

Santiago Domínguez Zermeño*

Disaster Chronicle Reflections of a Young Student, A So-Called “Millennial”



Gaceta UNAM / Víctor Hugo Sánchez

My house didn't collapse; it's still standing. Now there's an empty place on the wall where a picture used to hang. There's also a small crack in the living room. Nothing happened to us, but not everyone has the good fortune to be able to say that. The event of nature became a disaster, and it continues to shake us still. Many were affected physically in some tangible way, destroying their home and everything they called “theirs.” But it struck all of us deeply, stirring up our guts and leaving echoes of pain that are still with us. And for some, it took away the only absolute, irreparable thing: their lives.

The earthquake touched all of us and we responded. I had only experienced that through the stories my parents told me about that other catastrophe in 1985. The earthquake became a tidal wave, and we flooded the streets astoundingly, in a way I would have thought inconceivable if it hadn't exploded in my face, if I hadn't found myself there, stoking the phenomenon.

What was happening was as necessary and natural as it was surprising. The multitude, as I had never conceived of it, went out to give what it could in any way it could. The demiurge was cell-based, self-organized, autonomous, authentic, genuine. The multitude overflowed, unorganized, decentralized, horizontal . . . adjective after

adjective in an attempt to tinge with reason what the heart experiences. There's adrenaline, the desire to be a part of everything, feel useful, help, save. Frenzy feeds our spirits like the most feverish falling-in-love, in a whirlwind that allows for no leisurely moments. You have to go out into the streets, take over the plazas, link up with each other. And we do it. The other, usually foreign and dangerous in this city of love and hate, is now our ally, compatriot, brother/sister, and soldier in the war against the tragedy.

Soon, we realize that we crowd in together, like earth in a funnel; we crush each other. Hours after the quake, we begin to believe we've gotten past the real catastrophe; we think there's too much help, too many hands. The living phenomenon, the Multitude, sparks fantasies in many about the approach of a dreamed-of revolution, the one that's coming from the bottom up and overwhelms like the tide. The social media, the glossary of life, make their comments: “Young people have taken over Mexico City. I hope they never let it go.” This Tweet goes viral, together with the aid.¹ The social media are saturated, becoming communication that burns to the touch, we have to pass it on, throw it out there, somebody else must see this, it has to get out, fulfill its destiny. Volunteers spring up everywhere on the social media, whose main objective is to optimize them. Because, despite the fact that the Multitude is also showing up on them in

* Film student at the Cinematography Training Center (ccc).

any way it can, at the end of the day, everything must come down to a real act. A post that doesn't lead to a concrete act ends up being nothing, in a vacuum.

The motivations are authentic; we fight to optimize our efforts. Time is always against us. Food arrives in torrents on the streets; it clashes with people and with stockpiles. Entire boxes of sandwiches get soggy, in danger of going off completely. Strategists make a logistical call: don't send any more perishable food, no more volunteers, wait. And you feel so useless that you don't believe you deserve the third sandwich they offer you on the very same day.

Once again, I'm surprised. The individual packed lunches —the very ones that were in danger of going off— have been prepared with infinite love. They're full of details that make them special gestures, like a hug, somewhere, that someone wants to send to an anonymous ally. Written in felt-tip pen on the soft drink label or on the napkin that goes with the sandwich are tender words of encouragement and love.

Now, optimizing processes follows a curve that takes a while to achieve. There's trial and error; the engineers of aid and strategic brigade leaders continue discovering the best way of organizing the aid. Fabulous data bases are set up in real time, immersed in extremely complete maps, new channels of communication that are truly surprising. We have to learn to use them, get used to them. There is no lack of pessimists who complain about the confusion, but they just don't realize what's really happening. We're on the verge of history, learning to use quasi-telepathic, omniscient tools to deal with something as old as the world itself.

Suddenly, we're all engineers with a PhD in structures. Entering a building becomes an exercise of active observation of walls and rebar columns. We do it because it's fashionable, but also because we're afraid. A big concrete wall is now something fragile, and what before was shelter is now a threat. Everything moves us; we're apprehensive as seldom before. We become sensitive to others' pain. We look for stories that can explain what is happening, we embrace myths. We need symbols to be able to continue understanding this world that is getting away from us. And "Frida Sofía" is born,² for several hours more alive than any person who disappeared in the war against the drug kingpins. And we read Juan Villoro's "El puño en alto" (Fist Held High), and we weep in silence.³

Many were affected physically in some tangible way, destroying their home and everything they called "theirs."
But it struck all of us deeply.

Not much time goes by before the Multitude clashes with what it always clashes: the government. Everyone active, throbbing, finally awake, we all demand resources to deal with what's coming. Because, even though sometimes we forget, public action is political. And, being as active as we are, we all become empowered, even those who are usually indifferent. And they, the professional politicians, filthy as they are, tell us "no," that money is earmarked by law, that what we're asking for would be misappropriating funds. Above all, they hide behind the question, "Where would all this take us?" Because the future will bring another hurricane, another earthquake, another flood. Where would the state of emergency end? And the question shines, spotlighting the problem.

