Looking for *el Pozolero's* Traces: Identity and Liminal Condition in the War on Drug's Disappearances

Siguiendo las pistas del *pozolero:* Identidad y condición liminal en las desapariciones de la guerra contra las drogas

Carolina ROBLEDO SILVESTRE
Universidad Autónoma de Baja California
carolinarobledosilvestre@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the power of symbolic ritual actions performed by relatives of missing persons on the land of *el Pozolero*, to give them a place in the social world. The construction of community mourning is analyzed in the margins of social structure (liminality), and the process by which it provides new frameworks to interpret and make sense of disappearances in the War on Drugs.

Keywords: 1. disappearences, 2. liminality, 3. mourning, 4. Tijuana, 5. Mexico.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es demostrar la potencia simbólica de las acciones rituales llevadas a cabo por los familiares de desaparecidos en los predios del *pozolero*, para otorgar un lugar a los ausentes en el mundo social. Se analiza la construcción de la comunidad de duelo en los márgenes de la estructura social (lo liminal), y el proceso mediante el cual ésta alimenta nuevos marcos para interpretar y dar sentido a las desapariciones de la guerra contra las drogas.

Palabras clave: 1. desaparecidos, 2. liminalidad, 3. duelo, 4. Tijuana, 5. México.

In December 2012, after at least fifteen operations to search for human remains lasting a couple of years, experts from the Subprocuraduría de Investigación Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada-Office of Special Investigations on Organized Crime (Seido) found an abandoned farm on the outskirts of Tijuana with what could have been approximately one hundred corpses dissolved in caustic soda. It was organic matter poured onto the ground by Santiago Mesa, alias *el Pozolero*, responsible for disposing of bodies for the Tijuana cartels.

Mesa worked for several years for Teodoro García Simental, "El Teo," Arellano Felix cartel's lieutenant, and subsequently the operating arm of the Sinaloa cartel in Tijuana. On his arrest by the authorities in 2009, he confessed to having dissolved about 300 bodies in over eight years of working in Tijuana. However, when asked to identify some of the missing persons in an album containing their photographs, he claimed not to be able to recognize a single face.

The search for missing persons on *el Pozolero's* land began in December 2010, when Fernando Ocegueda Flores, president of the Asociación Fuerzas Unidas por los Desaparecidos de Baja California-Association of United Forces for Missing Persons in Baja California-, decided that in view of the lack of timely research leading to the whereabouts of living relatives, it was time to look for them underground. The disappearance of his son, a young graduate student, in January 2007, led him to assume the leadership of the struggle to demand investigation and justice in over 300 cases of disappearances that had taken place in Tijuana in the previous five years.

Like Fernando, other relatives of missing persons in Tijuana have found the public sphere to be a refuge for surviving the experience of disappearance, which profoundly affected their lives. Meeting up with others in similar circumstances enabled bereaved relatives to provide a space for the absent person and find one for themselves.

This liminal condition of the missing, which places them in the realm of the impossible, the unspeakable and the diffuse, offers a way to construct a *communitas*. This article explores this experience using the theory of Turner (1974), who invites us to think of liminality as a space of possibility and pure creation.

Events in Tijuana have created a specific way in which family members assume the search for the missing and create practices and discourses around their absence. The existence of *el Pozolero* has profoundly affected this experience, given its strength as a source of meaning surrounding the fate of missing persons. In order to shed light on this process, this article begins with a theoretical examina-

tion of the concepts of liminality and *communitas* of Victor Turner (1974) in a dialogue with the proposals of social science to understand the social dimension of mourning. It subsequently proposes an analysis of the collective practices carried out on the lands of *el Pozolero* as processes that contribute to the construction of a new category by which to lend meaning to the recent disappearances in Tijuana and Mexico.

LIMINAL STATE AND BEREAVEMENT: THEORETICAL ROUTES

Liminality is located in the cracks of social structure: where roles, status, class and other types of stratification and classification lose their organizational and explanatory power. Based on his studies of tribal communities and Arnold van Gennep's theory of "rites of passage" (Turner, 1974:231), Turner suggests that liminality occurs as part of a process that includes separation, liminality and reaggregation.

