A Sense of Brutality

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A Sense of Brutality: Philosophy after Narco-Culture.

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CHAPTER 2
On Violence
OR, A PRIMER ON NARCO-VIOLENCE

Justice is in itself powerless: what rules by nature is force.

—Arthur Schopenhauer, Essays and Aphorisms

| NUMBERS |

A headline from 2020 reads, “Mexico’s Homicide Count in 2019 among Its Highest.”¹ According to the official tally, cartel-related violence was responsible for 35,588 deaths that year (a 3 percent increase from the previous year). The number itself is straightforward and easy to grasp and articulate; however, the real human dead are not. Even when we try, our understanding fails us as we seek to visualize the persons that make up the number; we “see” the idea of a dead multitude but fail at seeing the reality. Human discernment falls short at picking out the parts from the whole, so we give up the effort, and death and its numbers, along with the brutality that brings it about, are accepted as a fait accompli, and “life goes on in apparent normality.”² Clearly, a lack of a global reaction to such a number points to something more pernicious—namely, that the constant and pervasive violence that fuels narco-culture has made us all dependent on abstractions to the detriment of actual human beings.³

1. Sheridan, “Mexico’s Homicide Count.”
2. This is Ioan Grillo’s way of referring to the manner in which Mexicans react to the everyday narco-related killings. See Grillo, “Paradox of Mexico’s Mass Graves.”
3. We will consider this process of abstraction or derealization in chapter 4.
Again, the culprit of the unprecedented death is suspected to be cartel violence. In Mexico, where narco-culture is ubiquitous, this inference is quickly made and quickly accepted. The rise in murders between 2006, when Mexico’s current War on Drugs officially kicked off, and 2019 is striking. In 2006, only 2,200 murders related to cartel violence were reported. The dramatic increase seen in 2019 could mean one of three things: (1) that the current numbers are misleading and are being manipulated for politics or propaganda, (2) that the criteria for what constitutes a cartel-related death have changed so that a death attributed to an “ordinary” drug deal gone wrong is now considered “cartel related,” or (3) that cartel violence is, in fact, responsible for the deaths and that the violence is exponentially increasing year by year. Regardless of the real cause—whether political manipulation, legal policy, or cartel violence—the suspicion that the increase in deaths is cartel related is firmly justified by an all-inclusive cultural metanarrative in which politics and the laws that seek to curtail the death count are themselves responsive to a cultural modality that values extreme and lethal violence for the achievement of its own ends. That is, this metanarrative, itself legitimated by the spectacle of narcobodies piled atop of bodies and shown nightly in the mass media, hides all other possible causal influences and points the finger directly at narco-culture. The 35,588 deaths are thus consumed by the metanarrative as statistics and abstractions, which means that they cannot be visualized or mourned and that no one is responsible. This is how the dead become a number, an idea, part of the “record” or constituents of a new “record”; in this sense, the thousands of dead lack reality and, ultimately, humanity.

As the dead are idealized, the violence that derealizes them becomes commonplace and itself becomes an abstraction. A significant mechanism for the idealization and consumption of this everyday violence, and thus of the metanarrative, is the narco-cortido, a genre of music unique to narco-culture. Through the narco-cortido, the rules (the regulae) of narco-culture are disseminated, moments that have instituted the familiar violence are relived, the dead are counted and named, and narco-culture’s

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5. I borrow the notion of derealization from Judith Butler, who uses it in much the same way. See Butler, Precarious Life; and chapter 4 in this volume.
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cultural profile is strengthened and delineated with the introduction of heroes, villains, and the all-too-common brutality that serves as its horizon. It is thus imperative in our understanding of narco-culture and the narrative of violence and brutality that defines it to understand the narco-corrido as both a cultural product of narco-culture and a mechanism of ideological dissemination in the creation of that culture.

| NARCO-CORRIDOS: A VIOLENCE TOLD |
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*With one foot he pressed against his chest*
*With one hand he grabbed him by the hair*
*In his other hand he had the knife*
*He decapitated them, cut their throats*
*And next to their bodies left a message*
*That children should be respected.*

Con un pie presionaba su pecho
Con una mano le agarró el pelo
En la otra mano tenía un cuchillo
Los decapitó les cortó el cuello
Y junto a él le dejó un mensaje
Que para los niños su respeto.

—Dinastía Norteña, “La venganza del M1”

Renowned folklorist Américo Paredes defines *corridos* as “narrative folk songs, especially those of epic themes, taking their name from *correr*, which means ‘to run’ or ‘to flow,’ for the *corrido* tells a story simply and swiftly, without embellishment.” As such, the corrido lends itself to the construction of cultural memory and to the constitution of objective history itself, since it means to tell an epic story objectively, or “without

6. A more nuanced reflection on narco-corridos would involve an entire project that I am not capable of undertaking here. Much has been written on the history, nature, and influence of narco-corridos both in the culture itself and outside the culture (as a source of information for Mexicans in the US, for instance). See, for example, Ramirez-Pimienta, *Cantar a los naros*; and Wald, *Narcocorrido*.
embellishment.” To listen to a Mexican corrido is to be an active participant in the construction of memory and history; in a brief three to four minutes, one learns of a life that deserves emulation, a death that refuses to be forgotten, or a struggle fought for its own sake, unselfishly and honorably. In this act of active listening, one attends to the story, anticipating a lesson or looking for confirmation of one’s own struggle given in the “epic” theme of the corrido. The music itself—the tonality, rhythm, and temporal structure—is secondary and only helps digest what is said. What one attends to, what one waits for, are the lyrics and what these convey. To listen to a narco-corrido, which is a variation of the corrido tradition, is thus to listen to a story, to anticipate a lesson or a new experience, but one about the narco way of life, or narco-culture, and its figures, its values, and its violent history.

And so it was with anticipation for an epic story that I listened to “La venganza del M1” by Dinastía Norteña on a typical morning commute. Up to that moment, I had listened to quite a few narco-corridos over the years and learned about the exploits of some of narco-culture’s most influential heroes and antiheroes. The story flows through four verses before it arrives at the verse quoted above. The brutality of the act described shocked me; it disrupted both the temporal flow of the corrido as well as my expectation of what the story was supposed to be about. In that verse alone (and one can find many such verses in many other narco-corridos), I became acquainted for the first time with a kind of violence that seemed to be more violent than that with which I was familiar as well as with that more-than-violent violence that runs through the metanarrative of narco-culture.

