The spectacle of cartel violence shocks and horrifies. Our moral conscience protests but is impotent before the sheer number of dead and missing—a number that rises year by year as we enter the second decade of what the Wall Street Journal called a “Crisis of Civilization.”1 By 2018, that number rose to more than 250,000 dead and over 34,000 missing since 2006; midway through 2019, “Mexico set a record for homicides, with 17,608. . . . The country of almost 125 million now has as many as 100 killings a day nationwide.”2 These numbers stupefy and, in so doing, succeed in hiding the real human cost—the concrete dead. That is, obstructed by the tally, there are real flesh-and-bone human beings derealized, de-faced, and dehumanized by the numbers themselves or, better yet, by the counting. While the counting of the dead and missing may seem innocent and necessary for the sake of political accountability, it is required by a logic of brutality that demands the normalization of its own rituals and the passivity of its accountants, who look not at the atrocities and the ruin that these numbers represent globally and to the human community but at the culture that allows it—at Mexico, at narco-culture.

This book has proposed a philosophical intervention into the culture, its logic, and its rituals. From our reflections, several conclusions can be drawn that seek to make sense of the violence and the brutality of narco-culture.

1. Narco-culture is culture, pure and simple. It has an economic substructure (the business of narcotics trafficking) and an ontological base

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1. Cordoba and Montes, “It’s a Crisis of Civilization.”
A Sense of Brutality

(a form of being—namely, the way of brutality) upon which a form of life is established that produces music, art, literature, religion, and other constructions considered to be real cultural contributions. One may ask, Why is it important to think of narco-culture as culture? The answer has to do with the way we ought to attend to it—namely, by seriously considering the various ways in which it produces and reproduces itself in our own time through excessive violence, normalized brutality, and the ritualization of death. Minimizing it as a sub- or fringe culture or, as some have suggested, as a “culture of the disenfranchised” (see chapter 1) minimizes both its contributions to humanity (its music and art, for example) and the atrocities that are carried out in its name or as a consequence of its imperatives. Finally, considering it as culture allows us to see the manner in which individuals are interpellated by its various social sanctions, rules, and demands that, in our effort of making them explicit, will perhaps motivate the appropriate social, political, economic, or even philosophical interventions.

2. Narco-culture is violent and also more than violent. In chapter 2, we considered violence in its analytic and instrumental definitions as well as the various ways in which the violence of narco-culture meets and exceeds these definitions. We have concluded that the violence of narco-culture is more than violence. We base our observations not only on the outward manifestations of a hyperviolence normalized in narco-culture (what we see, read, and hear about) but also on a historical logic internal to Mexico itself. This logic is reflected in a long-standing metanarrative about Mexico—namely, that it is a violent nation made up of violent people. It also talks about the violence of conquest, which is followed by the violence of colonialism and independence, reaching a crescendo with the violence of revolution. In other words, it is a metanarrative that affirms violence and death as written into the fabric of Mexican society, into its cultures and politics. This history of violence suggests a normalization of struggle, suffering, and animosity—a history that motivates the sociologist Claudio Lomnitz to conclude that Mexico “has defined itself as a nation of enemies.”

3. Lomnitz, *Mexico and the Idea of Death*, p. 53. What does it mean to say that Mexico is a nation of enemies? And what does this have to do with narco-culture? For one, it means that social and political organization are structured on the basis of enmity
Mexican narco-culture can be thought of as an extreme consequence of a history of enemies dying at each other's hands. The songs and legends of narco-lore attest to an expectation of a violent death at the hands of the enemy. What Lomnitz says about the Mexican “familiarity” with death applies to the narco form of life more than it does to any other culture (and related to this, hate, antagonism, rancor, hostility, antipathy, etc.)—that is, on the grounds that the other, my neighbor, represents a possible threat to my own life. This possibility increases when the other has a gun, has a stake in a criminal enterprise, or believes my bare existence poses a threat to his self-interests. These grounds on their own already legitimize narco-violence, both between narcos themselves and cartels and between narco-culture and the state. Because the narco, as necessarily standing outside the space of legality, opposes law and order, he is, at least in contemporary times, the greatest enemy to community and national life.

