CHAPTER ONE

Neoliberal Sensibility and Common Sense

IN HIS 1993 NOVELLA, *La leyenda de los soles* (The legend of the suns), Homero Ardijis paints a sunken, deforested Mexico City with dead vegetation, the volcano scape destroyed, and trash everywhere. He describes it as a "boundless and foreign world," a city that underwent "gradual loss of soil, air and water . . . the loss of its own self."[1] The environment imagined by Ardijis for Mexico City in 2027 is dysfunctional and violent, the dictatorship exacerbated by indescribable forms of control and violence. He portrays a city scourged by evils perceived as being of the same kind: crime, corruption, pollution. On the background of Ardijis's apocalyptic visions of the city, akin to the ruined earth in *Elysium* (2013) filmed in Tijuana, are the neoliberal reforms promised in the 1990s: a road of prosperity for all that which became the answer to the problems of corruption of public service and bureaucracy, and the dysfunctional government body in the 1970s and 1980s. The "transition to democracy" heralded in 2000 when the PAN (National Action Party) took power after the PRI's (Institutional Revolution Party) seventy-year-long

1 Homero Aridjis, *La leyenda de los soles* (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), 2.

reign, assuring the end of the perfect dictatorship and the beginning of real democracy: alternation, citizen participation, and an antagonistic struggle for consensus between civil society, the PAN, the PRI, and the leftist party PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution).

More than twenty-five years after Ardijis's novel was published, I live in "CDMX," a branded Mexico City and a key locality in the economic and cultural map of globalization. With most of the public services privatized, it has become an archipelago of sophistication and wealth where the quality of gasoline blued the sky. We enjoy "first-world" infrastructure and services; there are police officers in every corner, including eventual checkpoints, and informal vendors and beggars have been removed from public spaces. Beautiful "public" green areas flourish—some of them kept by neighbors, corporations, or private businesses, instead of the municipality, under a program called "Adopta un área verde" by the city's government (Adopt a Green Area). The city I inhabit and the privileged areas in which I circulate are far from the dry, dark desert of violence that Ardijis imagined in his novella. After twenty years of privatizations, concessions, and the implementation of "zonification"—which means that every one of Mexico City's delegations or boroughs is oriented toward their optimal economic vocations—privileged territories, like in many cities throughout Latin America and increasingly all over the world, coexist side by side with misery belts or slums. That is to say, privileged areas in which the government and the private sector are present to protect and apply an array of techniques of governance, coexist with misery belts or zones of sacrifice of environmental devastation inhabited by populations that have been made redundant by neoliberal reforms, This creates relationships of injurious interdependency between both kinds of populations, the latter a by-product of the expansion of the scope of migration from the mid-twentieth century of the present, continuous migration of rural population to urbanized areas.

Under Felipe Calderón and Enrique Peña Nieto, Mexico came to be governed through a complex network of relationships and forms of power that complemented each other: violent state repression, government of opinion, and repressive tolerance, along with the criminalization of dissidence, labor precariousness and debt as forms of submission, and fear and insecurity caused by "organized crime" or "narco violence." In sum, a form of oligarchic totalitarianism was set up, supported by government legislation and surveillance, political forces that propelled a redistribution of wealth focused on the private sphere, media and cultural production in detriment to public

infrastructure, and health and education systems. In this manner, neoliberal politics systematically exerted violence on bodies and forms of life, creating a form of sovereignty described as "deep power," comprised by decision-making behind closed doors by financial and political elites. That is to say, key choices concerning the economy came to be negotiated in secret within the limitless reign of capital, enclosing the space of political decision-making by shutting out the rest of the population.[2] Under this form of power, the government became the guarantor of the accumulation of capital hidden behind a smoke screen, where political processes foreign to issues of political decision-making were made public; for instance, cultural wars, corruption scandals, and human rights violations. At the global level, the new oligarchs had taken up the task to transform all nation states into servile instruments to enrich themselves and increase their power through neoliberal reforms and financial capitalism.[3] These elites are characterized by their lack of roots and alliances with nation states and carelessness about the injuries they could cause to workers or the environment. They tend to live inside gated communities and may float above traffic in otherwise congested cities, and they operate above borders, laws, and national and international regulations.[4] Thus, in order to legitimize the neoliberal politics that favored the elites while causing dispossession, extermination, and violence, state institutions were "hollowed out"—or rather, molded—to serve the interests of global capital in the name of "development" and "economic growth." A state of exception of permanent insecurity was normalized in which unprecedented and unthinkable levels of violence came to be part of the fabric of daily life and fodder to the Infosphere (the mass media

2 An example was the Trade in Services Agreement (TISA), which was ratified in May 2014. This treaty encompasses fifty countries and most commercial services in the world. It establishes rules to further the expansion of finance multinationals to other nations preventing regulatory barriers. The treaty prohibits regulation of financial services and promotes openness of the flux of information across borders (i.e., personal and financial information). When the treaty was signed, no one had heard about it.

3 Or the emancipation of money accumulation from industrial production of merchandise. See Franco "Bifo" Berardi, "Emancipation of the Sign: Poetry and Finance During the Twentieth Century," *e-flux journal* 39 (November 2012), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/emancipation-of-the-sign-poetry-and-finance-during-the-twentieth-century.

