
Reconstructing the Memory of the Wounded Social Body: A Philosophical-Theological Reflection from the Search for Missing Persons in Mexico

© Carlos Mendoza-Álvarez

Boston College

Abstract: This essay analyzes the phenomenon of clandestine graves of missing persons in Mexico as a social, political, and philosophical problem, where theological clues are established. With the contributions of decolonial thought this reflection seeks to think the absence and, within it, to think the emergence of an alternative world promoted by the just people of history with the resistances they create to live the present with dignity and hope.

Keywords: missing people, resistances, survivors, messianic times

CLC: I731 **Document Code:** A **Article ID:** 2096-4374(2021)02-0033-06

Doi: 10.53397/hunnu.jflc.202102004

Human existence is built with emotions and actions¹ that give meaning to being here and now on this earth. Each day is a dawn that calls us to full consciousness, paying attention to the inner world that inhabits us and the outer world that welcomes us. The irruption of the world thus becomes a discovery, but also a call to inhabit it as a common home where it is possible to meet with other human beings and with the creatures that inhabit our land. Within this original way of existing arises a sense of belonging and common destiny that gives way to personal and community life, as well as to work, creativity, and rest.

This dawn often turns into a confrontation with a hostile and adverse world, either because of the uncertainty of obtaining the bread and shelter necessary for a dignified life, overcoming the obstacles of a civilization based on mass productivity and unbridled consumption. The estrangement that bursts into our lives can sometimes come from the feeling of being far from others because of the differences that soon impose themselves in the family, at work and in the city. And as the day progresses, the separation from the world of others becomes more acute, hurtful, and worrying. Then arises the lacerating question, who am I in a world of masks and shadows where certainties vanish and where the initial confidence of the morning turns into doubt and perplexity?

The return home after a day of work and toil, of toil and effort to be part of an ever more uncertain whole—at school or the office, the factory or the cornfield, the theater, or the church—is like recovering a bit of intimate space, with an air of family, to return to being oneself. At the end of each day, in the dusk of the intense day that comes to an end, some glimmers of hope sometimes emerge. The night that awaits us at home, with a table set and a thalamus of rejoicing, promises to be the space and time for the fulfillment of the original longing.

However, that ideal routine of day and night is broken when someone in our family is a missing person. There is no longer any time or rhythm possible for those who are searching for a daughter or son, sisters, husbands, aunts, cousins who have been swallowed by the spiral of criminal violence that sweeps the globe in the 21st century. The harmonious inner world we described at the beginning of this story is collapsed by an absence that hurts “like a thorn in the flesh,” as the apostle Paul of Tarsus (2 Corinthians 12:7), one of the main sources of biblical Christianity, put it. In its phenomenological sense, it is a rupture of time in subjectivity that is also a political disruption when it tears the social fabric because it calls into question the modern state, incapable of dismantling the network of trafficking in people, drugs, arms, human organs and other goods and products controlled by criminal mafias in collusion with companies and governments, at all scales, whether local, regional, or global.

In Mexico alone, in the last fifteen years, it is estimated that there are more than 100,000 missing persons (López web) from all social strata and religious creeds, gender identities and diverse nationalities, as well as trades and professions from all walks of life. In other countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, the phenomenon of forced disappearance is growing as an endemic symptom of an unprecedented civilizational crisis. This crisis must be understood as a systemic phenomenon in order to unravel its meaning, its internal structure, and the possible ways out of the labyrinth of absences that the escalation of global violence generates unceasingly.

1. Absence as a Philosophical Question

Modern Western philosophy began the construction of the Cartesian ego as a story of emancipation through rational knowledge, in particular techno-scientific knowledge, to dominate the world constituted since then as “nature.” The Cartesian distinction between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* was the cornerstone for building, over five centuries, a civilization of instrumental reason that was forged since the 15th century but that converged as a capitalist mode of production in the 19th century. This civilization reached its industrial climax in the 20th century with the generation of a new geological era called Anthropocene by the devastating impact of the human species, under the impetus of a form of industrial civilization called Capitalocene. For this reason, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the great Lusitanian thinker of the ecology of knowledges, proposes the germinal idea of proceeding to the “deconfinement of the Cartesian god” (web) to return to a perception and thought of the immanent presence of the divine in the world.