The story itself is about a cartel figure known as M1 (Manuel Torres Félix), made famous by his bloodthirst and his penchant for the most brutal acts of violence—they also called him El Ondeado, which literally means “the crazy one” but is also a slang term that refers to one who has somehow “lost” his mind, who has lost his grip on reality mainly due to cocaine use and abuse. (His impressive narco-tomb is in Jardines de Humaya; see the introduction.) The corrido (one of many that tell the tale of this particular narco-figure) gives us an account of the reasons for M1’s brutality and his lack of grip on reality. According to this myth, after enemies killed his son, he vowed to make everyone associated with
his son’s murder pay with their lives. Thousands are said to have died at his own hands or by his orders. According to the narco-corridos that bear his name, many of those were decapitated, cut to pieces while alive, or tortured to death in various other gruesome ways. His unquenchable thirst for vengeance, however, was more than the emotional reaction of one subject. M1’s violent actions reaffirmed the notion that moral justifications for murder and brutality could be given in narco-culture (as irrational as they may seem to us)—justifications that likewise helped create the image of a cultural hero (or antihero), a hero embodying the qualities desired by the culture itself.

M1 was finally gunned down by the Mexican Naval Infantry Corps in October 2012—but not before placing in relief, in what we could call a preliminary fashion, the absolute brutality of narco-culture. Anecdotes from assassins and informants tell his story, but narco-corridos leave a lasting chronicle of M1’s violent tendencies. Further exposure to narco-corridos make it clear that M1 was not an isolated case, and his apparent psychopathy was not unique; rather, M1’s brutality was something like a shared cultural pathology, a cultural condition. We can thus say, in a general way, that narco-corridos depict that which is essential to narco-culture—namely, a violence that is gruesome, purposeful, and extreme and that transcends the psychology of particular individuals, ultimately resting in the structure of culture itself.

It could be said that I am putting too much weight on the narco-corrido as a source of justification for the claim that narco-culture is a violent culture. After all, it is just a song, and songs, as we know, are imaginative creations. We have already said that narco-corridos, if we put the matter abstractly (philosophically), are expressions of cultural memory, lyrically formed, and meant to transmit histories and narratives past the confines of political and social boundaries. As such, their social function is their communicative function. More specifically (less abstractly), just like corridos themselves, narco-corridos transmit stories whose epic theme is the narco form of life. But these are not made-up stories; the narco-corrido is supposed to tell a real story objectively and “without embellishment” or, barring that, a fictional story that is nonetheless reflective of the actuality.

8. This is a common belief among residents of Culiacán, Sinaloa. Personal interviews.
of narco-culture. Cesar Burgos provides the following characterization of the narco-corrido: “What is characteristic of this tradition has been to compose, narrate, and sing real histories or fictitious histories based on events that impact the sensibilities of the people.” These events, whether real or marginally based on real life, are explicitly those related to and made possible by the business of narco-trafficking. This means that the events narrated in narco-corridos are violent events that, in the process of preserving them in song, are preserved in memory and go on to serve as profiles of the culture itself. Burgos continues, “The music of narcotrafficking forms a part of a social phenomenon with profound social and historical roots that have come to configure . . . narco-culture.”

If we return to the verse quoted above, which on the surface is merely a glorification of cold-blooded vengeance, we notice the symbiotic relationship between the events themselves and the music, where the events (M1, his actions, and his form of life) constitute culture while the song justifies the events (the murder of M1’s son is given as justification for his actions or actions of the kind). We also notice that the violence exhibited by M1 toward his enemies (or the way it is described in the corrido) is of an excessive kind, yet it is an excessiveness suggested as necessary by the narco-corrido itself. It is excessive because of the way in which he decapitates his enemies—namely, with an almost intimate familiarity of the process (he does this with one hand!)—yet he acts as if the decapitation is necessary or, better yet, obligatory: the suggestion is that he goes to this extreme to uphold a rule, a regula, that one’s children are off-limits in the narco-war. This extreme yet necessary kind of violence is the material violence of narco-culture; it is, to put it a different way, a situated, contextual violence, and it asks us to question the nature and limits of our abstract notions of violence—those that define our cultural narratives and our intersubjective negotiations.

Narco-corridos thus possess a constitutive power that both codifies the history of a culture and re-creates it in the event of their transmission. As the state struggles with narco-culture and the violence that constitutes it and with its own complicity in the illegal drug trade, it has found it

necessary to outlaw narco-corridos and to do so “for the ethical protection of the youth.” This censure by the state, however, makes it more likely that narco-corridos will censure themselves less and hence be more revealing of the horrors of narco-culture’s brutal violence. And with that, their reach will be even greater and more legitimate as a source of testimony and justification.

For those of us who stand outside the cultural geography of narco-culture, narco-corridos are the most direct source of information (and belief justification) regarding the history, the figures, and the happenings of that form of life. Narco-corridos point, as cultural signposts, to a reality that stands beyond our immediate experience (as Burgos says, “The compositions capture the reality of contemporary Mexican daily life”) and invite us to approach it and “see for ourselves.” Those of us who look beyond the mythology broadcast in the narco-corrido find a reality saturated with violence, yet one that lies in plain sight in the company of other, less gruesome narratives—for instance, mid-America’s drug epidemic, the fall of this or that Mexican drug kingpin, and so on.

This is to say that beyond the dramatized violence of the narco-corrido, there is the real violence of narco-culture, a violence that is hard to grasp and even harder to articulate. While media reports attest to acts of violence on a daily basis (murders, extortions, kidnappings, dismemberments, assassinations, etc.), their pervasiveness and the excesses they communicate are not debated but met with acceptance and silence. Acapulco, which for decades was a vacation mecca for American tourists, has in the past six years ranked among the top five most violent cities in the world, so news reports of human remains scattered throughout the city, left in Styrofoam food containers or plastic bags, are unsurprising and familiar—that is, no one finds them shocking, no one asks about the who or the why, and it is prima facie assumed that this is narco-culture. The realities of this culture are thus real and excessive. Narco-violence is a hyperviolence—a violence that, while articulated in the conceptual register of violence itself, is more than violent. It is a kind of violence that overflows

13. “Descuartizan a dos hombre en Acapulco.”
its concept. In the next chapter, I make a case for calling this type of violence brutality. In order to make the case that brutality is more than violence, however, we must first consider the concept of violence itself.

