

# B.3 The Condition of Law: Essays

## Memory, Solidarity, and Social Collectives in Heartland and Periphery: From the Chinese Massacre of 1911 in Torreón, Mexico to the 1944 Landing at Normandy

Coalition for Peace & Ethics

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As the rebels entered the city, they were joined by thousands of locals, fired up by racist speeches. A herb-seller is said to have clutched a Mexican flag and screamed: "Let's kill the Chinese!" A revolutionary commander, Benjamín Argumedo, is believed to have fired the first shot. Over the next 10 hours, the mob sacked Chinese-owned businesses, looted the Chinese bank and dragged their Chinese neighbours by their distinctive braids, trampling them to death with horses.<sup>2</sup>

American exceptionalism sometimes colors analysis of the best and worst of the human experience. That is to be expected of a state of

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<sup>2</sup> David Agren, 'Mexico faces up to uneasy anniversary of Chinese massacre: President Andrés Manuel López Obrador will mark the killings of 303 Chinese people during the revolution that the city of Torreón has tried to forget,' The Guardian (16 May 2021) accessed <[https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/16/mexico-chinese-massacre-centenary-torreon?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/16/mexico-chinese-massacre-centenary-torreon?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)>.

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*imperium* in which even those deeply involved in the internal factional warfare that has taken on the forms of social justice (as it is understood today by those who claim authority to speak for "it" to "us") claim that the American experience is outsized. That has certainly been the case respecting the corruption of racial, ethnic, gender, and other privilege now considered culturally taboo (but not all privilege of course, discrimination in favor of which continues to be valued--merit, skill, for example--and rewarded by material things). Left and right make it a life goal to see everything through the lens of their own experiences, their own "truths", and their own psychology. This is, in essence, the very core of the sociology of the modern imperial state--whether it is driven by the traditional right, or by the left--however one might be sympathetic to their respective aims, goals, sensibilities, etc.

But everything does not revolve around the traumas of the American experience (as it has been constructed by those Americans with the power to frame these traumas to present in particular ways); nor should the tragedies of other peoples always be judged as a function of the core of an imperial network with its center in Washington, D.C. At the same time, the essence of empire produces precisely that result: empire is marked by the inevitable tendency of first, second and third order dependencies to mimic the sociology and psychologies of the elites at the center of imperial power. But that mimicry, at the same time is naturalized just enough to give it local flavor--enough to suggest autonomy, but also enough to affirm solidarity with the imperial center and its preferences. For the dependencies this provides a continuous source of frustration but also the enforcement of dependency at the socio-cultural level (expressed as a sociology of politics) tends to cement relations that are in the end of use to those who are charged with the management of these dependencies.

The dynamic between the performance of cultural politics in an imperial center, and its replication within its first and second order dependencies, is sometimes complicated by the echoes of displaced imperial systems and their cultural patrimony (a term used quite deliberately here for its evocation of hierarchies now contested within the normative frameworks of at least one faction of influential elites in the contemporary North American imperial center). And again, those layered hierarchies, with their own structures of communal integrity and hierarchies of belonging built around a central set of defining characteristics, become more pronounced where elements of neighboring or potentially threatening alternative imperial centers (in this case Asian and through additional settler movements) are introduced within the collective order.

Spaces like what is now Mexico provide an important space for understanding the way these dynamics play out. Mexico serves as a reminder, as well, that the world is not entirely a reflection of the politics of imperial centers, though they are a reflection of them. Moreover

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Mexico reminds us that exceptionalism is itself merely a spot on a spectrum of a complex dynamic between national context and extraterritorial reach. Its deep layers of empire--indigenous, European, North American--and existing close to but outside of new imperial boundaries, provide a more nuanced window onto the historically contingent dynamics of imperial cultural politics; Mexico may exist within the shadow of a greater contemporary empire, but it is also a product of the complex interplay of its own imperial and settler histories from out of which its own systems of privileging and its own methods of communal discipline against threatening outsiders evolved. And as a regional power, it suggests Mexico's own dynamic as an imperial center within its own domains of influence, especially in Central America, one subordinate to the front lie imperial machinery but still potent all the same within its own spheres of influence and control.

