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Semantics of Violence

Revolt and Political Assassination in Mexico

Nelson Arteaga Botello

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Il y a plus affaire à interpréter les interprétations qu'à interpréter les choses
Michel de Montaigne
Essais
Cap. XIII, De l'expérience

To my father

Foreword

Semantics of Violence is a superbly argued work of theoretical sociology and, at the same time, a subtle, deftly accomplished work of empirical hermeneutics.

Theoretically, Nelson Arteaga takes Civil Sphere Theory (CST) in new directions. In the decade and half after I introduced the model, social theorists and social scientists around the world have been engaged in a series of individual and collaborate efforts to elaborate and revise CST, demonstrating how the model's abstract tenets can be separated from the particular empirical contexts—mostly American and European—to which they were first applied. One strain of this theorizing, pioneered by Arteaga and Carlo Tognato, has developed the idea that in Latin American nations civil codes have long been powerfully challenged by competing and anti-democratic patrimonial codes, parties, and institutions. In *Semantics of Violence*, Arteaga brilliantly fills out this idea. He provides a new sociological history of Mexico's key political and communicative institutions, one that zooms in on the year 1994, when both patrimonial and civil elements responded to conspicuous and potentially highly destabilizing episodes of violence.

Counter-intuitively, Arteaga demonstrates that the patrimonial strain in Mexico, despite its decidedly anti-democratic character, was as critical of these violent eruptions as were the nation's emerging democratic traditions and institutions. Indeed, this book has something very distinctive to say about how such deeply antagonistic culture structures as patrimonialism and democracy can become intertwined in a manner that, rather than deepening social polarization, contribute to institutional stability and the

gossamer threads of civil comity. This truly unexpected insight is vitally important to a better understanding of the dangerously polarized conditions that civil spheres around the world experience today.

But *Semantics of Violence* is not just an original theoretical investigation. It is also an empirical tour de force that displays a high level of hermeneutic skill. Arteaga shows that violence is more than a heinous physical action, and that it must be made meaningful before it can exert social force. Examining thousands of social communications, Arteaga subjects them to a theoretically informed interpretation and elegantly reconstructs their collective meanings. He is able to create a literary plot that mirrors and sensitizes the reader to the social plots he is interpreting and explaining. Arteaga's narrative also establishes suspense for the reader as the social scientific story unfolds. Rhetoric and reality intertwine; this book makes a compelling "read."

Semantics of Violence makes an important contribution not only to CST but to cultural sociology *tout court*. It will be of great interest to CST theorists around the world and to all those who are interested in the theory and methods of cultural sociology. The book is also a major contribution to understanding the civil sphere in Mexico, and how its basic communicative and regulative institutions have exerted increasing civil power over the course of recent decades.

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Acknowledgments

This work represents the end of a journey I began over fifteen years ago when I first read Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith's work on the strong program of cultural sociology (SPCS) and Alexander's book on the civil sphere theory (CST). It continued with a series of works I published alongside Javier Arzuaga, from 2013 to 2018, where we tried to understand the tensions between the civil sphere and Mexican patrimonialism. Our work was significantly enhanced when I came in touch with Carlo Tognato in Yokohama, Japan, during the International Sociological Association Conference in July 2014. Then, thanks to Tognato's enthusiasm and intellectual commitment, we started meeting regularly in Bogota and Mexico City. In addition, Liliana Martínez, Santiago Carassale, and I started carrying out symposia and conferences at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences-México (FLACSO) hosted by our Sociology of the Frontier seminar, which allowed attendees to reflect upon the SPCS and the CST from a Latin American perspective. Graduate students promptly joined us, and the work and discussions from that seminar finally developed into the book *Society, Culture and the Civil Sphere; an agenda of cultural sociology* (FLACSO, 2019), edited by Tognato and myself.

