

Prologue

I began writing this book a long time ago out of desperation and impotence, out of the terrible pain and obfuscation that appears when great tragedy strikes the ones you love. I could not help the feelings, nor could I help my people with anything other than my thinking and writing. The resulting work is my attempt at using my thinking and writing to engage the bloody violence tearing Mexico apart, particularly the country's North, where I come from.

The reader will notice that the book is a stubborn retrenchment into historiography and publicity theory, at times an excursion into the past, at others into abstraction. Given the gravity of the events the book tackles, this stubbornness may seem irresponsible to some. Shouldn't my intellectual efforts concentrate on solving actual problems, alleviating the material suffering of those who live with the violence or who attempt to document it and expose those responsible? Shouldn't I propose actionable ideas, things that Mexicans and US Americans can do to reduce the violence, and the culture it inspires, which envelops us all?

Although I perhaps cannot convince all readers that theory and history are more practical than, let's say, policy prescriptions, I can at least share how I believe theory and history will be useful. I don't mean useful in a narrowly conceived sense that defines usefulness only in terms of practicality, and practicality only in terms of a solution to a problem narrowly conceived. Usefulness in this sense may describe something that can be used to reduce violence, such as normative proposals that Mexico improve its legal system broadly speaking and cultural and media policies

in particular. I don't believe this is the only way of conceiving usefulness. Understanding usefulness always depends on our ability to answer the question "Useful to whom?" and thus on understanding context and, in my case, potential readers and publics.

For good or for bad, the context of my work is the academy, and within the academy my work is meant to be useful to those thinking and writing about violence, about cultures of violence, about contemporary Mexico, about Latinos in the USA, and about the cultures surrounding the drug wars in the Americas. Importantly, my work is a response to the gaps in our knowledge of these subjects. I have found plenty of excellent work that archives and analyzes particular events in Mexico and that recommend astute policy and legal prescriptions that may indeed ameliorate the violence. By comparison, I have found little work on issues that historicize and deeply theorize these events. I hope *Trafficking* strengthens this reading list and helps the community of thinkers develop frameworks that can better explain what is happening in Mexico, through attention not only to the moment but also to the longer, broader genealogy that has created the conditions of possibility and meaning for these current events. I also hope the findings and insights in this book can be generalized beyond Mexico and beyond the West. This is the value of theory. Last, my analyses are meant to help us see deeper into our shared past with other Western nations and intellectual traditions as well as with other nations in the so-called Global South. This is the value of history.

This book is indebted to many people and institutions. I am thankful to the University of Virginia, particularly to the College of Arts and Sciences, current dean Ian Baucom, and former dean Meredith Woo, now the president of Sweet Briar College. Associate Dean Leonard Schoppa was particularly instrumental by giving me intellectual support and by granting me time and resources when needed to write and research. I am thankful also to the faculty of the Department of Media Studies, in particular Bruce Williams, Andrea Press, Siva Vaidhyanathan, Aniko Bodroghkozy, Christopher Ali, and Andre Cavalcante. They all read parts of this book and provided wonderful feedback. Moreover, this community of scholars, together with Jennifer Petersen, my wife and the only person who has advised me on the whole manuscript, has provided the intellectual landscape that nurtured every page. I would be remiss if I didn't also thank Barbara Gibbons, the administrator of the Department of Media Studies at the University of Virginia, who, in addition to helping with the daily activities of processing stipends, grants, and other

financial manners, gave me also her wisdom and support when it was most needed.

Others were also key to this project. Marwan Kraidy, at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, provided different intellectual spaces to present and discuss my work and gave wonderful feedback on specific chapters and ideas. I need also to thank the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University, which provided me a year of intellectual camaraderie and nurtured the interdisciplinary ambitions of this work. In particular, I am thankful to Margaret Levi, CASBS's director, and Professors Daniela Bleichmar, Caitlin Zaloom, Eric Klinenberg, Mark Greif, Gabrielle Jackson, Deborah Lawrence, Allison Pugh, Jesse Ribot, and Andrew Lakoff, whose ideas and friendships fueled my steady pace throughout the year.

Last, I need to thank Jennifer, my wife and my intellectual partner of almost two decades. Although I am certain that whatever I write will fail to capture the deep and broad scope of her influence and impact in this and all my work, I must at least try. Jennifer has taught me about history and theory; she has debated with me my sometimes-dubious ideas and pushed back against my bad intellectual habits, helping me see my limitations. She has also shown me the potential in my work and has kept my faith in intellectual inquiry and my ambition. At times when the writing was painful—and, believe me, pain was unavoidable—she held my hand.

I began this book years ago, and it took longer to write than I expected. Sometimes I thought that the book would be ready at a time when the violence in Mexico had dwindled and readers would be less interested. But sadly, that is not the case. The violence is plentiful and, it seems, never-ending. In fact, 2019 is likely to be the most violent year so far. Perhaps the new presidency of Andrés Manuel López Obrador will succeed where others failed. Perhaps.