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*“These are public acts of contestation, commemoration, and community building, not just spaces for collective mourning.”*

## The Struggle for Memory and Justice in Mexico

ALEXANDRA DÉLANO ALONSO AND BENJAMIN NIENASS

On September 25, 2021, alongside construction panels surrounding the monument where a statue of Christopher Columbus had been removed by the Mexico City government, feminist collectives and women victims of violence organized an action to reclaim the space as the *Glorieta de las Mujeres que Luchan*, or Roundabout of Women in the Struggle. The statue had been removed “for restoration purposes” in 2020 by government officials amid concerns that the monument would be defaced ahead of the commemoration of Columbus Day on October 12, as Mexican activists joined a movement across the Americas to topple monuments representing racism and colonial violence.

A year after it was removed, Claudia Sheinbaum, Mexico City’s mayor, announced that the Columbus statue would be replaced with a replica of a pre-colonial statue of an indigenous woman, “*La Mujer de Amajac*.” The government framed this as a response to critiques from indigenous communities and artists who rejected the initial proposal of a female Olmec head designed by a nonindigenous male artist, which was chosen without consultation or transparency. As anthropologist Sandra Rozental argues, the new proposal also reproduced the often violent ways in which the state has appropriated indigenous symbols, feigning justice by displaying them in public spaces without addressing the conditions of inequality and exclusion faced by indigenous communities.

In the midst of this debate, a group of feminist collectives intervened, proclaiming the monument

to be a “seized and revindicated space, as a site of memory and resistance.” Continuing a recent practice of the feminist movement in Mexico, the activists covered the panels protecting the monument with names, in this case, of groups and women who are fighting for justice across different struggles—from those searching for the disappeared to indigenous women defending their land and rural education. They installed a temporary statue with the figure of a woman (itself criticized by some for its heteronormative aesthetic) on the pedestal where Columbus previously stood. The following day, the names on the panels were erased, presumably by local authorities.

In a statement put out by Antimonumenta “*Vivas nos queremos*” (Countermonument “We want each other alive”), the group reaffirmed its commitment to make this space “a symbol of resistance of all the women who have fought and will continue fighting against police repression, against military crimes, against land removals, against extraction, against the stealing of water, against patriarchal violence, against femicides and disappearances, against the intromission of governments and churches on the right to decide on our bodies, against the inaction of corrupt institutions and the corruption of an absent state.” They reinscribed the names on the panels and continue to organize actions in this space to commemorate the victims of violence and express solidarity with women fighting for justice.

This is one example of a debate about public memory that has intensified in Mexico in a time of widespread violence and human rights abuses, and particularly in the context of the *guerra contra el narco* (war against drug cartels) that started in 2006. Over the past 15 years, more than 90,000 people have disappeared, more than 300,000 have been killed, and there has been a steady increase in criminal violence throughout the country.

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ALEXANDRA DÉLANO ALONSO is an associate professor and chair of Global Studies at The New School and a Current History contributing editor. BENJAMIN NIENASS is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and Law at Montclair State University.

Although the toll of this so-called war is unprecedented, activists within different movements and organizations of victims' families claim that the struggle for justice and memory goes beyond this specific context. They challenge the framing of the violence merely as an issue related to drugs and organized crime. Their interventions show the continuities in state violence over time, drawing attention to forms of structural violence that cut across enforced disappearances, violence against women, migrant deaths, resource extraction, attacks on activists and journalists, and the enduring discrimination against indigenous peoples and the dispossession of their lands.

## THE LONG WAR

The *guerra contra el narco*, declared in 2006 by then-President Felipe Calderón, began as an enforcement strategy based on deploying an enlarged military presence throughout the country to confront criminal organizations. The immediate and lasting impact of this strategy has been widespread violence between the state and the drug cartels, and also among the cartels themselves, fighting to control territory and trafficking routes. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, disappeared, or displaced, with limited if any responses from the state to bring justice to families of the victims and create a framework for truth, reparations, and guarantees of non-repetition of atrocities.