In 2016 I participated in Tognato's research seminar Civil Society in Post-Conflict Colombia, hosted by the Center for Social Studies at Bogota's National University of Colombia. That same year, Alexander and Tognato organized the Civil Sphere in Latin America workshop at the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale University. This meeting was followed by the seminar The Courage for Civil Repair: Narrating the Righteous in International Migration, organized by Tognato, Alexander, and Nadya

Jaworsky, and hosted by the Center for the Cultural Sociology of Migration at Masaryk University, in Brno, Czech Republic. These encounters inspired me to find the link between the CST and my research on violence in Mexico. Thus, Arzuaga and I embarked on a theoretical exploration of how symbolic societal structures lay down a pattern for interpreting violence. Our research was later published in *Sociologies of Violence: structures, subjects, interactions, and symbolic action* (FLACSO, 2017).

My projects on violence in Mexico are indebted to countless discussions with some extraordinary colleagues, including Alfredo Zavaleta, Salvador Maldonado, Gabino Solano, Willibald Sonnleitner, María Eugenia Suárez de Garay, Juan Pablo Moloeznik, Paul Hathazy, Ileana Padilla, Carmina Jasso, Rodrigo Díaz, Karina Ansolabehere, Evelyn Mejía, Cristina Puga, Óscar Contreras, Diana Guillén, Claudia Zamorano, Trevor Stack, Alejandro Monsiváis, and Rafael Valenzuela. They contributed with ideas and perspectives that helped me develop a more theoretically and methodologically solid point of view.

I was able to write the first draft of this book thanks to a grant from the National Council for Science and Technology (CONACYT) and the support of FLACSO, which allowed me to do a sabbatical stay in the Center for Cultural Sociology (CCS) at Yale University in 2019. As coordinators of the CCS, Alexander and Smith provided me with extraordinary conditions that helped me do my job in a stimulating and enriching environment. In addition, I participated in the CCS workshop during my stay, presenting a preliminary version of Chap. 3. The contributions and suggestions made to that document were essential for the further development of my research.

Smith and Tognato also made comments and suggestions to the first draft of this book, and the latter kindly accompanied the writing with a critical and discerning spirit. This book would not have seen the light without his vital inputs, and I am profoundly grateful for that. Also, Nadya Jaworsky did a splendid job editing the English version and making it legible. Finally, it is essential to point out that this book came to fruition thanks to an environment of care, discussion, and work that Luz Angela Cardona and I built. In addition, she accompanied the writing of this book with critical, sharp, and frank comments that generated a real spirit of intellectual cooperation.

The last draft of the book was presented during the seminar Conceptual and Methodological Strategies for Studying Violence in Latin America, organized by the Institute of Social Research Dr. José María Mora. I wish

to thank Kristina Pirker, coordinator of the seminar, for giving me the chance to obtain feedback on my work right before sending the final manuscript to my editor. Finally, I thank the Autonomous University of Coahuila for providing excellent conditions where I could happily finish writing this book.

Praise for *Semantics of Violence*

"Nelson Arteaga Botello is offering, with this book, a deep, rich and insightful analysis of the recent political life and events characterizing contemporary Mexico. Relying on an interpretation of the cultural dimension of this peculiar example in Latin America, his book enables one to understand the multi-layered phenomena that played out throughout the major transformations that shook the country in the last decades. As political violence erupted in the 1990s in Mexico, with the Zapatista revolt in Chiapas and the assassination of the PRI's presidential candidate Collosio Murrieta, among others, Arteaga Botello shows how the Mexican civil sphere reacted to those unprecedented acts in order to foster a more democratic order within the country. Instead of seeing the use of political violence through the narrow perspective of its unilateral condemnation, the analysis reveals how the reactions emanating from the various sectors of Mexican society dealt with this issue while maintaining such phenomenon within manageable civil codes. The book provides the best example of what cultural sociology can bring to the analysis of Mexican society, and highlights with great perspicacity the semantics of political violence in the context of reconstructing the civil sphere in times of intense social and historical transformations. Using Jeffrey C. Alexander's civil sphere theory enables Arteaga Botello to shed light on the role of mass media in the symbolization of this passage from an authoritarian form of political direction, under the PRI's 70 years reign, to a neoliberal agenda. With his deep and intimate knowledge of the cultural roots of Mexican political life, together with his expert eye on violence and political action, Arteaga Botello allows the reader to reach a high degree of understanding on how civility is being reconstructed through a new distribution of power between patrimonialism and neoliberalism. The new civil codes that enabled actors to recreate solidarity by sharing feelings about violence and its containment within rational limits is described with great minutia and subtility, providing a new key in the interpretation of how the civil sphere acts as a medium of democratic practices. Evolving between illegitimate and legitimate violence, the codification of the violent acts helps situating the normative aspect of its anti-civil or civil significance for the general population. In this sense, such codification provides guidance for the inclusion or exclusion into the civil sphere of the motivations, perpetrators and effects of violence, rendering this threat to social life a viable political means for achieving the historical transformations at stake. Far from seeing violence as a mere impossible match with politics, Arteaga Botello's analysis shows how its use is on the contrary always on the brinks of political life, especially in the context of dire social shifts or important changes in traditional

