A Sense of Brutality

Published by Amherst College Press

A Sense of Brutality: Philosophy after Narco-Culture.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/85742

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3001814
Introduction

**PHILOSOPHY AFTER NARCO-CULTURE**

The task of future philosophy is to clarify men’s ideas as to the social and moral strifes of their own day.

—John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*

*Philosophy exists wherever thought brings men to an awareness of their existence.*

—Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy and the World*

*“It’s a Crisis of Civilization in Mexico,’ with over 250,000 dead, 37,000 Missing.” In an echo of Latin American’s “Dirty Wars,” gang violence has fueled mounting disappearances, leaving mothers to search for their children’s corpses.*

—*Washington Post*, November 14, 2018

This book deals with a phenomenon that may seem to fall outside the purview of philosophy, considered in its traditional sense as the human preoccupation with the eternal and the universal. The phenomenon in question is the unmitigated savagery related to narcotics trafficking—or, to put it in terms we will use here, the phenomenon that preoccupies us is narco-violence, or the violence of “narco-culture.”

Offered here are a series of philosophical reflections *after* narco-culture. By this, I mean that the philosophical reflections are motivated by the violence and death that characterize this form of life. With over one-quarter of a million narco-related deaths in Mexico alone since 2006, when the administration of then president Felipe Calderón declared “war
against narcotrafficking,”1 narco-culture represents a historical event, a “crisis of civilization,” that demands a philosophical intervention. Similar to French philosophers who philosophized after Auschwitz, Mexican philosophers who philosophized after Tlatelolco, and American philosophers who philosophized after 9/11, these reflections assume that the occasion of 250,000 deaths well into the twenty-first century forces us to interrogate our most basic assumptions regarding human sociality.2 In this tradition, what follows are meditations, reflections, or interrogations on various aspects of the historical event and the social fact of narco-culture that, although starting from the concreteness of that culture, force us to reconsider some of our most basic and entrenched philosophical concepts: culture, violence, brutality, and personhood.

As a historical event and a social fact, narco-culture and the violence that frames it reveal a human crisis—specifically, an “American” crisis. Its Americanness is given in its history. Particularly, the history of narco-culture is wrapped up with the history of America’s War on Drugs, which in the twentieth century lent a very unique profile to American social, cultural, and political identity. At the roots of narco-culture, for instance, we find the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act of 1914, which regulated the sale and distribution of opiates and coca products and continues to do so to this day; narco-culture’s contemporary influence we can likewise link to American (or US) intervention in the dismantling of the Colombian drug-trafficking infrastructure—namely, with the fall of Pablo Escobar in 1993. We can say that narco-culture is the dialectical residue of these policies and these events. More impactful to its continual survival and evolution is its reactionary relationship with US antidrug (and border) policy, a relationship that forces narco-culture to continuously change, morph, and evolve with every new regulation US lawmakers invent to curb or combat the sale, consumption, and trafficking of illegal or illicit drugs. As drug use and sales are further criminalized in the US, thereby pushing consumers and producers alike further and further past the periphery of legality, Mexican narco-culture flourishes and

---

1. Borbolla, “Estrategia fallida.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
2. For instance, on philosophy after Auschwitz, we can count Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem; and Lyotard, Differend. After Tlatelolco, see Revueltas, México 68; and Monsiváis, Días de guardar. After 9/11, see Butler, Precarious Life; and Chomsky, 9-11.
becomes mainstream, turning “Mexico at the dawn of the twenty-first
century into a bloodbath that has shocked the world.”

If John Dewey is right and the task of philosophy today (Dewey’s
“future philosophy” is, in my mind, “today’s philosophy”) is to “clarify”
our ideas as to the “social and moral strifes of our day,” then thinking
about the violence of narco-culture certainly qualifies as a topic that phi-
losophers should worry about—especially “American” philosophers. After
all, every month thousands are indiscriminately murdered on our conti-
nent as a result of the specific operations of the particular cultural complex
that operates in our own day, and this, I contend, certainly counts as
“social and moral strife.” I am motivated by Dewey in suggesting that a
“crisis” of this nature should matter to philosophy. Some will object that
Dewey’s proclamation was simply a result of his pragmatist commitments
and that he meant something else by that statement. It could be that
by “social and moral strifes” he meant social and moral disagreements
in general—conceptual confusions that lead to social and moral issues (in
general)—and not strife so specific that its actors could be pointed out
and named. Perhaps, but this demand for a more radical and situated
engagement with the world around us is emblematic of what we could call
the radical branch of philosophy. Thus we find the call for such engage-
ment in the eleventh thesis of Marx’s Theses on Feuerbach, where he tells
us that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways
[when] the point is to change it.” We find it in José Ortega y Gasset, who,
after proposing the principle that “I am myself and my circumstance,”
or that my circumstances are intimately tied to my identity—that I am
my circumstances and my circumstances are me—he immediately
demands engagement, saying, “If I don’t save my circumstance, I don’t
save myself.”

In this tradition, I will endeavor to think about narco-culture and, so
as to save myself, about violence and death. Methodologically, I will work
on the fringes of phenomenological existentialism, and thus I consider
this study to be, first and foremost, phenomenological and existential. As

3. Grillo, El Narco, p. 3.
5. Ortega y Gasset, Meditations on Quixote, p. 45.
such, my analyses will be directed to the given in the circumstance, to the phenomena, and from there extract meaning and essence. Karl Jaspers attests to the application of phenomenological philosophy to the types of urgent moral conflicts such as the one we are presently considering. One key passage tells us,

What task can a philosophizing human being set himself under this violent terrorism? . . . The fundamentally new fact is that today large numbers of men simply vanish and are never heard of again. The individual’s impotence is complete. . . . For the wholly forsaken individual may cease to trust himself, may begin to doubt evident truth if he alone sees it and can no longer discuss it. The individual seems to be capable of taking utter absurdity for truth if an overpowering environment forces it upon him by its lasting influence. . . . [But], philosophy . . . should strengthen the powers of resistance to the cynical propaganda of a public life that has become monotonous, to the lure of yielding to the faith in absurdity which reaches so dreadful a climax in the confessions at show trials.6

The “violent terrorism” to which Jasper refers to here is the terrorism of his own times—for example, the terror of war, the terror of fascism, of Nazism, and so on. The sentiment, however, could be equally applied to the violent terrorism of narco-culture, where “men simply vanish and are never heard of again,” thrown into mass graves or dissolved in acid (as we will see below). Within the violent terrorism of narco-culture, moreover, the “individual’s impotence” is, in fact, absolute; individuals are swallowed up by the culture of violence itself, defined in their identity by a cultural ethos, by an ideology that is greater than themselves—so much so that they can no longer think beyond the immediacy of their station and believe themselves impotently tied to their circumstance. The role of philosophy appears in these conditions of terror, impotence, and absurdity as a breakthrough, as the ability or the possibility to break through the frameworks and propaganda and see the violence in its uniqueness as

Introduction

a situational crisis that should be articulated so that it may be understood (i.e., with Ortega, we aim to “save the circumstances”).