**CONCEPTIONS OF VIOLENCE**

The pervasive and excessive violence recounted in narco-corridos refers to a real, situated human crisis. It is, moreover, a crisis that demands our attention, one that demands a response. It is not enough to point out the violence, to call it out; something must be said that sheds light on the crisis—on the why of a violence that is so excessive, it challenges the very limits of understanding. We are interrogated: Is the violence necessary? Is it senseless? Is there ever a reason for violence? If there are reasons for violence, can these reasons ever be philosophically justified? More importantly, and regardless of its reasons or justifications, what do we mean when we speak of violence?

The present chapter attempts to answer all these questions but particularly the last: To what does the concept of violence refer? Or, simply, what are those experiences to which this concept could refer so that we could say that our concept is fulfilled by a certain experience? In a general sense, violence will be understood either abstractly (the content that will fulfill the concept will be abstract) or materially (the content will be some fact or activity in the world). In the former case, we consider violence in its definition, as how it should be understood—I will refer to this conception of violence as its analytical conception. In the latter case, we consider violence in its givenness, in virtue of how it is experienced or the role it plays in human intersubjective relations—I will refer to this conception of violence as its material conception. In terms of its analytical conception, violence is thought of in terms of force or aggression. In terms of its material conception, violence is understood as either instrumental or phenomenological. Instrumental conceptions of violence are found in the works of those thinkers who conceive of violence in instrumental terms, such as Georges Sorel, Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Hannah Arendt. We locate the phenomenological conceptions of violence, on the other hand, in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Because the analytical view simply clarifies the concept itself, I will begin with that
account. I will then discuss some instrumental views, and we will con-
clude the chapter by looking at the phenomenological view of Emmanuel
Levinas, claiming that Levinas’s conception holds promise for a deeper
understanding of the violence of narco-culture—one that hints at what
we mean when we speak of excessive or unnecessary violence.

Analytical Conceptions of Violence
The philosophy and sociology of violence are rich and their bibliographies
extensive. I will not attempt to consolidate all or even most of the views
on violence that have emerged in the long history of its study. My aim
is modest: to settle on a philosophical articulation of violence that reveals
violence as a horizon for the possibility of other acts that distinguish
themselves both conceptually and materially from it—that is, acts that
by being more than violent are other than violence.

What we may call the analytic conception of violence associates it with
excessive force against another, against nature, against oneself, against
text and ideas, and so on. We are said to use too much force when open-
ing a door that slams against the wall; it is thought that we “opened the
door violently.” Alternatively, we are said to use excessive force when
throwing a person from a ten-story building; we are said to have thrown
the person “violently” to his or her death. (Consider the act of shov-
ing a person from a ten-story building without much force, in which
case it is not said that the person was “violently” shoved even if the final
result was a violent death.) Indeed, force is in the etymology of the Latin
violentia—vis, “force,” and latus, “to take” or “to carry”—so that violence
in its literal sense means “to carry out force,” or to deploy force. In the
context of politics or justice, where rights and obligations are at stake,
harm is added to the definition. Thus we find violence defined in a con-
temporary dictionary of justice as “an action of exercising force against
something or someone producing harm.”

We accept this definition: violence is force that causes harm. It is
important to ask what we mean by harm. In a practical sense, harm is injury
or damage—physical or mental or even symbolic. We harm someone or
something when we damage them or it in some way. We can damage

or injure something or someone gently, with minimal force, so that the violence inflicted seems barely noticeable. A mother speaking under her breath about her daughter’s bad choices is damaging; the force that caused the damage, minimal. Or we can cause damage or injury with maximum force so that we all agree that the injury was violent. We think of a violent car crash or a decapitation. Hence violence is measured in degrees of force and injury. In the social sphere—the world of intersubjective negotiations, agreements, and sanctions—the greater the degree of force and injury, the more significant the violence and the more we speak about it, idealize it, and allow it to play a role in personal, cultural, and political matters.

Defined in this way, any act of force that produces any type of harm is violent. Thus my act of walking past a rose bush is violent if the wind produced by my stride forces a petal off a rose, thus harming the integrity of the rose. Similarly, my act of interpreting a Bible verse will be violent if I insist on (force) a certain meaning that injures your biblical sensibilities, your moral stance, or your life choices. Or if in interrupting you as you speak I hurt your sense of self-worth, then my act of interruption is violent. There is also the violence of aggression against ourselves or others; the violence of paradigm shifts, of new technological discoveries; and the violence of self-transformation—that is, of processes that transform history, the world, or ourselves into something new.

Regarding the violence of self-transformation, Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, speaks of the violence inherent in males’ social education. Beginning in puberty, she writes, boys are given a “real apprenticeship in violence.”15 As they grow into adulthood, violence becomes a means to assert power, a means for self-affirmation:

In the adult world, no doubt, brute force . . . haunts that world . . . for a man to feel in his fists his will to self-affirmation is enough to reassure him of his sovereignty. Against any insult, any attempt to reduce him

15. De Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, p. 308. Written halfway through the twentieth century, this observation does not cease to be true. In the context that currently has our attention, narco-culture, this is indeed the case. But in narco-culture, we could go further and say that the apprenticeship in violence begins much earlier; it begins soon after birth in stories of brutality and death that invade the home from all sides—for example, through music, folklore, and everyday chatter.
to the status of object, the male has recourse to his fists, to exposure of himself to blows: he does not let himself be transcended by others, he is himself at the heart of his subjectivity. Violence is the authentic proof of man’s loyalty to himself, to his passions, to his own will; radically to deny this will is to deny oneself any objective truth, it is to wall oneself in an abstract subjectivity. . . . It is a profound frustration not to be able to register one’s feelings upon the face of the world.  

Thus violence is the way to authentic being, a way for a man to keep from being demeaned and humiliated into less-than being, into an object. The right to violence is identified with the right to exist, the right to be a subject. To deny man his right to violence is to dehumanize him or, as Judith Butler will say, to derealize him, as it is to “wall oneself in an abstract subjectivity.” Of course, in both de Beauvoir and, later, Butler, this strategy of self-preservation is reserved for men in a male-centered world, where women, children, gays, lesbians, and minorities do not have recourse to violence as a strategy for self-affirmation or even for survival—where to “wall oneself in an abstract subjectivity” is a decision made on one’s behalf and not an autonomous choice. The violence of self-preservation and self-transformation is harmful, always, to someone.

