

# Mexico since September 11<sup>1</sup>

by Carlos Monsiváis



## ON FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF AN END OF THE WORLD

And that day, as the hallucinated dust spreads through the city, among inconceivable versions of flaming swords (planes) and skywriting (explosions), the great dusty cloud began what was unanimously called an “apocalypse.” And the thought of *Apocalypse Now* fed the visual and auditory testimony of a planet glued to radios and televisions, anxiously surfing the web, never sated with the flow of images.

And that day, the first of the Century of Enormous Distrust, disasters of urban Mother Nature came together: flames, dust, the fall of challenges into the sky, rubble, panic that is the blare of survival, and the transformation of ruins into omens.

And from the encounter of the depth of rancor and the solidarity of the latest technology emerge those mythical beasts, the unexpected horsemen of those moments and those cities: the hatred that is a religion made only of sacrifices; the

arrogance that is the dogma of the structures that “immortalize” themselves; the will of a few who offer their lives to strike a death blow to such anthropomorphic symbols.

The tragedy is as innumerable as the ways of perceiving it: people jump out of buildings, firefighters and police officers do their duty, twenty-first-century patriotism finds its homeland in human rights.

Viewers abyss—the verb is descriptive—in front of their sets. Never have so many seen the same thing for so long; never have so many expressed their solidarity with such similar words; never have so many—the rating of history—concentrated so passionately on the fascination of horror.

What can be said or thought about an apocalyptic landscape? And that day, we all knew at the same time that it was the end of any justification of terrorism and the beginning of a new rule: prophecies are only spoken after they have been fulfilled. We’re in the know: terrorism is the Evil of theologies

because its first victim is its very cause, and in the face of scenes from the end of the world, we think of the transcendental, the banal, our families, the images that envelope us and change us, where the worst that could happen has already happened to some of us.

#### PLANET OF DUST

What do ordinary citizens —almost everybody— know about terrorism? The word evokes a universe of conspiracies, secret camps, safe houses, forgetting the cause in favor of vengeance against its enemies or against people who don't even know it exists. After September 11, Mexicans justly rejected terrorism. However, unfortunately, there was no serious, systematic effort to understand the reasons for the extermination without justifying it in the least.

Terrorism is an offense against laws, human rights, lives, property, the very peoples it purports to defend and whose humiliations and suffering unflinching mount. And up until that moment, terrorism had been observed by sector; after September 11, we all unendingly watch the hijacked plane crash against the second of New York's Twin Towers. And we all ask ourselves: how did we get here? Is it just madness? Up to what point does the failure of causes, with the degree of justice they contain, turn into homicidal fury?



People talk increasingly about state terrorism, and irrefutable proof is offered: the legalization of torture by the U.S. government, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the prison systems of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, the genocide in Serbia or Darfur, the dirty wars in Latin America, and a very long etcetera. However, and with solid reasons, Edward Said is opposed to the term because he says it confuses the actions, and it is better to continue talking about government repression, being specific in each case. Bush is not a terrorist, but he is the promoter of genocides.



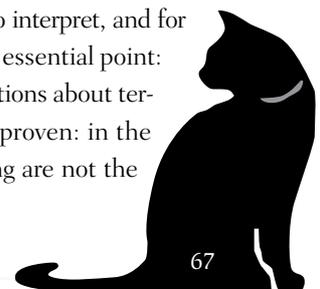
In the first months, reactions in Mexico to September 11 vary after the first impulse to horror. Globalized with no hope of a remedy —and no protest, either— by the events of that day and those that followed, Mexican society finds itself like al-

most all societies around the world, without clear definitions of globalization. Undoubtedly, we are globalized, but what does that mean? Is it simply getting the latest fashions and events at the same time in every country? In Mexico, radio and television reach 95 percent of places, and, after the terrorist attack, all the channels and stations spent weeks covering the events, finding out the identity of the victims, highlighting the heroism of police and firefighters, the acts of protest and memorials, the mourning in the United States and the world. There is no other topic of conversation, and, for example, musician Karl Heinz Stockhausen and essayist Jean Baudrillard are vigorously censored for frivolously commenting about the "portentous aesthetic act" of the collapse of the towers.

Amidst bewilderment and confusion, one idea (a fact) is indisputable: the radical change in history, a day in the life of New York, is literally an international leap revealing the power of violence in the strict hierarchies of globalization and exhibiting the intolerability of the arguments of intolerance.

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A whirlwind of hypotheses and interpretations is unleashed and, like everywhere, in Mexico the revenge-seeking version also circulated for a while: "the United States was asking for it, and, as you sow, so shall ye reap." This outlook, morally and politically unacceptable, is rooted in the perverse idea that guides the right-wing vision of massacres and genocides: countries, communities, creeds "ask for it." The victims are invariably the guilty parties. For those convinced of the Judgment Day Lottery, it does no good to locate those responsible for terrorism, the criminal castes, the financial perversions, and the psychopathological tremor of fanatics, who set themselves up as judges, pass sentence, and attempt to punish symbols regardless of who represents them. But the sectarian right and left agree on refusing to make the effort to interpret, and for that reason they do not comprehend the essential point: *there are no guilty victims*. And generalizations about terrorism ignore what has been more than proven: in the first place, the ones who do the reaping are not the



ones who do the sowing, but those close to where the crop comes up (and in this case, where the clash takes place).