The present introduction is divided into three sections. The first has sought to introduce the philosophical approach. The second section will aim to clarify the problem at hand while also preempting the objection that by calling narco-culture a brutal culture, I am convicting a set of people of barbarism. In the last section, I consider a dangerous misconception of the Mexican philosophy of death that suggests a symptomatic complacency toward the gratuitous murder and brutality of the systematically irrepressible violent demands of narco-culture—that is, I suggest that a Mexican philosophy of death can be thought to justify complacency toward killing, murder, and brutality. Between the second and third sections, I offer something of an interlude on a specific place that, considered abstractly, synthesizes the cultural nuances of narco-culture—namely, its rituals of death, its economy of excess, and the centrality of violence. The place is the narco-necropolis located on the outskirts of Culiacán in the Mexican state of Sinaloa: Jardines de Humaya.

| IMAGES OF UNSPEAKABLE VIOLENCE AND BARBARISM |

The Spectacle of Death

Familiar scenes are broadcast on television or computer screens: dead bodies strewn across dirt roads, riddled with bullets to the head, chest, stomach, face; headless corpses left inside abandoned cars, heads atop the car’s roof, in the trunk, or missing from the picture altogether; the noticeable profile of human bodies wrapped with black trash bags or blankets leaning lazily against walls or fences. In many cases, written confessions accompany these crimes, detailing the reasons for the executions, decapitations, or dismemberments and the person or groups responsible. These written confessions are known as narco-mantas (narco-banners), the writers are narcos, and they are commonplace in Mexican narco-culture. For curious Americans (those on the US side of the border) perusing the pages of Mexican newspapers or clicking web links dedicated to Mexico, the War on Drugs, or violence on CNN.com, Fox.com, or any other news outlet, the scenes are troubling reminders that this kind of gruesome
and otherwise unthinkable and unspeakable violence remains a possibility outside conditions of war or the global politics of terror.

Although these scenes unfold in places and contexts that are usually unfamiliar to us, we are all witnesses. We have our technological advancements in news and social media to thank for that. Indeed, as a result of the media saturation that is indicative of our technological age, the horrible scenes and atrocities of narco-culture unfold as sidenotes on more relevant social and political happenings of our day; as mere sidenotes, however, they grab our attention, and we, the “innocent bystanders,” are drawn in, unable to look away. We become witnesses. As witnesses, the violence that we encounter itself demands our response—we are asked by the things themselves to respond somehow—specifically, to respond in understanding.

How do we respond in understanding to this kind of violence? After all, this is a violence of an everyday type that is much more horrific, cruel, and brutal than what anyone should be used to. In what follows, we will try to understand this violence philosophically, or better yet, phenomenologically (i.e., as it gives itself). To begin, consider the following headlines detailing everyday cartel or narco-violence. What these headlines and their corresponding events demonstrate is a violence that is both excessive and dehumanizing, one that seems, prima facie, to be beyond understanding:

1. “5 Decapitated, Hearts Left in Mouths of Severed Heads” (April 26, 2018). In this gruesome scene in the tourist mecca of Cancún, Quintana Roo, authorities found five headless corpses inside a car, their heads mounted on the car’s hood and roof. The mouths of the heads were sewn shut with steel wire. When opened, it was discovered that they were stuffed with the dead men’s hearts.7

2. “Chilling Scene of the Narco War as Two Dismembered Bodies Found in Mexico City” (June 18, 2018). Two dismembered bodies were found in plain sight of Mexico City morning traffic. According to authorities, the “reason” for the grisly murders had to do with a “settling of accounts” between cartels. What was unusual about this crime was not that it happened but where: Mexico City,

---

7. “Decapitan a 5.”
which up to recent times had thought itself immune to cartel violence. This is no longer the case. The first sentence of the news report is telling: “In a scene which is a bit unusual in Mexico City, but not in the rest of the country, two bodies, cut into pieces and dispersed across the street, were found on Sunday morning.”

3. “The DEA Warns of a Circle of Hell in Mexico” (July 10, 2017). The bullet-ridden bodies of the Martinez children were found curled up next to the bodies of their parents in a small rented apartment. The reason for their untimely death seems to be that the father of the children was thought to be involved with a group of assassins who killed a rival cartel member. No proof of complicity or connection was established.

4. “It Turned Out to Be a Grave” (August 8, 2018). Seven decomposed bodies were found in a narco-fosa (narco-grave) located in the backyard of a neighborhood home. All the victims had been shot in the head and buried together—men and women. Previously, in the same neighborhood, twenty-eight bodies had been exhumed from a different narco-grave. The identities of the victims remain unknown.

There is a common denominator to these headlines and the stories they tell, one that when properly fleshed out can help us make sense of what are otherwise unintelligible acts of extreme barbarism. As phenomenological observers, we may ask, If we think of these and all possible stories that one could tell about narco-violence, what is it that remains unchanged about them all—their invariant kernel of truth? In a preliminary way, we can say that the invariant is the obvious fact that the violence manifested in these acts is always more than the violence required to bring about human death; the violence in these cases is excessive and, we also say, “unspeakable.” Words fail when a description is attempted. This excessiveness appears prima facie as the invariant kernel of narco-violence; it is, we say preliminarily, its phenomenological core.