political culture. This brilliant book is worth reading for enhancing anyone's interest in the complexity of Mexico's cultural life, seen from the angle of its civil commitments. Both highly instructive and cleverly written, Arteaga Botello's book represents a significant addition to the interpretation of the challenges facing democracy in Mexico, and elsewhere, in our era of deepening political polarizations, showing the crucial importance of maintaining a civil sphere where debates can still be held."

—Professor Jean-François Côté, *Department of sociology, Université du Québec à Montréal*

"In his creative deployment of civil sphere theory, Nelson Arteaga Botello offers a compelling and original account of the role of competing cultural codes shaping contemporary Mexican politics. The dialectical tensions both within and between the patrimonial and civil codes constitute competing discourses in the nation's civil society in its slow and fitful democratization. This is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand how what Mario Vargas Llosa has described as Mexico's 'perfect dictatorship' has been forced to reckon with the prospects of this transition to democracy."

—Peter Kivisto, *Augustana College and University of Helsinki*

"Ao partir da evidencia de que a violência pode ter diferentes (e mesmo contrapostas) interpretações, este livro (ou Arteaga) desenvolve uma abordagem original e extremamente inovadora das questões analíticas implicadas (e mal resolvidas) nos estudos sobre a violência na América Latina. O tema decisivo da competição pela legitimação ou deslegitimação das violências é tratado com grande acuidade. Trata-se de uma análise cuidadosa do caso mexicano mas que servirá para abrir novas perspectivas na pesquisa e na teoria sociológica latino-americana sobre a sociedade civil, o Estado e as diferentes formas de violência política e social aí implicadas.

By starting from the evidence that violence can have different (and even opposing) interpretations, this book develops an original and extremely innovative approach to the implicated (and unresolved) analytical issues of violence in Latin America. The decisive issue of competition for the legitimation or delegitimation of violence is treated with great acuity. It is a careful study of the Mexican case but one that will serve to open new perspectives in Latin American sociological research and theory on civil society, the state, and different forms of political and social violence.

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—Michel Misse, *Federal University of Rio de Janeiro*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Latin America experienced an agitated and violent twentieth century. From the 1950s until the end of the century, several wars caused by territorial disputes, guerilla movements, military *coups d'état*, and dictatorships left a mark on the region. In some countries, the Cold War heated internal conflicts. Bolivia, Venezuela, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador were marked by state violence, including indigenous and peasant resistance. At the same time, Colombia descended into a downward spiral of violence that continues to this day. In countries like Peru, terrorism has long had a devastating effect on society. In Ecuador, the urban guerilla movement operated in some cities with an equally bloody repressive response from the state throughout the 1980s and 1990s. During most of the second half of the twentieth century, Bolivia experienced brutal political persecution. Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, and Uruguay suffered the onslaught of military dictatorships that ended the lives of thousands of people. In short, Latin America experienced numerous forms of violence that left an indelible mark on its historical memory.

