

Thoughts on Violence and Modernity in Latin America, in Light of Arno

Mayer's *The Furies*¹

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I.

A history without violence would, for us at least, be unrecognizable *as* history. Yet, paradoxically, violence as phenomenon appears to exist apart from the history in which it is omnipresent. Violence seems, almost unconsciously, to found the historical imagination itself and at the same time to exist apart from it, as a moral or metaphysical absolute. In the final analysis this no doubt has to do with the impossibility of disassociating the idea of violence from that of death as physical annihilation. Taken to its extreme, violence could end history by destroying virtually all historical agents. Indeed, it must rank as one of the great historical feats of modernity that is has actualized what was before this merely theoretical possibility and even learned to make us accommodate ourselves to it in our daily lives. Alongside the abstract repugnance it universally merits in the language of official ‘values,’ violence as means and as sheer adaptation advances at a sure and accelerating pace. Whatever they may convey on the level of official historical sanctions, the stories and images of catastrophic violence--whether of Auschwitz or Hiroshima, of the *Escuela de Mecánica* or El Mozote, or for that matter of Columbine High, 9/11, Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib--inform us just as predictably of the adaptive

¹ This essay will appear in the forthcoming book, *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War*, Greg Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph eds. (Duke University Press).

cost that lived history can be relied upon to exact from its subjects: it *is* this bad, it will continue, and it will get worse. The real likelihood of violent annihilation becomes for many something to be factored into the equations of contemporary life, as one would a marriage or a retirement, while for the rest its specter becomes a permanent part of the domestic landscape.

Thus the forbiddingly difficult task of *historicizing* violence, political or otherwise—a task now, in the age of preemptive wars and suicide bombings, rendered more difficult and more urgent than ever. This if nothing else is what so emphatically commends the work of the historian Arno Mayer, which in part occasions this essay and the volume to which it seeks to contribute. In works such as *The Persistence of the Old Regime, Why did the Heavens not Darken?* and *The Furies*, Mayer has effectively withstood the nearly universal tendency that, by allowing the abstract and formal repudiation of violence to become the ideology of a real, daily adaptation to its regimes, absolves modern political history of its inherently violent foundations. Mayer marshals an impeccably objective historiography to prove, in *The Furies*, that by reducing the violence unleashed by the revolutions of 1789 and 1917 to a generic phenomenon understood either to vitiate their emancipatory content or to be completely external to them, one simply cannot explain them as events. Revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence and terror do not, as Mayer shows, cancel each other out, much less validate the Burkean conservatism that abjures them both. Their mutual determination, rather, traces a specific form of historical motion, that of the modern social revolution in its full scope. Up to a point at least, Mayer successfully historicizes violence by methodically refusing to remove violence from the historical context of revolution itself as both an objective social process and as an event in real time about which it is still impossible to think except, however minimally, in a historical spirit. In the end, the guillotine delivers a violent death just like any other instrument, and can dispatch a Robespierre

as readily as a Louis XVI, but the history that gave us the guillotine cannot be detached from the history of the political movements and ideologies that initially legitimated its use against some and not others.

That is, violence itself, for Mayer, remains, essentially, an *event*, inseparable from the larger chain of events that lead into and flow out of it. Hence the remarkable impact of a work such as *Why did the Heavens not Darken?*, which ties the decision of the National Socialist regime to implement the Final Solution, whatever its ideological predispositions, to the political fall-out from events on the battle fields of the Eastern Front, specifically the fall of the siege of Moscow in 1941. However controversial Mayer's historical theory of the Holocaust may in fact be, it forces us to reflect on Auschwitz as, on one level at least, a terrible historical contingency. That the violence of the death camps has more than a contingent quality is in no sense disputed by Mayer here. But by arguing, indeed seeking to prove to us that this violence was, as event, initially inseparable from the violence of the anti-Soviet war, the flight into the metaphysics of violence, into its combined existential abstraction and rationalization, is prevented.

II.