8. “Escalofriante escena de la guerra narco.”
9. “La DEA advierte del círculo del infierno.”
10. “Resultó ser fosa.”
What kind of violence is always more than violence? To think that it is simply violence underdetermines the acts in question. Violence, when it is simply violence, can be said to be formative in the constitution of subjectivity so that war, trauma, and other types of death struggles help make us who we are. In such a view (which I do not endorse), violence is creative and redeeming while also being that which serves as the horizon for the creation and redemption of persons. I take this view, proposed most notably by Jean-Paul Sartre in his reflections on revolutionary class struggle, to be too much of a romanticizing of the uses of violence by the oppressed.11 In the examples above, no one is redeemed, and no one is constituted (in fact, we can say all are deconstituted).

Perhaps these acts of excessive violence—a violence that is “too much” and “unimaginable” while not seeming to fit the concept in a straightforward way—are just another modality of the concept of violence and not something more. Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests three ways to think about violence: symbolic, subjective, and objective violence.12 Symbolic violence is the violence of ideology, of metanarratives that oppress and victimize groups of people (the dominating narratives that sustain patriarchy and whiteness are symbolically violent, for example); subjective violence is the violence attributed to subjects, to psychopaths and resentful men; and objective violence is the violence that is, Žižek says, “systematic,” “inherent in the system,”13 “uncanny,”14 and “anonymous” yet “determining”15 of what happens in our everyday lives. It is the violence of capitalism, of the 1 percent over the 99 percent, of white privilege and masculinity16—what Buffacchi calls “more deadly and destructive than direct violence.”17 These three ways of conceptualizing violence seem to capture most of those realities that we think about when we think about violence: the violence of ideas, the violence of subjects, and the violence of institutions and systems.

11. Sartre, introduction to Fanon, Wretched of the Earth.
12. Žižek, On Violence.
13. Žižek, p. 9.
14. Žižek, p. 12.
15. Žižek, p. 13.
In a certain sense, violence in the narco-context can be said to be objective in Žižek’s trichotomy. As the examples above show, this kind of violence is common; we will even say that it is “everyday” or “anonymous” and “normalized” or “inherent in the system.” However, what narco-violence also shows is an excess that can only be described as “unspeakable” or “unimaginable”—that, in those descriptions, shows itself to fall outside a space of justification or utility, that does not fit in the system or find reference in any other concept found within the known conceptual space used to describe human sociality. Often, as we will see (chapter 3), silence is the (morally problematic) cost of this lack of fit. Perhaps this excessiveness is that “uncanniness” of objective violence that Žižek points out—that is, the uncanny ability of violent excess to sink into the social fabric and become “anonymous” or “muted.”

Here we see that “something more” of the violence of narco-culture that in its excess stands outside the rational space of justification: it is seen as a fact of the world (we see five decapitated heads with their hearts in their mouths), but we are unable to find words that describe the fact of seeing it and, failing to account for the excessiveness of the act, allow it then to fade into the horizon of acceptable violence (the decapitations and dismemberments appear “normal” in the context of narco-illegality). This something more turns out to be the play of presence and absence, being and nonbeing that is more than subjective violence, more than symbolic violence, and more than objective violence; it thus overflows or cannot be fully captured by the concept of violence. I call this something more brutality, whose logic, I will show, denies itself as brutality in processes of dehumanization, objectification, and destruction of human life. The logic of brutality contributes to a perpetuation of itself (thus breeding more violence and death) when it says that the excess is not extraordinary but normal and acceptable in its own context—when it says that excessive violence against another person is not excessive because the other person is not a person but a body in a War on Drugs, a “narco,” a “criminal,” or, when dead, a statistic, a number, or simply “someone who should’ve known what they were getting into.” This person is thus totalized (objectified) in such a way that he can be killed and defiled because it is not irrational to kill or defile these types of people in the narco-context.
Hannah Arendt writes, “Violence is neither beastly nor irrational,” by which she means that violence will always stand within a horizon of intelligibility where it will make sense; its rationality will be instrumental, always having a (rational) end. This is the case with brutality, which, as expressing that which cannot be said and demanding that it not be named in its being, appeals to a space of rational justification where the most “beastly” acts will be swallowed up by the normality of the culture itself. With this in mind, the goal should thus be to unmask brutality’s pretense to rationality and normality, to bring it to presence so as to name it, and to expose it and bring understanding to bear upon it. I am convinced that the cultural space of narco-culture is the only horizon of intelligibility where this may be accomplished.

Is a Culture of Brutality a Culture of Brutes?
It could be said that in making these claims, and even in undertaking this project, I am running the risk of characterizing persons who exist within the space of narco-culture, or in those sectors of the Mexican community where it is found, as savages or uncivilized brutes. It is thus imperative to upend this criticism and propose that the unmitigated brutality of narco-culture represents one aspect of civilized society—namely, the extreme limits of neoliberal capitalism and hyperconsumer culture (i.e., the culture of excess).

It is hard to disassociate brutality from cultural backwardness. Mexicans themselves have a hard time making this distinction. In the spring of 2017, a wave of cartel violence in the states of Veracruz and Guerrero left eighteen dead within a twenty-four-hour period, prompting the governor of Veracruz, Miguel Ángel Yunes, to make the following declaration:

These are cowardly acts, filled with vileness, that give us some idea as to what we are facing. We are not facing human beings, we are facing beasts, cowards, villains, persons who are capable of murdering children with the aim of holding our people hostage.\(^{19}\)

---

The danger of such a characterization is that it places the blame on the irrational elements of the culture—on the psychopaths, the sick—while simultaneously distracting from the circumstances that allow and require such acts to take place. The beastly, vile, and cowardly acts are part of a system of allowances connected with an economy and a politics of excess.

An editorial in a Mexican journal attempted to sort out the “philosophy of the narco-trafficker,” and to their credit, the editors were able to reduce it into one dicho, or “saying,” pinpointing what this philosophy was in essence: “The philosophy [of narco-culture] was synthesized by a low-level provincial assassin in an interview after his capture: ‘It is better to live 5 years as a king, than 50 years as a fool.’” This philosophy, they continue, “palpitates in an entire culture,” and at its core are two maxims: “fast money with little effort” and “an asphyxiating materialist consumerism.” While this “philosophy” is more akin to a mantra and appears somewhat irrational, it is the most rational attitude one can have in a world that promotes such things as “fast money with little effort,” that values luxury and wealth, and that measures success in the registers of excess. However, this mantra is not only a reflection of the culture; it is also a result of it. One has to live this way; it is demanded by a system of allowances—namely, by culture itself.