In contrast, Mexico remained peaceful for seven decades. Violent events did not ultimately lead to a military *coup d'état* or the establishment of a socially supported permanent guerilla force, as was the case in other Latin American countries. Instead, it underwent a slow and complicated democratization process, subject to authoritarian excesses and explosions of isolated and local violence. However, what might have appeared to be a peculiarity on the Latin American horizon exploded in 1994. In the first

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hours of that year, the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) burst onto the national scene, with effects that would reverberate on a global scale. Two months later, the presidential candidate for the official party—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had maintained power for seventy years—was assassinated. Only five months later, the secretary-general of the same party was also killed. Since then, violence has become widespread throughout all corners of Mexican society. In the last twenty-five years, the assassination of politicians, journalists, and social leaders, the massive number of "disappeared" citizens, mass executions of migrants, femicides, decapitations of organized crime members and citizens, armed blockades in cities, among other acts of violence, have come to characterize Mexico's social horizon.

To re-establish order and find a way out of the violence, Latin American societies sought to understand its causes, the responsible parties and their goals, and its consequences. For example, part of the population interpreted the military *coups d'état* of Augusto Pinochet in Chile (1973–1988) and Rafael Videla in Argentina (1976–1981) as responses that would halt the supposed turn toward the socialist left of the governments of Salvador Allende and Eva Perón. Meanwhile, another part of the population in both countries understood the military *coups d'état* as a reaction by local elites that sought to prevent the disruption of their political and economic interests. Similar interpretations have been put forth concerning the military *coups d'état* in Bolivia (1971–1978), Brazil (1964–1985), Ecuador (1971–1974), Paraguay (1954–1989), and Uruguay (1971–1984). Likewise, guerilla movements have garnered support for their supposedly liberating character and criticism because they embodied authoritarian ideals. Among these movements, the most debated was the Cuban Revolution of 1953, spearheaded by the brothers Fidel and Raúl Castro, who ended up establishing what was, for some, one of the most long-standing authoritarian regimes in the American continent and, for others, a model of popular democracy worthy of imitation.

Even today, disputes about the transformative or merely strategic character of revolutionary struggles continue to mark the insurrection of the Montoneros (Argentina) and the Ñancahuazú Guerilla (Bolivia), as well as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (El Salvador). For a long time, sympathy for the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Nicaragua) was practically unanimous since the front had confronted the dictatorship of the Somoza family, which spanned three generations (1937–1979). Something similar

occurred with the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity and the Tupamaros National Liberation Movement (Uruguay). In contrast, the debate on the acts of violence perpetrated by the Shining Path (Peru) was much more polarizing, as was the more recent dispute on the popular or authoritarian signification of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela headed by Hugo Chávez, responsible for leading a *coup d'état* in 1992.

Guerilla rebellions and military revolts have confronted civil and political societies in Latin America, making it clear how difficult it is to control violence in the region. The positions in favor of and against the calls to war and the military *coups d'état* constitute moral stances on the legitimate, correct, or appropriate character of the use of violence. Their moral character accounts not only for a panoply of political viewpoints, but it also expresses ideas about solidarity, a sense of belief and social belonging, and collective ties. In this way, interpretations of violence reinforce opinions about how the social order should appear. Hence, it is possible to interpret violence as a threat to the said order, a way to re-establish it, or a rugged path that leads toward a more articulated and perfect version of it. Moreover, interpretations of violence are translated into discourse, actions, and institutions that either incentivize or halt it, rather than simply justifying it. Consequently, we should analyze how and to what extent institutions, activities, and discourses tend to stop violence and how they may facilitate it.

Among the cases mentioned above in Latin America, Mexico stands out in the region as the only country that had managed to maintain social cohesion and keep violence out of the center of the country's national political life for seventy years. In addition, it has been the only country in the region that, even while facing violent actions, has overcome them, maintaining a stable political center. After a decade of revolution (1910–1920), which cost over two million lives, Mexico constructed a discursive and institutional patrimonial camp that allowed for a determined and negotiated group of democratic freedoms (Arteaga & Arzuaga, 2018). The foundations of this discourse hearken back to the mass politics that guaranteed the fulfillment of social demands through a paternalistic, authoritarian state that functioned as society's mainstay of conciliation, organization, and material development (Córdova, 1973). Other Latin American countries have articulated similar systems—such as corporatism in Brazil (Baiocchi, 2006) or the hacienda in Colombia (Tognato, 2018). However, they could not prevent recurring intra-state wars, *coups d'état*, or bloodthirsty military dictatorships. In the meantime, the strength of