The government's emphasis on a military strategy—as opposed to alternatives such as legalizing drugs, fighting corruption, and improving the justice system—was continued by the two presidents who followed Calderón. Enrique Peña Nieto, of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, drew heavy criticism and scrutiny for alleged corruption and widespread impunity. The current president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Morena, a party of the left, so far has fallen short of his campaign promise to shift the focus to justice for the victims. His administration has continued and even expanded the military's domestic deployment, while the number of those who have disappeared or been killed keeps rising.

López Obrador has made important symbolic moves to recognize victims of violence, including issuing public apologies, opening archives, creating a Commission for Truth and Justice in the case of 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa, and establishing a Mexico City memorial, the *Sitio de Memoria Circular de Morelia*, to acknowledge the

state crimes of the 1970s Dirty War. Yet families' organizations and civil society groups have been disappointed by his dismissal of claims about the continuation of violence and human rights abuses during his administration. They have also criticized his failure to commit resources to investigate these cases and bring perpetrators (including state officials) to justice, to strengthen the Executive Commission for Attention to Victims (CEAV), or to offer reparations to victims.

The government's October 2021 establishment of a Commission for Truth and Justice (1965–1990) may well mark a shift. But it does not address violent events in the present or signal a departure from the strategy of militarization. So far, it has also failed to respond to demands for memory and justice regarding historical and structural violence against marginalized populations, in addition to criminal violence.

As with other cases of state violence and organized crime in Latin America, distinctions between victims and perpetrators are blurry. Peacemaking and memorialization efforts are not only contested by those directly affected and by the wider public, but also face threats from criminal organizations and state actors. The struggle over memory and justice in Mexico to a large extent is a struggle over what and who needs to be remembered in the first place, when these acts of remembrance should take place, and how memorials are part of the demand for truth, justice, reparations, and non-repetition.

## MEMORY AS A SITE OF MOBILIZATION

Mass mobilizations against criminal violence and insecurity have taken place locally since the late 1990s, including some commemorative interventions, such as the pink crosses laid in public spaces throughout Ciudad Juárez to publicly mourn victims of femicide. The violence of the *guerra contra el narco* has led to unprecedented mass protests at the national level, however. The state's inadequate response to the consequences of its militarization strategy has also prompted the formation of community defense groups (*autodefensas*) who fight the drug cartels by their own means, while organized groups of victims' families and *rastreadoras* (trackers) have mobilized to search for mass graves and remains of their loved ones.

One of the most notable mobilizations took place in 2011, when Javier Sicilia founded the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity

(MPJD). Sicilia, a poet whose son was killed that year by members of a drug gang in Cuernavaca, Morelos, began a caravan for peace in Mexico and in the United States, aiming to bring together victims of this violence. This was a key moment in which the demands for justice for the victims were clearly articulated and recognized by the Mexican state. Among the resulting actions were a law to recognize and protect the rights of crime victims (passed in 2013), a national registry of victims, and a compensation fund (which became part of the CEAV, established in 2014).

The MPJD's demands also included a memorial for the victims of violence, bringing the question of memory and memorialization to the forefront of mass mobilizations. Up to this point, memory and public space had not been at the center of widespread debates in Mexico. Previous activism around these questions had mostly been suppressed by the state, particularly in the aftermath of the 1968 student massacre and the Dirty War of the 1970s—a time that the scholar María de Vecchi Gerli refers to as the “first period of disappearances.” In part, de Vecchi Gerli claims, this was because Mexico's transition to democracy did not lead to deep structural change and lacked a framework of transitional justice, whereas other countries have experienced “military dictatorships or internal wars with more defined beginning and ending points.”

The current “second period of disappearances” has seen an emergence of memory debates in a context marked by different forms of violence and high levels of impunity resulting from corruption and an ineffective criminal justice system. The MPJD called for spaces for communal mourning that could represent and mobilize society in response to the ongoing violence and its many victims—victims who are often portrayed by the government and the media as collateral damage, as criminals who killed each other, or as “deserving” of what happened to them, and whose families are often mistreated by authorities.