So the violence announced in the headlines, the visceral brutality of the acts, and the culture that allows it—these are not irrational or barbaric but part of the rational system of capitalist consumption of which narco-trafficking, narco-war, and narco-violence are a part. Nonetheless, my claim that brutality is constitutive of narco-culture would suggest that narco-culture is the culture of brutes or savages; the claim would suggest that I am making a judgment about the primitiveness of an entire sector of the Mexican population—that is, that I am holding on to the colonial conception that sees non-Europeans as uncivilized. After all, brutality, since Aristotle, is the behavior of those who cannot control their impulses and live dangerous and short lives. In his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle himself warns us against the “brutish types” who are “rarely found” but who “surpass ordinary men in vice” (1145a30–32). Brutality, he writes, is

20. Quesada, “La filosofía del narcotraficante.”
a “moral state to be avoided” (1145a16), and he associated it with brutality with irrational and animallike barbarians—in his own time represented by uncultured non-Greek “foreigners” who posed a threat to the Greek polis and who thus existed outside the space of “Reason” (1145a30). The strangers were barbarian brutes; the Greeks were civilized. Thus the risk of referring to a particular cultural form as brutal is that brutality drags around its opposite, and so it appears that when we call those in the brutal, or alien, cultural form uncivilized, we are simultaneously legitimizing ourselves, albeit falsely, as civilized by default. In the present case, our association of brutality with the everydayness of narco-culture might suggest that narcos or those associated with the narco form of life are themselves irrational and animallike brutes that must be denied at all costs (even if, as Aristotle insists, they are “rarely found”) or that narco-culture, in being brutal or demanding brutality, is no culture at all but a primitive state of war of all against all—a natural state of savagery housing “brutish types.” This conception is maintained by Thomas Aquinas, who tells us that brutality is applied to those who bear a likeness to “wild beasts.”

Ultimately, the perception that brutality belongs to wild beasts is, of course, a key moment in the history of the West, particularly when it is deployed as a justification for colonialism, slavery, and cultural genocide. So I do not deny the association that exists when making the claim that brutality is a constituent moment in narco-culture, but I deny the truth of that association. Those involved in the murder of children or the dismemberment of human bodies are not animals; they are subjects who reason and engage in complicated existential negotiations, who participate in the machinations of modern hypercapitalism fully aware that they may succeed or die trying, and who, in their doings and commitments, create and re-create culture and history itself. I strongly believe that brutality is a function of our global culture and the economic and political scaffolding supporting most contemporary neoliberal states, and the particular form it takes in Mexico is merely its most obvious manifestation. To paraphrase the French philosopher Michel Henry, culture precedes barbarism:

Barbarism is not a beginning. It is always the second to a state of culture that necessarily precedes it, and it is only in relation to this prior culture that it can appear as an impoverishment and a degeneration. Barbarism . . . is a ruin, not a rudiment. Culture is thus always first.22

This suggests that narco-culture is culture and not a primitive state of nature, a “ruin,” or a “rudiment.” Hence the omnipresence of brutality demands that we ask how this condition exists as a possibility and a reality in a legitimate legal, social, and cultural context—namely, the Mexican state, a context that is otherwise perfectly aware of itself as being rational, modern, progressively civilized, and humanistic.

Ultimately, I am not saying that Mexicans are brutal; rather, I maintain that the cultural topography of narco-culture is brutal, that its geography is brutal, that its rites and rituals are brutal, and that the logic of brutality predominates its intersubjective negotiations, its economy, and its arts—that is, in general, that the ontology of narco-culture (the kinds and types of beings and events that define it) is an ontology of brutality.

| INTERLUDE: JARDINES DE HUMAYA |

A central theme of the present book is that those scenes of violence illustrated above are not isolated events that manifest the extremities and excesses of culture; they are not nonsensical eruptions of barbarism and brutality exhibiting the dialectical nature of cultural progress. This book claims that such extreme violence constitutes narco-culture and thus that extreme violence can be constitutive of culture itself.

The objection may be raised that narco-culture is not culture but a sub- or marginal culture. This objection, however, depends on an essentialist view of culture, one that thinks that there is only one kind of culture and that narco-culture is not it. My view is that no such homogenous or hegemonic culture exists. There are no subcultures; there are only different cultures. Even if we were to insist that, yes, there are subcultures (think skateboarding culture, surf culture, punk culture, etc.), narco-culture is

not one of them; it is culture, pure and simple. One interesting phenomenon that makes this clear is the burial rites associated with the most notorious figures in narco-lore.

On a recent trip to Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico, I was granted access to the famed Jardines de Humaya. By all accounts, Jardines de Humaya is a cemetery. Established in 1969, it is located within the Culiacán city limits, and according to its website, it is an option for anyone looking for a final resting place. There are maps and price charts, with the costs associated with maintenance and upkeep exceeding the costs of living for the average Mexican. This, however, is not an ordinary cemetery. The costs associated with it and the tradition that it announces indicate that this is not a “final resting place” for just anyone. It is reserved for narcos living (and dying) the narco-life; it is a narco-necropolis. As with all things narco, it is a cemetery of excess and extremes; it is a necropolis, a true city of the dead, with roads, Wi-Fi and cable access, functional plumbing, satellites, playgrounds, security cameras, and of course, tombs. The dead rule this city, and the only living things within its limits are the few construction workers building the next tomb, the trees that line the main avenues, and (on this day) my guide and me.

Jardines is a revered and almost holy place to the people of Sinaloa. In order to secure my visit as a foreigner, my host had to get “special” permission, and not from any government designee. (I’m not sure who he called or what kind of permission we received, but after a ten-minute conversation, I was allowed to freely roam the grounds.) This is a place that preserves the memory of cultural heroes, so the utmost respect is demanded before one enters and while one is there. There is a complete absence of graffiti on the walls, there is no garbage on the ground, there are a few dead or wilted flowers here and there that are sure to be replaced at any moment, and there are no wandering tourists snapping selfies. One goes quietly and reverently as if not wanting to disturb the inhabitants. In the dead quiet of the place, there are unannounced expectations about how to behave and how to revere—expectations that are alive, loud, and authoritative. There is a heavy threat of violence that descends with the warm, humid air. Disrespect is simply not allowed.