Separation consists of the physical or symbolic marginalization of the individual from his or her social structure or from a certain framework of pre-established cultural conditions ("a state"). The liminal period, for its part, is a state of ambiguity characterized by the inability to be socially defined. And reaggregation is the return of the individual to the social structure, to a "state" or role that fits inside the establishment. Rituals are crucial in this process, since they act as a sequence of symbolic, transformative acts that reveal the main classifications, categories and contradictions of cultural processes.

Although the author does not address disappearance from his concept of liminality, the latter has made an enormous contribution to studies on the subject (Panizo, 2010; Regueiro, 2010). From his theory, Turner allows one to understand disappearance as a process of separation from the missing person regarding his social roles, and his place in the world of everyday and social life. This separation not only affects the family and personal life of those suffering his or her absence, but destabilizes the general order, because of the state of uncertainty implied by the lack of a social category into which missing persons may be placed.

Much of the struggle of the families of missing persons in Tijuana and Mexico in recent years has involved precisely the work of giving the missing person a specific framework of meaning within the context of the events surrounding disappearance and violence nowadays. That is why many of the recent practices and discourses associated with disappearance regard the *War on Drugs* as a narrative source that provides a social space for reflecting on the absence of missing persons.

The aspect associated with the shared experience of loss has been widely studied by an anthropology of death that explores the processes of ritualization concerning the body of the dead in the group (Augé, 1998; Baudrillard, 1976; Ariès, 1977). Functionalist and structuralist perspectives of anthropology, developed in the early 20th century, were particularly interested in the value of the ritual accompaniment of death as a means of classifying the status and importance of the absent subject, as well as the respective functions and attributions of the bereaved.

These approaches enable one to understand funerary ceremonies as an element that concerns not only the family but also the entire social group to which the missing person belonged: "Thus, death is conceived as the social recognition of remaining united and acknowledging oneself through common ancestors, and creating a special mechanism for bringing individuals closer together." (Duche 2012). A propos of this, Augé (1998) notes that the ritual surrounding death is designed to provide "treatment" (interpretation and control) of the event (illness, death, accident, a casual event)." In other words, it makes it possible to direct the unknown status of the other toward what is already known, thanks to a relational process in which the bereaved and their community are involved.

The relational process can be understood from Turner's theory as the construction of *communitas*, which provides a specific framework for integrating ambiguity into the world of the living and providing a kind of social "treatment" for absences. This shows how for Turner, social structure is not a rigid, inflexible construction, since liminoid spaces open up a unique range of possibilities for transformation.

In liminality, the missing person is an individual devoid of social insignias and properties, who is in a state of transition to something else. That something is collectively constructed through ritual practice and discourse. As a space outside social structure, the *communitas* is characterized by being a spontaneous, self-generated construction. It is the bond that unites people beyond any formal social tie.

It is therefore an antistructural, undifferentiated, egalitarian and non-rational (although not irrational) bond shared by a group of individuals who share the same experience of the liminal.

For the case studied in this paper, the *communitas* is presented as the social experience of a group of relatives of missing persons who share narratives, ritual actions and forms of identification in the individual and collective purpose of making sense of the marginal status of disappearance.

According to Turner, there is a dialectic relationship between social structure and *communitas*, as part of what the author calls "societas" or "society," which

will be translated as "social" here. This social experience is definitely a constant relationship between the established and the spontaneous, processes and their interstices, and continuity and rupture. Ritual action is located at the heart of this social experience. Rites of passage serve as practices that make it possible to maintain the established order. In the case of the dead, rituals of burial, wakes or cremation enable the community and relatives to socially and symbolically locate the absent person in the world of the dead, and in their new role in the world of the living.

The complexity of the phenomenon of the missing lies precisely in this point, since it does not contain a spectrum of rituals that allow the absent subject to make the transition to a new state. The empirical studies by Laura Panizo (2010) in the case of disappearances in Argentina show how the lack of a body breaks down the categories established around death, leading to practices and attitudes that go beyond the scope of "normality" (Panizo, 2010:19). This difficulty in ritualizing the absence of a loved one occurs in the closest circle of his or her social relations: family, friends, but also the broader social context to which the subject belongs.

This social condition of mourning must also be considered when processes of mass killings or disappearances are studied in the context of an armed conflict or war. Its importance lies in the political and cultural power of the collective experience, as a process of seeking meaning and restoring order. In order to understand this dimension, some authors have made a distinction between grief and mourning, as two simultaneous, concurrent processes. Grief refers to the individual or psychological response to loss (Pérez-Sales and Lucena: 2000). Or, as DuBose says (1997), it corresponds to the emotional response that comes from within. Conversely, mourning refers to shared pain and the cultural practices associated with it (Pérez-Sales and Lucena, 2000). In the words of DuBose (1997), this would be the process of incorporating the loss of life into the world.