Are Mayer's methodically historical account of violence as event, and, more pointedly, his insistence on the often under-estimated historical role of counterrevolutionary violence and terror in shaping the violence and terror of revolution illuminating or especially pertinent to the modern history of Latin America? In the most general sense, obviously, yes—as they are for history generally. But in a certain narrower sense, the answer is, ironically, no, if only because political and state violence in Latin America have, especially since 1945, been so notoriously and

self-evidently the practice of the Latin American counterrevolution (in league with US imperialism) that the correction is almost superfluous. While revolutionary violence and terror are obviously not unknown in modern Latin American history, they cannot be compared to the Jacobin and Soviet experiences in the latter's obsessive, ideologically overdetermined interest for historiography, especially Cold War liberal historiography. If anything, the postwar Latin American experience of political violence is what stands in a position to illuminate and buttress Mayer's historical argument even further—an argument that, not unlike Surrealism according to the theory of the “real maravilloso,”² would make immediate sense to the Latin American man on the street.

But this in turn points to a more basic question than the above, and one to which a work such as *The Furies* can no doubt help to supply answers: *what is the structural relationship of revolution and counterrevolution to the process of capitalist modernization itself in Latin America, as compared to this relationship in Western Europe and even in Imperial and Soviet Russia?* In both of the latter cases, violent revolution is the prelude to far-reaching social and political processes of modernization. Despite their obvious differences vis a vis each other, and the fact that, in the wake of its effective collapse in 1991, the Soviet model begins to look in certain ways more ‘Latin American,’ 1789 and 1917 really have no precise historical analogues in Latin America. Where is so determinate and strict a succession of such elemental historical processes as political revolution and social and economic modernization to be observed in Latin American history?

² In his famed preface to the first edition of his novel *El reino de este mundo* (1949) Alejo Carpentier turned the tables of iconoclasm against Surrealism itself, suggesting that what, in Paris, could only be a private, intellectualized experience induced by drugs became, once inserted into the new historical context of Latin America's mythically-inflected popular culture, the stuff of every-day life: the ‘*real maravilloso*.’

In a punctual sense, perhaps the cases of Mexico and Cuba could be cited. The Mexican Revolution, curiously, more or less shares the chronology of the Soviet experience: from revolutionary inception in the second decade of the 20th century to economic crisis and political implosion or near implosion in the 1980s and 1990s. Cuba's revolutionary modernization, uniquely configured by the geopolitics and the chronology of the Cold War, probably parallels more closely than any other Latin America revolution the orthodox sequence of a 1917, in which the direct seizure of power is followed by a sweeping social and economic transformation together with a largely successful monopolization of violence as legitimate force on the part of the revolutionary state. But with the end of the Cold War, Cuba, even more than Mexico, has had to trade off the political integrity of its revolutionary institutions in exchange for conceding most of the economic and social reforms for which these institutions once stood. Their shared, close proximity to the dominating power to their north—a power that, for all its counterrevolutionary fervor and propensity to violence can, ironically, ill afford significant social upheavals just across its borders—probably explains more about the formal, institutional longevity of these modernizing revolutions --ironically coupled to their effective social reversal—than could any deeper homology with the historical syntax of 1789 or 1917.

As a rule, however, revolutions are more frequent if also more sporadic, short-lived and fragmented events—i.e., much more *volatile*—in Latin America than in the European and North American theaters of modernity. This has given rise to a widely broadcast caricature of Latin America as the land of the eternal coup d'état, complete with the inevitable medal-strewn *miles gloriosus* and menacing men with guns, and in which the political difference between those against the wall and those manning the firing squad soon evanesces. But behind the caricature lies what is nevertheless an important historical qualification, perhaps so obvious as to be in

danger of being set aside: that, because capitalist modernization is itself such a violent and volatile affair in Latin America, the revolutions and counterrevolutions that are its “birth pangs” are likewise so. Latin American revolutions occupy a place more transverse, so to speak, to the history of economic modernization, a less punctual place than in the case of their epoch-creating models in 1789 and 1917.

The reasons for this are, in a sense, the central problem of modern Latin American political and economic history and long a stock-in-trade of Latin American historians. But it is, for all that, rare that anyone thinks in a very sustained way about the general, structural relation of revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence to modernization and modernity in Latin America, even if, on a local level, one often thinks about little else. (Rare, that is, that one thinks through this relation and still thinks *historically* rather than veering off into the realms of liberal morality and metaphysics.) In this sense, Mayer’s magisterially *comparative* account of 1789 and 1917—one in which the crucial factors not only of chronological disparity but also (even more crucially for Latin Americanists) of unequal capitalist development are plainly determinant—can serve as a fundamental point of orientation.