It was with this in mind that one might usefully approach the recognition, publicly (and at last) of the massacre of a large portion of the Chinese population of Torreón, in the Mexican state of Coahuila, to be acknowledged by Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador who will ask forgiveness of the Chinese community on behalf of the state. President López Obrador is to be commended for the gesture. In that he follows the pattern of empire with its center in Washington, D.C. And the event itself ought to produce a much richer examination of the replicating patterns of racism, ethnocentrism and hegemony within societies constructed from out of quite distinct socio-racial-religious orders.

That replication produces exceptions within every community, and it appears in that context as naturalized in one as in another. These are the constructs of communities and the constructions of their borders. And their management, within the constraints of applicable cultural politics, marks the essence of *imperium* by, through, and over communities cobbled together through contemporary political-economic systems. These are the constructs that create contradiction as communities become porous and space is shared. More difficult, is when those porous borders permeate not just physical space but the communal space of (shared) identity. The markers of difference had dangerous consequences in an era in which cultural politics was grounded on hierarchies of differences.

That construction, of course, is much different in 2021 than it was in 1911. But its potency remains; as might the hierarchies of privilege that normalize the suppression of threatening difference. There was a greater difference as well. This difference impacts the American discussion as well as Mexican history. In 1911 Mexico agreed to pay reparations. . . and never did.<sup>3</sup> In 2021 the Mexican President

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<sup>3</sup> David Agren, 'Mexico faces up to uneasy anniversary of Chinese massacre,' *supra* ("The Torreón massacre caused indignation in China, and Mexico eventually

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emphasized ceremonies and gestures, but no issue touching on reparation.

Torreón is a reminder that the manifestation of (extreme) violence connected to the preservation of communal integrity (however discredited at the time or thereafter) is not exceptional. What changes appears to be the characteristics that mark that integrity, and those change dramatically as a society moves from one stage of historical development to another. That should trouble those who seek to build systems of social justice on foundations of difference; and it should serve as a caution to those who might believe that there is any community built on difference that is a stranger to the projection of violence as the performance of difference. President López Obrador's visit to Torreón, then, marks the characteristics of the new imperialism built over the foundational layers of older imperial forms and in the shadow of a first order system with respect to which there is a relationship of dependency. The nature of belonging is different, though no less powerful. A fidelity to the state and to its political-economic principles now serve where race, religion, ethnicity, and the like held pride of place. In that context it is only natural to seek forgiveness for markers of difference now abandoned and at the same time to insist on affirmation of allegiance to the new markers of difference and of belonging.

The act of memory—and its gestures—in Mexico, touch on the larger issue of the consequences and preservation of memory in the construction and reconstruction of popular narratives of the state. It is well revealed, for example, in the context of the memory of the great victories of the Allied Forces in the Second World War—for example the landing at Normandy in 1944. As time moves further and further from the middle of the last century, and as the character of the events that determined the outcome of the last part of the wars that engulfed Europe between 1914 and 1944 increasingly become history rather than experience, one stands at that very brief point in history between living memory (and its immediacy) and the recording of the memories of those no longer here (and its remoteness in virtually every respect). What is lost between living memory and its recording is intensity and the passion of action without foreknowledge. Memory is in the world; history is an abstract space that sometimes speaks more to the historian than to the object or craft of history.

It is with this in mind and to capture both the intensity and passion of the times--and its changes among that generation that survived the events and then built a world upon its memory--that the changing performance of historical commemoration around Torreón, like that of the landing at Normandy becomes much more important.

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agreed to pay 3.1m pesos in gold in reparations, although the payment was never made. In Torreón, nobody was ever charged – let alone tried or convicted – over the massacre, and today the events of 1911 remain largely unmentioned.” Ibid.).

