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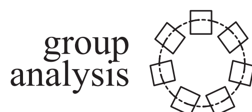

Response to 'The Mexican social unconscious—Part I: The roots of a nation' and 'Part II: Politics and group analysis' by Reyna Hernández-Tubert

Elisabeth Rohr

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In Mexico City

The 'Paseo de la Reforma' is the name of an impressive avenue crossing Mexico City, from east to west over a distance of 15km. This iconic street runs through the heart of the city and never sleeps. Cars and buses are rushing day and night over 10 lanes, passing a tree-lined park in the middle, surrounded by jacaranda trees with their violet blooms. Along the sidewalks, some of the city's mesmerizing skyscrapers offer amazing architecture; banks occupy upgraded luxurious colonial buildings, the design of the Mexican stock exchange is a symbol of wealth and power, reaching far into smog covered skies; embassies, hotels, coffee houses and restaurants, all of them heavily protected by uniformed and armed guards, line both sides of the avenue.

Walking down La Reforma turns a leisurely stroll inadvertently into an excursion of Mexican history, coming across numerous huge monuments like the 'Glorieta Cuitláhuac', commemorating one of the last Aztec emperors (1520) who died of smallpox, introduced by

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the Spanish invaders. A bit further down is the 'Glorieta de Simon Bolivar', honouring the great Latin American liberator from Spanish rule. Then there is the 'Monument to Cuauhtémoc', dedicated to the last Mexica ruler (tlatoani) of Tenochtitlan, brutally tortured to reveal the hideouts of gold and silver and later murdered by Hernán Cortés (1924). The mural painting of Siqueiros in the Museum of the Palace of Fine Arts (1950–51) offers a vivid impression of the '*Torment and Apotheosis of Cuauhtémoc'*, revealing the inherent violence of the conquest.

Finally, passing 'El Angel de la Independencia' and in the midst of all these luxurious buildings and historical monuments, the pathway is blocked abruptly in front of an assembly of poor and dilapidated looking small tents, surrounded by a fence of black and white photographs, showing close-up faces of numerous young men. Handwritten posters explain: These are the faces of 43 young men, who disappeared under mysterious, and up until today, unclarified circumstances in September 2014, in Iguala, Mexico.

Iguala 43

It is known that these 43 young men of indigenous background and students of a rural teachers' college in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico were forcibly abducted by police officers on September 26, in 2014, then handed over to members of the narco cartel 'Guerreros Unidos', and since have disappeared from the face of this earth. Their families have turned literally every stone in the outback of Iguala, in their desperate search for their sons, stumbling over more than 60 unknown mass graves, but never finding any human remains of their sons (BBC, 2015). However, by organizing continuous nationwide marches, they made sure that government officials all the way up to president Peña Nieto, who was in power at that time, were not able to eradicate this unresolved crime from their political agenda.

Standing in front of this almost surrealistic scene on La Reforma produces a sheer overwhelming feeling of shock, disbelief, immense sadness and pain. The tents and photographs in the midst of all this wealth and luxury make me freeze under the rays of a blazing sun.

Some first thoughts, trying to make sense of it: There are, in the heart of the city, images of immense wealth, prosperity and luxury, alongside historical monuments, referring to the nation's glorious and traumatic past. Then, unexpectedly, a very different reality blocks off the pathway; next to the symbols of wealth and power appears

this dehumanizing reality of massive violence, of killings and of 'forced disappearance', referring not to a far past, but to a horrifying present. And worst of all, there seems no doubt: Police and organized crime have been involved jointly in this incredibly brutal act of killing 43 young men, making sure, that all of them disappeared, without leaving any trace (Verza, 2020).