III.

Has, then—to proceed in this analogous mode—the counterrevolution definitively triumphed in Latin America? Has the old regime survived, in the end, or come back to overturn all efforts to effect revolutionary change? In the plainest sense, yes. With the heavily qualified exceptions of Cuba and Venezuela—and the frankly even more circumscribed and adventitious exceptions of the transient regime changes (ca. 2004) in Brazil or Bolivia—the class elites that

dominated Latin American states and societies at the outset of the Cold War retain their dominant position. But to further sustain this viewpoint, one would have immediately to qualify and relativize its terms. “Counterrevolution” and “old regime” in precisely what sense? For Mayer the old regime of landowning aristocrats is associated with a feudal or at best transitionally capitalist mode of production. It is at the very least a matter of debate as to whether such a class has ever existed in Latin America. While landed wealth in Latin America remains a crucial political power, its own relationship to the uneven and fraught process of economic and social modernization invites little comparison, it seems to me, to the class positionings of money-wise English baronets, Prussian *Junkers* or Russian *boyars*. Rural elites in Latin America are typically not the grudging accommodators and sly survivors of modernizing liberal bourgeoisies but themselves principal agents of modernization and liberalization and less the junior partners of a local than of an absentee, ultramarine ‘foreign’ bourgeoisie whose banks are practically as powerful as states. While the cities in Latin America have been the sites of the ‘middle class’ revolts that have forced retreats and (when in league with rural uprisings) land reforms on the ‘old regime,’ these cities themselves were and remain in many ways the mere extension of traditional class power, the portuary nodes of a network of class relations centered outside both country and city.

All of this of course points to the structural fact of colonial and neo-colonial domination of Latin America and the latter’s determinant role in forcing and, in the wake of the ‘neo-liberal’ Thermidor, reinforcing an export-led, extroverted path of modernization on the region, one in which both rural and industrial products in the form of commodities enter a world market, so to speak, as equals. In Latin America the countryside does not, by feeding the cities, perform its historic role in the potentiating of ‘primitive accumulation.’ Both countryside and city must be

fed by the world market, dominated in its turn by always-already accumulated masses of capital that set the limits to any local process of modernization, and for which the politics of ‘old’ and ‘new’ regimes in, say, Argentina or Honduras are effectively a matter of indifference.

Here, that is to say, Mayer’s painstaking insistence on the violence of modern revolution as the latter’s active constituent but at the same time as irreducibly political and event-driven, apposite as this is to his critical objective as a historian, begins to fail us. The working premise of *The Furies* is, like Marx’s in his political writings, that revolutions are the nodal flash points and the semi-conscious instruments of a kind of capitalist (or ‘socialist’) modernization from within. They are thresholds of the modern. The ‘old regime’ can ‘persist’ because that to which it will eventually give way is moving against it on the same social and national plane. But the revolutions and counterrevolutions of modern Latin America, especially in the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, take place within a framework of modernization that is both a given of colonial and neo-colonial social formation —a modernization in this sense ‘from without’—and, paradoxically, also a constitutive absence. The modern in Latin America is perpetually unfinished business, a success that breeds its own failure as a very part of its development, not a threshold but the single doorway leading into and out of—what else?—a labyrinth. Because both are arrayed alongside and at the same time against the abstract plane of a protean modernity that is inseparable from the social itself, the friction of ‘old’ and ‘new’ regimes, of revolution and counterrevolution, becomes chronic rather than punctual and generates a violence that seems circular and irrational.