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Every key ritualized performance of memory then speaks as much to the transformation of contemporary history (in the way that memory is reshaped to suit the times) into some sort of act seeking a measure of preservation of the past. It is to the art of historically driven curation rather than to lived history—to interpretation and curation rather than events as they were undertaken and contemporaneously understood--that the past is (re)framed for the present. Thus reframed it is meant to be projected onto the future.

The key moments of lived intensity that took the nation and its allied order from the beaches of Normandy to the world we now intend to make and remake in this century from out of the last century's blood sacrifices of millions across the globe provide an intense example of the more attenuated impulse that produced (and reproduced) Torreón. The reframing of the memory that is the landing at Normandy in 1944 reminds one that the sacrifices of the past may well only be a harbinger of those sacrifices that must be made when the collective that is this Republic may be called upon to demand it. How the collective responds and re-imagines this memory with normative objective from time to time will say much about the potency of the earlier sacrifice. More potently, that ritualized performance of memory will reveal much about the state of the transformation of the Republic for the preservation of which those earlier sacrifice were made.

It is then worth reading the text of the official pronouncements by high political and military leaders of the nation from the first, grounded in hope and expectation, to the last, in which the immediacy of the events, its passion and vision, was almost a memory, recorded for strangers and available for use projecting forward. On the eve of the landing, the President of the United States spoke in the language of prayer for the sacrifice of the flower of the nation "to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization."<sup>4</sup> The Supreme Allied Commander spoke more pragmatically to the destruction of the enemy and the threat that the enemy posed to the nation united against it.<sup>5</sup> Ten years later that same Supreme Commander, now President of the United States, spoke of the hope and inspiration that lay at the core of the significance of the landing.<sup>6</sup> This hope and inspiration, the sacrifice of Normandy, could

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<sup>4</sup> President Roosevelt, Radio Address to the Nation 6 June 1944; accessed <<https://www.fdrlibrary.org/d-day>>

<sup>5</sup> General Dwight D. Eisenhower, D-Day Order of the Day (6 June 1944) Accessed <<http://www.kansasheritage.org/abilene/ikespeech.html>> ("You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.")

<sup>6</sup> President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Statement by the President on the 10th Anniversary of the Landing in Normandy (6 June 1954) accessed

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eventually bring together enemies under a common normative project of stability and mutual prosperity.<sup>7</sup> A decade later, Normandy acquires yet another overlay.<sup>8</sup> It is understood as a vindication of sacrifice in a world now deemed safer, richer, and more stable than the one that found itself engulfed in global war two decades earlier; “the beachheads of Normandy have been opened into beachheads of hope for us all—hope for a world without tyranny, without war, without aggression, without oppression.”<sup>9</sup> Normandy has now become a call to arms to finish the job begun with the entry of the U.S. into war in 1941.<sup>10</sup>

Forty years after the landing, Normandy becomes an act of faith in an age of faith, the strength of which was then drawn on for the battles (moral and concrete) yet to be fought and won against the new moral-physical enemy.<sup>11</sup>

The men of Normandy had faith that what they were doing was right, faith that they fought for all humanity, faith that a just God would grant them mercy on this beachhead or on the next. It was the deep knowledge -- and pray God we have not lost it -- that there is a profound, moral difference between the use of force for liberation and the use of force for conquest.<sup>12</sup>

What forty years had brought to a head was a near inflection point in yet another conflict among antagonistic ideologies. “Today, as 40 years ago, our armies are here for only one purpose -- to protect and defend democracy. The only territories we hold are memorials like this one and graveyards where our heroes rest.”<sup>13</sup>

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<<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/statement-the-president-the-10th-anniversary-the-landing-normandy>> (“They remind us particularly of the accomplishments attainable through close cooperation and friendship among free peoples striving toward a common goal.”).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. (“These lessons of unity and cooperation have by no means been lost in the trying period of reconstruction since the fighting stopped. Rather, we see peoples, once bitter enemies, burying their antagonisms and joining together to meet the problems of the postwar world.”).