Some other contemporary thinkers such as Immanuel Wallerstein in the United States called this hegemonic civilization the world-system to denote the internal logic of capitalism in its pre-industrial, industrial, and post-industrial phases that subjugates the whole world. Other authors such as Victor Toledo in Mexico have created other approaches such as ecological ecology (35-55) to highlight the internal processes and strategies of capitalism itself in its production of goods on a large scale, at the lowest possible cost, thus producing the trashing of life. And some other authors, located in the Epistemic South as Galeano in Chiapas and other anti-systemic thinkers of Latin America and the Caribbean, have called this hegemonic techno-industrial world “the capitalist hydra” that metamorphoses in each new phase of its development, thus pointing out the power that has shown that capitalism is not in crisis but in global expansion, imposing the logic of enrichment by dispossession that Raul Zibechi in Uruguay, among other authors, has analyzed.

Let us not forget that this modern emancipatory meta-narrative of the individual subject had specific characteristics from its origins, as analyzed by the Argentinian Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel

and Silvia Rivera-Cusicanqui in Bolivia. It was a meta-narrative centered on a male, white, European, Christian, and proprietary subject. A couple of centuries later, with the Germanic Enlightenment in the 18th century, that project of modern civilization acquired an even more radical emancipatory approach, resulting in the autonomous individual in his ways of thinking, deciding, and hoping for himself, without heteronomy, that is, without any external influence. This enlightened stage of the development of modernity, besides being an ideal accessible only to a minority of the world's population, brought with it unbridled exploitation of nature, but also epistemicides, that is, acts of barbarism that destroyed other knowledge as modes of knowledge, social organization, and representation of the transcendent mystery of the real that peoples had developed over millennia of sapiential, ethical-political, and religious experience. These millenarian bodies of knowledge were subdued, and in most of the occasions destroyed, by the rationalist and empiricist machine that dominated the industrialization of the 19th century.

For this reason, decolonial and anti-systemic thought, since the end of the 20th century, have begun to dismantle this narrative and to reconstruct a different genealogy of the modern world based on “the sociology of absences and emergencies” (web), a perspective proposed by Santos from Portugal to rewrite the history of the world. In a convergent sense, Achille Mbembe from South Africa thinks of the globalized democracies from the dark side of necropower, that is, from those peoples subjected and colonized by a state model that administers death, no longer life as was the biopower of the modern welfare state analyzed by Michel Foucault. This ethical-political imperative of reconstructing history that highlights those vanquished by the machine of progress was underlined a century ago with critical acuity by Walter Benjamin, in the context of the consolidation of Nazism in Europe (389-400). Therefore, the rights of the dead are the guide to write a philosophy of history that stops the angel of progress.

But a century after that philosophical warning, well into the 21st century of the environmental crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, the question becomes even more radical because it opens the horizon of the rights of the living treated as the dead. In fact, due to the garbage disposal of life on a planetary scale, we speak today of the living dead, for example those who are “invisibilized” as garbage population that is not productive for the global market. But we also refer to the trashed lives of the disappeared persons who were not useful for the production-consumption chain of criminal merchandise and, therefore, were sacrificed and thrown into clandestine graves. As a fundamental strategy of this systemic violence is what the Argentine political scientist Rita Laura Segato has described as a war against women (615-624) because patriarchal capitalism identified women's bodies as spoils of war and territory of conquest for the consolidation of its power.

In this context of dominant *necropower* in the global village, the phenomenon of absences has become an ethical-political problem that puts governments and the modern state in check. But also, the ubiquity of this *necropower* has unveiled a question about the logic of enforced disappearance and what it reveals about the crisis of the state and the ongoing civilizational model. Indeed, the clandestine graves are the space and time representation of the current civilizational collapse. More than a metaphor for the absence of meaning, the clandestine graves are indicative of a crisis of meaning that is affecting globalized societies and that requires urgent critical inquiry to dismantle the power of the Capitalocene².

In this perspective, Latin American philosophical thought now brings together various disciplines and analytical perspectives to think critically about the phenomenon of absences that is expressed in a bloody way as forced migration, femicides, hate crimes, and forced disappearances. But, above all, this critical thinking seeks to think about the social “emergencies” that resist such violence, from the social, environmental, and countercultural movements that generate processes of social agreement in

the very fractures of the system.

In this framework of interdisciplinary debate, decolonial theory and mimetic theory are two theoretical instruments of high epistemological value for the understanding of this crisis. Here we will develop in the following two issues some ideas for thinking absence as a political and sapiential act of resistance that confronts the crisis and dismantles its logic of death.