This is, in fact, the violent irrationality latent—and nowadays more and more manifest—in all modes of capitalist modernity, but one that it has, so far, been the function of peripheral zones like Latin America to displace onto themselves and absorb, whether by enduring the

unilateral, directly violent batterings of imperialist domination and subjugation or through the medium of social and economic ‘policy.’ (Think, to cite a timely and stark analogy here, of the transition in Iraq from the regime of indirectly murderous UN-approved sanctions to that of direct, overtly and massively violent US invasion and occupation.) But one may reasonably speculate whether the coming phase in the history of the capitalist modernity once ushered in through the ‘straight gate’ leading from the guillotine to the voting booth and the stock exchange may now have become the roosting place for a rather different species of ‘furies,’ on their way ‘home,’ so to speak, from places like Latin America. In that sense, it is perhaps the latter’s seemingly irrational form of violence as a political relation of means to end that might prompt us to re-think the history of violence set forth in works like *The Furies*.

IV.

I want at this point to expound, however briefly, one such re-thinking, likely, for linguistic reasons, to be unfamiliar to most readers in Latin America and the US. This is the work of a group of radical critical theorists centered around the contemporary German journals *Krisis*³ and *Exit!*⁴, the most prominent of whom is Robert Kurz, author of works such as *Schwarzbuch Kapitalismus*⁵, a monumental historical study of capitalism from the standpoint of a radically revised, post-Cold War Marxism, and, more recently, *Weltordnungskrieg*⁶. Kurz’s fundamental thesis, an intensely controversial one to be sure, is that, in the wake of the post-Fordist “third” industrial revolution ushered in by micro-electronics, vastly increased levels of productivity and the corresponding rise in the so-called organic composition of capital are

³ See www.krisis.org

⁴ See www.exit-online.org

⁵ Eichborn Verlag AG:Frankfurt Am Main, 1999.

⁶ Horlemann: Bad Honnef, 2003.

pushing all social formations subordinate to the law of value—that is, *all* social formations—to the brink of a terminal crisis of reproduction. Because the continued self-valorization of capital now, at currently attained levels of productivity, requires a vastly diminished quantity of abstract labor power, enormous pools of that labor power become effectively “unexploitable,” permanently superfluous to the needs of self-valorization. Those familiar with Marx’s classical exposition of the law of the rising organic composition of capital—and the subsequent “law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall”—will be able to fill in the last blank here: absolute declines in the capacity to valorize labor power mean absolute declines in the capacity to extract surplus-value. Expressed in terms of the commodity and commodity-form: as labor-power more and more ceases to be a saleable commodity, the commodity-form itself loses its content, becoming an increasingly ‘fictional’ social form, actualized only through ever more desperate ‘flights forward’ into financial speculation and the resort to what Kurz and others refer to as outright “economies of plunder,” i.e., throwing onto the market whatever pools of money or directly saleable commodities there are that can be looted for short-term gain or to stave off eventual collapse, whether these are gathered in the savings accounts of pensioners, the fraudulently over-valued portfolios of Enron and Worldcom stockholders, or in the subsoil of Iraq.

According to Kurz, the economies of the Third and former Second World were the first to succumb to this crisis. The attempt, common to both, at competing successfully on the world market through an accelerated, or “recuperative” (*nachholend*) modernization has, in this view, effectively failed. Economies from the former Soviet Union to Argentina simply could not undertake the immense capital investment required to achieve levels of productivity commensurate with those of the US or the EU and Japan and, in some cases (e.g., the former

GDR) experience the de-valorization of an entire national-industrial base virtually overnight. India, China and Brazil may prove to be the only (temporary) exceptions to this rule—but for how long, and at what social cost to their own populations? Meanwhile, the societies of sub-Saharan Africa, of much of Central and Southeast Asia, and of a significant swath of Latin America virtually fall off the map, becoming little more than immense, stagnant reservoirs of ‘unexploitable’ labor-power crowded into gargantuan, unlivable cities, “monetary subjects without money” forced to compete in the most violent fashion for the crumbs of globalization. This is reality *now* for the majority of the planet, a reality recently described in chilling fashion by the urbanist Mike Davis in his chilling essay, “Planet of Slums.”⁷