As group analysts, we are trained to search for coherence in a seemingly incoherent context, including contexts that reach far beyond any clinical context[1]. This dramatic enactment of protest and rebellion on La Reforma, draws attention to a crime that Mexican society cannot forget. As a reminiscence of a human rights crime, it urges the observer—maybe even unintentionally—to ask some disturbing questions: how do these seemingly incoherent images of wealth, violence and killing fit together? Is there any connection? What do these antagonistic and contradictory images of Mexican reality, enacted right in front of our eyes on this beautiful avenue of 'La Reforma', tell us? Can we really choose not to hear this desperate and excruciatingly painful cry for justice in the face of wealth and power, carved in stone in the heart of the city, as if for eternity, overshadowing these dilapidated tents and rain washed photographs of 43 dead men? As group analysts and psychoanalysts, should we not feel urged to focus our attention upon these antagonistic and disturbing images of a reality that might help us to understand something about destructive social and political dynamics in Mexican society and in that line of thought, maybe even understand something about the 'Mexican social unconscious'?

A Mexican social unconscious?

It is a novelty in the journal of group analysis to read two large accounts of Mexican history. The title of these two articles, written by Reyna Hernández-Tubert, the 'Mexican social unconscious' (Hernández-Tubert, 2021a, 2021b), generates a lot of curiosity and promises a fascinating reading experience, especially for those interested in Latin American history.

In the first part of these two articles, Reyna deals extensively with the Spanish conquest and all its devastating genocidal killings of the Mexican population of that time. She focuses especially on the brutality of the conquest, showing that the Spaniards tried with all their might to destroy the traditional culture and religion of highly developed, nevertheless also violent societies. Newer studies confirm

ritualized mass sacrifices in pre-Colombian times in Mesoamerica (Mann, 2011). Some of these traditional cultural and religious traditions survived in syncretistic disguise, like in the figure of Guadalupe, as Reyna explains.

Even though Reyna does not use this term and she does not say this explicitly, I understand her saying that the trauma of the conquest prevails, because the Mexican of today is undoubtedly the product of this violent conquest. To be the son or the daughter of a violated historical mother is such a painful and traumatizing 'memory' that it never vanishes. Reyna argues that this violent mixing of races assured survival, on the one hand, but produced at the same time a strong identification with the aggressor. Therefore, the trauma is still alive and for that reason, has to be recounted over and over again, like a never ending agony. This is also mirrored in Reyna's account of the Spanish conquest, even though, the history of the Spanish conquest fills thousands of books in Mexico (and worldwide) and has been studied and analysed in depth, tells it again, in her own words (and unfortunately without any references to well-known historical sources)[2]. Even though she does not spell it out, I assume, she suggests that the impact of the violent conquest of the Spaniards is today's Mexican social unconscious. There cannot be any doubt; the impact of the conquest still can be felt and overshadows today's social life and politics (not only) in Mexico (Hidalgo, 2011). However, the question is, how does the conquest influence today's society and politics? More importantly, what in effect is unconscious about the conquest? The violence? I doubt it, because as far as I can see, trauma and violence of the conquest have not been driven into the Mexican unconscious. On the contrary. This traumatizing violence of the conquerors is a vivid reality in art, in paintings (for example the murals of Siqueiros, Orozco, Rivera), in statues, monuments, spread all over the country, in a rich treasure of world-renowned literature and in numerous historical studies (Knight, 2002).

In addition, the specific violence towards women is represented in the tragic and iconic figure of Malinche[3], translator, mediator and escort of Hernán Cortés, mother of his first son and symbolic mother of the new Mexican race, the 'mestizos'. These two historical figures, Cortés and Malinche, are even symbolically represented in one of the most famous murals of Orozco, called 'Cortés y la Malinche'. A really stunning painting: *Under the foot of Cortés* (painted naked in a glaring grey-white), a distorted and disabled human being, obviously an indigenous man, shrunk to the size of a dwarf, desperately

reaching out for Malinche (painted naked in a rich brown), without being able to reach her.

It was obviously Malinche's ability to translate and culturally, to mediate the orders of the Spaniards that helped them to conquer the indigenous population with greater ease. Many songs and poems still ask today, was this outstanding indigenous woman a traitor or did she help her people to survive (Cypess, 1991)?