We find ourselves in a state of emergency. We are experiencing a moment of collective trauma that, in my inexperience and ignorance, I cannot help but link up —perhaps naively— to coups d'état, dictatorships, civil wars, revolutions. The inspiring Multitude makes us believe that we are in the middle of a transforming whirlwind. Even though I don't know —I really don't know— the true dimension of the current moment. What can come out of all this? The level of social and political involvement is extraordinary, at least for Mexico. Will the national trauma be big enough to politicize us permanently, beyond just a couple of weeks? I think about 1985 and the repercussions of the 1986 student movement, the effervescent participation of civil society, the 1988 elections, that victory of the left turned into a defeat by fraud. I don't know if this political moment will manage to transcend the immediate crisis because it's not national in scope, and the enemy (the antagonist, the common obstacle that brings us together and that we all identify with) is first of all a natural phenomenon, a misfortune. An initial reading —in fact, the one that prompted us all to go out onto the streets to do what we could— tells us that we're all victims and there are no clear guilty parties. We are all vulnerable. With that outlook, we go out shoulder to shoulder with the police officer, the sol-

dier, the sailor, to remove rubble and fight to the end for any indication of life. This is no small thing.

However, with the street occupied, as time goes on, what has to happen, happens. Society's action is political, and what's at stake is power. The political parties know that when they refuse to release the money; the Navy also knows it when it sees that what has the upper hand in a collapse site is the need to rescue people, not military order. So, one by one, the emergency sites come under the control of law enforcement and the military. Everyone who was there, helping to remove debris, to take food, to distribute water, witnessed the small manifestations of this struggle for power. Orders that were given with the aim of maintaining a certain order, orders for orders' sake, at the cost of the real needs of the people trapped. We refused to concede what we had been able to build, the spaces won. We defended the donations from being used for self-interested political chicanery. We defended life, whether in the form of a miraculously living survivor or of the body that we want to give human burial to.

I could only be on the front lines of a collapsed building one day. It was my job to distribute water to the brigade members: *topos*, sailors, soldiers, and Japanese and Israeli rescue workers. There were about 500 of us trying to rescue those trapped in the Tlalpan Housing Project. In the nine hours I was there, I did not witness the rescue of any survivors.

We all worked hard, in the hope of being able to help with a miracle. Suddenly, fists are raised and the silence descends. Five hundred people stop in their tracks. Traffic comes to a halt on Tlalpan Boulevard. In the country where we lived before Tuesday the 19th, I would have had a hard time believing that we would attribute that value to one life. A hint of life. Now, immersed in the absolute silence, I have nothing more than a huge lump in my throat. From deep inside the rubble comes a shout: "If there's someone inside this building, answer! Make a noise! Now!" The silence continues, and no matter how moving it is, I cannot help but think that it's a terrible silence, a truly

The living phenomenon, the Multitude,
sparks fantasies in many about the approach
of a dreamed-of revolution, the one
that's coming from the bottom up
and overwhelms like the tide.

douchebag silence. A rescue worker asks twice again. Moments later, we hear the shout: "There's life!" We applaud. Some of us cry. Hope nourishes our mood and we get back to work.

A couple of hours later, we fall silent again. We stop. The soldiers and rescue workers form two human lines, creating a corridor. In the quiet, a soft breeze can be felt rocking the leaves, a draught that caresses our skin. We take off our helmets. The exhaustion and sadness shows on our faces. From the rubble, a litter is carried down, covered with a white sheet. The body goes by. Across from me is a soldier. With head bowed and eyes to the ground, his effort to hold back his tears is clear. I do the same. From the moment we're born, weeping means being alive, but when the body goes by, I don't allow myself to break down in tears; I know there's still work to be done.

I witnessed the rescue of two bodies. Both times, the same soldier was across from me. I see him clench his jaw and clutch his helmet to his chest. We share the pain the way I never thought I would with a soldier. Into my mind come the images of extra-legal executions and the other human rights violations committed in Mexico recently. The soldier, a representative of the forces of order, power, is that: a soldier. He personifies himself and all the others who have abused the people in the name of the government. Because the soldier is human, of course, and therefore carries his shadow. Because what the Army has done cannot be erased. Because Mexico is still Mexico.

The natural phenomenon lasted 70 seconds. But we made a disaster that has already lasted five days and will surely last many more. Like in *Oedipus Rex*, the tragedy was predestined, just waiting for the veil to drop and the truth to manifest itself. No building should have collapsed. Who is to blame? What are we going to do when we find out? What's next? **MM**

▼
Notes

1 This tweet was published September 20, 2017, by leftist Mexican politician Fernando Belaunzarán, <https://twitter.com/ferbelaunzarán/status/910561960420294656?lang=es>. [Editor's Note.]

2 See the articles in this issue by Leonardo Curzio and Raúl Trejo Delarbre that deal more in depth with the "Frida Sofía" media phenomenon, which for many hours held the attention of the nation because it was about the supposed rescue of a little girl alive in the rubble, but which turned out to be untrue. [Editor's Note.]

3 See this poem in Spanish and English in this issue. [Editor's Note.]