That such a crisis must and does lead to catastrophic increases in and the constant proliferation of new forms of violence is self-evident. Perhaps, after all, much the same could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of the crises of the old regime that led successively to 1789, 1917 and even, in Mayer’s argument, the ‘second Thirty Years War’ of 1914-1945. But the structural relation of violence to the total process of social formation and reproduction has surely changed. The violence of ethnic cleansing, of death squads and para-militarism, of suicide bombings and pre-emptive wars—of, to paraphrase the title of Kurz’s most recent book, ‘world civil war’—has ceased to be punctual and ‘foundational’ and become both chronic and corrosive. Violence more and more leaks out of politics and the state, calling forth ever more violent state reprisals and policing measures in its turn. In Kurz’s view, violence becomes the *ultima ratio* not merely of the state, but of strained market relations themselves, of the commodity logic that the modern state was erected to institute and regulate⁸. Violence now enters the market directly as a kind of apocalyptic form of reproduction, no longer buying in order to sell (Marx’s famously succinct

⁷ *New Left Review*, no. 26, Mar/Apr (2004): 5-34.

⁸ See, especially, pp. 45-74 of *Weltordnungskrieg*, “Die Realen Gespenster der Weltkrise.”

formula for the capital relation) but *looting* in order to sell. As it once did in its early youth, capitalism again writes its history in the “annals of blood and fire.” But this time it is a primitive accumulation in reverse

Ernst Lohoff, a frequent contributor to *Krisis* and the author of an important critical study of the civil-cum-international war that produced the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s⁹, has recently synthesized this historical re-thinking of violence in rigorously theoretical and systematic terms. In “*Gewaltordnung und Vernichtungslogik*”¹⁰ (“Violent Order and the Logic of Annihilation”) Lohoff traces what he terms the “violent core” (*Gewaltkern*) of the social subject of commodity-society to the historical foundations of modernity itself. Hobbes’ defense of the absolutist state as the only bulwark against the ‘bellum omnia contra omnes,’ re-read by Lohoff in light of the contemporary rise in “post-state” violence, reveals violence itself to be a constitutive ideological element of the civic values of freedom and equality to which it is officially anathema. “Men are equal,” for Hobbes, “insofar as they all share a mutual capacity to kill one another.”¹¹

Hobbes’ construct brings into view the fundamental relationship in which men are displaced by their own unsocial sociality [*“ungesellschaftliche Gesellschaftlichkeit”*]. Contract and Right are not the precipitates of human cooperation but rather grow out of a sublimated praxis of violence [*‘Gewalttätigkeit’*], a praxis that

⁹ *Der Dritte Weg in den Bürgerkrieg: Jugoslawien und das Ende der nachholenden Modernisierung* (Horlemann: Bad Honnef, 1996)

¹⁰ *Krisis: Beiträge zur Kritik der Warengesellschaft* no. 27 (2003): 17-63. Available online at www.krisis.org.

¹¹ 20. My translation. German original: “Die Menschen sind insofern gleich,” for Hobbes “als sie sich allesamt gegenseitig umbringen können.”

is not abandoned in a fully normalized commodity-producing society, but that is presupposed in it.¹²

The state as the generalized, universalized and externalized form of a violence inherent in the social logic of alienated, commodity relations goes on to perfect its social base of market-subjects by claiming the exclusive, ‘sovereign’ right to wage war¹³. And, by warring against other states and evolving standing armies of conscript citizens

“a certain regimentation of violence [*Gewaltregime*] evolves, without which the modern, monadic subjects of market-competition and work could simply not have arisen. The fraternity of the national ‘we,’ the self-induction into militarized corps of fellow countrymen, prepares the ground for the market “I”...¹⁴

When, however, commodity-relations themselves enter into the purportedly terminal crisis described in the paragraphs immediately above, the resulting weakening of the state monopoly on violence, the “leakage” of violence from the political onto the directly social and economic planes, forces the submerged “*Gewaltkern*” of modern, ‘monetary’ subjectivity back out of its sublimated, political forms and into the open, making society and economy themselves into virtual battlefields. In “post-state” war, writes Lohoff,

the separation between war as end and warlike means breaks down; the path becomes the goal. The economics of war [now] function as an economics of plunder, as the form of reproduction peculiar to a business of war, from which the

¹² 21. My translation. German original: “...[M]acht Hobbes’ Konstrukt das Gründverhältnis sichtbar, in das ungesellschaftliche Gesellschaftlichkeit Menschen versetzt. Vertrag und der Recht sind kein Niederschlag menschlicher Kooperation, sonder erwachsen aus sublimierter Gewalttätigkeit, Gewalttätigkeit, die im warengesellschaftlichen Normalvollzug nicht zugelassen, ihm aber vorausgesetzt ist.”