Malinche represents more than any other historical figure this ambivalence, which has to be understood as an essential part of the Mexican version of the identification with the aggressor. Unfortunately, Reyna Hernández-Tubert does not explore in depth these symbolic representations of the conquest and its violence. How can we understand a social unconscious if it is not related to specific circumstances, figures, experiences and especially to concrete traumas of past and present times (Hopper, 2018)? Reyna focuses exclusively on the Spanish atrocities and the genocidal reality of a conquest 500 years ago. She refers to the violence of the conquest in general; she does not take out one scene, one traumatizing incident to prove and to clarify her argument. Moreover, she does not explain, where and what is the link between the conquest and today's specific social unconscious of the Mexicans? It is not enough to state it as a matter of fact, saying the reality of today is a result of the violence of the Spaniards, without analysing the impact of the conquest and showing how and in which form the Mexican social unconscious expresses itself today or in which way it forms or influences today's social and political reality. Where and how does it show, in which perverted, distorted and symptomatic form does it emerge? Who are the aggressors of today? Are there any emblematic figures, representing this aggressiveness, these atrocities in present times? These questions stay unanswered also in the second part of the paper.

Here she describes Mexican history from independence all the way to the 21st-century, naming several famous and renowned presidents (like Benito Juárez, Lázaro Cárdenas), who have shaped the fate of the country. However, the list of these presidents only seems to serve one purpose, to finally be able to present one president, who is different and not corrupt, maybe a bit like Benito Juárez and Cárdenas, a great reformer. Reyna's enthusiastic description (added as a postscript) of today's president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, popularly known as AMLO, is understandable, especially if you compare him with some of the past presidents, who are responsible for the escalation of violence in the country, especially Calderón, president from

2006–2012, with his 'war on drugs' (The Guardian, 2016). AMLO indeed has brought hope into a seemingly hopeless political situation, trying very hard to change the political, economic and social situation of the country. Even though I fully understand and share her enthusiasm about a president, who seems to be an upright and sincere personality, fact is that the violence in the country has hardly changed since he took power, reports even say, it has reached a new record high (DW, 2020). Therefore, it seems unexplainable why Reyna leaves out all this 'newer' violence in her paper. She attributes violence exclusively to the Spanish conquest and allusively to some corrupt presidents, ignoring the reality of countless excesses of violence, of massacres and extrajudicial killings and of human rights violations that have terrorized the country and its people in recent years, up until today. It seems strange that she does not even mention this paradigmatic example of human rights crimes, this murderous killing of the 43, alive in the memory of the country, vividly represented in the heart of the city[4]. Nor are any of the other numerous (almost countless) massacres mentioned that happened in recent years. To name just two: the killing of 72 Latin American migrants in Tamaulipas/ Mexico in 2010 (Arroyo, 2021) by narco cartels and the more than 3,000 'femicidios' that happened in a period of only four years, between 2015–2019 (Hernández, 2019). To leave no doubt: this is the absolute short list of massive acts of violence and killings that have left traces of blood all over the country[5]. However, there is no mention of all this newer violence in Reyna Hernández-Tubert's paper[6].

Working as a psychoanalyst, I asked myself, whether Reyna's patients ever talk about the impact of these violent acts, about all these massacres happening daily and threatening the life of every citizen of the country? It would be hard to believe that her patients are not affected by this rampant violence or that they are able to ignore it. When more than 100,000 people joined the well-known poet and writer Javier Sicilia in his march in Mexico City (May, 2011) to condemn publicly the slaughtering of his son by members of a known drug cartel—in cooperation with the police—this event was covered by all TV stations, social media and newspapers (Padgett, 2011). It is simply not possible, not to know, not to perceive, not to observe and not to be afraid, if you live in Mexico.

As a group analyst, I am not able to understand the social unconscious without referring to the existing social context and to specific traumatizing incidents, embedded in this context. This is what group analysis tells and teaches us (Hopper, 2018). Of course, and without

any doubt, it is easier for me as a foreigner[7] to talk from afar about this massive violence in the country than for any Mexican. However, there are hundreds of excellent studies of historians, sociologists and psychologists, exploring and analysing the spreading of the unbound violence in this nation (Mackenbach and Maihold, 2015). These studies or clinical cases could have been used for explorations of the Mexican social unconscious. However, this has not happened.