4 C. J. Polychroniou, "An Interview with Henri Giroux on Democracy in Crisis," *Counterpunch*, May 5, 2014, http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/05/30/an-interview-with-henry-giroux-on-democracy-in-crisis.

and the culture industry). The collateral damage of neoliberal predator capitalism expanded to destroy social ties and safety networks, relying on social Darwinism as a form of subjection and extermination, thereby legitimizing neoliberal politics of exclusion and violence.

One of the reasons for the normalization of extreme violence was the neoliberal institution—grounded on our colonial structures that remain intact from the past—of racialized disposability. This means that it no longer makes sense to think about the world as divided into "first" and "third"; rather, we are seeing modernized pockets of privilege and cultural sophistication coexist with enclaves inhabited by "redundant populations." This sector of the population has differential access to health care, citizenship, debt, education, and jobs. Some of them live in "zones of sacrifice," or the literal contemporary manifestation of coloniality. These zones are inhabited by communities surviving with the toxic load of our systemic need to consume fossil fuels undergoing slow violence,[5] and their common and sustainable autonomous forms of life are being destroyed in the name of well-being and development. Moreover, their destruction is de facto sustaining the privileges of people living in modernized enclaves who are denying, yet justifying, their annihilation under the logic of development and inclusion in global markets.

For the past forty years, people have been dispossessed and forcibly displaced to misery belts, rural cities, or to the north. Meanwhile, urban centers operate with measures like gentrification and the penalization of what are known as "quality of life crimes" such as: itinerant selling, homelessness, or vagrancy. There, "social cleansing" is the rule. Furthermore, the land of millions of people is being expropriated and given to private corporations in the name of "public interest" to create agroindustrial farms of Special Zones of Economic Development (SEZs), infrastructure projects like dams, highways, car manufacturing, growth of marihuana and poppy, or kitchens for chemically designed drugs; or they are transformed into extractivist zones. It is a fact that Mexico is a leading producer in silver, tenth in gold and copper and among the top ten in lead, fluorite, bismuth, and other minerals. Since 2000, the Mexican government has given hundreds of mining concessions to foreign companies, mostly Canadian.[6] The consequence: environmental

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5 See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

6 Darcy Victor Tetreault, "Mexico: The Political Ecology of Mining," in *The New Extractivism: A Post-Neoliberal Development Model or Imperialism of the*

devastation manifesting as the rapid appearance of dead rivers, dry wells, bare mountains, toxic oceans, and deforested woodlands, all reflected on a damaged and impoverished social environment subject to precariousness and unthinkable levels of social violence.

It could thus be argued that neoliberalism is a form of ecological, social, and cultural reengineering that has destroyed the environment while reproducing a culture of consumption, stupidity, and illiteracy. As an intensified phase of colonial capitalism, the current manifestations of neoliberalism bring to light the fact that violence has sustained the system of Western supremacy by violence through extractivism exerted on Indigenous peoples' territories and bodies and specific forms of violence against women. Parallels may be drawn between the extraction of reproductive labor and financial exploitation and the capture of the sensible realm and vital forces by both financialization and automation; language has been expropriated by corporatized education, music by TV contests, flesh and sexuality by mass pornography, the city by the police and corporations, and our friends by Darwinist competitivity and precarious working conditions. Paul B. Preciado articulated the continuity of colonialism in the present in this manner: "If the annihilating workings of sixteenth-century colonialism hid behind the shine of Potosí silver, today, behind the screens are hiding the most extreme forms of neocolonial, technological and subjective domination."[7]

A lot of people have succumbed to the neoliberal limitation of autonomous action and have begun to think of themselves mainly as consumers or victims (of narco or state violence), and they are prey not only to the culture of hedonistic pleasure, but also of fear and violence. This is why one of the consequences of neoliberalism is the production of a collective existential crisis of agency. This crisis led to the current form of authoritarianism rooted in historical, pedagogical, and cultural Mexican traditions, which has taken further form as a net of control that proliferates, displaces, molds, and subjects under the guise of a neo-populist fight against corruption and petit bourgeois decadence (the 1% is invisible from this equation).

If the consequences of neoliberal policies have been so dire, I must ask, what has made neoliberalism prevail? One of the reasons I can think of is to

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Twenty-First Century?, ed. Henry Veltmeyer and James Petras (London: Zed Books, 2014), 144–71.

7 Paul B. Preciado, introduction to Suely Rolnik, *Esferas de la insurrección: Apuntes para descolonizar el inconsciente* (Madrid: Tinta Limón, 2019), 9.