Mexican patrimonialism has generated solidarities that have guaranteed the country's political stability for seven decades. As Mario Vargas Llosa, the Nobel laureate Peruvian author, warned:

> The perfect dictatorship is not communism. It is not the USSR. It is not Fidel Castro. The perfect dictatorship is Mexico. It is a hidden dictatorship. It has the characteristics of a dictatorship: the permanence, not of a man, but a party. Moreover, a party that is immovable […] that grants enough space for criticism […] confirming that it is a democratic state […] The Mexican dictatorship is so much so that all Latin American dictatorships since as far as I can remember have attempted to create something equivalent to the PRI. (Krauze & Paz, 1991, p. 160)

With this statement, he underscored the ability of the patrimonial regime to organize an authoritarian system with clear institutionalized rules that guaranteed its continuity in time and that had even been capable of opening incipient democratic channels. Mexican patrimonialism constructed solidarities based on traditional sectorial, corporate, and clientelist models that regulated power relations. They established the symbolic weight of the presidential office as the center of national politics and unity (Balandier, 1994; Magaloni, 2006). The presidency guaranteed the social order through customary institutionalized norms modeled on the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (Langston, 2017; Duverger, 1957).

In the late twentieth century critical journalists, opposition intellectuals, civil associations, unions, social movements, and liberal and left-wing political parties began to shape a civil sphere that eroded Mexican patrimonialism (Alonso & Gómez, 1991; Molinar, 1991). As a result, the demand for citizen participation and the claim for the construction of ever more democratic political institutions started to generate a tense relationship, becoming embroiled in the characteristic practices of the patrimonial camp. This context was instrumental in shaping a democratic transition characterized by a series of institutional changes in the regulation of access to power, which allowed for limited political competition among political parties and the creation of independent civil associations, albeit within the virtually intact structures of the hegemonic and patrimonial regime. Consequently, there was no clear boundary that allowed a distinction between democratic institutions and practices and those of a more patrimonial nature (Arteaga & Arzuaga, 2018).

Toward the end of the twentieth century, this intertwining of authoritarian and democratic practices had to confront the violent eruption of guerilla movements and two political assassinations, unprecedented in the country's recent history. In less than eight months, an insurgent movement headed by the EZLN, along with the assassination of the PRI's presidential candidate and the secretary-general of the party, brought Mexico's political stability into question, both inside and outside the country. At that moment, the authoritarian and democratic camps interpreted violence as challenging both the patrimonial order and the nascent democracy. They interpreted guerilla activity and the assassinations as symptoms of political disintegration, much like those experienced in Central American countries in the 1970s and 1980s, or as precursors to social confrontations akin to those in Peru and Colombia. The authoritarian and democratic camps even described the guerrilla movements and the assassinations as signs of a military *coup d'état* like those that had occurred in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile.

What kept Mexico from descending into violence, as was often the case in other Latin American countries? Further, how was it possible that the tense relationship between consolidated patrimonial and incipient democratic practices managed to carry on in a functional (even if edgy) manner, without the country ending up in a military *coup d'état* or civil war? Despite a sizeable indigenous rebellion and the assassination of two key actors in the hegemonic party regime, the country managed to sustain—not without complications and much debate—some margin of institutional maneuvering. At this point, an analysis becomes salient insofar that it allows us to establish how a worn-out authoritarian system and weak democratic institutionalism managed to avert the collapse of the country's social and political civility. Through in-depth analysis of the Mexican case, I unravel the complex intertwining among violence, moral models of civil inclusion, and the solidarity that characterizes the patrimonial, corporate, or clientelist spheres in the countries of the Latin American region.

This book demonstrates that interpretations of violence emanating from a patrimonial and democratic horizon did not lead to a social polarization that caused Mexico to become fractured. On the contrary, the moral stances, emotional commitments, and sense of social and patrimonial order had competed with the democratic order but nevertheless managed to establish nodes of interconnection that guaranteed the continuity of the two horizons. In other words, the competition over the interpretation of violence from different worlds of meaning and moral models do

not necessarily end up canceling each other out but rather establish forms of communication that remain in constant tension. This competitive tension can lead to the survival of civil society and its democratic institutions, in parallel with an authoritarian order such as the patrimonial system. Exploring this paradox confronted by Latin American countries helps us to rethink existing theories of democracy and social change.