From the perspective of these authors, mourning as a social process expresses a scenario of mutual relations between the public and the private. This means that the context of the interpretation of death is also a framework for community building (Lomnitz, 2004; Butler: 2006). Based on these principles, the sociological perspective on mourning shown here explores the network of relationships from which the value of a life is defined and its incorporation into "us," in the comings and goings in the world of individuals into the world of the *communitas*.

According to Judith Butler, mourning places the individual in the world of the other: "Mourning teaches the subjection to which we submit our relationship with others in ways we cannot always tell or explain" (Butler, 2006:49). This inter-subjective condition of the individual expressed in mourning also indicates that the body has an invariably public dimension: "Delivered from the outset to the world of others, the body takes its traces, is formed in the crucible of social life. Only later, and without any doubt can I claim my body as my own, as indeed I do so often" (Butler, 2006:52). So the missing not only belong to the world of his or her closest relatives, but their bodies—in this case their absence—also create a conflict for their social group.

Thus, the mourning surrounding their disappearance, like death, demands family and social rituals to resolve the liminal state of the gap created by absence. As explained in the following sections, the construction of *communitas* and the category of missing persons in the context of the War on Drugs draws on rituals that seek to lend meaning to the condition of the absent person and forge an identity for them as a social subject.

But ritual action is not only important for lending continuity to the processes of social structure, such as the change from one role to another or the change of status from living to dead. It is also essential for the consolidation of the *communitas* generated outside the structure. Joint symbolic action stabilizes shared symbols and strengthens group identity. The way these processes are expressed in the case of Tijuana is described below.

COMMUNITAS: SHARED GRIEF

At the center of the individual and social experience of grief lies the collective experience of the group of mourners, which can be understood as a "community of suffering" (De Alencar, 2009). These communities produce narratives that sustain collective belonging and can sometimes be expanded outward, creating mobilizations around the shared drama: "Essa experiência comunicada e compartilhada pode mobilizar a ação política das vítimas" (De Alencar, 2009:9).

According to Cárdia (2000), violent crimes are associated with contexts where there is an absence of social organization, understood as low participation in group activities, a lack of church affiliation, and other factors such as greater mobility among inhabitants, unemployment and high population density. Other authors (Scheper-Hughes, 1997) consider that in "cultures of death," people become ac-

customed and indifferent to violence and families that are unable to flee become isolated, restrict their relations with the community, withdraw from collective life and withdraw into domestic life.

Unlike these approaches, which highlight the disintegrating potential of death in regard to the social fabric, authors such as Patricia Tovar suggest that processes of violence also "help to reinforce or change social structures, opening up the possibility for it to also be an experience of personal growth" (Tovar: 2004, 279). Bussinger (2008) shares this point of view by positing that grief may reveal a new form of social participation, linked to collective action to achieve social justice and recognition. In his study of the "Del Espíritu Santo" (Of the Holy Spirit) organization in Brazil, Bussinger notes that this organization of mothers (of murdered or missing children) emerges as a "place in the world," a space in which they identify with others with the same pain and build relationships of solidarity and unique recognition. Acceptance, says the author, is what leads the women to participate in the group. And this acceptance has to do with the spontaneous, supportive nature of the *communitas*.

While not all relatives of missing persons in Tijuana participate in collective action, it is true that the experience of groups present in the public space has profoundly changed the framework of meaning in which disappearance is interpreted and experienced in this social space nowadays.

In Tijuana, disappearance associated with organized crime and drug trafficking has achieved a public presence through the media since the early 1990s, when most of the cases involved illegal arrests by the police authorities in their attempt to obtain information from key witnesses (Robledo, 2012). But it was not until 2008 that the families of victims became visible as a group when they began to demonstrate in a sit-in in front of the palace of the State Government of Baja California. By then, disappearances had increased sharply, together with the number of violent homicides in the city.