consider neoliberalism as the intensification of violence inherent to modern capitalist sensibility that manifests itself in our relationships to the world, nature, things, and beings, presupposing the creation of surplus value, unlimited growth, and development by way of the mercantilization of life and the marketization of human and nonhuman forms of life. Neoliberalism, moreover, has become the filter through which we now perceive and understand that which cannot be verbalized, a form of common sense that permeates our basic ability to understand and judge things based on a fear of others; it means existing in survival mode and having as goals hedonistic pleasure and generating surplus value. The neoliberal violence against the sensible, furthermore, means that sensibility and common sense are the battlefields on which individual options and collective forces of economics and politics are at play. From this point of view, "neoliberalism" designates at least three different things: the restructuration of capitalist social relations; a political party that at every juncture (it does not matter if left or right) tries to expand the free-market economic policy favoring corporations and the oligarchy; and governance through specific forms of coercion. The kind of neoliberal violence against individuals that subsumed desire to market forces, however, is no longer enough to sustain the neoliberal economic politics, which explains why neofascisms are being implemented worldwide. If neoliberalism had taught us to live according to free-market imperatives, now that it is in crisis, it is showing us its true, hostile face, attacking what remains of autonomous life forms and spaces with the intensification of extractivism, gender violence, intolerance, and militarization. The self-governing and governing techniques of coaching, repressive tolerance, and the promise of success and riches had been powerful tools of neoliberal subjection. But now that the incompatibility of neoliberalism and democracy is obvious, its "side effects" (such as environmental devastation, massive dispossession and displacement, and the COVID-19 pandemic, increased precarity and poverty) are impossible to deny. Therefore, the system needs to find other techniques like repression and the expansion of hatred against all who refuse to comply to the mandates of the free market. But what got us here is neoliberal common sense, the product of violence against the sensible at the basis of neoliberal subjectification.

Hannah Arendt described common sense as deriving from sensibility, or from the experience of the materially and sensually given world; it is the sense data that we share with others, enabling us to live and judge from a singular

perspective in our common world.[8] Similarly, Suely Rolnik defines the sensible as the human capacity to perceive and feel to apprehend the world—what we denominate reality. The modes of existence or reality are articulated according to sociocultural codes that configure people, their places, and their distribution in the social field, which are inseparable from the distribution of access to material and immaterial goods, as well as from hierarchies and representations. Such codes orient the ways in which we apprehend the world; our perceptions and feelings are already associated to codes and representations that we project upon perception, which allow us to make sense of it.[9]

Therefore, common sense is shared meaning, with the potential to create a sense of belonging in social and political terms. Neoliberal common sense, however, is tied to a crisis of relationality, diagnosed by Félix Guattari in the 1980s, an exacerbated form of modern alienation. In Guattari's view, this crisis is due to the reduction of kinship networks to the bare minimum, the poisoning of domestic life by the gangrene of mass-media consumption, the ossification of family life by a standardization of behavior, and the reduction of neighbor relations to their meanest expression.[10] This crisis translates to a common sense of hostility toward public schools, social security, and other institutions focused on helping the weakest and administering the commons. Slowly, public institutions were privatized and government functions subcontracted, under the justification that they would be more competitive and offer higher-quality services. The mechanism for achieving this worked as follows: first, subsidies were taken away to make the organism or institution inoperative; then, unions were demonized and their independence and agency were limited. In order for the given public institution to stop being a disaster, people accepted privatization. Privatizations, however, do not make public institutions or services necessarily better; rather, they shift focus from providing a public service to making a profit.

The logic of privatization under neoliberalism, moreover, promoted that everyone could be a shareholder, owner, and entrepreneur. At the same time, it celebrated the creative visionary, the independent worker, and individual freedom of expression, and it proclaimed the autonomy of the economic,

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8 Hannah Arendt, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," *Review of Politics* 15, no. 3 (July 1953): 324.

9 Rolnik, *Esferas de la insurrección*, 34.

10 Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: Athlone Press, 1989), 27.

political, and cultural spheres. The fetish verbs of the neoliberal era (almost always without direct object) are: to change, to reform, to move, to break away, to better, to participate, to interact. Everyone began seeking to exploit their human capital to modify some things and to preserve others; self-exploitation became the new conformism. Decisions, however, were being made by a minority, and public debt—the existential condition of the neoliberal citizen-consumer—continues to impoverish everyone. At a global scale, whether in public spaces or in the private sphere, we are always under surveillance. The Internet is the apparatus in which the vital infrastructure of millions of people from all over the world has been emptied out, and this has become available as a tool for the new government-corporate mechanisms of control.

Neoliberalism in Mexico

In 1979, the United States underwent two oil crises and a financial shock; in October of that year, Paul Volcker, chairman of the US Federal Reserve System, unveiled a new monetary policy aimed at making the American dollar the most sought-after currency in the world and began to force interest rates upward to combat inflation. Mexico defaulted in 1982 as the "Volcker Shock" was applied, and the United States secured rigid repayment at exorbitant fees. Capital flooded out of the country, while the Mexican peso lost 78 percent of its value and continued devaluating. As a solution to enable repayment, the Reagan administration found a way to assemble the powers of the US treasury and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to roll the debt over in return for neoliberal reforms.[11] President José López Portillo's government cracked under the pressure and submitted the country to draconian austerity measures crafted by the IMF that encompassed an extensive privatization and deregulation program, as well as a series of reforms liberalizing the Mexican trade regime. The same year, and the last of López Portillo's presidency, banks were nationalized as a patriotic measure and as a means to solve the problems of speculation and capital flight, as well as a way to impose controls on foreign exchange. In his last presidential address, López Portillo announced the

11 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29.

decision, famously bursting into tears and sobbing: "It is now or never. We have been sacked. It is not the end of Mexico. We shall not be sacked again!"[12]

