



LAST100: VIDEO 11: “The Terror”

Last time, we discussed Cuba and the Cuban Revolution. We focused on Che Guevara and his vision of a new social subject that was to be forged in the fires of revolutionary combat and struggle: the “new man” of the twenty-first century, heroic and self-sacrificial, motivated by love. For Guevara, the revolution was less a singular event that could be assigned a date (January 1, 1959) than an ongoing process whose endpoint could not be predicted and might never come. For Guevara, the process was everything, which may be one reason why he abandoned his relatively comfortable life as a politician and bureaucrat in Havana, to plunge back into the fray with clandestine military campaigns in first the Congo and then Bolivia. The Bolivian expedition, however, was to be Che’s last.

Che Guevara: Death and Legacy

The theory was that a guerilla “*foco*,” a small band of committed insurgents (*new men avant la lettre*), could inspire an oppressed rural peasantry to rise up against the state. But less than a year after entering the country, Che and the final sixteen fighters still under his command, their numbers reduced by desertion, capture, ambush, and sheer mishap, found themselves in a remote and rocky ravine surrounded by US-trained Bolivian Rangers. The guerrillas were filthy and bedraggled, lacking supplies and wracked by sickness, demoralized and staring defeat in the face. They had failed to recruit a single peasant to their cause. In the ensuing firefight, Guevara’s carbine was hit by a bullet and rendered useless. He was quickly captured. The following morning he was executed in the one-room schoolhouse of the nearby hamlet of La Higuera. His body was then helicoptered to the town of Vallegrande, where it was displayed, draped over the sinks of the hospital laundry, to curious locals as well as representatives of the world’s press.

Many people have commented that the photographs of the dead Che look like images of a martyred Christ. His messianism had found its Messiah.

If Guevara's own revolutionary adventures ended with an abject failure, this did not mean that he was no longer viewed as an example to follow. On the contrary. Even today, the sites in southern Bolivia where he met his end draw pilgrims and tourists; the walls of the laundry in Vallegrande are covered in graffiti that extol Che and his philosophy. And in the decades following his death, guerrilla insurgencies erupted around Latin America, from Mexico to Argentina, Central America to Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Venezuela. Often, Che's image and words accompanied them.

Guevara himself may have viewed the Cuban Revolution less as an event than as a process, but for the region as a whole it was an event of the highest order. For much of the Left, the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship and the Castro regime's subsequent resilience in the face of constant US pressure (ranging from attempted invasion or covert dirty tricks, to diplomatic isolation and economic embargo) demonstrated that other options were possible, that alternative social and political models could survive if not always thrive. Reciprocally, for the United States and ruling national elites Cuba served as an affront and a dire warning that their dominance might be more precarious than they hoped. Whether celebrated or censured, Cuba manifested the power of an exception.

All this fed and was exacerbated by Cold War tensions, as Castro (against Che's own preference to stress solidarity with the Third World) came to rely on Soviet assistance. Things came to a head with the Cuban missile crisis of October, 1962, when the USSR's deployment of nuclear warheads on the island almost led to direct and disastrous confrontation between the two superpowers. But even once that tension was defused (the Russians withdrew their weapons, and the USA stood down its blockade of Cuban ports), Latin America continued to be the site of conflicts that were framed as proxy wars between East and West, between Communism and the so-called "free world."

The Military Takes Centre Stage

Justifying their actions in terms of the need to keep the peace and to prevent “another Cuba,” though often also falling into the pattern of violent repression that dates back to the colonial period, states increasingly resorted to force to put down incipient protest, armed or otherwise. Throughout the region, and mostly with the approval if not always the direct connivance of the United States, the military took centre stage, bringing down civilian governments and ushering in a reign of state violence and terror with the aim of securing social order and warding off the specter of revolutionary change.

In 1964, amid economic crisis and fears that the president was becoming too friendly to Cuba, Brazilian generals removed democratically-elected leader João Goulart, installing a military regime that would continue until 1985. In October, 1968, police and soldiers fired on unarmed student protestors in Mexico City, killing up to 300 in the “Tlatelolco Massacre.” In 1971, General Hugo Banzer took power in a coup in Bolivia. In June, 1973, in Uruguay, in the wake of activities by the Tupamaro guerrillas, President Juan María Bordaberry closed parliament and initiated a “civic military dictatorship” that would last for another twelve years. On September 11 of the same year, in Chile, General Augusto Pinochet led an uprising that brought down the “Popular Unity” government of Salvador Allende, sending planes to bomb the presidential palace in downtown Santiago. And in March, 1976, in the context of rising violence from both the Right and the Left, the Argentine military overthrew Juan Perón’s widow, Isabel Martínez de Perón, who had been in power since her husband’s death two years previously.

Much of Latin America (Paraguay, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Haiti, for example) already had what were effectively military or at least anti-democratic regimes of long standing. Now they were joined even by countries that had prided themselves on their liberal and democratic credentials. By the late 1970s, authoritarianism was the norm rather than the exception from Tijuana to Tierra del Fuego, San Salvador to Salvador da Bahía.