Many of the missing were "taken" from their homes or public places by armed commandos. Others were abducted by small criminal groups that demanded a ransom and never returned the hostages while still others disappeared one day without a trace. Although there were substantial differences between the cases, they were neutralized in the effort to build a common narrative that identifies the drama as a shared situation. This is possible because the relatives of the missing shared the same experience: the degrading, exhausting tour of public law enforcement offices and the passage of time without obtaining a response. It is precisely

this encounter with institutions and the loss of their credibility that permeates the shared experience of loss. In this respect, much of the plight of the families of the disappeared involves demanding an acknowledgement of their pain and an institutional response in terms of investigation and justice.

The possibility of creating a common identity with which to describe individuals as "missing" provides specific conditions for the social and political discussion of this category and at the same time enables the demands of the bereaved to be inserted into the social space in which they begin to discuss the meanings associated with security and violence. Thus, the *communitas* is gradually constructed in the gap provided by the crisis of social structure, and it is through social action and ritual that the bases of a new category to incorporate disappearances into this context are established.

THE DESECRATED BODY: BELIEF IN DEATH

The ambiguous situation of disappearance and the loneliness of the bereaved is compounded by the iconic and symbolic force of the violence associated with the War on Drugs, which focuses on the body and whose bloodthirsty nature creates a framework of terror around the imaginaries of death and disappearance. In this context, the search for human remains responds to the need to put an end to the liminal status of the missing, but also to the collective construction of beliefs and narratives that place the absent body within a specific scenario of violence which seeks to lend it meaning.

The body of a missing person in Tijuana is given meaning through the media discourse which generates its own narrative about the current state of things: the everyday occurrence of headlines and stories about mutilated, decapitated and disintegrated bodies creates a framework for interpreting the condition of missing persons: a body that bears witness to terror, an anomalous, dehumanized body. The images of terror surrounding death in Tijuana make the relationship with the absent body controversial, meaning that the relatives of missing persons accept death as a possibility for their loved ones. The case of Tijuana in particular is compounded by the existence of *el Pozolero*, who has become a reference point for the struggle and ways to handle the grief of those affected by the disappearance of their relatives.

The search for bodies in Tijuana began in the wake of *el Pozolero's* arrest and responds narratively to his statements. Relatives responded to the terror created

by this man's words to make sense of the possible fate of their missing. In this context, the search for bodies has two purposes: first, to provide proof of the crime, which will force the authorities to respond to a problem that has not yet been made visible; and second, the possibility of building a relationship with the missing person.

But looking for bodies is in itself a thorny path in terms of the identity of both the subject and the community of mourners. The study conducted in Argentina by Panizo shows that in some cases, the search for bodies could destroy the shared sense of identity among the community of mourners. The bodies that appeared destroyed the collective forms of identification, first separating the individual found from the rest of the missing persons and then their relatives from the remaining mourners (Panizo, 2010).

This could explain why in some historical situations, such as those described by the author, the demand that the missing be found alive, as the case of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, is assumed as a collective political decision. Over time, these claims have become more flexible while the search for remains has been accompanied by the reconstruction of memory. But Panizo argues that finding bodies visibly affects the identity of the group and the relationship to the liminal state. If a missing person appears, whether dead or alive, he ceases to belong to the marginal condition of liminality, breaking the social bond of the community of mourners by violating the essence of communion.

The recent case of the missing in Tijuana has its own characteristics. First of all, the search for human remains can be interpreted precisely as an opposing force to the possibility of separation from the group. Although it can destroy the liminal condition of missing persons and lead to a possible split within the group in a hypothetical future, the search for bodies in Tijuana has become one of the symbolic, ritual actions that have strengthened the social acknowledgement of their pain. It has also strengthened the presence of the category of "missing" in public space, lending cohesion to the narrative shared by family members.

Since liminality is the "realm of pure possibility" (Turner, 1974), the search for bodies is presented as a suitable field for the construction of narratives and meanings to fill that void. In the case of the disappearances in Tijuana, this state enables certain shared beliefs to achieve a status of common narratives and drive both the construction of *communitas* and the recognition of a new category of disappearance.

In order to understand how the narratives and actions that drive the resolution of the liminal state are created, it is useful to examine the studies published by Emilio

de Ípola on contexts of uncertainty. According to the author, the lack of information on tragedies such as disappearance makes the expectations of the bereaved converge with rumors that may achieve a level of beliefs that lend meaning to what is happening in these scenarios: "Naturally, a social environment constructed in this way leads those engaged in it to a systematic, almost obsessive search for signs" (De Ípola, 1997:91). These narratives begin as rumors or threats which, converted into belief, trigger social activities by the community involved (De Ípola, 1997).