In the last months of his administration, Calderón responded to the MPJD's demand by designating a space next to the Campo Marte military camp in Mexico City as the site for a Memorial a las Víctimas de la Violencia (Memorial to the Victims of Violence). The memorial drew heavy criticism because of the rushed process through which the

design was chosen, and even more so because of its location next to a military training camp, while the army has been implicated in the very violence that the memorial is supposed to address. The MPJD and most organizations representing victims and their families disengaged completely from the project, which they refer to as a “pretty park” or a “memorial of the state.”

The struggle for memory has since taken form in different ways. Through interventions in state memorials, monuments, plazas, and other sites, activists create spaces for communal mourning and resist the idea of memorials as devices for closure. Different groups and organizations of families have renamed plazas, monuments, and streets, such as the Plaza de los Desaparecidos in Monterrey, the Estela de Luz monument in Mexico City, or the Memorial Calle 28 de marzo in Cuernavaca.

Collectives of embroiderers known as *Bordando por la paz* come together weekly in different parts of the country (and abroad) to embroider and display white handkerchiefs bearing the names of the disappeared in public spaces. The artist and activist collective *Huellas de la Memoria* has organized actions on the streets and in museums, universities, and other public spaces, displaying shoes of family members searching for the disappeared, from victims of the 1970s Dirty War to Central American migrants who went missing on their journey north.

Local memorials featuring murals and graffiti, including the Mural de la Memoria in Córdoba, Veracruz, or the Memoria que Resiste mural in Mexicali, Baja California, have challenged the narrative about victims as “collateral damage” or as deserving of what happened to them, and thus as undeserving of public commemoration. These interventions aim to counteract the normalization of violence by telling the stories of the victims, situating them in their local context, and making them widely visible to the public on well-known streets and plazas. Yet calls for broader solidarity have also been met with resistance. The parents' association of the school where the Mural de la Memoria was painted decided to erase it.

Other activists and victims working for memory and justice seek to confront both the state and the whole of society by placing “Antimonumentos” (countermonuments) in front of government

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offices and on important avenues, making public demands for accountability and against closure. All along Paseo de la Reforma, one of the main avenues in Mexico City, bold sculptures with bright colors bearing the number of victims for specific events commemorate different forms of violence over the past 15 years. They mark the 49 child victims of a 2009 fire in the ABC childcare facility in Hermosillo, Sonora, due to government neglect; the 2010 massacre of 72 migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas; and the 2014 disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa, among others. They draw connections between historical events, such as the 1968 student massacre, and the violence that continues. The Antimonumenta installed in 2019 in the plaza of the renowned Palacio de Bellas Artes has an inscription that reminds the public that every day in Mexico, nine women are victims of femicide (in 2021 the number increased to 10.5).

Some memorials go further by creating spaces meant to address the conditions that led to violence. Among these are the New's Divine Memorial, the Memorial to the Victims of Disappearance in Baja California, and the proposed Memorial to the Victims of Enforced Disappearance in El Quemado. These projects have been able to secure government concessions of space and funding to offer cultural and educational activities focused on restitching the social fabric.

These are public acts of contestation, commemoration, and community building, not just spaces for collective mourning. They are framed as calls for the whole of society to join in the struggle for justice—recognizing that what is being remembered is still happening, and that it is part of a longer history of violence and state neglect, manifested in different forms.

## THE POLITICS OF TIME

The debate taking place in Mexico is not only about the politics of memory—who gets to control the telling of the past, to name and publicly mourn the victims—but also about the politics of time. Who gets to declare “transitions,” and when? How does the commemoration of past victims relate to the prevention of future violence? How can activists connect different forms and histories of injustice, not just to create broader solidarities, but to show the deep-seated structural conditions of violence and impunity?

In the context of the “war on drug cartels,” successive presidents have attempted to put symbolic boundaries between their present and the previous administration's past. This reflects a “temporal Manichaeism” (in the words of historian Berber Bevernage), which locates human rights abuses mainly in the past and consequently focuses present efforts on public commemoration. Such an approach can be seen in Calderón's rushed process to create the Memorial a las Víctimas de la Violencia at the end of his administration, and in that project's focus on closure. It can also be found in the responses of the current administration.