This episode marks the beginning of a severe restructuring of the Mexican economy, society, and politics, inspired by the ideology and operating framework known as neoliberalism, which generally implies a shift away from state-led industrialization and welfare state policies, and a move toward a market-led political economy. The banks were privatized between 1991 and 1992 under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, followed by the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, which represented the continuation of Mexico's comprehensive trade liberalization and economic-reform programs that began in the early 1980s. Eliminating trade barriers between the United States, Canada, and Mexico was publicized as the best way to bring economic development to the southern country. According to Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, politicians and technocrats promised that the trade agreement would finally allow the third world to become like the first world: "rich, cultured, and happy"; "We Can Be Like Them" was the mantra leading from underdevelopment to modernization.[13] The treaty covered aspects of investment, labor markets, and environmental policies. It was the first free-trade treaty signed between advanced countries and a developing economy, creating the world's largest trade area in terms of total gross domestic product (GDP); it is the second-largest in terms of total trade volume, after the European Union.[14] According to the official line presented by politologist and opinionist Luis Rubio, NAFTA is a strategic political instrument that has helped orient the country "toward the future and toward the outside," promoting economic development and establishing a regime of "political discipline." In Rubio's words, it also implied depoliticization in investment choices made by corporations and investment parties:

> Thanks to the treaty, the economy managed to enable Mexican exports to grow dramatically and prodigiously. In its 20 years of life, NAFTA has made

12 Gloria Leticia Díaz, "Quiso, no pudo . . . y se pudrió," *Proceso*, February 19, 2004, http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/mexico/portillo-pudrio.htm.

13 Eduardo Galeano, "To Be Like Them," in *Juárez: The Laboratory of Our Future*, ed. Charles Bowden (New York: Aperture, 1998), 121.

14 M. Ayhan Kose, Guy M. Meredith, and Christopher M. Towe, "How Has NAFTA Affected the Mexican Economy? Review and Evidence," *IMF Working Paper* WP/04/59 (April 2004), 6, http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2004/wp0459.pdf.

> growth possible and now exports not only compensate for the *contraction that characterizes the internal market*, but it also provided a new horizon to the country's industrial development.[15]

According to Rubio, the new horizon of industrial development was related to an increment in Mexican corporations' productivity, having benefited from the comparative advantages that are characteristic of Mexico (e.g., cheap labor). Another positive consequence of NAFTA, according to Rubio, was credit growth (in consumption and mortgage credits) and the reduction of the real prices of consumer goods. These two factors, which are the basis of the myth of the emergence of the new Mexican "middle class," [16] allegedly indicates the reduction of poverty in the past twenty years.

From a different point of view than the official, ten years after the treaty was signed, the promise of modernization had not yet been fulfilled—unless "modernization" is understood as massive access to cheap consumer goods and services through credit. Most foreign investment had gone toward *maquiladora* (assembly) factories, creating an export-oriented manufacturing and assembly-plant economy, severed from direct economic development in the rest of the country. Moreover, as China and other regions in Latin America were integrated into global trade networks, Mexico began to face competitive pressure, and some of the export sectors (such as textiles) shifted production elsewhere, where it was cheaper. Without a doubt, starting in 1994, the Mexican economy was weakened in favor of a subordinate and unequal "insertion" into international capital flows.

The agricultural sector was hit the worst. Between 1994 and 2004, the United States flooded the Mexican market with highly subsidized farming goods, forcing national producers to lower their prices and ultimately leading them to bankruptcy. By 2005, Mexico was already importing about 42 percent of the food it consumes. The production of basic grains, rice, sorghum, and soy was dismantled alongside the production of pork meat, milk, maize, and beans. As a consequence, in the past twenty years, almost two million campesinos were forced to leave their lands behind as Mexico lost its food autonomy. In addition to many other well-known problems brought about by the ratification of NAFTA, there has been a negative impact on natural

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15 Luis Rubio, *Veinte años del TLC, su dimensión política y estratégica* (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014), 39. My emphasis.

16 Rubio, *Veinte años del TLC*, 58.

resources and worker's rights; moreover, wages and purchasing power have fallen for most Mexicans over the past thirty years, violating the Mexican constitution that guarantees a living wage.[17]

Almost forty years of neoliberal reforms imposed on Mexico have resulted in a remodeling of social hierarchies and an entirely new social landscape. Added to an already unequal society were geographically uneven urban and rural development, bringing about the simultaneous homogenization and differentiation of new, potentially politicized subjectivities. These include migrants, peasants, urban unemployed people, *ninis*,[18] public-school teachers, middle-class and poor victims of organized crime, anarchists, self-armed Indigenous defense groups, students of private and public universities, originary or Indigenous peoples fighting against transnationals' and government's megaprojects, miners, narco-insurgents, members of recently dismantled unions, and more. Drifting side by side, they have tried to speak out and to survive in a highly fragmented and violent social landscape.