In the specific case of disappearance in Tijuana, the threat of the death of the missing person achieves a degree of belief that drives actions such as the search for bodies. Without shared beliefs, the group could degenerate to the point of disappearance. These beliefs must therefore enjoy validity and credibility among those who share them so that they become an engine of the fight.

The belief in the possible death of the missing and the threat of oblivion by society creates a field of discussions and negotiations over the identity of the missing and promotes the struggle by their families. Overall, the state has shown a systematic indifference to the cases of disappearance and it is only since 2011 that it has included this category in its speeches and policies, albeit in a fragile, still exclusive manner. The time that has elapsed between events and the present make it increasingly difficult to conduct investigation and finding the missing alive.

Given these circumstances, the search for bodies is a political decision: relatives of the disappeared in Tijuana found this a means of solving their grief and have made greater progress in terms of support and logistics in the search for dead bodies than in their attempts to find survivors or culprits. This process allows us to see how beliefs about death and the threat of oblivion have been consolidated as a trigger for action by relatives in Tijuana. The following section presents an event that demonstrates the theoretical assumptions put forward above.

ON THE LAND OF EL POZOLERO

On Saturday April 23, 2011, relatives of missing persons carrying white crosses adorned with a black ribbon arrived at an abandoned farm in a plot of land in Valle Bonito, on the outskirts of the city of Tijuana. It was Easter Saturday, the day when the Catholic Church celebrates the burial of Christ and the moment chosen by the bereaved to perform a ritual to commemorate those killed in these fields: victims of *el Pozolero's* method for eliminating bodies. A month earlier, the Seido had found the first human bones and teeth in the middle

of a quagmire containing a mixture of soil and organic matter. Cameras, microphones and journalists accompanied the small procession that began at the entrance to the farm and ended in front of a mound of earth from which experts had removed human remains. Relatives of the missing buried the crosses in the soil, which began to exude a viscous, reddish material, causing widespread panic among the attendees. Lourdes picked up the organic matter with her hands and burst into tears in front of the television cameras recording the event. She was accompanied in her despair by all the relatives present while the cameramen zoomed in on the image. Cristina Palacios (RIP), president of the Citizens' Association Against Impunity, expressed the pain of this episode: "This is not an experience I would wish for anyone. To see this 'mole' that emerged from the earth, and to imagine that one day, it might have been a relative of some of the people who just went there to pray for our relatives. As I said at the scene, God rest his soul" (Palacios, 2011).

Since then, the image was established as common narrative of the identity of the missing, embodied in this "earth mole." For the families of missing, the materialization of this image of violence was an unexpected sign of the events that they were representing through their ritual. Through its embodiment, the image of pain and cruelty publicized by the media, provided families with a reason to demand answers from the government. In this respect, the finding served as proof of the violence and as a testimonial of an excluded memory, as Lourdes declared in a statement she offered the media during the episode:

> This is organic matter (taking it into her hands), which you can see, proving that they are here. Here is the blood, they are here, what more proof do they want? What do they want? If the authorities are unable to do anything, let us do it... They were not all criminals, *they* are the criminals. They are ignoring the lives of these innocent people and even if they were guilty, they also deserved a trial (Lourdes, personal communication, April 23, 2011).

The corporeality of possible death, synthesized in the newly found material, produced rejection and anger among the relatives, and at the same time, established an imaginary, a belief that would guide the struggle. The testimonials of pain accompanied by the image obtained by the media in the episode of the Easter Saturday were installed as a narrative that framed the limits of the identity of the absent subject. From a sociological point of view, it is an essential event for the

construction of collective identity, understood as the confirmation of a shared belief that serves as an engine for joint action. It is not, however, an isolated episode, but rather a process that may have begun with the capture of *el Pozolero* a year earlier and his first press statements. Hector de Mauleón (2009), a journalist from *Nexos* magazine, recalls the moment when the journalists were taken with *el Pozolero* to tour the site of Ojo de Agua, located in the east of the city:

"Who did you disintegrate here?"

"I don't know who they were. They just gave them to me."

"Did you chop them up?"

"No, I put them into the drums whole."

"How long did they take to dissolve?"

"Fourteen or fifteen hours."

"What did you do with the remains?"

"I buried them."

"Where?"