¹³ The dominance of the principle of sovereignty as it concerns the intercourse between states, merges, in the final analysis, with the *ius ad bellum*.” My translation. German original: “Für den zwischenstaatlichen Verkehr fällt die Herrschaft des Souveränitätsprinzips dagegen letztinstanzlich mit dem *ius ad bellum* zusammen.” 31.

¹⁴ 29. My translation. German original: “hat sich jenes Gewaltregime herausgebildet, ohne das sich die Moderne Konkurrenz- und Arbeitsmonade letztlich gar nicht hätte entwickeln können. Die Brüderlichkeit des nationalen WIR, das Sich-Einfügen in den wehrhaften Volkskörper, bereitete dem Waren-ICH...”

appearance of abstract universality has fallen away. In ways quite reminiscent of the battles of early modernity, it is now increasingly up to war to supply the means of war.¹⁵

V.

A Latin Americanist who reads Kurz and Lohoff will, however skeptically, likely experience something like a shock of recognition. Until much of the rest of the world caught up to it in the 1990s, seemingly disproportionate and irrational outbreaks of violence--from the overthrow of Arbenz in the 1950s to the mass torturings and killings carried out by military dictatorships in Brazil and the Southern Cone in the 1960s and 70s to the counterrevolutionary terror in Central America in the 1980s--made Latin America into the grisly poster-child of wanton, 'civil' blood-letting. That the greatest and bloodiest monopolist of violence of all time, the United States, played a decisive role in virtually all of this cruel history must never for a moment be forgotten, but Dulles, Kissinger and Elliot Abrams found ready collaborators among the ranks of the Latin American praetorians and 'lumpenbourgeoisies.' Consolidated and, if such a thing is possible, routinized and normalized on the social and economic rack of neo-liberalism, the horrific mass murders of, say, the Argentine 'Proceso' or the Reagan-sponsored Nicaraguan 'contra' genocide nevertheless continue to pose a terrible, sphinx-like question to survivors and historians alike. Bluntly phrased: were all these deaths in vain? Here and there a few generals or police captains and other 'bad apples' go to jail, but the reforms, radical and modest, for which

¹⁵ 49. My translation. German original: "die Trennung von Kriegsziel und kriegerischen Mittel ist hinfällig; der Weg ist zum Ziel geworden. [...] Kriegsökonomie [...]funktioniert als Plünderungsökonomie, als die besondere Reproduktionsform der Kriegsbetriebe, die aufgehört haben, als abstrakte Allgemeinheit aufzutreten. Ganz ähnlich wie in den frühzeitlichen Konflikten ist es zunehmend am Krieg, den Krieg zu ernähren" (49).

so many died now seem almost beyond recall, much less imaginable in the present. Can such catastrophic violence and injustice really have had built into it no redemptive denouement?

Perhaps history will eventually surrender up an answer, but in the meantime one must consider whether this redemption tends still, in fundamentally Enlightenment fashion, to be imagined as the missing final act of the drama of progressive, liberal modernization. Those who die for ‘liberty, fraternity and equality’ are, so it is said, redeemed by the fact that these ideals become enshrined in the institutions of the state and civil society. But what of those who die at the hands of these very ideals and institutions themselves, ideals and institutions which, having now outlived themselves and grown violent and nihilistic with the progressive crumbling of their commodity-structured, modernized economic and social underpinning, turn on their subjects because, like unsaleable commodities, the latter paradoxically now stand in the way of the social automaton that liberates and equalizes them only in the abstract? Indeed, what of those who die at the hands of such ideals and institutions, while still believing in them? For that matter, what of those who, in wreaking such violence, become the agents of a retro-Hobbesian modernity while imagining themselves to be the champions of tradition and the knights of the old regime? It is only against the violent backdrops of 1789 and 1917, no doubt, that these historical actors (among whom we must also be included) could recognize themselves. But in modern Latin America, as, increasingly now, in the rest of the world, the stage may already have been set for something else.