During my visit, I understood I was merely a guest whose presence was tolerated insofar as I obeyed the rules, attended to my steps, and did not disparage the holy ground.

Calling Jardines a cemetery, however, does not do it justice. This is not a mausoleum. This is not truly a necropolis. This is a living community whose avenues and homes are possessed by reason and intention. The place itself aims to be a living representation of the ideal narco-community. Consider its architecture: the style varies from house to house, depending, I suppose, on the preferences of the narco who, while he lived, ordered its construction. A house in the baroque style sits authoritatively next to a colorful two-story modernist-style building, while behind it, a post-modern three-story tower with see-through windowpanes reaches for the sky. I have seen these streets and these houses before in the more luxurious areas of San Francisco or the Hollywood Hills, but no one lives here. These homes—furnished with sofas, televisions, air conditioning, heating, plumbing, and even playgrounds—are the homes of the dead, who in death fulfill some implicit cultural purpose.

This living community of the dead is the home of some of the most notorious gangsters in recent Mexican history. Entombed in the same lavish tradition as Egyptian pharaohs and Mayan snake kings, the narcos built for themselves a final resting place to reflect the life they led and the death they only dreamed of. In the extravagance of their burial chambers, they sought to mimic the extravagance of their lives. These tombs are monuments to a life lived in luxury or its pursuit, ultimately symbolizing the final price paid for their sacrifices, their courage, their daring, and their success (however short-lived).

Walking through narrow paths that carve out this “suburb” of Culiacán, through homes conceived in moments of peace in an otherwise fast and violent life with the foreknowledge that only by dying would one take one’s rightful place as master of the house, I am assured that while “not all” narcos end up here, in Jardines, this is certainly a place to which those for whom narco-culture provides a form of life may always aspire. Of course, Jardines is not the only place where these lavish tombs may be found; some are located in private cemeteries scattered throughout Mexico, but a common characteristic ties them all together: the dead were involved in narco-culture in one way or another. One wonders about the narcissism
necessary to envision one’s final resting place as a luxury condominium; the alternative would be that thinking of this place as a possible final destination is just another requirement of the narco-life. I can only conclude that this funerary ritual is a cultural aspect of that life, one related to that culture’s attitudes regarding life and death.

Jardines speaks to the allowances of culture. This cemetery did not force its way into a plot of land on the outskirts of Culiacán; it was methodologically planned, financed, and constructed—it was allowed. It is a symbolic gesture of the culture of el narco itself. It is a testament to a cultural consciousness that glorifies material accumulation and excess. Jardines does not glorify death as much as it glorifies a life lived for the sake of economic success. The tombs are thus reminders and permanent symbols of a violent culture; they justify the permanence of the culture and a defiance of its own death.

Jardines is a cultural landmark belonging not to “Mexican culture” but to narco-culture itself. This is my point: once we zero in on a particular culture’s philosophies of death, we have authenticated its cultural status. It is not a sub- or fringe culture; it is a culture, period. This is because locating the role that death plays within any culture can be done by looking at the rites of death practiced by members of the culture. We know what the Egyptians, the Mayans, and the Vikings thought about death (their own deaths and death in general) by the way that they buried their dead, and from this, we gather insight into the kind of lives they lived. Similarly, we can gather the narco way of life from the death rites of its culture. This is not to say that all narcos are buried with such excess and opulence, but it does speak to an established cultural aspiration that, along with other cultural aspirations related to that way of life (e.g., imperatives of money, violence, and brutality), marks a complete cultural ethos. As one mourner in Jardines summarized it to an American journalist, “We have narco culture running through our veins.”

24. Garsd, “This Narco Cemetery.”
INDIFFERENCE TO DEATH

The violence announced in the headlines, excessive and “unspeakable,” is embedded in a system of significance that cannot be called irrational or barbaric. Justification for those acts that render one silent is found within a space of reasons; it is found in the realm of rationality, which is culture itself. Narco-culture is a rational culture, justified as culture in its rites of death, its music, its “social sanctions,” its codes of silence and honor, and its call for brutality, all of which blend into a hypercapitalist economic social consciousness where excess, corruption, and an “asphyxiating consumerism” are reasons (or values) that justify either the killing of the other in all of its possible permutations or complacency before the other’s death. Nonetheless, it is easy for us to attribute irrationality and barbarism to those contexts in which such violence exists. It is easier to accept a brutal act as senseless or irrational than to accept it as an intentional act of a civilized and rational person. Perhaps this has to do with our own unwillingness to imagine ourselves, rational and civilized as we are, capable of such acts—with our own refusal to imagine ourselves as extremely violent or capable of unspeakable acts. This, of course, is an irrational assumption; we have no reason to believe that we are not capable of such acts.

One way to explain the willingness of others to engage in what we may want to think of as barbaric acts of violence is to imagine that, perhaps due to socioeconomic circumstances, these others are indifferent to death. Believing that, in a particular context, death is accepted with indifference or that it plays a pronounced role in the cultural imaginary would help explain why those who exist in that context are quick to devalue their own lives and enthusiastically lend themselves and their bodies to the narco-life; after all, if ultimately la vida no vale madre (life is not worth a damn), as a popular Mexican saying goes, then it doesn’t matter how it ends.

---

25. I borrow the concept of “social sanction” from John Stuart Mill, who, describing what he called “the despotism of custom” (On Liberty, p. 134), identified social sanctions as (external) prohibitions on one’s liberty. In narco-culture, such prohibitions that stymy freedom are necessary for cultural survival—for example, sanctions against “snitching,” fraternizing with the enemy, and so on or sanctions that require violence, revenge, or corruption. See Mill, On Liberty; see also Mill, Utilitarianism, especially, “Of the Ultimate Sanction of the Principle of Utility,” pp. 27–34.
Mexican sociologist and philosopher Roger Bartra suggests that acceptance of the notion that one’s life does not matter, that one ought to be indifferent to death, is promoted by the social and political elite as a means of maintaining power by convincing the disenfranchised that their deaths will cause no alarm because they themselves have no intrinsic value or are not fully human (civilized) and worthy of the state’s protection. In a similar way, my claim that brutality is constitutive of narco-culture would seem to suggest that calling brutality a constitutive feature of that culture must mean that those living in it ought to be complacent about its happening or, worse, that they must resign themselves to their brutal fate and respond to brutal violence with more brutal violence, a suggestion that would play well into the colonialist conception of non-Europeans as barbarians (Aristotle) or wild beasts (Aquinas).