Trauma and Narrative

Moreover, many of these regimes were exceptionally bloody and brutal in their repression of basic human rights. Censorship and surveillance were routine. Labor unions and left-wing parties were particular targets, and were proscribed, disbanded, and their members persecuted. Students, peasants, journalists, and intellectuals were under suspicion, but bad luck or being in the wrong place at the wrong time could make you a victim without recourse to appeal. Clandestine detention without trial was commonplace, often in secret prisons and camps where abuse was systematic.

In Chile under Pinochet, tens of thousands were imprisoned and tortured; up to 5,000 were killed or forcibly “disappeared.” In the Argentine “dirty war,” right-wing death squads and the state combined to murder up to 30,000, some of whom were drugged and then dropped, still alive, from planes over the South Atlantic. In Guatemala, highland villages were razed and well over 150,000 people, mostly indigenous, were killed in a campaign of genocide that had begun back in the 1960s. In El Salvador, in the context of a civil war fought against the FMLN guerrilla, the armed forces repeatedly violated protocols of legitimate combat; more than 800 civilians were killed in a single day in the village of El Mozote in 1981; priests associated with “liberation theology” were subject to death threats and assassination; the archbishop of San Salvador, Monseñor Romero, was shot dead while saying mass. Up and down Latin America, hundreds of thousands sought refuge and fled into exile—at one point, one in five Uruguayans had left their country—and many more were homeless and internally displaced. Not that fleeing necessarily brought safety: on the frontier between El Salvador and Honduras, Honduran troops colluded with the Salvadoran army by turning back refugees and enabling the “Sumpul River Massacre,” in which hundreds were slaughtered; in the Southern Cone, governments secretly collaborated in “Operation Condor,” to pursue their enemies beyond national borders.

It is time to take stock. Such lists of atrocities and statistics of abuse can numb the senses. They call out for but also overwhelm sentiments of sympathy and solidarity. This is no doubt why the same period saw the rise of *testimonio* or testimonial narratives in the region: stories of individuals who both suffered and resisted state terror in the region,

who give a human face and dimension to a trauma that is almost beyond imagination. Through such stories we learned of Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan indigenous woman and peasant activist whose father was killed in a protest at the Spanish embassy, and whose brother was murdered by the army before her eyes; and of Alicia Partnoy, a prisoner in an Argentine detention center nicknamed the "little school." But there is a limit to what such narratives can tell. And doubt came to haunt some of these stories, above all Menchú's. It is not clear, for instance, that her brother was killed quite as she says he was. So even *testimonio* fails to give us access to the brutality of the terror.

But perhaps the numbers are the point. Perhaps, as with other historical traumas (slavery, the Holocaust, for example, but also "smaller" traumas that similarly escape measurement), we are left with the incomprehensibility of what happened, with the way in which they challenge our understanding. This week, I have no questions, as they would suggest that you (or I, or anyone) could provide answers that would be anything but glib. Or rather, all we have are questions, as we reach the limits of any explanation or narrative. Whatever words we offer are shadowed by absence. Pause the video here, and try to listen to that silence. I am not thirsty right now, but I'll be right back.

[. . .]

Silence is one, quite appropriate, response to terror. But it is also the response that terror desires. After all, terror is an assault on language; this is why it seems to render words useless. Terror encourages a form of silence that is complicity: not simply by making us fearful to speak out, but also (and more insidiously) by making us think that there is no point in doing so; that there is nothing to be said, nothing to be done. And while many responded in this way to state terror in Latin America, not everyone did. Next week, we will look at (and hear from) those who spoke out.

Terror as Counter-Revolution

Moreover, we should be wary of the notion that terror is simply stasis, paralysis; or that it is merely reactive, merely negative. The "states of exception" that governed so much of Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s did not seek only to destroy their perceived

enemies (however they pictured them—as Communists, subversives, terrorists, or whatever). Rather than seeking to turn the clock back to some imagined golden age of harmony that might have existed before the “cancer” of the Cuban Revolution spread, they advanced a new socio-political and economic project for the region. In its way, indeed, their impact was almost as revolutionary as that of the left-wing agenda that they thwarted and feared. The terror ushered in what Italian theorist Paolo Virno describes as a “counterrevolution” in the sense of a “revolution in reverse,” “an impetuous innovation of modes of production, forms of life, and social relations that, however, consolidate and set again in motion capitalist command” (241). In the words of Canadian activist Naomi Klein, it was the “shock doctrine” of authoritarianism that brought us what we have come to know as neoliberalism.

We will return to neoliberalism later. For the moment, note that the Argentine military dictatorship called itself a “Proceso de Reorganización Nacional,” a wholesale “Process of National Reorganization.” Or read Alberto Fujimori’s statement, suspending Congress and the constitutional order in Peru, in which he outlines a profound transformation, “planting the seeds of a new nation and leaving behind the fetid ruins of the old order” (314). Fujimori and Che Guevara may have agreed on little else, but they coincide in their disdain for the status quo, and in their ambition to change it.

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