<sup>8</sup> President Lyndon B. President Johnson, Remarks to Members of the Delegation to the D-Day Ceremonies (3 June 1964); accessed <<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-members-the-delegation-the-d-day-ceremonies>>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. (“In this, the central force for progress has been, and continues to be, the unity and the strength of all nations of the Atlantic Alliance. Out of our alliance in adversity has grown a great partnership for peace and prosperity. On the success of that partnership rests the hopes of men everywhere.”).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. (“On this anniversary, the memory of yesterday's battles in war only move us all to fight more valiantly today's battles for tomorrow's peace.”).

<sup>11</sup> President Ronald Reagan,

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

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Victory appeared within the grasp of the allies on the eve of the half century anniversary of the landing. And with that victory a reimagining of the landing itself.

At this place, let us honor all the Americans who lost their lives in World War II. Let us remember, as well, that over 40 million human beings from every side perished -- soldiers on the field of battle, Jews in the ghettos and death camps, civilians ravaged by shell fire and famine. May God give rest to all their souls. Fifty years later, what a different world we live in. Germany, Japan and Italy, liberated by our victory, now stand among our closest allies and the staunchest defenders of freedom. Russia, decimated during the war and frozen afterward in communism and Cold War, has been reborn in democracy. And as freedom rings from Prague to Kiev, the liberation of this continent is nearly complete.<sup>14</sup>

Under conditions of victory, then, the question about Normandy shifted from a marker of struggle to a foundation for building on a long overdue victory.<sup>15</sup> Normandy becomes a metaphor as well as a normative baseline of action that must be repeated in every generation: "Today our mission is to expand freedom's reach forward; to test the full potential of each of our own citizens; to strengthen our families, our faith and our communities; to fight indifference and intolerance; to keep our nation strong; and to light the lives of those still dwelling in the darkness of undemocratic rule."<sup>16</sup>

Victory, though, was short lived. By the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the landing Normandy again took on a different complexion.<sup>17</sup> Normandy becomes a story—a part of a larger morality tale that is meant to serve as a guide to the moral narrative of the nation, and its allies. Sacrifice must be renewed and pledges remade in the face of new threats to the foundation of the global order built on the alter pyre of the dead of the

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<sup>14</sup> President William J. Clinton, "Remarks at D-Day 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ceremony" (6 June 1994); accessed <[https://www.usapatriotism.org/speeches/wclinton\\_060694.htm](https://www.usapatriotism.org/speeches/wclinton_060694.htm)> .

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. ("How will we build upon the sacrifice of D-Day's heroes?" ... Avoiding today's problems would be our own generation's appeasements. For just as freedom has a price, it also has a purpose, and its name is progress.").

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> President Barack H. Obama, "Remarks by President Obama at the 70th Anniversary of D-Day -- Omaha Beach, Normandy (6 June 2014) accessed <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/06/remarks-president-obama-70th-anniversary-d-day-omaha-beach-normandy>> ("We come to remember why America and our allies gave so much for the survival of liberty at its moment of maximum peril. We come to tell the story of the men and women who did it so that it remains seared into the memory of a future world.")

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Second World War.<sup>18</sup> The then contemporary generation had another beachhead to capture and sacrifice to make and the Normandy landing served to frame the present in terms of the past. This is the state of narrative reinforced on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landing.<sup>19</sup> What remains constant is sacrifice. And for the sacrifice of the past there is the lessons that must be extracted from the past.