The point is that in the analytical conception of violence, violence is the causing of harm through force. We thus call “violent” any act that seems to intentionally seek to injure, corrupt, or harm. Some of these acts that cause harm through force are explicit (e.g., stabbing someone to death), while others are invisible to the perceptive understanding (e.g., racial or sexual discrimination). In his *On Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Slavoj Žižek calls the violence that we see “subjective” and the “most visible” kind of violence.  

There are other kinds of violence to which we attend in what follows—namely, the “subtle” or “symbolic” kinds of violence that are not directly visible, or what others conceive as instrumental, political, ideological, and ontological.

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Instrumental Conceptions of Violence

In its philosophical historiography, the analytical conception of violence is usually thought to entail its instrumentality—its usefulness as a means for the achievement of certain personal, social, political, or historical ends. For the most part, these ends are usually political, and so philosophers of violence maintain a certain generality in their philosophical pronouncements, speaking broadly about violence as a permanent condition of human sociality and about politics as the ways in which to deploy, control, or confront it.

Benjamin and Sorel

Famous among these reflections are Walter Benjamin’s in his “Critique of Violence,” where he writes,

All violence as a means is either law-making or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, it forfeits all validity. It follows, however, that all violence as a means, even in the most favorable case, is implicated in the problematic nature of law itself.18

While Benjamin goes on to argue against any sort of moral justification for violence, since it is always a manifestation of power and not of justice, he concedes that violence is actually necessary for the making or preservation of human laws. To make or preserve laws requires power, and power is, of necessity, violent.

In a more abstract yet still instrumental way, violence is thought to play a role in the movement of history itself; paradigm shifts and dialectical movements come about with the violent irruption of an established order, with the replacement of that order (its overcoming) with a new order, and this process is anything but comfortable. Thus G. W. Hegel’s dialectic is violent, and so is Karl Marx’s as well as Friedrich Engel’s materialist interpretation of the same. However, we see it most clearly in Georges Sorel, who situates violence at the center of the class struggle. For Sorel, “violence has the additional effect of stimulating the class consciousness of the workers, of bringing vividly before them their sublime

mission in history and, as a result, of incorporating their aspirations in the idea of the general strike.” On this account, violence plays a revelatory role, one that brings about class consciousness. But this is perhaps too soft a characterization of Sorel’s vision. I say too soft because in his own “Reflections on Violence,” Sorel seems to suggest that violence is nothing more than a weapon—an instrument at the disposal of the proletariat for the inevitable confrontation with “the middle-class corrupters” who have ruined society and its morals. He concludes his reflection in the following dramatic way:

I have accomplished the task which I imposed upon myself; I have, in fact, established that proletarian violence has an entirely different significance from that attributed to it by superficial scholars and by politicians. In the total ruin of institutions and of morals there remains something which is powerful, new, and intact, and it is that which constitutes, properly speaking, the soul of the revolutionary proletariat. Nor will this be swept away in the general decadence of moral values, if the workers have enough energy to bar the road to the middle-class corrupters, answering their advances with the plainest brutality.

Sorel’s notion of “plainest brutality” here means real, physical force intended to cause harm that, if it causes enough harm, stops the advance of the “class corrupters.” Violence, for Sorel, is thus necessary for the success of the struggle. The self-revelations that might go along with the exercise of the plainest brutality are secondary to the bashing of heads and the hoped-for victory. Sorel’s political consideration of violence thus sees violence as a tool—one necessary for the movement of history or, better yet, for the liberation of the oppressed.

Fanon, Sartre, and Arendt
Violence as instrumental is easy to grasp. We only have to think of how violence or the threat of violence kept us in our place as children. The fear of my father’s violence was prohibitive and, I later realized, formative.

A more radical view of instrumental violence is found in Frantz Fanon. In Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), we get a view of violence as emancipatory. As for Sorel, for Fanon, violence is a form of “mediation,” a necessary step in overcoming oppressive or colonizing conditions. The violence of rebellion—of resistance, of protest—is necessary work for this cause. As Fanon writes, “For the colonized, this violence represents the absolute praxis. . . . Violence can thus be understood to be the perfect mediation. The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence.”21 Put differently, participation in violence is a *means* to detach oneself from conditions of colonization. With a violent act, I am no longer adhering to the rules of my oppression; I am *other* to it, and I am also *the same* with those with whom I participate in violent struggle. Fanon gives us the example of revolutionary groups forcing their members to minimally participate in an “irreversible act” as a form of initiation and, in a more important sense, solidarity. Once a violent act is committed in common—say, killing another—there is no turning back, no way to “rejoin the colonized system” because “everyone was thus personally responsible for the death of the victim.”22 Thus, Fanon writes, “the violence of the colonized . . . unifies people.”23

This notion of violence as a necessary step in the process of liberation or as unifying that we find in both Sorel and Fanon makes sense in non-revolutionary contexts as well. Narco-soldiers, for whom participation in the violence of the narco form of life is a way *out of* poverty and social marginalization, will certainly see their violence as liberating and unifying; in doing a brutal, otherwise unspeakable deed, that is, they constitute themselves as trusted members of the group (the cartel), unified in solidarity. Of course, this kind of unifying and liberating violence does not make sense in *every* context, nor does it always make sense in those contexts in which it makes sense *sometimes*. Later I will claim that certain acts of “senseless” brutality (for instance, the murdering of an entire family so as to send a message regarding territory or trafficking routes) have no liberating or unifying qualities.

21. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 44.
22. Fanon, p. 44.
23. Fanon, p. 51.
Jean-Paul Sartre, in his introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth*, endorses Fanon’s view of violence. He writes that Fanon “shows perfectly clearly that . . . irrepressible violence is neither a storm in a teacup nor the reemergence of savage instincts nor even a consequence of resentment: it is man recreating himself.”