Political philosophy has a story to tell about social organization on the basis of animosity. In Carl Schmitt's political thought, for example, the primary political maneuver is to create and define an originary distinction between friend and enemy—one that “denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation” (Concept of the Political, p. 26). This is done by the state, which decides who the enemy will be and “decides for itself the friend-enemy distinction” (p. 30). In other words, the state legitimizes itself through the identification of enemies—those that stand against the collective, who threaten it. According to this political stance, then, friends should be protected and are politically valuable; enemies stand outside the space of law and protection and represent those who will be engaged in the death struggles that will define national identity itself.

To say that Mexico is a nation of enemies is to recognize that enemies are constitutive of its historical essence; in other words, that the enemy is not “external” to Mexican history and society but necessarily internal to it (constitutive of its identity) and dependent on it. In Mexican history (and correspondingly, in its politics), the nation creates and re-creates itself in the struggle against internal enemies—that is, those who seek its destruction from within. These enemies can be real or imagined, but they must “exist” in one way or another. The enemy is, in this way, as Giorgio Agamben suggests in a similar context, “something that is included solely through an exclusion” (Homo Sacer, p. 11). In narco-culture, participants in narco-violence are both necessary to Mexican identity and rejected by the state apparatus as a threat to the greater good. They are included by being excluded as enemies. However, the more necessary the enemy becomes in the definition of identity, the more power is bestowed on the enemy's role in social or cultural contexts. This would explain a phenomenon that Claudio Lomnitz describes in the following way: “Instead of having a towering and universally acclaimed hero, Mexico is haunted by an entire pantheon of caudillos, who often died at each other's hands” (Mexico and the Idea of Death, p. 54).

A nation of enemies means that violence is unavoidable and that death at the hands of the other will not provoke surprise. As Schmitt warns, “To the enemy concept belongs the ever-present possibility of combat” and these “receive their real meaning precisely because they [friend, enemy, and combat] refer to the real possibility of physical killing” (Concept of the Political, p. 32).
in this geographical space: “The Mexican’s flirtation and familiarity with death is also the recognition of an achieved modus vivendi between the descendants of mortal enemies, a tactical and provisional collective reconciliation in the knowledge that no one escapes death.” An illustration makes this recognition obvious: when Valentín Elizalde, a murdered narco-corrido singer whose profession implies his willing participation in narco-culture, sings his hit song “A mis enemigos” (To my enemies) and tells them “You know who you’re messing with / Come and try your luck,” he is affirming not only that his enemies envy his success but also that he knows that they want him dead. The song itself is both a proclamation that he is not afraid to die and a confession that he is aware that “no one escapes death.” When Elizalde was brutally assassinated on November 25, 2006, the assassin confessed that the murder had to do with that specific song, which had offended Elizalde’s enemies. It is important to note here that Elizalde’s death points not only to the “flirtation with death” common to narco-culture but also to the fact that the narco form of life is all encompassing, and thus the decision to participate can be as easy as singing songs about it or even listening to those songs.

3. Narco-culture is brutal. A central point of this work is that violence, as a concept, cannot properly capture the reality of those acts that define narco-culture as a social and human threat. We need a new name for the violence, and this name is brutality. Brutality constitutes the ontological foundations (the way of being) of the narco form of life. The logic of brutality demands a primary dehumanization, or derealization, of persons, who can then be subject to violence and erasure. This same logic also requires that the realization or dehumanization does not become evident, that it does not become spectacle; brutality recedes into the background as a normalization and does not seek to call attention to itself. This, of course, makes it so that violence and death become everyday affairs, and their normality is ritualized in the practices of the culture. Narco-culture is brutal in this way, and those who exist within its horizon are always already (due to their essential vulnerability) possible victims of its death rituals.

5. Elizalde, “A mis enemigos.”
4. Narco-culture is a threat to personhood itself. The brutality of narco-culture interrogates our most basic assumptions about violence, its nature, and its limits. It also asks us to consider the nature of personhood itself, to rethink the limits of what we deem permissible in terms of the treatment of others, to think about the harm we are allowed (by culture or society) to inflict on others in order to meet our ends or the demands of our form of life; it interrogates us as to the ruin to which the other may be subjected. An excessively violent act—like that of dismembering, decapitating, or liquefying another—makes us question the limits and nature not only of violence but of brutality, which is, as we claim, more than violence. The hyperviolent act overly saturates our concepts; it pushes against the boundaries of our moral, epistemological, and political imagination.