Commemoration and lesson drawing to suit the times—that is the great insight of germinal events. And those germinal events—to the extent they remain recognized speak to the character and contemporary focus of the nation. For Mexico it was a performative commemoration of racism by a people who themselves are embedded in its moral conundrums. For the United States it is drawing on the sacrifice which animated the current order and normative narrative of the Republic. Yet as the event fades, so does its resonance and with that diminution, the fading of the impact of its sacrifice. In 2022, President Biden's commemoration could be reduced to a Tweet.<sup>20</sup> That is a diminished performance worth noting. And that diminution is now reflected in the extent of US involvement in the defense of the ideals of the landing in a far corner of Europe in 2022.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. ("And this generation -- this 9/11 Generation of servicemembers -- they, too, felt something. They answered some call; they said, "I will go." They, too, chose to serve a cause that's greater than self -- many even after they knew they'd be sent into harm's way. And for more than a decade, they have endured tour after tour.").

<sup>19</sup> President Donald Trump, "Speech at the 75th Anniversary of the Landing at Normandy (6 June 2019) accessed <<https://www.foxnews.com/world/president-trumps-speech-75th-d-day-anniversary-normandy>> ("They were sustained by the confidence that America can do anything, because we are a noble nation, with a virtuous people, praying to a righteous God. The exceptional might came from a truly exceptional spirit. The abundance of courage came from an abundance of faith").

<sup>20</sup> Discussed in Larry Catá Backer, *Broken Parallels--President Biden Marks the 78th Anniversary of the Allied Landing in Normandy, Law at the End of the Day* (7 June 2022); accessed <https://lcbackerblog.blogspot.com/2022/06/broken-parallels-president-biden-marks.html> ("Today, we mark 78 years since D-Day and honor those who answered duty's call on the beaches of Normandy," Biden tweeted. "We must never forget the service and sacrifice in defense of freedom, and we must strive every day to live up to the ideals they fought to defend." Text of President Biden's Tweet; Ibid.).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. ("in a way that parallels the limits of the ways in which American officials now "strive every day to live up to the ideals they fought to defend"; the President sent Army Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Normandy, for the purpose of connecting past to present--but now as an involved spectator rather than as the leading force. "The fight in Ukraine is about honoring these veterans of World War II," Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, said at the American Cemetery of Colleville-sur-Mer, overlooking Omaha Beach in Normandy." Ibid., quoting in part )John Leicester and Hanna Arhirova, 'AP Exclusive: Ukraine Recovers Bodies from Steel Plant Siege,' AP New (6 June 2022); accessed <<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-kyiv-travel-government-and-politics-fd34c02c14247c39589bd93cd85ff818>>).



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This journey through the normative reconstruction of history as new history is made on its foundations, that process of commemoration, provides an extraordinary opportunity to reflect of the value of human sacrifice over generations--its fluidity and the that the intensity of blood sacrifices appear to lose their potency as generations unborn, strangers to the events, must seek alternative ways of embedding those sacrifices for the times in which they live. Over all of this is the regulatory power of time, and the temporal malleability of regulatory perception.

Every life, every effort, every endeavor, within the realities constructed through this obsession, is both marked by time, and doomed to a cycle of initial vigor and eventual decline, irrelevance, and oblivion (or more delicately put, toward ascent to a more eternal space of memory or joinder with a higher power). Indeed, since in the West human life is sometimes understood to stand as the measure of all things, it is appropriate to gauge the passage of institutional time by the expected lifetime of the humans who are responsible for its formation. Though the lifespan of institutions (including states, enterprises, and other social structures) may exceed the span of a human life many times over, it is the span of a human life that gives value to such long-lived expressions of the collective humanity from out of which it is spawned, nourished, and used. The same applies to ideas, and to principles on which human organizations are incarnated, and to all structures through which humans are trained to "see the world" they believe they make.<sup>22</sup>

Here is a chronicle of living semiosis--of the way that signification starts as an object and symbol directly and is then transformed as its meaning becomes embedded in the objectified contexts of those who are strangers to the events but for whom its potency may still be embedded.




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<sup>22</sup> Larry Catá Backer, Open Call for Input from the UN Working Group for Business and Human Rights: Next Decade 10+ 'Business and human rights – towards a decade of global implementation,' Law at the End of the Day (23 September 2020); available < <https://lbackerblog.blogspot.com/2020/09/open-call-for-input-from-un-working.html> >.

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