In Latin America, the most abject demonstration of terrorism in the name of social justice has been the Peruvian group Shining Path. Among his demented demands, President Gonzalo, or Abimael Guzmán, the criminal who presented himself as “the fourth sword of Marxism,” orders the murder of peasants, social leaders, doctors, police officers, soldiers, anyone who gets in the way of “revolutionary purity.” To justify it, they talked of the cruelty and racism of Peru’s great landowners and army officers. Though this cruelty and racism is undeniable and central, they do not explain in the least a single one of Shining Path’s crimes. And, in the Basque Country, ETA is another devastating example. We know this: the monstrous irrationality that says it acts in the name of national social justice is one of the great obstacles to the democratic struggle.

#### THE EMPIRE AND ITS ENVIRONS

In October 2001, an axiom is propagated almost without the need for words: the center of planetary power is—as always and much more than ever—the United States. The news leaves no room for doubt about the preparations for revenge, the mass detentions of Arabs and Palestinians in the United States, the resurgence of McCarthyism, and the increase in police severity along the border. September 11 shows up and fortifies on the international level the weakness of almost all countries.

#### THE NATIONALISM OF 2001

The myths and legends about Mexican nationalism belong for the most part to a past that has basically disappeared. In recent years, that nationalism has lost its old militant edge, limiting itself to rituals, to the enthusiasm for sports and food, in the traditions that have been salvaged from the shipwreck imposed by savage modernization... and to the permanent core of rancor against the empire. It is obvious that there is no longer any indignant nationalism in the face of the loss of half of Mexico in 1847, or any of that old organized anti-Yanqui-ism. Today, the “gringo” has stopped being strictly “the other.” He is the other, yes, and the neighbor of the other, who turns out to be our cousin, sister, or the

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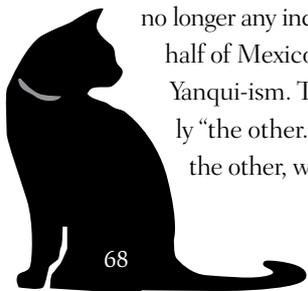
uncle of that sedentary man or woman who did not cross the border. The weight of successive migrations changes extraordinarily the culture and economy of Mexico (with a big impact in its politics), and the notion of the United States has been changing, without the characterizations of racism and labor abuses fading in the least.

Nationalism cannot escape from this influence, and is transformed, on the one hand, into rituals of self-pity, and on the other hand into a grieved, amused national conscience that oscillates between pride and despondence. When U.S. nationalism overflowed very recently, Mexicans were quite aware of it. They have never experienced nor will they ever experience anything like that: the chauvinistic obsession that waves the national flag at all hours, says it is in “the promised land,” and proclaims the twentieth and twenty-first centuries “the American centuries.” But the absence of a bellicose nationalism with that much resonance does not eliminate national feeling nor its diversifications, and the irrefutable globalization imposed September 11, like it or not, is subject to the most devastating criticism, which intensifies with the war in Afghanistan and, above all, with the monstrous invasion of Iraq and the chain of grotesque lies spewed to try to justify it for a while.

We are globalized, yes, but how? The unequal and combined globalization can be felt in Mexico in innumerable ways. Among the most outstanding:

- *Submission* in Mexican government practices, subjection to a series of decisions by the U.S. government. This is expressed very elementally in President Fox’s recommendation to Commander Castro in March 2002, two days before the Monterrey Summit, a conversation divulged by Castro, who completely forgot an explicit commitment and in retaliation for Mexico’s vote on human rights in Cuba:

Castro: Tell me, what else can I do to be of service to you?



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Iván Stephens/Cuartoscuro

Fox: Well, basically, you can not attack the United States or President Bush; rather, [we should] limit ourselves.

A recommendation like this would have been inconceivable even under the Institutional Revolutionary Party, also submissive to U.S. administrations, but careful about the legal forms of nationalism. What does “limit ourselves” mean? In this context, it seems to mean remembering our second-class status and never attempting to leave it: “I know my place.” President Fox belongs to a generation of Mexicans marked by pragmatism in its most elementary form, the kind that dictates that whoever holds the most power hold the keys to all forms of behavior. The conclusion would be that whoever rules gives the orders and channels the collective psychology.

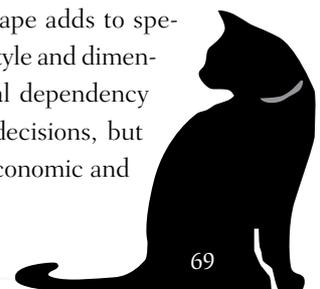
- *Determinism*, a primordial part of Latin America and Mexico’s psychology and culture that becomes more vigorous with globalization. Not only does the society of national states go into crisis, but also, due to transnational bodies, the problems of transborder space become sharper, accenting the unfair division of labor and social inequality. “What can be done against this?” Latin Americans have long asked themselves. And, after September 11, the question fades away partially as the levels of impotence in the face of the aim of unseating the Islamic world are verified.