2. The Resistance of the Survivors

Thinking from the fractures of history has been a constant in times of crisis. A century ago, Benjamin proposed the construction of the philosophy of history as a critical account that emerges from the vanquished, with the aim of opening a path to reverse the social destruction caused by the angel of progress (389-400). It is a task that would be carried out by the survivors, with the duty to respect the rights of the dead, in an act of subversion of history.

This socio-political praxis has given rise in the 20th century to a rewriting of history from the reverse side of hegemonic processes. In this perspective, decolonial thought in the epistemic South, for example, continues to develop this idea as the axis of the dismantling of the neocolonial capitalist narrative of the millenary patriarchy that even today subjects the majority of the population to *nuda vida* or bare life, but as specific subjectivities (women, indigenous peoples, and vulnerable populations) through control devices such as the concentration camps of the 20th century and the suburbs of contemporary megalopolises where the discarded of the system live.

But in the background of this post-Marxist thought there is a Hebrew source that must be recovered in all its sapiential and political depth. It is about, as Benjamin insinuated without going to the Hebrew background, a temporality different from that of progress. We refer to the “instant through which the messiah slips” that he points out in his *Theses for a Philosophy of History*. It designates the contracted temporality that defeats *Chronos* in its unstoppable logic of a linear time that is never fulfilled, the promise of a future that never arrives, to establish there precisely a “revolutionary” time that transforms violent history.

It is a question of a “kairological” time of the now where the other world bursts forth. A time that anticipates in an eschatological way the fullness of history through memory with justice and truth, opening the horizon of reconciliation, through the never-ending process of forgiveness as humanity remembered thanks to the praxis of the survivors.

The interpretation of the philosophy of liberation (Dussel 73-92), proposed in Latin America in the second half of the 20th century following Benjamin, focused on the emancipation of peoples from the yoke of capitalism and opened timidly to other slaveries generated by the hegemonic world. In this sense, for example, the political ecology proposed by Toledo (35-55) and other contemporary scientists allows us today to glimpse a comprehensive way out of the maelstrom of destruction of the world-system by interconnecting the various forms of violence with their primordial source, which is the arrogance of the techno-scientific civilization that has produced the Capitalocene.

In this framework of discussion of the crisis of instrumental modernity, the decolonial thought that emerges from the knowledge denied by hegemonic epistemology has another logic. There is a rationality that emerges from the vulnerable life of the systemic victims who transform this subjugation from their open wounds and from the scars generated by multiple violence. The path opened by the families of disappeared persons, in this sense, is a melting pot where this other

rationality emerges from the indignation in the face of absence and shared pain as a political power of mutual care, of rationality of affections, which can transform the world.

However, it is not only a political praxis because it arises from a wellspring of ancestral spirituality, as Sylvia Marcos pointed out in Mexico (25-45). In a world collapsed by the systemic violence of criminal mafias, the search for missing persons reconstitutes the public space from the non-place, sowing a seed of indignation and a cry for justice amid this crack in history. We call this inner and communal strength experienced by peoples in resistance here other knowledge and spirituality because they denote a wellspring of hope that is only accessible through an incarnated faith that life is stronger than death.

This fountain of life that does not resign itself to death, religions have called God. From there flows in an intense way an intelligence of the real that is a rupture with the world of systemic violence. Such wisdom makes possible the establishment of an alternative inter-subjectivity to the domination of the strongest. It is, in its theological sense, an always unfinished process of hope, incipient but firm, in a world to come as a commission from the dead to the living.

3. Memory as the Opening of Alternative Worlds

Thus, we come to consider in this last section the theological dimension of this reflection on absence as a political, philosophical, and theological problem.

It is not about the second-degree discourse which is theology itself as a critical reflection of the faith praxis of believing communities of various religious traditions. Rather we refer here to the sapiential source of life from which spirituality flows as conversion of the mind and heart to live the present as a unique time of redemption where justice for the dead is fulfilled. The term theological denotes the experience of subjectivity to access reconciliation amid violent societies. This original experience is attainable only through acts of graciousness and donation performed by the just people of history.