The Mexican case is particularly compelling because it allows us to explore democratic transition processes in spaces where the old authoritarian rules are not yet entirely dead, and new civil practices are not yet fully born, but where both establish a functional balance in the face of significant violent actions. It sheds light not only on other cases in Latin America but also in different contexts where it is possible to find continuing disputes and the intertwining of authoritarian and democratic horizons in the face of serious acts of violence. This book posits analytical questions and offers approaches that allow for understanding similar dynamics in many other political spaces; for example, in those countries that have experienced crisis and faced political violence during the transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. Moreover, it also helps to reveal how authoritarian logic can emerge in countries deemed as democratic when situations of violence are triggered.

This book's central argument is straightforward, namely, that it is possible to interpret violence in multiple ways, as an opportunity to consolidate codes, democratic institutions, and civil inclusion, as well as a warning call presaging the re-establishment of authoritarian institutions and regulations. The intertwining of both interpretations and the disputes they engender in defining the meaning of violence allows us to better understand interpretations of order and social change and how attributing a particular semantics to violence imprints a specific weight to justify or reject it. Accordingly, this book explores how different positions articulate and compete to interpret violence, giving rise to interdependent relations from which nodes of tension and non-tension emerge, encouraging functional dependencies. These positions emerge from the various social spheres that make up modern societies, such as the state, the economy, science, religion, and civil society. These spheres have been shaped over time and operate through moral orders, specific forms of solidarity, and principles of social inclusion and exclusion.

Alexander (2006) has argued that non-civil spheres such as the economy, the state, the family, and religion appeal to such causes as political or economic cooperation and competition, the dynamics of affectionate and

intimate family relations, and spiritual transcendence. They further possess moral structures based on sectorial values and principles, particular and non-universal, based on transcendental beliefs, race, status, gender, party affiliation, or social status. In contrast, the civil sphere is a realm of solidarity that maintains abstract-universal models connected to the ideals of solidarity and freedom, mobilizing criteria for inclusion and appealing to norms of democratic participation. The civil sphere transcends the particularities of the specific membership categories of non-civil spheres. Non-civil spheres and the civil sphere are in constant interaction, establishing mutual relationships that modify their respective boundaries.

Through an analysis of how social actors in different spheres interpret violence and engage in competition over its meaning, this book illuminates the processes of competition and coupling between the civil sphere and non-civil spheres. This book further offers an interpretation of violence that is different from, on the one hand, modernization theory, which considers political violence the result of the persistent, ancestral, non-civil rifts that have long plagued Latin American societies. On the other hand, it also distances itself from an interpretation of violence as the result of neoliberal economics and democracy (Arias & Goldstein, 2010; Silva & Rossi, 2018; Wilson & Bayón, 2017), which have fractured the traditional organization of class and sector-based politics (Davis, 2010; Gago, 2017) in favor of the free market, individual rights, and procedural democracy (Goldstein, 2003; Kiely, 2017). In other words, these interpretations consider that armed uprisings, military *coups d'état*, and political assassinations are the consequence of dysfunctional processes among social spheres, driven by the process of liberal and, then, neoliberal, modernization. However, both of these approaches have overlooked how discourses and narratives of violence are actually constructed. They are therefore generally unable to account for the fact that violence is a highly structured symbolic world that influences the lives and deaths of people. In the rare cases that such symbolism is taken seriously, it is characterized as a reservoir of ideological rhetorical resources from which political elites and subordinate groups draw upon to compete over the meaning of violence (Paley, 2002). However, as I demonstrate in this book, the competition and intertwining of different social spheres in the interpretation of violence cannot be reduced to mere rhetoric or an ideological instrument. Instead, it alludes to worlds of meaning linked to particular perceptions of morality, solidarity, and social order. Violence is read through these worlds