A normative conception of personhood, wherein a person’s value is measured according to utility or function in the economics of narco-trafficking, has far-reaching consequences. The person’s embodiment can be taken for granted for the sake of greater imperatives (of economic or financial projects)—that is, for the sake of an overriding reason, one’s essential human vulnerability can be exposed in spectacle. YouTube videos showing executions and decapitations, images of bodies hanging from crowded pedestrian bridges, severed heads left with genitals in their mouths: these are all meant to provoke horror, terror, or as Adriana Cavrero calls it, horrorism. We could call it narco-horrorism, although we do not, since horrorism has a different, voyeuristic logic. Our claim above has been that it is in the logic of brutality that excessive acts of human harm remain hidden behind normalizations and repetitions. This does not mean that brutality always hides behind these, as some acts are meant to be seen. Consider the actions of one of the Tijuana Cartel’s most infamous capos, whose brutality bordered on the cinematic:

The punishment [dismembering people and laying them out for everyone to see] was less about destroying evidence and more about devastating the victim’s family psychologically. Ramón [Arellano Félix] was famed for throwing victim’s corpses onto a fire, grilling up some steaks over it, and standing around with his goons, enjoying beef, beer, and cocaine.6

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However, neither do acts like these—or the ones previously mentioned—qualify as horrorism, since no one is shocked by the spectacle. Burning, hanging, or decapitating bodies no longer provokes horror or terror; it provokes instead perhaps only powerlessness, disgust, or concern. And there are plenty more examples of this kind of unnecessarily violent excess. Here we think of Ramón Arellano Félix’s cruelty and the brutality of the act, of the spectacle that the act tried to project. Most brutal acts deny and refuse the spectacle, however, as is the case with making pozole or dumping bodies in anonymous mass graves.

5. Considering that brutality is ontologized in the way described in this book, and considering also that narco-culture is culture in the way described, another philosophically interesting question has to do with human agency: Are people in narco-culture free to do as they please or must they assume the mandates of the narco form of life? Is narco-culture determining in the exercise of choice? Or, if we assume that narco-culture is determining or that brutality is ontological, what happens with human free will?

To say that narco-culture is the social-existential space that we have made it out to be—one where regulæ and a self-generating form of life have normalized violence, where brutality hides behind its own dehumanizations—is to suggest that persons are not free. They are not free to choose, free to live as they please, or free in some other meaningful way. Someone could object that individual participants in narco-culture freely decide to involve themselves in the illegal economy even with the knowledge that their participation may cost them their lives. Here, our talk turns to human agency as autonomy of choice—they freely choose the “life.” We wonder, however, about how free this “choice” actually is when it is a choice between “living like a dog” or “dying like a king.” In other words, is the choice to engage in the activities of narco-culture free or is it predetermined by the unavailability of other choices?

Without getting embroiled in the determinism versus free will debates common in philosophy, I posit the following claim: existing conditions of brutality are determining to such an extent that the possibilities of action (before agents existing in the narco-context) will be limited so that agents are, in the end, determined by their circumstances. In other words, individuals are free to the extent that they choose among a limited
set of alternatives, themselves determined by the context in which they find themselves. Manuel Vargas calls the “circumstances that support and enable exercises of agency” the “moral ecology.” The moral ecology of narco-culture is one that involves the allure of unimaginable riches, the hope for one’s name to be inscribed forever in song (in a narco-corrido), and the seduction of fame or infamy. These ideas float freely in the moral ecology of narco-culture and, together with concrete and immediate conditions of poverty, brutality, economic alienation, and political marginalization, inform imaginations and establish purposes while fueling action. The agent’s freedom is thus bound to narco-culture—to its economy, its politics, and the aspirations of its people (among other ties, such as religious, familial, and educational). The state, rather than offering a way out of the bondage, labels those marginalized by these conditions as enemies of the public good and thus as untouchable yet killable, thereby closing off, in advance, any possibility of escape (except by dying, of course). These enemies are, after all, biopolitical bodies that with their labor, their brutality, and their death feed the spectacle that ultimately justifies the limits and function of the state itself. As Vargas tells us, “Societies, states, and cultures all structure our actual capacities,” and in the case of narco-culture, those capacities will be limited to what the state and this particular culture requires for the process of its own justification—namely, the capacity to kill and the capacity to die.