As a counterpart of this phenomenological process of subjectivity open to otherness, the idea of redemption arises. It is a theological idea updated in its philosophical sense in the 20th century by Franz Rosenzweig (205-242), who brought together post-Kantian thought with the Hebrew spiritual tradition as rationality in dialogue with Athens, following in the footsteps of his colleague Hermann Cohen (236-268). The idea of redemption, according to the German Jewish thinker, designates the horizon of the fulfillment of history as the overcoming of historical conflicts. But the way in which this overcoming proceeds is based on the concatenation of the divine acts of creation, revelation and redemption that constitute the core of the real. Each of these spheres represents a mode of correlation between the world, humanity, and transcendence, so that reconciliation thus has a cosmic, worldly, and spiritual connotation where everything is interconnected. The function of the philosophy of redemption in this perspective will be to contribute to the gestation of a thought that integrates this harmonious diversity of the created world with the divine world.

Following this vector of modern Hebrew philosophical thought, decolonial Christian theology—emerging from the resistances of social movements confronting diverse forms of violence—is beginning to reconstruct this founding trilogy from the world denied by the present hegemony. It will be necessary to carefully rethink the founding theological ideas in a decolonial context.³ Creation as an always unfinished process of humanity and new cosmoses, recognized in their constitutive fragility and, at the same time, in their own density of existence. Revelation of the other world that (in)emerges from beneath hierarchical societies. Redemption as “promise fulfilled” for bodies and territories

trashed by the power of patriarchal, colonial, and racist capitalism that always demands new victims to be sacrificed on the altar of the infernal cycle of production-consumption-devastation.

4. Conclusion

Summarizing, the memory that the relatives of the disappeared reconstruct during the civilizational collapse of our times opens the possibility of a future for all. This remembrance is, in its philosophical background, a form of temporality that occurs as an act of truth with justice, dignity and oblivion of those who are missing. And in its theological sense it is an act of redemption thanks to the just people of history and peoples in resistance that are nourished by an original source of dignified life that summons all.

Without this memory as a reconstruction of the lives denied, as an affirmation of the truth of the victims and as a clamor for restorative justice, there is no reconciliation possible, neither among human beings nor with the species that populate the common home.

With this ancestral baggage we can face, in these times of global uncertainty sharpened by the pandemic, the dilemma of living, narrating, and thinking the catastrophe as a foundational place of an uncertain future that becomes a horizon of hope when it is transformed, by force of ethical indignation and eschatological imagination, into the promise of another world where the life of the smallest is cared for and preserved as a gift and a task for all humanity.

Notes

1. We evoke in this first part the phenomenology of subjectivity in the category of vulnerability proposed by Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas half a century ago. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, 1990; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, Vrin, 1996; Jean-Luc Marion, "The Voice without Name Homage to Levinas," *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, edited by Jeffery Blooehchl, Fordham UP, 2000, pp. 224-230.
2. The Anthropocene as a geological era has been accelerated by instrumental techno-scientific reasoning in the second half of the 20th century. The result is globalized capitalism as an "ecology of capital" that generates wealth at the cost of cheapening life. Cf. Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, U of California P, 2017.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. "On the Concept of History." *Selected Writings, vol. 4: 1938-1940*, Harvard UP, 2003, pp. 389-400.
- Cohen, Hermann. "The Idea of the Messiah and Mankind." *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, Scholars, 2005, pp. 236-268.
- Dussel, Enrique Domingo. "From Fraternity to Solidarity." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, vol. 38, no. 1, Spring 2007, pp. 73-92.
- López, Oscar. "Desaparecidos en México." *New York Times*, 30 Oct. 2021, www.nytimes.com/es/interactive/2021/10/03/world/americas/mexico-desaparecidos.html.
- Marcos, Silvia. "Mesoamerican Women's Indigenous Spirituality: Decolonizing Religious Beliefs." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 25, no. 2, Fall 2009, pp. 25-45.
- Rosenzweig, Franz. "Redemption." *The Star of Redemption*, U of Notre Dame P, 2012, pp. 205-242.
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. "El fin del confinamiento del dios cartesiano." *Publico*, 30 June 2021, blogs.publico.es/espejos-extranos/2021/06/30/el-fin-del-confinamiento-del-dios-cartesiano/.
- Segato, Rita Laura. "Patriarchy from Margin to Center." *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, July 2016, pp. 615-624.
- Toledo, Víctor Manuel. "De que hablamos cuando hablamos de sustentabilidad? Una propuesta ecológico-política." *Interdisciplina*, vol. 3, no. 7, 2015, pp. 35-55.
- Wallerstein, Emmanuel. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Duke UP, 2004.