Sartre’s interpretation of violence here is simply that in colonized settings, violence allows the colonized to recover her identity, to assert her humanity, and to reconstruct herself. The question that arises, however, is how much violence is enough for the recreation or reconstruction to be complete. It seems that the construction of subjectivity itself is endless and complex, involving the prior construction of community and world; thus it would seem that the reconstruction of subjects through violence would be equally endless. Violence would then be a permanent state of existence, as one is in a perpetual process of self-reconstruction that ends only in death.

This is what Hannah Arendt criticized in Sartre’s endorsement of Fanon’s notion of violence in *On Violence*. While Arendt does agree with Fanon’s interpretation of violence as instrumental, as a means to an end, she does not see why it must be necessary for the reconstruction of man. She considers Sartre’s Hegelian-Marxist roots. Hegel, she argues, proposes that persons “produce” themselves through thought, while Marx believes the same occurs through labor, and both thought and labor express a certain “rebellion against the very factuality of the human condition,” which may be perceived as violent. Nonetheless, she concludes, “a gulf separates the essentially peaceful activities of thinking and laboring from all deeds of violence.”

In this context, Arendt sets out to clarify the notion of violence once and for all. In general, she challenges the popular conceptions of violence that either propose violence as a necessary step for the development of the human person or seem to conflate violence with legitimacy, state power, authority, or strength.

According to a popular conception, “Violence is nothing more than the most flagrant manifestation of power.” Again, that violence is one of the ways in which power is expressed ignores the fact that many violent

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24. Fanon, p. lv.
27. Arendt, p. 35.
acts do not relate to power at all. For instance, the violence of an accident says nothing of power, and yet the accident is still a violent event. What ultimately distinguishes power from violence, according to Arendt, is that “power stands in need of numbers, whereas violence up to a point can manage without them because it relies on implements.” In this sense, the 35,588 deaths resulting from cartel-related violence in Mexico in 2019 serve power. However, what Arendt herself cannot account for is that the number also serves violence, since it makes the quantity of dead acceptable (or digestible) by being abstract. This social definition of power asserts that power manifests itself as a unity of subjectivities that come together to exert their will “in concert,” while violence does not require any such unity or concert, since its “instrumental character” means that any individual (alone) can exercise it.

Arendt agrees with Sorel and Sartre: violence is thus always a means to an end. This also means that on its own, violence cannot legitimize anything; as a means, it requires a justification for itself and so cannot be a justification for something else. As Arendt writes, “Like all means, [violence] always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues.” We are mistaken, therefore, to think that violence will legitimize power or justify strength, since, in essence, it can do neither. Power, on the other hand, can justify violence, which proves one of Arendt’s points—namely, that violence and power are not the same.

Arendt’s instrumental definition of violence shows that violence is usually unnecessary for the attainment of ends that are constructive, or positive, as philosophers like Sartre have insisted. It cannot justify its ends, whatever they may be; what it can do, and what it does, is perpetuate itself in ways that destroy ends, such as power, strength, unity, community, and so on. Arendt writes, “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world.” This has been the case in Mexico’s fight with narco-criminality. The state,

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29. Arendt, p. 44.
30. Arendt, p. 46.
32. Arendt, p. 80.
in its effort to quell the rise in violent deaths, resorts to violent means, continuing a self-perpetuating cycle that is seemingly endless. Journalist Javier Valdez Cárdenas, himself murdered in 2017 by cartel hit men, put it thus: “I believe that the violence, what we call narco-violence, will continue. . . . [The federal government] will only provoke more dead, more violence, and more of our common fear as a form of life.” 33 In Mexico, that is, the “violent world” that Arendt fears is destined to become a “form of life” due to what Cárdenas recognized as the self-generating nature of violence.

We thus return to the Sartre-inspired question posed above: How much violence is enough to reproduce the human being? The answer is that no amount of violence will be enough to reproduce or reconstruct the human being because while violence will simply reproduce itself perpetually, humankind’s insatiable appetite will hunger for another, more fulfilling reconstruction.

| PHENOMENOLOGICAL ENTRYWAYS |

As we saw with the analytical conception of violence, violence is thought to be any force that causes harm. The instrumental conception takes this a step further and suggests that violence is any force that causes harm that also has some utility or lends itself to some end. There is also what I am calling a phenomenological conception of violence, where the emphasis is not on violence as force or violence as utility but on the radical or originary experience of violence as interruption, interference, suspension, and so on—that is, any experience of a radical discontinuity or change. In this conception, violence is usually framed as a generic state of our being—as a permanent state of human existence, of being itself—in which what there is is always under threat of interruption, modification, sublation, and so on. Because of its originary, existential nature, violence characterizes our radical, most intimate, pretheoretical experience of the world; it marks our language, our silence, our reading, our writing, our social interactions, the flutter of a butterfly’s wings, and so on. In this phenomenological sense, violence is always present, always potential, always possible.
characterization, violence cannot be appropriated as an instrument, nor can it be evaluated through normative metrics. In this view, violence is the world in flux—what happens, how it happens—and it gives itself in interruption, interference, intervention, interpretation, and so on, all generally conceived, so that the water coming out of a showerhead is violent as it speeds out of the nozzle with its own (nonethical) force and aggressiveness. Similarly, an intense glance is violent when it appears overly hard or penetrating, and so on.

We can thus talk about a spectrum of violence, one where on one extreme, we have a violent armed conflict; on the other, the bad interpretation of a good poem (or the good interpretation of a bad poem). This spectrum can be said to constitute the limits of the concept of violence itself. We can also say that the spectrum is the horizon of violence. From the point of view of the violence horizon, we can make sense of the myriad ways in which violence manifests itself in everyday life. Real, material, and visceral acts of violence—those that inflict suffering, death, and destruction on persons or communities—find their fit within this spectrum or horizon; likewise, ideas of violence that characterize it as redeeming and constitutive of subjectivity (Sorel’s, for instance) can also be found in this horizon.