In spite of the damage inflicted on the country and its citizens, subsequent treaties ensured the continuation and expansion of neoliberal reforms into other regions and institutional domains in Mexico. On November 30, 2018, US, Mexican, and Canadian leaders signed the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) at the G-20 meeting, changing NAFTA in six areas: auto companies manufacturing (to create more US jobs), Canada opening up its dairy market to US farmers, Mexican trucks meeting US safety standards, Mexico allowing its workers to form unions, more protection for patents and trademarks (many of the intellectual property rights in the Trans-Pacific Agreement), allowing US drug companies to sell products in Canada and Mexico for up to ten years before facing generic competition, and finally, the new rule in which companies can no longer use Chapter 11 of NAFTA to resolve disputes with governments except for US oil companies. This last point was created in fear of the renationalization of Mexico's oil industry. Prior to USMCA, there had been the Puebla-Panama Plan (2001), later renamed the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project (PPP-MIDP) in 2007; this agreement covers "development" projects in the area known as Mesoamerica, a hot spot rich in resources and biodiversity. There is also the Mundo Maya Project, conceived under Salinas de Gortari's

17 See "NAFTA's Impact on Mexico," *Sierra Club*, http://www.sierraclub.org/trade/downloads/nafta-and-mexico.pdf.

18 "Ni trabajan ni estudian" (neither do they work nor study).

presidency in the 1990s, but put into effect in 2011, a touristic development pole in the Southeast and Yucatán Peninsula. These projects seek to "promote connectivity and competition in the regions," opening them up for foreign investment and the exploitation of natural, mineral, and cultural richness, while at the same time, "integrating their economy with Central and North America."[19] The agreements were designed to advance Mexico's neoliberal economic, social, and political reform program and are currently transforming entire regions, forms of life, and ways of making a living. They follow an integration-fragmentation model based on dismantling small-scale productive activities at the national level in favor of massive foreign investment. While they include token production projects and assistance for the affected communities, they have devastated entire communities.[20] I must note here the continuity between previous regimes and Andrés López Obrador's "Plan Nacional de Desarrollo" made public in April 2019, which includes the "Tren Maya Project," an ambitious enterprise that if executed would definitely compete with Salinas de Gortari's and Calderón's projects in the region, geared at development of tourism infrastructure, having created the "The Mayan Riviera." López Obrador's "Tren Maya Project" will include 1,525 km of railroad with 15 stations across the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo with the goal of promoting tourism, employment, and "sustainable development," as well as protecting the environment. The instruments used to conceptualize the project are territorial zoning and community consultation. The current regime, furthermore, envisions a similar development project with the purpose of boosting the economy at the Istmo de Tehuantepec, a 200-km area that comprises 76 municipalities in the adjunct states of Oaxaca and Veracruz, as well as the Mexican Gulf with the Pacific Ocean. The "Corredor Multimodal Oceánico" or "Multimodal Oceanic Corridor" would compete with the Panama Canal and would include an EPZ to attract private investment with lower taxes, cheaper fuel, state-of-the-art urban infrastructure, education and human-capital training, housing, and basic facilities for research and technological development. Apparently, approval of the originary Binnizá (Zapoteco), Ayuuk (Mixe), Zoque, Ikoots

19 Judith Amador Tello, "El proyecto Mundo Maya, 'salvajemente neoliberal,' " *Proceso*, July 30, 2011, http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=277485.

20 Laura Carlsen, "Plan Puebla-Panama Advances: New Name, Same Game," *Americas Program*, September 10, 2009, http://www.cipamericas.org/archives/1834.

(Huave), Chontal, Chinanteco, Mazateco, Mixteco, Populca, Náhuatl, and Afro-American peoples inhabiting the region has been granted as of March 2019.[21] All these projects, however, have met huge resistance and mobilization, above all due to anomalies in community consultation procedures. The Tren Maya Project, moreover, has been highly criticized for potentially endangering originary communities and flora and fauna in the region, and it has been described as a project of "Border Reordering," aspiring to create yet a new globalized space for foreign investment and free market in an attempt to integrate and control territories rich in resources, which follows the current extractivist logic and seeks to contain migration from Central America as cheap labor.

In spite of its populist agenda of putting the interests of the "poor people" first and of fighting against corruption throughout the country, López Obrador's government seems to seamlessly continue his predecessors' neoliberal agenda. For instance, there has been no mention on the current or future status of Enrique Peña Nieto's reforms that enabled further entrenchment of neoliberal policies. In his inaugural speech on December 1, 2012, at Palacio Nacional in Mexico City, Mexico's symbolic seat of power, President Enrique Peña Nieto announced concrete reforms and plans to end the telecommunications monopoly in order to deeply transform Mexico's education system and energy sector. To that effect, the first actions of his government were to arrest Elba Esther Gordillo, the previously untouchable leader of the public school system's union (the biggest and most powerful in Latin America). The following day, he promulgated the education reform, and teachers who were members of the Education Workers Union (CNTE) organized protests in Mexico City, which were violently evicted from the Zócalo (Mexico City's main square in front of Palacio Nacional) on December 14, 2013, and were systematically demonized in the mass media. As an integral part of Peña Nieto's political program, and with the purpose of furthering Mexico's growth, the "Pacto por México" was put into action. This national agreement was signed by the three main political parties and implied an ambitious agenda of structural and institutional reforms promoting neoliberal political rationality: changes in labor law and reforms in the fiscal, public education, telecommunication industries, and energy areas, all of which were in favor of giving foreign corporations more freedom to hire and fire workers—hire them for

21 Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019–2024, https://lopezobrador.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PLAN-NACIONAL-DE-DESARROLLO-2019-2024.pdf.