"Here", indicating the ground under his feet with his chin.

Thereafter, *el Pozolero'so*'s mediatized testimonial began to establish beliefs that would be ritualized on Easter Saturday, as a representation of the tragedy suffered by the families of the missing. According to Susan Sontag (2003), tragedy as a spectacle is installed in these spaces, where images take on a political dimension as bearers of particular meanings that vary according to the interests of those who use them, but also of time and space.

Taking up the position of Sontag (2003), the cry of a mother carrying a piece of earth connoting death refers to at least three key issues. The first is the existence of violence shown through its consequences embodied in the disintegrated corpses. The second involves the political construction of the identities of the missing subjects on which an image is built through the ritual. The third issue is the bodily presence of the missing person as a means of communicating and re-establishing their position in the world of the living.

RITUAL AND ITS POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Christian burial and mourning are an essential part of the Judeo-Christian cultural matrix, associated with the traditional idea that the absent relative is in heaven (or some equivalent symbolic space) and that it is therefore possible to talk to him (Baeza *et al.,* 2007). Thus the dead person are given a new life without annihilat-

ing them, through the ritual and physical space in which they are performed. That is why the cemetery is so important as a space for the continuity of the relationship with those who are no longer here: "He who dies therefore has a dual existence with the bereaved: one linked to the intangible space recreated on the basis of imaginaries that draw on cultural and religious beliefs, and another physical one, linked to the grave" (Arboleda and Hinestroza, 2006:177).

Obviously, in the case of disappearance, these possibilities vanish, forcing mourners to rethink traditional practices within the liminal state. In this context, the practices developed by the relatives of missing persons on *el Pozolero's* land have a symbolic importance that should be valued because they give the bereaved an opportunity to do something for the absent: "To have at our disposal the means that somehow connect us with their existence" (Landsberg, 1940:83). Symbolic burial rituals, altars in the intimate space, communication through dreams, through meetings with third parties (soothsayers, shamans, people with special gifts, etc.), sit-ins, masses and public manifestations of pain are some of the alternative ways to construct a relationship with absent persons and integrate them into the world of the living.

Balandier (1994) states that it is necessary for the dead person to be treated in the prescribed manner so that he does not become an agent of disorder wandering among the living but rather a beneficial power who acts on their behalf. He notes that only ritual symbolic work can turn something negative (potential) into something positive (actual).

In Tijuana, the discovery of remains continues to encourage the construction of a symbolic repertoire to make sense of the disappearance and question oblivion. The anomalous body, the one that is out of place, the violated body referred to by Carozzi (2006), the body of the missing, empty, in suspense, triggers the urgent need to respect the bereaved (Carozzi, 2006:104). And this need gives shape and strength to the collective pay discourse in the public arena. In other cases, such as Guatemala, for example, so many processes of exhumation have taken place that the process itself has lost its "Social potential to be included in the collective memory" (Pérez-Sales and Navarro, 2007:80).

But that is not the case in Mexico, at least for now. The organic matter shown to relatives and society through the media proves that the missing have been killed in the context of a social conflict and constitutes proof of this with all the symbolic power of the violence it summarizes. The public nature of the ritual action performed in these spaces permits the construction of meanings shared by the

community of mourners, and the gradual establishment of a social category that provides a space for those who are absent.

The findings are also important because they generate a new discursive space in recent Mexican history. The remains found in Tijuana and the mass graves found in other states of the country in recent years are a novelty in a country where although disappearance has been a systematic strategy at different periods in national history, the search for bodies has not been a constant. The recently discovered bodies and human remains dramatize excessive violence (Blair, 2005) and constitute a symbolic power that can transform the frameworks of interpretation of disappearance, and the relationships that weave their integration into the political and social life of the country.

The recent finding of mass graves, far more common in the past five years, is due to other reasons unrelated to the government's urgent needs to solve crimes associated with disappearance. These are unforeseen circumstances that are usually achieved as a result of citizens' complaints rather than a process of investigation. On a visit to Mexico in March 2011, one of the members of the UN Expert Group on Enforced Disappearances said that, "In Mexico there are no clear rules for the exhumation and identification of mortal remains, or for their storage" (Alcántara and Otero, 2011). Thus, the social action undertaken by the relatives of victims in cities such as Tijuana is also driving institutions to transform their skills and respond more efficiently to the new realities.

