolitical analysis that places the topic of disappearances in the sphere of social, political and economic conflict that surpasses national borders.

According to the author, an important part of disappearances in recent years might be related with at least two aspects: in the first place, the interest of producing terror in the populations where there are economic interests derived from the extraction of natural resources (especially shale gas in northeastern Mexico); and secondly, the continuity of a Dirty War that intends to “eliminate persons who belong to social movements, community leaders who oppose megaprojects, activists that organize the people against the exploitation of its land and uncomfortable journalists” (p. 36).

After this introduction, the author presents in the following eleven chapters other cases of forced disappearances in Mexico from the Dirty War.¹ Each of them is presented with its particularities, but stressing a common fact that characterized them as forced disappearance: the participation of the Mexican State in various modalities.

In chapter one, the author presents the case of Alan, a young men from Cuernavaca who went missing from a football field in his neighborhood on December 24th, 2011. After being forcefully taken by a group of hitmen, Alan was left in the Public Prosecutor Office in Chilpancingo, where he disappeared again. Suspicion on the acting of the corporation in the second disappearance of the young man are recorded in the alteration of documents, harboring of information and the indications of collusion with organized crime that the layer of the family denounces.

In chapter two “Migrants and Zetas”, the author presents us the case of Daniel and his road partners, Central American migrants, harassed by organized crime members, common delinquency and State authorities along their journey in Mexico. The author also retakes the interview with Father Solalinde, migrants’ human rights defender, who denounces the disappearance of Central Americans by Federal armed forces, which sell them to organized crime groups that ask for

¹ Dirty war is term utilized to refer to various historic events, not only in Mexico, but in the world. The author refers to the period between the 1960’ and the end of the 1970’s, in which repression events committed by the Government against opposition took place. Civil society organisms point at the disappearance of at least 500 persons over such period.

ransoms: “each migrant costs between 2000 and 5000 USD. If the family does not pay, they kill them, and fill common graves with bodies without a name; the disappeared” (p. 60).

In chapter three the author starts outlining the route of continuities of forced disappearances as he traces in the State of Guerrero de footprints of Dirty War, Lucio Cabañas’ guerrilla and the disappearance of peasant leader Rosendo Radilla, in 1974: “the State of Guerrero is the most propitious place to understand the tradition of forced disappearances in Mexico, a practice that the Mexican State has been using for more than 40 years to control civil population and repress social struggles” (p. 78).

Chapter four tells the story of Miguel, a young man from Oaxaca kidnapped in Tepic by an armed group of men, who retained him a safe house with other youths for months abusing him in various manners. Miguel managed to escape and tell his story and that of other poor young people who go missing on the streets to be used as “narco-messages” by criminal groups when impact is needed, piling up dead bodies on the streets or exhibiting dismembered cadavers.

The following chapter, “Galactic Cowboy” tells the story of a street artist, gone missing in Monterrey and offers us information on the “false positives”, a technique created in Colombia and replicated in Monterrey to present results from the war against organized crime. In these cases concur the modus operandi of police forces, which work for criminal groups and the incompetence of authorities that enforce and administrate justice, which do not manage to publish those guilty and find those disappeared.

Chapter six gathers the testimony of Margarita, the mother of a young woman who disappeared in Oaxaca. Her story makes it visible the action of relatives, who are the main investigators of the case and the dangers which they face in this endeavor. In the case of Margarita, the government had to give her protection after a criminal group in people smuggling, and related with the disappearance of her daughter, tries to murder her on two occasions. She has also been harassed by the same authorities which she has denounced and in some cases he has managed to arrest them temporarily: “not we have to take care of organized crime, we have to take care of the very government, which as usual, in one way or another tries to silence us” (p. 133).

On the line that underscores the risk the relatives in the search for justice, chapter seven retakes the case of Nepomuceno Moreno, father of a young man gone missing in Sonora, who was assassinated a year after he started searching for his son. With this case the author underscores the symbolical forms with which the official discourse criminalizes victims, promoting the suspicion of their own culpability. In the case of Nepomuceno, the very authority has been in charge of bringing out a criminal background, which according to the author’s research, does not exist: “this is the strategy that has been carried out over these years ‘war on drugs’: the criminalization of victims” (p. 141).

Chapter eight approaches the emotional and existential world of the relatives of the disappeared, to the daily effort of missing, keeping alive, continue searching, of remaining alone, of facing familial disintegration and stigma. They speak us about the trauma at individual level, but also at social and warns us on the tendency to “emotional numbing” (p. 158) that diminishes the capacity for indignation and reject violence.

In chapter nine Mastrogiovanni approaches his central hypothesis: forced disappearance as terror strategy to favor the interests of transnational companies. With interviews in Coahuila, he generates a line of reflection on this and other States where there are natural resources and a vicious cycle of violence-displacement-peace-apparent economic recovery is experienced, related to the current State reforms and the traditional strategies of repression and social cleansing.

Chapter ten reaches the northern border of Mexico, the domains of *El Pozolero*² (Stew Maker), located in Tijuana. The testimonial of Fernando Ocegueda, leader of the relatives of the disappeared in this city, reveals the need to bury the remains of the absent, in a constant search for indications, proofs and small fragments of life. Finally, chapter eleven closes the circle of stories, retuning to Alan’s case and the finding of his body, to which after years of searching his parents can offer a farewell ritual, however in terms of justice it will remain the same and the perpetrators of the crime had not been punished.

The book concludes with a series of photographs that allow glimpsing the author’s research work and complete the radiography of human tragedy experienced in Mexico due to the 22000 people disappeared over the last eight years.

By means of the testimonials of relatives, lawyers, activists and an exhaustive document revision, this work offers an important set of data that offer knowledge at a time when those interested in approaching this issue lack statistics and official sources of information. Mainly, it is an important step at analytical level, as it enables us to learn the continuities, conceptual breaks and practices implied by the forced disappearance of persons in the times of the so called “war on drugs”.

Naturally, it will be the task of social scientists to begin generating academic works that deepen into the suppositions stated by Mastrogiovanni, mainly on the existing relation between the exploitation of natural resources and forced disappearance of persons, one of the riskiest and most suggestive hypothesis in this work.

² El Pozolero (Stew Maker) is the nickname of Santiago Mesa, who worked for more than eight years in Tijuana for Arellano Félix’s cartel and then for Chapo Guzmán’s cartel, dissolving in caustic soda the bodies of people killed by these criminal groups. In his declaration, after being captured in 2009, he claimed to have disappeared more than 300 bodies using this technique.

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