6. In a general sense, our phenomenological intervention reveals that narco-culture is a brutal yet productive and very human culture. Human bodies are inserted into the culture as object-bodies whose only intrinsic value is their ability to contribute to the narco-economy through their labor (as mules, assassins, lookouts, etc.), the sacrifice of their bodies (as soldiers, bodyguards, dead bodies for spectacle), or their silence (as citizens of the culture, keepers of secrets, etc.). In so doing, narco-culture transforms its citizens into a vulnerable class for whom saying no to the call or demands of narco-culture is usually not an option (non-participation, while an option, is usually not a very appealing one). Their vulnerability makes them expendable, disposable, replaceable, and killable.

7. In narco-culture, the dead are usually thought to have been participants in the narco form of life—regardless of whether their participation was voluntary or involuntary. This is a form of objectification, or derealization. Their derealization means that it does not matter whether they chose this way of life. The dead, in dying violent or brutal deaths, are stripped of their concreteness, and their deaths point to a political solution to the “problem” (e.g., a narcotics trafficker, in involving himself in the illicit business, has threatened the public’s health, and thus his death at the hands of another is always already justified). Killing the perceived narco, the trafficker, is thus allowed, and his death will contribute to the statistics of the War on Drugs while not causing moral outrage. He is a criminal and, because of his inscription (his inhabiting) in narco-culture, always already judged and banned and thus outside the realm of the properly human. Giorgio Agamben puts it this way:

The relation of exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable.10

Narco-culture thus represents, under this schema, an outlaw space. Moreover, since it is still within the purview of the state, it is indistinguishably inside and outside. It exists, as Agamben notes, in a “relation of exception” to the state: “We shall give the name relation of exception to the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion.”11

8. Those who participate (in one way or another) in the narco form of life will be interpreted as attaining the status of exemptions to any sort of civil protection. They may kill each other at will; they are those who must die for the sake of the culture. After all, as I have often heard in

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9. The trafficking of illegal drugs in Mexico falls under laws that protect public health. Speaking of these early laws, J. C. Puyana et al. write, “The key reasoning for outlawing the commerce of [illicit] substances was that they were deemed ‘noxious to health.’” See Puyana et al., “Drug Violence and Trauma,” pp. 309–17.

10. Agamben, Homo Sacer, p. 28.

the context of any violent death, they knew what they were getting themselves into. Moreover, because they must die, they are also killable. The necropolitical commitments assumed by narco-culture are made explicit in the more than two hundred thousand deaths since the War on Drugs began in 2006. The dead “deserved” their deaths only because their deaths were already allowed in advance by their involvement in narco-culture and by a decision (made perhaps implicitly and institutionalized through myth and cultural repetitions) that they must die.

9. Of course, because the nation-state requires its internal enemies, narco-culture arrives at the self-awareness that it is outside the space of law. As Maihold and Maihold write, narco-culture broadcasts this self-consciousness and says that “its message is impunity [and finds] itself hovering over law and its capacity to impose its own order and its own justice.” As narco-culture becomes more aware of its own power and thus more aware of its own independence from accepted culture, it achieves a state of being a state. Consequently, narco-culture, in its self-conception as a political entity, constructs itself as the exception to the exception and thus perpetually affirms its identity through violence and death.

10. Finally, a premise of this book has been that Mexican narco-culture is a manifestation of advanced modern culture—it operates under liberal economic principles, exalts competition and profit, and takes full advantage of free markets and the laws that scaffold these (even if its principal economy is, ironically, illegal). Nevertheless, there does exist a relation with violence and death that might seem prima facie barbaric and primitive, which might seem prima facie irrational and natural. I insist, however, that the cultural relationship between death and the allowances of brutality is not a symptom of cultural backwardness but rather a symptom of advanced modern consumer cultures themselves. In this and other senses discussed in this book, Mexican narco-culture and the brutality that underlies it put us all firmly into question.