- *Sovereignty*, a term that in the past was unquestionable, is now subjected to many revisions and polemics. The behavior of the great powers enormously affects the environment (climate changes, the hole in the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect), and the life of every country is powerfully intervened in by holding companies, monetary crises, the price of oil, wars, cable television, and the conception of the fashionable, understood as cloning societies. “There are no borders anymore,” say those who never comment on the atrocious mistreatment of Mexicans in the U.S. border area. And the disappearance of the signs of Mexican sovereignty increases. How is national sovereignty defined in the face of transnational structures?

In day-to-day practice, national states’ freedom of movement is considerably reduced. Their capabilities for international action shrink, and sovereignty is fragmented by national, regional, and international factors. This, something that should be carefully evaluated, immediately hooks up with a determinist mentality, and after September 11, it is commonplace to hear people alluding to “the despair of sovereignty”: if you can’t beat ’em, join ’em.

- *Drug trafficking*, the criminal “parallel state” that devastates societies, contributes enormously to the massive spread of crime, and the “Trojan horse” of U.S. police in Mexico’s internal affairs.

In short, what the post-9/11 landscape adds to specific knowledge is the knowledge of the style and dimensions of dependency. This is not mental dependency—there, there would be no collective decisions, but only strictly individual ones— or even economic and



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political dependency —although that certainly exists and in multiple ways. Rather, it is the dependency born of the lack of alternatives. It resuscitates the old idea of Mexico as “the back yard,” and in the face of that, there are no organized responses.

#### BECOMING AWARE IN TIMES OF CONFORMITY

If the hegemony of U.S.-style globalization was inevitable, the emergence of a very recently perceptible critical sensibility is not so foreseeable. Certainly, it did not look possible. The wrongly dubbed “global-phobes” have been rather invisible in Mexico, even though many understand the justice of their demands and that the real “global-phobes” are those who belong to the capitalist minorities who attack the planet’s resources and freedoms.<sup>2</sup> However, despite the poverty of left organizations and the weakness of civil society —more a project than a reality— the attacks against Mexicans in the United States are now encountering greater resistance in Mexico. We should emphasize here what is already obvious: if in Mexico anything has changed the perspective of Mexican communities abroad, it is globalization. Unannounced, but ferociously, globalization has informed us of the obvious: destiny hangs from the thread of computer keyboard strokes; investments have no homeland; homelands have no investments; in the face of neoliberalism there are no alternatives; and neoliberalism is not and cannot be an alternative for the majorities and responsible minorities. Globalization exterminates any fetishism or volunteerism of “what comes from outside.” If “what comes from outside” is already here inside, why not accept that Mexicans abroad also be globalized in a tyrannical, monopolistic way? The kinds of opportunities available differentiate us; the enormous difficulty in taking advantage of them makes us similar.

Being “globalized” means being more informed about very different events, among them the immense obstacles for dealing with political and financial power. It

means more people educated in passiveness and also, in many and an increasing number of cases, it means people more willing to defend human rights wherever they are infringed. So, the murders, the beatings, the *Migra’s* arbitrary treatment, and the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision declaring a Mexican worker’s rights non-existent have been met with indignation in Mexico. Similarly, although the war in Afghanistan did not spark much visible response —barely a few letters to the editor— the events in Iraq have been met with almost unanimous response from the collective consciousness.

#### ON THE CONGRESS OF POINTS OF VIEW AND THE MORALS OF THE STORY

Despite the overused term, September 11 is a historic turning point. On that day, the consciousness of globalization was formally launched without exception. The notion of “spectacle” changed profoundly; humanist reactions of solidarity were put to the test; and what are undeniably the powers that be were reaffirmed including all their vulnerable points. In this process, the invasion of Iraq radicalizes people. In the countries of the old Third World, September 11 has been until now the ominous, flashy beginning of the destruction of their expectations. For Mexicans, the awareness of real, inevitable globalization has meant and continues to mean too many things, among them the strengthening of the defense of human rights, resistance to racism, the oppressive feeling of limits, medium- and long-term despair, the clarification of their demands and the possibilities to organize in the United States in a much-needed, broad alliance with the Hispanic communities, another great protagonist of recent years. ■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This text was previously published in Spanish in Claire Joysmith, ed., *Speaking desde las heridas. Cibertestimonios transfronterizos/transborder (September 11, 2001-March 11, 2007)* (Mexico City: CISAN/ITESM/Whittier College, 2007). [Editor’s Note.]

<sup>2</sup> In Mexico, the media dubbed the global justice movement that first made a name for itself in the 1999 Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization summit a movement of “global-phobes.” [Translator’s Note.]