This horizon or spectrum of violence also contains idealizations of violence, or violence in the abstract, even though it is harder to see how violence in the abstract fits into the spectrum. If we look at violence in the abstract—for instance, violence as a break in the continuity of being—we are unable to grasp it without an attendant image of what it is that is being “broken,” what continuity is being interrupted, or how being is changed as a result. This suggests that violence in the abstract does not give itself in itself. It is difficult (or impossible) to attend to violence on its own, abstracted or ripped from its particularity—that is, from those events that mark its particular occurrence so as to be left with violence in its “pure” form. In its pure form, violence simply conforms to its definition (the analytic conception) and is merely a concept signifying force without its normative (ethical or moral) dimension (viz., force that harms). As a concept, it can then be applied to a disruptive, interrupting force inherent in any act that awakens or provokes, such as reading, writing, linguistic
On Violence

In this abstracted state, violence is merely a predicate—something we can attribute to something else but not a phenomenon that gives itself without content.

As we raise violence to this level of abstraction, it becomes mysteriously spectral. We cannot see it itself, although we can see it attached to some other event (for instance, we see the violence in the mutilated body but not without it). James Dodd notes that “in all cases,” violence “eludes our grasp—whether as empty, impossible to accept or a foregone conclusion.” Thus a proper phenomenological—or even a proper philosophical—account of violence will be limited by the way in which violence gives itself so that the “act” in the “violent act” will necessarily obscure a clear intuition of what makes it violent. Dodd writes,

> The problematic sense of violence straddles, in a fluid and anarchic way, the divide between sense and non-sense, between clarity and obscurity; it is thus not simply a question of cause and effect, of where violence comes from and where it is going, but how violence manifests itself within a human situation or world.

In other words, the problem is that violence does not give itself straightforwardly (as, for instance, an object or an event can); furthermore, it cannot be isolated from its social (and thus historical) situation, which means it cannot be an object of something like a phenomenological epoché, which could let us see it in its abstractness. To grasp the sense of violence, one is forced to consider it together with the complex in which it is given or the acts that give it. Dodd concludes, “To a great extent violence is marked by a peculiar refusal of phenomenality itself.”

I partially agree with Dodd that violence refuses phenomenality. If violence does refuse phenomenality, or givenness, it is not because it lacks it.

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34. See, for instance, Pagès, “Fenomenología, violencia, y deconstrucción.”
35. See, for example, the important volume by Thompson and Embree, *Phenomenology and the Political*.
37. Dodd, p. 15.
38. Dodd, p. 16 (my emphasis).
It refuses phenomenality only because it need not give it. In my view, it is not so much that violence refuses phenomenality as it is the case that its methods are oversaturated with givenness. When our attention turns to violence, we are focused not on violence itself but on the ways or methods whereby the act or event is violent. In other words, we turn to the events in which violence appears and then make judgments about the event’s place in the violence horizon or spectrum. Thus rather than violence refusing its own phenomenality or givenness, it is we, in the processes of our intentionality, who are incapable of seeing it.

As such, we grasp violence in its aftermath, in its chaos, in its interventions, in its intensity, or in its intentionality. We grasp violence not in itself but always already in those events or occurrences that interrupt our focus or intervene with the flow of consciousness in daily life. Moreover, we judge the violence of those events or occurrences within the spectrum or horizon of violence outlined above; we judge violence within the limits of its concept. We are then at a loss when an act presents itself as overly saturated with violence, as overflowing its concept, or as breaking out of the spectrum or horizon. It is this violence that, as more-than-violence, is no longer violence, which I call brutality. Although its appearance emerges from a horizon of violence, as we understand it or fail to understand it in and of itself, brutality is not identical to violence. It is more than that. Brutality is what we grasp without understanding but cannot “see” when we announce the excessiveness of violence; brutality is what we fear but of which we cannot speak when a violent act shocks us and leaves us without words. In this sense, violence is the confrontation between cartel assassins and the state police that leaves countless dead; brutality is the decapitation of a father and the disembowelment of his family that preceded it—that which has us saying, “This is too much.” While violence remains but a concept that points to the force of interruption, intervention, and dislocation, brutality as a concept tries to capture something more—that is, the shock, the disbelief, the unsayability, or the excess violence of decapitation, of dismemberment, or of the “unthinkable” destruction of the human being.
On Violence

A persistent claim of this book is that the horizon or the spectrum of violence cannot contain the reality of brutality. Underlying this claim is the view that violence is one thing and brutality another; violence is internal to the permanent field of being, while brutality is an emergence, something more than violence. This is because whether one subscribes to the instrumental or the noninstrumental view of violence, there is a sense in which violence is thought to be necessary and omnipresent, which accounts for us having a spectrum or a horizon of violence in the first place. However, why say that violence is necessary or pervasive? And how does it become something else?

Emmanuel Levinas’s phenomenology helps us approach these questions. Levinas’s phenomenological ethics begins with a critique of traditional conceptions of philosophy in which “Reason” is given sovereignty over all things human, a move that leads ultimately to a leveling of difference and a promotion of similarities (“sameness”) for the sake of rational calculation and effective understanding of human conduct (i.e., knowledge). Ultimately, the hegemony of the “Rational” imposes itself on human sociality in the form of politics, whose end is the administration of war. Levinas writes, “The art of foreseeing war and winning it by any and every means—politics—is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naïveté.”

In building toward his phenomenological ethics, Levinas begins with the insight that the moment when an existent (self-consciousness) emerges from the anonymity of being (what he calls the “there is,” or the il y a) is a moment of originary violence. “Consciousness,” he says in *Time and the Other*, “is a rupture of the anonymous vigilance of the there is.” In other words, the appearance of self-awareness from the general, “impersonal ‘field of forces’ of existence” or from the “murmur of silence”—or as Edith Wyschogrod describes it, the “premataphysical unity” of thought and being—is a moment of primordial violence. This

39. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.
40. Levinas, p. 21.
42. Levinas, p. 46.
rupture disrupts, disturbs, interrupts, displaces, and dislocates; it is thus a necessary violence required for there to be an “I” that will ultimately have to reckon with “an other.”

The reckoning of one with an other will necessarily involve this originary violence. The confrontation and subsequent struggle of consciousnesses midway through Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* show that a basic demand for recognition can necessitate some sort of violent conflict. For Levinas, the appearance of the third consciousness, or the third person, creates even more demands and more conflicts. Thus the appearance of the third, he says, is the origin for the need for justice; it is the “hour” to set the rules of the encounter in an effort to protect the vulnerable and the naked. Furthermore, this is the moment for a philosophical gesture, which in its description will reveal that vulnerability and that nakedness; it will be a phenomenology that matters, since the nakedness and vulnerability in which the other appears are already “an exposure unto death.”