This is then a real danger with the thesis that brutality is a constitutive aspect of narco-culture: according to the history of the concept of brutality itself, to call a people brutal is to equate them with animals, with brutes, with the unhuman. Again, brutality is a phenomenon of civilized culture; we can say that it is simply a consequence of intersubjective (and thus human) coexistence, where empathy and fellow feeling are subsumed under a logic of violence that is internal to human togetherness that demands, for its own sake, ever-present processes of objectification and dehumanization. Brutality is, in this sense, a human phenomenon of civilized people in modern (late-capitalist) societies and not one restricted to the animal kingdom.

In this section, I would like to consider a philosophical conception of death that, if fully fleshed out, would give us reason to think that the excessive violence that underscores the logic of narco-culture is, in fact, a reflection of the value placed on death by Mexican culture itself. In particular, I consider the view of Mexican philosopher and poet Octavio Paz, who has previously argued that a certain “indifference” to death is inherent in Mexican culture more generally conceived. Paz’s remarks about the Mexican attitude toward death will help frame our discussion about brutality and narco-culture. Of course, Paz’s claims have not gone unchallenged, and for reasons similar to those I have mentioned above—namely, that an “indifference” to death belongs to barbarism and not civilization—I will consider the strongest case against Paz (Roger Bartra’s) and suggest that
neither Paz’s nor Bartra’s accounts give us sufficient reasons to think that the rampant and escalating lethality that plagues modern Mexico can be justified by such philosophies of death.

In The Labyrinth of Solitude, Octavio Paz’s classic treatise on Mexican identity written in 1951, death plays a constitutive role in the formation of Mexican identity. “Tell me how you die,” Paz declares, “and I will tell you who you are.”

A variation of “Tell me who your friends are, and I will tell you who you are,” Paz’s declaration aims to highlight a very Mexican attitude toward death—namely, that the ways of death and dying, like the people with whom one surrounds oneself, say more about who one is than any other aspect of his or her ordinary existence. For Paz, the replacement of friends with death is meant to point to an intimacy with death—with a pretheoretical sensitivity that says that who one is gets reflected in how one dies. For this reason, death is the other for Mexicans, the other who serves as a “mirror,” who reflects me back to myself—or, as Paz puts it, “Death defines life.”

In that mirroring with death, life finds its limit and its end. This, according to Paz, is the modern conception of death in Mexico, the one that defines modern Mexican life. In that conception, life and death are intertwined, and they are of equal value.

In telling you how I die, I tell you who I am. I am the way of my death. This means that my death will reflect my life or, simply, that I should die as I lived. If my death is tragic, then my life was tragic; if my death is quiet, then my life was quiet; if my death is violent, then so was my life.

In a telling passage, Paz writes, “Death, like life, is not transferable. If we do not die as we lived, it is because the life we lived was not really ours: it did not belong to us, just as the bad death that kills us does not belong to us.”

An incongruity between life and death whereby one’s death does not reflect one’s life can only mean, according to Paz, that somewhere along the line, one’s life was (somehow) replaced with someone else’s life. If I don’t die as I lived, then I died someone else’s death. This can only mean that I lived a false life, a life in bad faith, an imposed life, or a stolen life. If I die a tragic death while having lived a peaceful life, then the

27. Paz, p. 54.
28. Paz, p. 54.
peaceful life I lived was false; it didn’t belong to me. Likewise, if I lived a violent life but die a peaceful death, then the violent life I lived did not belong to me; it was imposed, it was false. Who or what imposes a life that can only lead to a “bad death”—a “wrong” death, one that did not belong to me in the first place? If this is the “modern” conception of death, then we can only guess that modernity itself makes possible these incongruities.

Modernity interrupts the simplicity of dying. Unlike the pre-Hispanic Mexicans, for whom death was a natural continuation of life and thus not an end or even a mirror, modern Mexicans see in their own deaths the story of their lives. So a good death points to a good life and vice versa. This means that a good death (or better yet, a *right* death, one that belongs to me) is, of course, desired at *all costs*. Because it is desired at all costs, all attempts at dying a good death that reflects a good life will fall short. So the good death has to be invented; the invented death will account for a life (supposedly) lived to its fullest—a fullness reflected and introduced into the world as a fact among facts, as Jardines de Humaya illustrates in its architectural opulence. Paz writes that the modern Mexican “is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love.”29 This is not literally the case, of course. The idea here is that death is ever present in the Mexican everyday consciousness, and while we are afraid of dying, of the inevitability of death, it is not the kind of fear from which to run and hide behind blind consumerism, false security, or any of the many games we play that distract us from thoughts about our own personal demise. Paz calls this an “indifference to death,” by which he means that Mexicans do not give death any more importance than that which they give any other aspect of their own lives.30 It is the indifference of she who is not surprised by the arrival of the unwanted guest—the indifference of someone who, while afraid of an arrival, expects what is coming nonetheless. Paz writes,

The Mexican’s indifference toward death is fostered by his indifference toward life. He views not only death but also life as nontranscendent.

Our songs, proverbs, fiestas and popular beliefs show very clearly that the

29. Paz, p. 57.
30. Paz, p. 58.
Paz’s observations of the Mexican attitude toward death lend a difference to Mexicans that some, like Roger Bartra, repudiate as another colonialist ploy to demean the Mexican people, to regard them as uncivilized and uncultured. However, Paz is pointing out a phenomenon that is seen, verbalized, and actually experienced in modern Mexican life. In literature, popular music, and art, we see Mexicans judging a lost life based on the manner of its death. A violent death is immediately reflective of a violent life; for example, when someone living in proximity to the narco-context dies a violent death, people tend to say, “He must’ve been doing bad things or hanging out with bad people.” We see them reflecting on a life lived in poverty, in lawlessness, with little to no expectation of a government intervention that will better the circumstances and confident that history can only repeat itself in a Nietzschean eternal recurrence of the same. In these circumstances, men and women will naturally affirm that a “quick death” is preferable to continuing with a miserable life. In this sense, Paz says that life “cures” one of the fear of death, since one cannot possibly imagine that death is a worse option. The value of life is then equal to the value of death in the sense that neither has value. The passage above, however, also suggests that the inverse would be true. If on reflecting on one’s life, one found it to be rich and full, lived in peace and serenity, with the confidence that its labors were worth the effort and that what one did in this life contributed to the betterment of those lives still to come, then death would mean something—it would mean something positive if death was rest or transcendence, or it would mean something negative if death was the interruption of that life. In either case, one’s death would reflect one’s life—that it matters to die would have meant that life itself mattered. Looked at in this way, Jardines de Humaya is the cultural

31. Paz, p. 58.
representation of an effort to (perhaps retroactively) lend (or force) meaning to a life lived. The opulence of the tombs means to tell us (or to convince us) that the dead lived opulently, which in the language of narco-culture means that the particular life had value and was lived “well” (or in accordance with narco-culture’s ideals of success and the “good life”).