To summarize my critique: Reyna Hernández-Tubert offers an extensive and personally coloured description of Mexican history under the title ‘Mexican social unconscious’, but then leaves it up to the reader to figure out how the Mexican social unconscious developed out of all the atrocities of the Spaniards and how it presents itself today. Something essential seems missing; the answer to the question: what precisely is the Mexican social unconscious? How can it be understood?

Therefore, I would like to focus in my response on issues of present day violence. I will return to the story of the Iguala 43 and consider this a case to be explored. This case, I think, symbolizes part of the ingredients of today’s violence in Mexico: the impunity, the abuse of power, the corruption of politicians, the corrosion of society, the seemingly unlimited violence. The impact this has on society and its people is clearly expressed in Doña Maria’s words, the mother of a disappeared son: ‘In former times we were afraid of the soldiers, but today it is much worse. Today we don’t even know anymore, who kidnapped and killed whom and for what reason. You cannot trust anybody anymore!’ (Halbmayer and Kar, 2012: 171) (author translation).

The Iguala massacre—a paradigmatic case for the analysis of a Mexican social unconscious

The mass abduction and killing of the 43 students was the greatest scandal during the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018). It represents recent failures and malfunctions of the Mexican government. The disappearance of the students and all ensuing cover up actions evoked massive protests throughout the country, ending in a severe political crisis (International Crisis Group, 2018). If anything, it was this abominable killing of 43 young promising men and the inability of official experts to find the perpetrators that eventually led to the victory of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in 2018—because he promised clarification of the circumstances of the killing, and the end of corruption.

It is worth a closer look at what happened in the aftermath of this case, because this case offers some significant indications of deep rooted causes behind the 'chronified violence' (Adams, 2017) and even some first glimpses of a social unconscious underlying these violent acts, terrorizing the country up until present times.

Talking about the social unconscious signifies to talk or to approach representations of social and political experiences that have been excluded from societal consensus (Lorenzer,1981) that are connected to massive trauma (Hopper, 2018), especially to a trauma that could not be mourned (Volkan, 2004).

The first and foremost question is; what is being excluded from societal consensus? What is the trauma that was not mourned? This seems easy to answer, remembering the case of the Iguala 43: Massive and arbitrary violence, the involvement of officials and the cooperation of police and organized crime and the denial of government officials.

What are the facts so far?

According to official reports, the students had planned to travel by bus to Mexico City to commemorate the anniversary of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre of the university students (This is the only massacre mentioned by Reyna Hernández-Tubert). Even though details remain unclear to this day, there is no doubt that the Iguala 43 were handed over by the police to a local crime syndicate. An official version claims they were mistaken for members of a drug gang (The Guardian, 2015). Even though some human remains of two of the students have been found, the bodies of the other 41 students seem to have disappeared forever. There are alleged suspicions that the Mexican Army was directly involved in the kidnapping and murder, claiming that two of the buses were secretly transporting heroin, without the students' knowledge. A drug lord supposedly ordered a colonel from the army to intercept the drugs; the students, as witnesses of the attack, were killed as collateral damage. They were turned over to members of the cartel 'Guerreros Unidos', then allegedly tortured and murdered and finally their corpses burned in a garbage dump. Iguala's mayor and his wife were later arrested, like more than 100 other suspects (44 of whom were police officers), but none of them were ever put on trial. Almost all of them have been released but many of them were heavily tortured in prison (Hernández, 2020).

The families of the victims have refused to accept this version of the story, which placed all blame on local actors and absolved the Federal Government of any culpability. In 2018, newly elected President Andrés Manuel López Obrador promised a new process of

clarification and announced the creation of a truth commission. Two years later, several leaders of a crime syndicate were arrested and charged with the murder of the students. Still, the families of the students also rejected this version of the truth, insisting that not only members and heads of organized crime and drug cartels were involved, but security forces, government officials, the military and the police as well.