extremely low salaries seeking to make the Mexican economy "more competitive" and controversially inviting foreign capital for investment in the oil, energy, and resource industries. As production costs and wages rose in China, efforts were made to position Mexico as the new China, or "Aztec Tiger," and draw manufacturing away from Asia, facilitated by the Pact for the rewriting of Mexico's 1970 labor laws.[22] Thus, Peña Nieto's Pact for Mexico, along with production innovations such as cloud computing and open-source innovation, were geared at attracting global investment in cars, aerospace, household goods, and even manufacturing drones for civilian use.[23]

From this point of view, the country's growth implied the return of the *maquiladoras*, as well as the continuation of attendant social policies: large-scale incarceration, mass surveillance, and permanent presence of the military in some regions of the country, under the guise of the "war against crime"; for instance, actions taken by the governments of the states of Morelos and Puebla against organized opposition to the Morelos Integral Project (PIM). The PIM is the alleged vanguard of the industrialization of Eastern Morelos and adjacent zones in Puebla and Tlaxcala at the skirts of the Popocatépetl volcano, a region that is also rich in gold and minerals like silver, copper, lead, zinc, and iron. The PIM was designed in the 1990s and envisioned the creation of two thermoelectric plants: a gas and water pipeline traversing 60 peasant communities, and an aqueduct to transport 50 million liters of water from the Cuautla River every day. The megaproject has put populations at high risk, creating opposition. Since 2014, however, social fighters and leaders mobilized against the PIM have been subject to harassment, threats, and arbitrary detentions, leading to the murder of Samir Flores three months into Peña Nieto's government and right before a referendum on the PIM. The results of the referendum—59.9 percent positive votes—were clearly marked by the murder of Flores. In López Obrador's daily morning address on February 25, he dismissed opposition and the boycott of the megaproject as "provocations," alleging that "contracts must be respected."[24]

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22 Paul Imison, "The Ultimate Mexican Hype Machine: The Myth of the Aztec Tiger," *Counterpunch* March 29, 2013, http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/03/29/the-myth-of-the-aztec-tiger.

23 Chris Anderson, "Mexico: The New China," *New York Times*, January 26, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/opinion/sunday/the-tijuana-connection-a-template-for-growth.html?_r=0.

24 "Anuncia AMLO resultados de consulta: termoeléctrica y Proyecto Integral Morelos," *La Izquierda Diario*, February 25, 2019, https://www.laizquierdadiario.

Under Peña Nieto, repression had expanded to Indigenous campesino communities in the Sierra Norte in Puebla, opposing the "deadly megaprojects" that included eighty-seven mining concessions and more than ten hydroelectric and fracking projects. In addition, Puebla governor Rafael Moreno Valle proposed what is known as the "Ley bala" (Bullet Law), which enables police to shoot with firearms if a protest becomes violent; the law legitimized the use of force and weapons in detentions, emergencies, and natural disasters, as well as during public demonstrations. A similar law was also pronounced in Chiapas, which was denounced for its ambiguity and totalitarian and repressive undertones. Moreno Valle was accused of sending, through the "Ley bala," a social message to inhibit protests against these projects.[25]

Aside from the repressive policies tied to Mexico's intensified authoritarianism, since 2006 there has been a permanent military presence in certain regions of the country under the guise of the "war against insecurity and organized crime." According to Pilar Calveiro, the war against organized crime is a form of state violence that has a central role in the process of neoliberal reconfiguration; state violence is exerted by public and private organisms, is tied to global security policies and authoritarian domination, and has enabled the most radical forms of repressive violence. Permanent military occupation in certain areas in Mexico has been accompanied by reforms in the penitentiary system, resulting in the incarceration of more people, and for longer terms.[26] These measures serve as a means of social control to assure (or perhaps guarantee) the free traffic of (legal and illegal) merchandise within the country and toward the north, as well as the means to implement

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mx/Anuncia-AMLO-resultados-de-consulta-termoelectrica-y-el-Proyecto-Integral-Morelos-van

25 See "Chomsky, Galeano, Sicilia y más intelectuales exigen a Graco (Morelos) y Moreno (Puebla) alto al acoso de activistas," *SinEmbargo*, April 25, 2014, http://www.sinembargo.mx/25-04-2014/973048; and Gilberto López Rivas, "Puebla: entre represión y el despojo neoliberal," *La Jornada*, April 25, 2014, http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2014/04/25/opinion/023a2pol; Sonia Corona, "Un Estado mexicano admite que la policía use armas de fuego en las propuestas," *El País*, May 20, 2014, http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2014/05/20/actualidad/1400613204_366357.html; and Gabriela Hernández, "Acusan a Moreno Valle de Infundir miedo a la oposición con la 'ley bala,'" *Proceso*, May 20, 2014, http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=372718.

26 See Pilar Calveiro, *Violencias de Estado: la Guerra antiterrorista y la Guerra contra el crimen como medios de control global* (México: Siglo XXI Editores, 2013).

megaprojects of resource extraction or energy production (Aeolic parks, industrial farming, mines, hydroelectric plants, dams, etc.), which not only have negatively impacted the ways in which people live and make a living, but are also destroying the environment.