In Roger Bartra’s *The Cage of Melancholy*, however, the case is made that this death narrative is a myth, reflecting relations of power meant to marginalize and degrade by convincing everyday Mexicans that their lives are worthless and can be easily squandered. The subtext of the death narrative, then, says that modern Mexicans have failed at the project of modernity due to their inability to participate in it and that they are *always already* failures living miserable lives and dying miserable deaths. This subtext thus justifies a tragic existence where violence and brutality are natural consequences—where misery is expected and accepted as a normal aspect of Mexican life. Ultimately, Bartra aims to explain the “indifference” that Paz says characterizes Mexican life:

> I have suggested that the Mexican’s “indifference to death” is a myth having two origins: religious fatalism, which fosters lives of misery; and the disdain of the powerful for the lives of the workers. . . . In Mexican culture these two tendencies intertwine to weave a peculiar fabric that ties together despair and disdain, anxiety and pride. But there is a third element in this cultural fabric surrounding death. The felt longing for a paradise lost is transformed into an intellectual quest for the authentically human dimension buried by modern industrial civilization.32

Unlike Paz, for whom the “indifference to death” is a phenomenological fact—that is, it is given in his observations of Mexican life—for Bartra, this givenness has an origin, and an intentionally malicious one at that: the desire of the elites to maintain power over the rest. There is a process here: the church fosters lives of misery *so as* to keep the lower classes in perpetual need of religion while the powerful (through politics, education,

and popular culture) foster “indifference” so as to rid the workers of their fear of death so that they may easily accept their own deaths and the exploitation that precedes them. “Such people die like animals,” says the myth, “because they live like them.”\textsuperscript{33} Tying all of this together, according to Bartra, is the intellectual effort (e.g., the philosophical, poetical, artistic effort) to convince the exploited and the marginalized that this indifference to death is natural, or human. Thus, Bartra writes, “the myth of the Mexican indifference to death, the man who disdains death; this is one of the most trite commonplaces of modern Mexican thought.”\textsuperscript{34}

Bartra’s explanation goes far in exposing the reasons for the Mexican attitude of fearlessness in the face of death. It is a product of modernity and related to relations of domination that have existed since the Conquest. Those who live recklessly and fearlessly can thus be said to suffer from a colonized mind that tells them that it is in their nature to live and die like animals. Bartra concludes that “the Mexican ‘indifference to death’ is [thus] an invention of modern culture.”\textsuperscript{35}

Alternatively, perhaps what Bartra means is that not all Mexicans operate under this paradigm of death indifference. However, Paz’s point appears to be that if and when life itself lacks significance, then there is no reason for a person to think that death will be anything more than what it is—namely, the absolute cessation of the vital functions. The evidence is everywhere: songs, \textit{dichos}, the chaos of the Mexican fiesta—phenomena that all point to if not a fearlessness toward death then at least a welcoming of it. Of course, if life is found to have meaning, then death will also have meaning; it will mean the end of a meaningful life or a transition to a more meaningful existence beyond this one.

When we consider the deadly violence of Mexican narco-culture, its normality seems to suggest an attitude of complacency toward death that is essential to culture itself, an attitude possibly attributable to a powerful yet implicit belief that death is just another necessary and inescapable fact of life. This is a belief that tells one to make what one can out of one’s

\textsuperscript{33} Bartra, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{34} Bartra, p. 60.
\textsuperscript{35} Bartra, p. 64.
fleeting moment on earth. From the looks of things, the message is that everyone thinks this way, and so the death of the other, by my own hands or by another’s, is naturally met with a certain degree of indifference. Moreover, since death is just another fact and, as Paz says, is reflective of one’s life, then one must accept the manner of one’s death, whatever that may be. How one dies becomes as meaningless as that one dies. Enter the radical violence that we call brutality. If death does not have any meaning outside the space of one’s particular beliefs, and if it is just another fact among facts, then the manner of its arrival is not important; why not hasten it through the most extreme, excessive, and foul means?

We ask, Is this “indifference to death” natural to Mexicans because they are Mexicans, or is it socially constructed in the industrial machinery of those in power? There is no way to properly pry the socially constructed attitude from the one that is “natural” to the Mexican person. It is true that without the drug markets (both potential and those that already exist) and the underlying hypercapitalism that is required to make narco-trafficking the successful business that it is, the body count would not be as high and the violence required to protect it would not be required; there is also a sense that the political elite somehow allow the brutal massacres in an effort to maintain power by keeping the rural poor in a perpetual state of vigilance and fear. It is also true that this indifference and fearlessness toward death is historical, accumulating as a shared memory of ritual sacrifices (e.g., pre-Hispanic practices), cultural genocide (e.g., the Conquest and colonization), civil wars (e.g., the War of Independence), revolutions (e.g., the Mexican Revolution), and the more immediate and everyday experiences of machismo, paternalism, and hero worship, to name but a few. All of this means that attempts to locate this indifference to death through either a characterology (Paz) or political critique (Bartra) will naturally fall short.