The strategy of proclaiming a rupture fits in with the temporal politics prominently displayed in López Obrador's slogan of a “fourth transformation,” promising a fundamental shift echoing previous defining moments in Mexican history. In this framing, the present and the future are symbolically unburdened by the legacies of the past. As the organization Article 19 has argued, however, the current government's approach to addressing the violence so far largely relies on

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symbolic gestures rather than a serious commitment to non-repetition. Apologies for colonial violence or isolated incidents are paired with denials of ongoing state crimes.

Memory activists, according to sociologist Yifat Gutman and political scientist Jenny Wüstenberg, “use memory as the crucial way of transforming society from below.” The activism that fits this description in Mexico consists of diverse actors with various interests and goals, often embedded in specific local contexts. Nonetheless, Mexican memory activists share practices and have often resorted to two major strategies, both confronting the state with a different politics of time. They envision commemorative spaces not simply as places of mourning and accountability, but also as future-oriented spaces of intervention; and they actively link the past and the present to show continuities of state neglect and impunity.

Both of these strategies undermine the tendency of the state (and of each administration) to unburden the political present by locating injustice firmly in a clearly defined past. They also reject the idea that demands for restitution and struggles for transformation are mutually exclusive. Pursuing a form of prefigurative politics, they model and enact an alternative future. Accordingly, these

social functions of commemorative spaces often go beyond addressing the past as past. Instead, they try to intervene in ongoing forms of violence and to demonstrate that the state has largely “rescinded its responsibility for the care of its constituents’ bodies,” as Mexican author Cristina Rivera Garza recently remarked.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT, SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

The New’s Divine Memorial, in the low-income Mexico City neighborhood of Nueva Atzacolco, is one such intervention. It commemorates the deaths of nine youths and three police officers, as well as sixteen people who sustained critical injuries, as a result of a police raid at a disco. Some of the victims suffocated to death after police closed the doors to prevent youths from leaving the premises. A culture of police brutality and the negligence of government authorities at various levels were blamed for this ill-conceived operation.

What happened at the New’s Divine was a reflection of the larger problems faced by residents of impoverished areas of the city, where youths have limited opportunities for recreation and encounter the state mostly in the form of policing. Nueva Atzacolco is considered a marginal zone at the border between Mexico City and the State of Mexico, and has largely been abandoned in terms of public space, services, and security. The police raid at the New’s Divine resulted from false claims that the club was involved in small-scale drug trading. It was an easy target for the city government’s claims that it was responding effectively against narco-violence. But the architect Sergio Beltrán-García, who led the memorial project, argues that the tragedy was also a consequence of structural neglect by the state.

The memorial is grounded in a set of questions that transcend the commemorative function of the space. Most directly, how can memorial architecture address the fact that there are few spaces for communities to gather and for youths to engage in activities like sports and cultural development? The memorial is a reminder of the consequences of this urban neglect, and of the negative portrayal of nightclubs frequented by youth. Beltrán-García refers to the memorial as “not just a building . . . [but] an institute . . . a public space, a problem-solving tool that gets the ‘never again’ narrative closer to everyday realities.”

In other projects, Beltrán-García and the activists with whom he collaborates follow a similar future-oriented logic. His “Memorial to the City,” a statement against the privatization of public space in Mexico City, imagined a memorial to a “tragedy that [had] not occurred yet.” The civilian movement *Nuestro Memorial 19s*, in which Beltrán-García participated, requested civic input for the design of a memorial to the victims of the 2017 earthquake that toppled dozens of buildings in Mexico City, killing some 370 people. It sought a commemorative space focused on reconstruction as much as commemoration.

The Memorial to the Victims of Enforced Disappearance, commissioned by the federal government (though currently paused in response to families’ demand for reparations first), commemorates the 91 victims of enforced disappearance and torture by the military in the town of El Quemado, Guerrero, in 1972. As stated in the description of the project, the memorial seeks to “remember these crimes of state terror, but also holistically repair root causes of the tragedy, thus reducing and preventing future recurrences of state violence.” This effort includes repurposing sites of violence to create spaces for cultural activities and agricultural development.