This then finally allows a glimpse of the unimaginable truth, possibly an important clue to the Mexican social unconsciousness: There seems to exist a clandestine and well-established co-operation of organized crime (drug cartels), military, police, security forces, government and law officials and large parts of civil society all involved, voluntarily and/or by force, in drug trafficking. In a 'business' that produces enormous amounts of wealth, using fear, death threats, bribes and mercilessness brute force to reach its goals. This goal is to sell as many drugs as possible (mostly to an expanding US market).

Research of journalists has shown that there were people in Iguala watching the abduction, taking videos (to be found on the internet), but too afraid to talk. Death threats silenced everybody in town. To dare to talk meant risking your life (Hernández, 2020). The circumstances of this human rights crime, and of course the crime itself, had to be excluded from societal consciousness, because the cooperation between police, drug cartel and the military were obvious and known. Nevertheless, it was not the end of the story—because neither government nor law officials were able or willing to clarify the crime. There was a human rights crime, which everybody in Mexico knew about; it was widely reported on television, in newspapers, social media—and then there was impunity. The crime itself and the trauma connected to this killing and the ensuing impunity had to be excluded from all societal consensus.

To dare to talk and not adhere to the societal consensus, simply meant you might not survive. More than 100 journalists have been killed since 2000, because they dared to write about these types of violent reality, uncovering parts and participants of these clandestine criminal networks (Braun und Spinrath, 2020).

This ever-growing clandestine cooperation of drug cartels, civil society, politicians, police, military and law enforcement agents (up to the office of the General Attorney) make up the toxic cocktail of a Mexican social unconscious. Today this toxic cocktail is made up of 24.8 homicides per 100,000 people, taking place 19 on an international scale of homicides[8] (BBC, 2020).

Almost 300,000 people died since 2006 in this dirty war between official security forces and rampant drug cartels. More than 60,000 people are missing and about 60% of the killings have been attributed to the drug cartels, the rest to official security forces (The Guardian, 2016; Bechle, 2020; Council on foreign relations, 2021). Also AMLO was forced to acknowledge his powerlessness in 2019, when the son of Chapo Guzmán, recently send to life prison in the USA, was arrested in Culiacán. Within hours, heavily armed combatants of the Sinaloa-cartel terrorized the city, blocked off streets, burned cars, attacked the police and liberated prison inmates. Pictures of a city under siege appeared in social media. Fearing a bloody massacre, the Government decided to release the man unconditionally (Bechle, 2020).

Sadly, but one president alone is not able to change the reality of massive violence and the infiltration of drug cartels into society and politics just within a period of few years. There are simply too many crooks working for drug cartels and organized crime, being at the same time, in a position of power within the government and receiving support from security forces and civil society, when it comes to drug trafficking businesses.

A picture of the Mexican social unconscious is unfolding: Today it is not a foreign military power anymore, subjugating and killing Mexicans, but instead Mexican drug cartels killing Mexicans, seemingly without any remorse and exclusively for money by selling drugs. Just to prove the case; since 2006, more than 20 governors of Mexican states have been accused of corruption. Additionally, a report of the Mexican parliament from August 2010 stated that 70% of 2,439 municipalities were under the influence of drug lords and 195 communities were completely controlled by drug lords (Ehlers, 2013: 35). But that is not all: In December 2019 Genaro García Luna was arrested in the USA and accused of drug trafficking. García Luna was minister for public security under President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) and additionally responsible for Calderón's war on drugs. He was accused of having accepted millions of bribe money from the Sinaloa-cartel. In return he offered free escort for drug trafficking. Furthermore, he forwarded sensitive security information about pending lawsuits to the cartel and about rivalling drug cartels.

He is not the only villain: In October of 2020, a high-ranking military officer, a general in fact, was arrested in the USA. General Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda has been minister of defence under President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018). He was accused having received bribe money from a drug cartel (Bechle, 2020).