The violence present at the moment of the I’s or “Ego’s” emergence out of the *anonymous field of forces of existence* persists through the death of another by my hands or the hands of a neighbor; this is what we call murder. Murder is already a possibility for an Ego who is always already for another or, as Levinas says, the “hostage of the other person.”

The other—as vulnerable, as separated, as difference—is, Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity*, “the sole being I can wish to kill.”

Why the wish to kill the other? I wish to kill the other because his separation from me makes him an enigma, an unknown that escapes my comprehension; killing the other reduces him to an intelligible datum—a “sensible datum”—that I can digest or “neutralize.” Levinas writes, “To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate: it is to renounce comprehension absolutely.” Thus murder is the absolute manifestation of a will to ignorance, the final surrender of epistemological lust. If the other cannot be known, then he must be killed. Thus violence negates the other’s separation, it annuls her independence from my gaze and my reach, and it

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44. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 106.
45. Levinas, p. 107.
46. Levinas, p. 107.
47. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 198.
does so by acts directed not at her humanity but at her eternal difference. Levinas concludes, “Murder alone lays claim to total negation.”

In this way, murder is an extreme and final act of comprehension (or totalization or subjection) after the possibilities of the encounter are exhausted. Murder is on the extremity of the spectrum. The violence that precedes murder takes the form of suppression or oppression or marginalization. Levinas says,

Violence itself does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action.

Violence, in other words, is coercive and, through this process of coercion, constitutive. It is not constitutive in the Sorelian or Sartrean sense that it brings about a consciousness of an individual’s own subjectivity (re-creating); rather, it is constitutive in the negative sense that it transforms persons into inauthentic representations of themselves (it is, in this sense, dehumanizing). The violence that precedes murder interrupts the continuity of persons—their living experience, their future, and their projects. The interruption (violence itself) suddenly limits the possibilities of fulfillment, thus “making them play roles”—being what they are not and what they are not supposed to be.

Violence is thus an originary interruption. We return again to the vagueness of the term, since we could say, alternatively, that all interruptions are violent. Thus the interruption of the speaker by a heckler is violent if the speaker is now forced to change her speech, deflect, defend, and address what she did not plan on addressing; she has betrayed her commitment and must now risk losing the point of her speech. Similarly, the interruption of my sleep by a loud noise is violent precisely because the continuity of my slumber was suddenly disrupted.

49. Levinas, p. 198.
50. Levinas, p. 21.
Violence turns out to be a fundamental relational characteristic of human sociality. Violence is the horizon of the social. In this horizon, we find the necessary violence of discourse and the transformative interruptions that redirect one’s life as well as those that end it: murder, death. “In death,” Levinas writes with poetic beauty, “I am exposed to absolute violence, to murder in the night.”51 It is “murder in the night” because death comes from nowhere (it is “absolutely unforeseeable”52) and brings about an interruption that prohibits all continuity, any chance of assuming a new role or a new vital project. And although we believe that death will come on its own and on its own time, the other (the other person) represents she who can bring it about either now or in the future. Hence “the violence of death threatens as tyranny through proceeding for a foreign will”53—namely, the will of another.

This other—who is absolutely unknowable, ungraspable, and incomprehensible—is also my greatest threat, as she is the one who can kill me. This other is the constant representation of my possible death. Experiencing the other as the possibility of my own death means that I am also the other’s possible death; I am also a threat. This immediate experience of threat, of fear of otherness, points to a vulnerability at the heart of human sociality where both agents are apprehensive of each other. Levinas says, “Murder, at the origin of death, reveals a cruel world, but one to the scale of human relations,”54 which means simply that human relations are intrinsically cruel (or brutal, as I will claim).

From Phenomenology to a Philosophy of Narco-Violence

In narco-culture, the repetition and omnipresence of murders and assassinations could serve as the material for a phenomenology of cruelty such as we find in Levinas. The omnipresence of death certainly points to an essential vulnerability at the heart of human relations that could be revealed by such a study. Levinas himself describes this vulnerability as the “essential mortality of the will”55—an essential being-toward-death

51. Levinas, p. 233.
52. Levinas, p. 235.
53. Levinas, p. 234.
54. Levinas, p. 236.
that exposes human interiority to “seduction, propaganda, and torture.”\textsuperscript{56} That is, our will, our interior self, thinks itself immortal and incorruptible by virtue of its power to transcend immediacy, but as it succumbs to exterior influences, it is reduced to a “force of nature, absolutely tractable . . . exposed to influences”\textsuperscript{57}—to a penetrable thing that can be destroyed, erased, or brutally murdered. Our vulnerability is thus due to the confluence of a false conception we have of ourselves as permanent and incorruptible (our will, we think, is immortal) and the fact that our will can be, and often is, influenced, grasped, and submissive. Levinas says that “the will remains on this moving limit between inviolability and degeneration.”\textsuperscript{58} Moreover, so long as the will is on this limit, it poses a threat to other wills (other interiorities) by virtue of its vulnerability, as it thinks of everything as a threat and seeks to protect itself through a similar kind of violence as that which it thinks will be inflicted upon it.

Violence thus becomes necessary for an Ego that in the vulnerability of its exposed being seeks to guard itself from murder. Echoing Levinas, Judith Butler offers us an opportunity to transition from the account of originary violence we find in Levinas to that of narco-brutality we are seeking to highlight here. Butler writes,

\begin{quote}
To the extent that we commit violence, we are acting on another, putting the other at risk, causing the other damage, threatening to expunge the other. . . . This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defense are limited.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

Similar to Levinas, Butler conceives of violence as essentially related to the other—to “acting on another.” There is a recognition in her account of the corresponding relation between vulnerability and violence: the more vulnerable one is, the more one seeks to protect oneself and thus engage in preemptive violence or the easier it is for one to be reduced to an object, dehumanized, and murdered. This is because, as Levinas writes,

\textsuperscript{56} Levinas, p. 237.
\textsuperscript{57} Levinas, p. 237.
\textsuperscript{58} Levinas, p. 237.
\textsuperscript{59} Butler, \textit{Precarious Life}, p. 29.
“murder still aims at a sensible datum, and yet it finds itself before the datum whose being cannot be suspended by an appropriation. It finds itself before a datum absolutely non-neutralizable.” Moreover, Butler notes, the necessity to neutralize the other human being, to reduce him to a “sensible datum,” is a necessity in those cultural, historical, social, or political conditions where “violence is a way of life”—for instance, in narco-culture.