The work of memory activists at the *Maclovio Rojas* plot in Tijuana has a similar focus on urban renewal, community involvement, and social transformation. Like the New’s Divine Memorial and the project for El Quemado, the Memorial to the Victims of Disappearance in Baja California is located in a specific place where violence occurred. This plot, known as “La Gallera,” was one of the main sites where drug cartels brought dead bodies for disposal. In a space disguised as an auto-repair shop, a man nicknamed *El Pozolero* (The Stewmaker) would dissolve the bodies in acid and deposit the remains in a pit, making it nearly impossible to find any traces that could be identified through DNA analysis.

In an area where criminal violence is ever present, the memorial project was at first led by a group of activists and researchers from the *Universidad Autónoma de Baja California*, together with the *Association of the Families of the Disappeared in Baja California*. The project initially included a space for mourning as well as a community kitchen and arts programs, particularly focused on youth at risk of getting involved in organized crime.

But the funding promised by the government did not materialize until much later. Meanwhile,

criminal groups left graffiti threats and dead animals wrapped in blankets inside the plot. The space remained mostly abandoned until new excavations began in 2017 to allow further forensic tests. After years of advocacy, the memorial site was officially inaugurated in 2018, and plates with the names of victims of disappearance in Baja California were finally placed in the space. The other elements of the project focusing on cultural development and community programming were discontinued, given the unsafe conditions in the neighborhood.

Apart from threats, such transformative memorial interventions face delays or cancellations of government funding, as well as backlashes from local communities that prefer not to draw attention to violent events that took place in their midst. In the case of New's Divine, most stakeholders were more interested in the legal claims around the case than in the memorial's intended role of keeping the memory of the tragedy alive or in its cultural programming.

These projects had limited government support and resources. But they also exemplify a lack of solidarity in society, which can prevent memorials from becoming sites where less-affected groups can reflect on their own relationship to, and complicity in, ongoing forms of violence. Some communities reject memorial spaces that blur the line between victim and perpetrator. Others fear that a memorial can generate more violence.

Such concerns emerged in the challenges to the Sitio de Memoria Circular de Morelia. Its commemorative plates in the garden across the street were vandalized, presumably by local residents. Some of the neighbors said that they did not want to be reminded of violent events in their neighborhood. They felt that the names of the disappeared should not be displayed publicly, assuming that they had likely been criminals.

There can also be a tension between what kinds of memorials best serve the needs of victims' families and what types of art or memory work can attract the (seemingly) unaffected. Families want recognition for a concrete act of injustice; other activists want to show the historical and structural conditions that shape the larger context in which state and criminal violence takes place. Spaces that achieve the latter goal often display certain levels of ambiguity and openness to allow for multiple historical associations. Such features do not always easily connect with families' demands for the moral clarity that serves as a foundation for claims to truth, justice, and reparations.

## HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES

In 2018, the fiftieth anniversary of the 1968 student massacre was marked by the reopening of the memorial museum in the Plaza de Tlatelolco in Mexico City, where the events took place. Renamed M68: Memorial del 68 y Museo de los Movimientos Sociales (Memorial of 68 and Museum of Social Movements), the site attempts to challenge the dominant patriarchal and teleological narrative of the 1968 movement, with its leading male figures and its portrayal as a single, exceptional event, separated from past and current social movements.

In the vision of the lead curators, Luis Vargas Santiago and Luis Josué Martínez Rodríguez, M68 proposes a polyphonic, open approach to memory, drawing from a multiplicity of archives and artistic interventions to create a nonlinear narrative in which connections between past events and present movements can be made. They emphasize the idea that memory is always in construction and center a feminist perspective, bringing forward the voices of women in the 1968 movement. Their approach seeks to create discomfort, generate responses and action by the public, and challenge the idea of closure in monuments, memorials, or archives.

It is reflective of the shift in Mexico's memory debate that such claims are made by M68, an institutional space that is part of the National Autonomous University and has a wide public reach, drawing students from around the country and providing programming for the local community. Yet such challenges to the dominant narrative and evocations of historical continuities have already been at the center of some memory activists' work, most notably that of Comité 68, Comité ¡Eureka!, and H.I.J.O.S. These organizations were founded by activists, intellectuals, and victims' families to search for the disappeared, to commemorate victims of the 1968 and 1971 student massacres in Mexico City and the Dirty War of the 1970s, and to build legal cases against the responsible state officials.