What then is the trauma behind the Mexican social unconscious? No longer able to blame the conquerors for all the misery, aggression and violence, there is a need to acknowledge that it is a Mexican, maybe your neighbour or a family member, that is the perpetrator who mercilessly slaughters anybody who endangers upcoming drug trafficking deals. The identification with the aggressor today is an identification with seemingly almighty drug lords. They are not outcasts of society and they definitely are not foreigners or any foreign army: They are a specific and clandestine group of Mexicans, admired by many for their wealth, their ruthless brutality and their seemingly unlimited power. For some, they are heroes. They are the antithesis of state owned law and order, obeying only their own law codex. They despise a government that is weak and unable to enforce law and order. There are numerous Netflix series, youtube videos, snap-shots of brutal killings, glorifying drug lords and turning them into heroes. The identification with the aggressor, the surviving principle of the conquest, has been transformed, but not abolished. The social unconscious is connected to the trauma of experienced violence, maybe even starting with the Aztecs, then continuing in a genocidal fashion with the Spaniards and nowadays evolving as violence of Mexicans against Mexicans. The trauma of the conquest could never be mourned, therefore never healed, because the violence is shaping today's society and is deeply embedded in all levels of society. The Spanish aggressors of 500 years ago have been transformed in the course of a failing mourning process into Mexico's drug lords.

Summary

The Mexican social unconscious is a toxic cocktail, made up of clandestine networks of drug cartels, police, military, government and law officials and civil society[9]. This truth has been excluded from societal consensus and works, because there exists an uncanny identification with the aggressor.

The trauma of the Spanish conquest could not be mourned because the new Mexican was the offspring of a mixing of races, child of a Spanish father and a violated Mexican mother. The conquerors' aggression survived in the disguise of a new form of aggression, exercised by Mexicans towards other Mexicans. The evolving trauma is that there is no trust and no confidence anymore. Mexico's government is not able or capable to protect its citizens, because drug lords and cartels have managed to take partially hostage of the country, the Government and its people as well.

Notes

1. Devereux (1967) has insisted and shown that psychoanalysis is not only a method, to be applied in clinical therapy, but also a method to understand the unconscious in a societal and cultural context.
2. I know this urge as well, when talking about German history, I always have to talk about the Shoah and when talking about Guatemala, I always have to talk about the impact of the armed conflict. The pain connected with these events cannot be rationalized easily.
3. Malinche's, story in short: Her father, a cacique, died when she was a young girl and her mother remarried and had a son out of this marriage. She then decided to sell Malinche into slavery to ensure all the wealth of the family went to her second born son. Malinche was sold various times as a slave before the Spaniards arrived. After the conquest, she was eventually given to Hernán Cortés, who recognized her linguistic talent and ordered her to be his escort, translator, mediator and mistress.
4. Publishing a paper now that has been finished in 2012 means it has to be brought up to date, especially concerning political developments.
5. For a list of recent massacres see BBC Jan 25, 2021 and March 19, 2021.
6. There are many Mexican psychologists, psychoanalysts and supervisors, who work with migrants in detention centres, with people who have been tortured in prisons, with families searching for their missing sons and daughters, trying to reach the United States, but never having arrived there, see: Duque y Rohr, 2018.
7. I am familiar with many aspects of Latin American history and reality, having done research about left behind children of migrants in Ecuador and developing a group analytic supervisory training in Guatemala from 2005–2020 (Duque y Rohr, 2018).
8. Only slightly behind Guatemala and Colombia. In comparison, Great Britain's rate is 1.2 and Germany's rate is 0.7.
9. I do not mean to say that every Mexican is part of one of these clandestine networks, but truth seems to be that there are more than 450,000 members of drug cartels and the livelihood of more than 3.2 million people depend on various parts of drug trade (Chew Sanchez, 2014).

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Elisabeth Rohr was Professor for Intercultural Education at the University of Marburg, Germany until 2012. She has been working as a group analyst, supervisor and coach in national and international organizations, and is engaged in online consultancy in Africa, Palestine and Afghanistan. *Address*: Schifferstr. 42, D-60594 Frankfurt, Germany. *Email*: erohr@staff.uni-marburg.de