For many observers, Peña Nieto ended a cycle that started in the 1980s with the hurried reform of Articles 25, 26, and 27 of the Federal Constitution in December 2013, and he established a new political regime. With the energy reform, more areas of the public sector became profitable, and thus, a political regime, which consists in the coalition of hegemonic forces that have the purpose neither of governing nor administering the common good but rather of exploiting it, was secured. This new model of a state fragmented in autonomous sectors sought to gain from the commons and to compete at the international level as "state productive enterprises," bringing about a new relationship between the political class, corporations, and citizens. One of the consequences of this reform was that PEMEX and Comisión Federal de Electricidad (the former national enterprises of oil extraction and provision of electricity, respectively) ceased to be "commissions" with the purpose of offering a public service by providing energy to Mexican people. In turn, they took a profitable approach (owned by the State) and began to compete with transnational companies and sell their services for gain. In other words, Peña Nieto's reforms eliminated the articles that determined the State's exclusivity in energy management, and through a regime of contracts and concessions, both PEMEX's and CFE's autonomy were abolished, along with their bureaucrats and unions; the CFE's union was eliminated in 2010 with Felipe Calderón. The consequence of joining the free market is that both enterprises began to compete at the level of their foreign analogues, which happened to be protected by international treaties; NAFTA allows foreign investors to sue before international tribunals and to demand state compensation if its policies or domestic actions diminish the earnings they had expected. The details of the reform were ambiguous regarding the property of hydrocarbons: Is bestowing extraction "licenses" the same as "giving concessions?" And thus, do foreign companies not have the rights to own what they extract from under Mexican soil, yet have the ability to sell it?[27] As of March 2019, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador declared that contracts derived from the 2013 energy reform

27 David Brooks, "Deliberada ambigüedad en la reforma energética," *La Jornada*, 21 de diciembre de 2013, http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2013/12/21/politica/007n1pol; Laura Carlsen, "Mexico's Oil Privatization is a

would be respected.[28] In 2020, however, President López Obrador sought to limit access of the private sector to the production and distribution of energy, seeking to dismantle the 2013 energy reform. Private owners' connection to the public energy distribution network was suddenly threatened. Indeed, the government seeks to be in charge of the administration of the country's energy; the problem is that renewable energies are a collateral damage of restatization. Its aim is to provide cheaper energy produced by PEMEX through fossil-fuel burning in obsolete, inefficient, and polluting plants, in detriment of private renewable energy suppliers.[29]

Mexico, as of the first countries to implement a neoliberal state apparatus and its experience—along with other pioneering regions in Southeast Asia and China—served as a prime example of the effects of neoliberal structural economic reform. These included experimenting with the precarization of labor (or instituting precarious labor) and the relocation of dispossessed farmers. Its cities have served as social laboratories of repression and violence management, and its authoritarian state mechanisms have been emulated elsewhere; for example, the sexual harassment of women by police at the protests in Atenco in 2006, as well as at the 2010 G-20 protests in Toronto. Another example is the experimental militarization of fifty communities in the state of Guerrero undertaken in 2013, under the humanitarian disguise of Peña Nieto's hunger-relief campaign, *La Cruzada contra el hambre* [The crusade against hunger]."[30] A similar campaign has been implemented by López Obrador's regime, the "Sembrando vida" program, in which military forest nurseries expand through the southern and southeastern areas of Mexico. Experimental GMO corn crops were approved in the states of Sinaloa and Tamaulipas in 2010, putting at risk the country's important genetic food heritage (contaminating and destroying the environment). Transgenic seeds will soon be commodities patented by a few transnational companies, polluting

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Risky Business," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, May 27, 2014, http://fpif.org/mexicos-oil-privatization-risky-business.

28 "Se respetarán contratos de la reforma energética," *Forbes*, March 18, 2019, https://www.forbes.com.mx/se-respetaran-contratos-de-la-reforma-energetica-asegura-amlo.

29 Fernando Tudela, "El cambio climático: balance temprano," in *Balance temprano desde la izquierda democrática*, ed. Ricardo Becerra and José Woldenberg (México D.F.: IETD and Editorial Grano de Sal, 2020).

30 Marcela Turati, "Militarización disfrazada de Cruzada contra el Hambre," *Proceso*, August 31, 2013, http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=351609.

corn at its source of origin and eradicating the means for the autonomous production of food.[31] Transgenic soy fields are devastating the Yucatán Peninsula, whose economy, aside from tourism, is based on pig farming.

Moreover, neoliberal reorganizational alignments in the past forty years have caused the mass migration of individuals to the outskirts of cities and to the border, expelling people from their ways of life and of making a living, putting them in places where they are not wanted and where they are most vulnerable. The State manages and excludes portions of the population by selectively ignoring them, without investing or providing social and physical infrastructure, and governing by using a form of "graded sovereignty,"[32] which is discussed below in more detail. It is not only that the Mexican State has failed its citizens and that corrupt politicians are to blame. For example, poet Javier Sicilia's "Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity" was problematically based on the apolitical premise of the idea that the government must be held accountable for violence and responsible for containing crime, and it was thus centered on an ethical critique of power as a form of politics.