The truth is that this indifference to death is a fact of the cultures of Mexico and not just an invention of philosophers or ideologues. It is a facet of the ontology of certain historically constituted peoples and not merely a psychological complex that has infected them all. Claudio Lomnitz’s excellent study of Mexico’s death culture, Death and the Idea of Mexico, clearly shows both the centrality of death for the Mexican people (in a general sense) and its multifaceted historical origins. Lomnitz writes,
The most relevant questions concerning Mexico’s elaborate history of death do not coalesce around the issue of whether it is an “invented tradition”—nor whether Mexican attitudes toward death are identical with those of any other modern society. These questions are superficial, and they do not even excite much academic interest. If death has been a looming presence in Mexican political discourse, it is because the political control over dying, the dead, and the representation of the dead and the afterlife has been key to the formation of the modern state, images of popular culture, and a properly national identity. These processes involve deliberate work on the part of intellectuals, popular classes, bureaucrats, and market vendors, true, but the dead always exceed or fall short of their manipulative intentions. There is no inventor, no owner, no meaning that can contain death, that can tame it.

We are left with the fact of death as its own thing. The indifference to it cannot be reduced to psychological or political attitudes, as there is always a remainder. The remainder is what cannot be explained in our descriptions of the Mexican relation to death; it is that which ultimately grounds those behaviors that we, external and curious observers of Mexican life, find so appalling: the senseless murders, decapitations, dismemberments, disintegrations, and so on.

Those acts of unspeakable violence that, as unspeakable, should thus be passed over in silence nonetheless inform the constituting narratives of narco-culture; those acts can be justified in many different ways. Their justification can be grounded in the violence required by the competitive nature of unrestrained free-market capitalism, which creates the space for multinational drug trafficking to take root and blossom; they can be grounded in a politics of death that seeks to marginalize and oppress the poor and downtrodden by forcing them into the dangerous business of the drug trade; they can be grounded in a natural, essential, fearlessness-toward-death characteristic of Mexicans themselves that makes murder and being murdered a priori possibilities of a way of life. Whatever the justification might be, whether one or all of these together, violence is rooted in the cultures of Mexico, and in the case of

narco-culture in particular, it is a violence that, like death itself, cannot be tamed.

**CONCLUSION**

At one point during my “tour” of Jardines de Humaya, I ask my guide to point out the tombs of those he personally knew, and he motions to a few of the most ornate. “I knew that man there,” he says, pointing to a brown, two-story, chapel-like structure with security cameras above gated bulletproof windows. “I asked him how many men he’d killed. He told me, ‘Personally, maybe around five hundred, but I gave the order on another couple of thousand.’ . . . They called him ‘el Ondeado’; he loved to gut his victims with a long knife that he carried with him at all times [to] decapitate them, cut them to pieces. He was a brutal man.” Indeed, the beauty of Jardines de Humaya conceals brutal deeds and the brutal men that carried them out. One spectacular tomb enshrines the body of a man cut to pieces by his enemies; another, of a man gun down by the Mexican Naval Infantry Corps; and yet another holds the body of a Mexican beauty queen savagely murdered by a jealous lover, a narco, who in his guilt built her the home of her dreams. The architectural perfection of the garden’s buildings is meant to hide the ugliness of a life lived violently in the omnipresence of death.

Death is the horizon of violence; it is the end of horror, terror, cruelty, and brutality. Cultural conceptions of death thus help explain particular attitudes toward violence and its different guises. It is clear, moreover, that these conceptions do not cause violence; violence is its own thing, has its own essence apart from death. This book is an attempt to think about extreme situated violence as opposed to abstract conceptual violence; in particular, it deals with the kind of violence that provokes silence and detachment, a violence that demands objectification and dehumanization, a violence that in its ubiquitousness and everydayness has become ontological, a violence that in its excess overflows its own concept and thus requires a new name; we call it brutality.

The brutality that we think about is situated in narco-culture. The dead in narco-culture are innumerable, and the brutality that kills is said
to be unspeakable (although we will make an effort to speak it here), giving rise to what the Washington Post called “A Crisis of Civilization.”

OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In the chapters that follow, I aim to show that the degree and the kind of violence we find as common and everyday in narco-culture reveal that there is some truth to every justification we may give it: men and women kill each other with unprecedented indifference and brutality not only because a colonial narrative has forced them into a murderous existence but also because in the form of life that is narco-culture, human bodies are commodities in the service of economic ends, and the life of the other, or the life of the narco-other, has no intrinsic value. Moreover, a history of fearlessness in the face of death, of indifference to death, has endorsed a narrative that accepts this brutality as its consequence. The end result is the acceptance of brutality as a way of life.

On the whole, this book is about violence. More specifically, it is a reflection on extreme violence and on the different ways in which extreme violence has been rationalized, politicized, and institutionalized in the spatial-temporal sociopolitical phenomenon that is narco-culture. Once narco-culture is delimited as a space of reflection, certain conceptual distinctions are made, which constitute the heart of the present interpretation. Specifically, distinctions are made throughout that are meant to disentangle violence, brutality, cruelty, and terror, concepts that are usually used interchangeably when discussing violence in general and violent cultures in particular, making a mess of clarity and ultimately confusing our philosophies of violence. My claim is that making these distinctions is a necessary step toward a clearer understanding of violence in cultural modalities such as narco-culture.

Central to the book is the claim that narco-culture is brutal, or that its violence is more than violence. This process, that of thinking philosophically about narco-culture and its brutal ontology, also forces us to interrogate (or reinterrogate) a number of previously well-established concepts in the

37. Cordoba and Montes, “It’s a Crisis of Civilization.”
history of philosophy. Chapter 1 thus aims at a philosophical description of narco-culture that forces us to reconsider the notion of culture itself. Chapter 2 reviews the philosophical literature on violence, focusing on those conceptions that might better account for (or, in their failure to account, reveal the limits of the concept of) violence when confronted with the “unthinkable” violence that defines what I refer to interchangeably as the narco form of life, narco-context, or narco-culture. The concept of brutality as that which is *more than violence* better captures the reality of excessive violence, and this is the argument of chapter 3; it is brutality, I insist, that helps us account for the otherwise *unspeakable* ways in which persons are objectified and dehumanized into disposable objects in the machinery of narco-culture. In chapter 4, I reconsider the notion of personhood under conditions of brutality. I do this by thinking about a particular act, familiar in narco-culture: “making pozole,” or the act of killing, dismembering, and dissolving bodies in barrels of acid with the aim of bringing about their absolute erasure. The principal distinction among brutality, horror, and terror is made here, where I claim that brutality, unlike the others, does not obey the logic of the spectacle. Lastly, the concluding chapter seeks to tie these reflections together while hinting at possible ways to rethink violence in our contemporary context.