Their protests and interventions in public spaces and archives have challenged the state's narrative by drawing links between the drug war and state violence dating back decades. The Museo Casa de la Memoria Indómita in Mexico City, established in 2012 by Comité ¡Eureka!, connects the violence of 1968 and 1971 with current events, demonstrating the continuation of a system of impunity and the cartels' adoption of state methods from the Dirty War.

Comité 68's 2013 intervention in the Memorial to the Victims of Violence in Mexico City made these connections explicit by placing canvases with the names of 7,978 victims of political persecution, torture, extrajudicial killing, forced disappearance, femicide, and criminal negligence on the empty steel plates of the "state memorial." The list goes back to the 1950s, but it also includes events that occurred after the inauguration of the memorial, such as the disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa in 2014. Comité 68 calls this a "seized memorial." It renamed the space with a canvas that reads "Memorial to the Victims of State Violence," echoing the slogan of mass mobilizations around the disappearance of the 43 students: "Fue el Estado" (It Was the State). Comité 68's long-term vision is to create a space for its archive in the memorial in order to document state violence, assign responsibility to the perpetrators, and recognize the victims.

The philosopher Tzvetan Todorov's distinction between literal and exemplary memories—between a memory that adheres to the specificity of an event (and the event's meaning for the specific victims) and a memory that strives for generalizations—is useful for understanding such activist interventions. To a certain extent, those two poles are always at play in public memory: some victims strive for recognition for a specific instance or moment of suffering, whereas other activists give meaning to events by linking them to questions about the underlying conditions in which violence and injustice occur. Memorial interventions are aimed at examining specific events in the context of a larger history.

Activists like the Comité 68 do not simply create an analogy between events, but remind us of historical continuities in the trajectory of Mexican politics. In the words of sociologist Robin Wagner-Pacifici, they "carry events forward." The continuities they expose lie not only in the system of impunity, but also in the cartels' direct involvement in and appropriation of the state's counter-insurgency methods of the Dirty War. Now, activists have started to draw even wider circles of historical injustice to build broader solidarities against the enduring effects of patriarchal and colonial violence.

## MEMORY AS PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

The Mexico City government's recent proposal to replace the Columbus statue with a replica of

a pre-Columbian statue was framed by the mayor as a recognition of "a history of classism and racism that dates back to colonization." This discourse attempted to respond to the demands that feminist collectives, indigenous movements, and memory activists have made for recognizing the historical roots of the current violence and linking different forms of violence.

Yet as Fátima Gamboa, a Mayan lawyer who is part of the Red Abogadas Indígenas (Network of Indigenous Lawyers), argued: "The debate is now about a statue rather than about the rights of the women who are alive now, their precarious socioeconomic status, and the discrimination they continue to face." One of the challenges in this debate over public memory, at the center of intersecting struggles for justice in Mexico, is how to link accountability for past injustices to a commitment to social transformation in the present.

In a context of continuing violence, repression, and dismissal—consider López Obrador's statements that reports of domestic violence are exaggerated and that he has "had enough" (*ya chole*) of feminist groups—there is a struggle to change dominant narratives that have historically criminalized activists and victims of violence and generated social indifference. At the same time, the breadth of the movement for memory and justice, with its multiple manifestations around the country and echoes in the Mexican diaspora, offers an opportunity to demonstrate how memorials not only can support the struggle for truth and justice, but also can create public space to address the conditions of violence—with the past, present, and future in mind.

This long-standing call echoes Rosario Castellanos's 1968 poem "Memorial de Tlatelolco," written after the student massacre of October 2:

*Recuerdo, recordamos*

*Esta es nuestra manera de ayudar a que amanezca  
sobre tantas conciencias mancilladas,  
sobre un texto iracundo, sobre una reja abierta,  
sobre el rostro amparado tras la máscara.*

*Recuerdo, recordemos*

*hasta que la justicia se siente entre nosotros.*

"I remember, we remember / This is our way of helping it dawn / upon so many tainted consciences, / upon a wrathful text, upon an open fence, / upon the face sheltered behind the mask. / I remember, let us remember / Until justice comes to sit among us." ■