It should be recalled that the discovery of the remains in Tijuana happened within a national context of powerful tensions. After the death of the son of writer and government opponent Javier Sicilia and the discovery of graves in Tamaulipas and Durango (*El Universal,* 2011), the violated bodies made sense in terms of political demand. Their finding revealed the consequences of a general state of violence. Media images and the discourse of the government's opponents begin to subvert the stability of an official discourse in which the cruelly exposed bodies had been pigeonholed as war casualties and collateral damage. Now the concept of victim begins to be positioned in the center of the agenda and demands a reconstruction of the symbolic frameworks within which war had previously been understood. The case of Tijuana is in itself a challenge to the discourse that marginalizes the corporeality of the absent persons and assumes as an excuse for inaction.

The missing person, embodied in terms of terror, acts as a trigger for resistance and mobilizes the emotional, social, and political resources to gain a place in the world to which he belonged. The symbolic act of burial is at once individual and

collective. It affects the bereaved in their personal pathways to processing grief and society in its frameworks of interpretation and disputes over the meanings associated with disappearance in violent times.

CONCLUSIONS: TO A NEW CATEGORY OF DISAPPEARANCE IN MEXICO

The case described in this paper shows how the loss of a loved one triggers different practices and symbolic resources at the intrapersonal and relational level. This process occurs through the imposition of common images of death and disappearance, as well as through the resistance to the establishment from a liminal space.

The collective response to the liminality of disappearance contains a challenge to individualism and oblivion, since it places in the public sphere that which had been intended for privacy, which modernity had removed from the public sphere: pain and death itself. At the same time, it becomes a demand for the memory of those who suffer the consequences of an unbalanced social and political system, since deaths and disappearances only serve to make visible the vulnerability of certain populations in regard to others.

If disappearances are in themselves a deconstruction of meaning, these are collective actions that constitute a framework of social recognition for interpreting and integrating them into our social life. The case of Argentina is proof of this. In time, the missing became a social category, a symbol of a particular, tragic event in national history that has encouraged the search for knowledge, truth and justice.

The conclusions of this article are oriented towards this point, and are nothing more than an incentive for future inquiries. Mexican society is witnessing the construction of a new category to understand, name and locate the missing in our current context. The condition of missing within the War on Drugs, shifts from being an isolated situation to a collective fact, enabling the creation of a social category. It is a category that identifies the missing as the disappeared, as victims, as a result of conflict and as social subjects. And while it fails to reinstitute the liminal nature of their condition, it does allow one to place them in the field of public disputes due to their existence as part of society.

This in turn allows us to conceive of disappearance as a socio-historical category that derives its meaning from the context and the network of social relations to which it belongs and from which it is interpreted. In time, it will be necessary

to begin to identify the features of this category, which can already be perceived through a substantial change in terms of its historical precedents.

In order to provide a description of this new category, it can be said to be a missing person whose corporeality experiences the effects of a bloody violence that denigrates and erases the faces of victims. It is, therefore, a category representing a truth, while erasing the stories and name in a symbolic process that is not simple: at the same time as it reduces the identity of the missing person in the inability to give a name and a biography to the finding, it provides evidence of violence and allows relatives to affirm the subject in the public space. It shapes a path for the social affirmation of a subject who was previously unknown and excluded.

This category has gradually been installed as part of the recent struggle by the victims of violence, driven by the families of those missing and murdered across the country, which has elicited a bureaucratic response from the government. It entails the exercise of power and violence by actors seeking to conceal crimes and terrorize through disappearance.

Another key fact in this category is of course the context in which it takes place. Unlike disappearances during the dirty war, not only in Mexico but in much of Latin America, involving repression mechanisms used by the government to eliminate the opposition, today's disappearances form part of an ambiguous framework of accountability and actors. This does not mean that we do not experience the continuation or intensification of earlier forms of repression, but rather that these situations, which continue to occur, acquire other meanings due to the importance of the symbolic situation within which they are framed. The War on Drugs offers its own interpretations of war, repression, the enemy and therefore disappearance. Stigma, lack of clarity, unrecorded crime rates, are the general features of this incipient category.

It is essential to wait for time to elapse to consider the development of this process, whereby future generations will be able to explore the category "missing" at this moment in Mexican history. To this end, the narratives and resistance provided by regions such as the northern border of Mexico and in this case Tijuana are crucial to the establishment of a new framework for understanding violence and its victims.

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