Narco-culture, in its material structure—one constituted by a politics and economics of competition and excess—is thus that form of life where the other can be reduced to an object, where killing him is legitimated under its own rules. Allowing the other to be more than a “sensible datum” would imply a recognition and acceptance of one’s own moral obligations to that other, a recognition that has no place in a culture of violence where the goal is the conspicuous consumption of resources, be they money or people. Narco-culture is a culture of killing—a culture where, as Levinas writes, “to kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely.” Because only the human other frustrates me in this way—that is, in his refusal to allow me to know him absolutely or know his intentions—he is the only one who poses a real risk (as competition) to my independence and threatens my vulnerability. Thus, Levinas says, “the other is the sole being I can wish to kill.”

This “wish to kill” is reflected in the hundreds of thousands of narco-related deaths in Mexico. We can certainly read these deaths as resulting from the frustrated attempt by some to have others bend to their will—a frustration that ends either by calling those that do not bend “enemies” or by seeking to annihilate them by any means necessary. As Butler puts it,

Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way

60. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 198.
61. Levinas, p. 198.
62. As opposed to say, an animal, whose dissection, DNA testing, and so on will offer all the knowledge I wish to have of it.
in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another.\textsuperscript{64}

The wish to kill can achieve cultural normalcy when, in a culture in which violence is a way of life, the “willful action” of others seeks but fails to completely subjugate the other. There, killing appears as the \textit{only} option.

The wish to kill has achieved cultural normalcy in the cultural modality under discussion here. As Alondra Aguilar writes, “The people that are part of narco-culture demonstrate an attitude of predominance, of feeling owners of everything that surrounds them (including people) and that, in a way that is dangerous to social coexistence.”\textsuperscript{65} Ultimately, the illegal foundation (economic as well as political) on which narco-culture rests, both locally and internationally, justifies the wish to kill and the attitude of predominance that is necessary for personal survival. However, if the juridical apparatus of the state is incapable of combating these wishes and attitudes that necessitate brutality, then society is bound to revert to an absolute chaos, a state of war of all against all.

What we get from the phenomenological account of Levinas (and later Butler) is merely an interpretation of violence, cruelty, and brutality as essential characteristics of human coexistence—characteristics that both ethics and law aim to control and overcome, a generally successful attempt. When it comes to narco-culture, understood as a cultural phenomenon that inverts the value of justice and morality, any phenomenological observation is merely a “distanciation” (as Paul Ricoeur would say in regard to interpretation\textsuperscript{66}) whereby the reality of narco-culture is underdetermined by its phenomenality.

\textbf{“ESTO NO ES UNA ENFERMEDAD; ES VIOLENCIA”}

A popular phrase that appears in several songs by artists of the narco-corrido genre tells us that the happenings of narco-culture are not symptoms of a social affliction or a societal disease; the happenings are simply

\textsuperscript{64} Butler, \textit{Precarious Life}, pp. 27–28.
\textsuperscript{65} Aguilar, “Una peligrosa admiración.”
\textsuperscript{66} Ricoeur, \textit{Interpretation Theory}. 
the happenings of an accepted violence. The popular group Voz de Mando interrupts one of their songs and tells us, “And remember, this is not a sickness; this is violence” (Y recuerden, esto no es una enfermedad; es violencia). With this, the poets of the culture remind us that violence is a permanent condition of that particular culture, that it is what defines it. Violence is not a symptom of something else (no es una enfermedad); it is the culture itself (es violencia).

Hence the attempt has been made in this chapter to consider how previous conceptions of violence might fit into our reflections of narco-culture. As we have seen, an effective philosophical analysis of narco-culture must quickly turn to the tools and methodologies, theories and thinkers in political philosophy—for example, Hannah Arendt and Frantz Fanon. We propose, however, that while social and political theorists will craft an analysis in which the breakdown of either common-sense rationality or the political itself is mainly to blame for the rise of those regimes of necro- and narco-power that have established themselves as cultural markers in places such as Mexico, Central America, and Colombia, these accounts will leave out the subtle (yet most concrete) ways in which these regimes normalize the dehumanization of human life through justified cultural practices of (extreme and unspeakable) violence toward the other.

Narco-culture is complex, as is the violence that defines it. Vittoria Bòrso considers it a culture of extremes, referring to the “bipolarity of narcoculture.” At one pole, she notes, are culture and those productions that constitute culture in general (music, film, literature, fashion, religion, etc.); at the other pole, however, we have what Bòrso, following Roberto Esposito, calls “the regime of thanatological power for those for whom life is mere ‘material,’ bare life in the sense of Agamben, material that can be annihilated without this act entering the sphere of the punishable.” It is this second pole of the bifurcation that demands the philosophical intervention that I am attempting here. It is the exercise of “thanatological power” with impunity that calls on our moral conscience to intervene, and it is the treatment of others as “mere ‘material,’” as faceless matter,
that challenges our humanity. The regime of thanatological power that underlies narco-culture is more than a violent regime, more than a regime that authorizes death and cruelty; it is a regime of brutality. In the following chapter, I will make these distinctions more explicit.

Reflecting on narco-culture, we see that the circularity of violence envisioned by Arendt and predicted by Cárdenas has come to pass. In that context, violence gives way to violence, and more violence gives way to more violence, and so on. How can we explain this? One way to do so is to focus on what violence accomplishes, on its materiality or instrumentality, as Arendt and Fanon show. Another more abstract and philosophical way is to determine the extent to which violence is a response to a basic human vulnerability exposed in our primordial being-with-others—to ask, What does violence do to our very humanity? That is the question of chapter 4. For now, we think along the lines suggested by the narco-corridos—namely, that violence defines the form of life that is narco-culture or, as we put it above, that violence is the horizon in which narco-culture fulfills its possibilities. Violence as horizon or as predicate, however, fails to capture the realities that those same narco-corridos describe—that is, narco-violence in its own way transcends violence as force, violence as interruption, and violence as instrument and rests in the unimaginable, the unspeakable, and the unthinkable.

We are no longer talking about violence as we know it or fail to know it; we are talking about brutality.