Because of Mexico's history of colonization and repression, dispossession and racism are embedded in the DNA of Mexican people, and since its inception, the country has been ruled by a political culture that disregards laws. Neoliberal reforms were thus imposed on the country at very little political cost, facing meek (or effectively repressed) resistance. In this regard, governing as exclusion and exception was not a sign of corruption or failure, but strictly adheres to Bill Clinton's campaign catchphrase: "It's the economy, stupid." As Aihwa Ong has argued, the reconfiguration of the relationships between the governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality is integral to the neoliberal project. While the neoliberal state was shrunk or strengthened in certain strategic areas, techniques to exclude or reengineer citizen-subjects has proliferated.[33] Following Aiwha Ong, the neoliberal reconfiguration of relationships between those governed and those governing, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality are integral to the neoliberal project. Thus, while the neoliberal state shrinks or is reinforced in strategic areas (such as legislation), techniques

31 Silvia Ribeiro, "Químicamente tóxico," *La Jornada*, February 12, 2012, http://www.rebelion.org/noticia.php?id=144530.

32 Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 96.

33 Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 96.

to exclude citizens proliferate; some through violence tied to crime and the war against crime, and others to reengineering techniques.[34]

Neoliberalism has also created particular ways of seeing the world, reconfiguring our common sense to justify destruction and dispossession with ideas of progress and development, and it has tried to solve economic precariousness with coaching, self-help, and permanent education.

In addition, it features the promotion of health regimes, such as Peña Nieto's national campaign to combat diabetes and obesity by taxing soft drinks and junk food as a regulative measure since December 2013 (when in reality huge amounts of tax money are returned to industrial food producers yearly). In continuity with this, the IMSS (Mexican Institute for Social Health) launched a policy to brand industrialized food products as the blame for the current epidemics of hypertension, diabetes, and obesity, giving way to Mexico's COVID-19 death rate of 12 percent.

The government has also promoted programs for the acquisition of skills, while private education institutions endlessly offer expensive *diplomados*, *certificados*, courses, master's degrees, and even doctoral degrees of dubious academic quality; there are public funds for the development of entrepreneurial ventures (there are state programs geared toward aiding the growth of small and medium entrepreneurial ventures, the PYMES), and other techniques of self-engineering and capital accumulation. As part of the Fourth Transformation, the program Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro grants a scholarship to young men and women who want to be apprentices or interns in certain companies willing to teach them a trade. (I can't help but think of the 2005–2006 protests in France around a similar policy, the infamous *Contrat de première embauche*.) There are also the PILARES, which are cultural community centers disseminated across the country that offer programs of education, entrepreneurialism, and self-betterment. Furthermore, since the ratification of NAFTA, Mexican farmers and proletarians have been converted into *maquiladora* workers (virtually as slaves, because they earn below the minimum living wage), *sicarios* (hit men), entrepreneurs, consumers (or handicapped, indebted consumers), criminals, dead bodies, prisoners, and members of the permanently unemployed underclass. A term has even been coined to describe the eight million youths excluded from education and work: *ninis*.

34 Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 2, 14.

In this regard, *ninis* represent the very success of capitalism in producing unemployment and exclusion from the modernizing projects. Unemployment is in itself the most current form of capitalist exploitation, and thus of domination: "the exploited are not only those who produce or 'create,' but also those who are condemned not to 'create.' "[35] Domination is therefore inscribed in the very structure of the production process, which is why everyone can have personal freedom and equality—but only formal freedom and a graded equality, with many having no access at all to jobs, education, health care, housing, and other profit-generating enterprises, services, and goods. The current regime is attempting to generate inclusion through social programs based on cash handouts to students and vulnerable populations like the elderly or single mothers (in detriment of state-funded but privately run childcare centers, which have been dismantled). Inclusion here means making the redundant populations part of the market as consumers or debtors.

One of the main consequences of the implementation of neoliberalism in Mexico has been that life and death are now part of the economy, manifesting as a culture of violence, which both denigrates and gives life. The fact that more women have joined the labor market in places like Ciudad Juárez, where the *maquiladora* industry dominates, is understood as the reason why more and more women are being murdered there, and why this kind of death has been normalized and expanded to the rest of the country; in a traditional macho society such as Mexico, women's newly gained economic independence is perceived by men as a threat.[36] Following Sayak Valencia and Subhabrata Banerjee, the current period of neoliberal globalization can be characterized as *capitalismo gore* (slasher capitalism), or "necrocapitalism." In this regard, financial growth and economic accumulation are inseparable from the increase in the worldwide production of death.[37]

In short, the Mexican neoliberal experience shows what life looks like when institutional, material, and sensible forms of power operate the political

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35 Slavoj Žižek, "Capitalism Can No Longer Afford Freedom," *ABC*, May 25, 2012, http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/05/25/3511327.htm.

36 See Sayak Valencia, *Capitalismo Gore* (Madrid: Melusina, 2010); and Sergio González Rodríguez, *The Femicide Machine* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2011).

37 Subhabrata Banerjee, "Necrocapitalism," *Organization Studies* 29, no. 12 (2008): 1541–63, quoted in Marko Stamenkovic, "Radical Withdrawal: Necropolitics, *Capitalismo Gore* and Other Kinds of Life," *The Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism*, no. 6 (2013): 29–36.