

**La Comuna de Oaxaca: Rebellion, Repression and Class  
Consciousness in Tryno Maldonado's *Teoría de las catástrofes***

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On 19 June 2016, striking teachers of the Local 22, the Oaxacan section of the dissident union CNTE (Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación/National Coordinator of Education Workers), who had occupied the highway between Mexico City and Oaxaca—the capital of the homonymous state—to protest about the education reform designed by Peña Nieto's administration, were violently attacked by the police in Nochixtlán (Dillingham and González Pizarro). During the clashes, at least 8 demonstrators were killed (García). The 2016 four-month protest of the CNTE is, however, only one of the most recent episodes of the long social struggle in Oaxaca, which has seen teachers as protagonists.

Founded in 1979 in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, as an alternative to the PRI-aligned National Education Workers Union (SNTE, Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación), the CNTE “became one of the primary organizing hubs not only for teachers, but for a wide variety of other movements in the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond” (Stephen 39). In Oaxaca, where 75% of the population lives in extreme poverty (Favela 64), teachers, who come mostly from indigenous background and/or work in poor and remote areas, represent the backbone of social protest. Teachers are strongly connected to their communities and therefore their mobilization usually advances not only the demands of their own union, but also those of the communities they represent (Hernández

Navarro 389). Typically exposed to the history of Emiliano Zapata, the programs of agrarian reform, and the work of Paolo Freire, the teacher in Oaxaca “is a factor in political change” (Favela 65).

The events of Nochixtlán came precisely ten years after a watershed moment in the history of social struggle in Oaxaca: the emergence of the *Asemblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca* (APPO, Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca), a coalition of social movements and left-wing organizations which challenged state and national governments for nearly seven months, occupying radio and TV stations, building barricades to defend the protest and, above all, proposing a model of radical and participatory politics.

In 2006, worsened socio-economic conditions sparked the protest of the teachers who occupied Oaxaca’s *zócalo* to demand fairer wages, greater support for their students and more resources for rural schools (Favela 66-67). While the occupation of the city’s main square had been in the past a consolidated practice of the teachers’ movement, the then newly elected governor of Oaxaca, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz,<sup>1</sup> decided to use the iron fist against the striking teachers. At the dawn of Friday 16 June 2006, state and local police stormed the camp. When evidence of brutality against the occupants began to emerge, thousands of Oaxacans joined the teachers, “demanding an end to fraud, corruption, and unfettered globalization” (Favela 65), as well as the removal of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (Stephen 77). Amid state and paramilitary violence against protestors, the barricades resisted until 25 November 2006, when the resistance was broken by the intervention of the *Policía Federal Preventiva* (PFP, Federal Police), which deployed tanks, helicopters, bulldozers, water cannons, and tear gas (Favela 68).

The events related to the 2006 conflict in Oaxaca, the emergence of the APPO, the construction of the barricades, and the repression which followed, are the subjects of *Teoría de las catástrofes*, a 2012 novel by the Mexican writer Tryno Maldonado (Zacatecas, 1977). This essay argues that, while the reasons for the protest and the origins of the movement somehow remain in the background, Maldonado’s work can be defined as a novel of political formation, as well as a novel about the development of class consciousness. Moreover, it claims that the process of class consciousness is set in motion by an acquired awareness of the history of systemic violence against subaltern social groups, left-wing and anti-capitalist movements and organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> Politically affiliated to the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party), the party which governed Mexico uninterruptedly for more than 70 years until 2000, and which is now back in power.

*Tryno Maldonado: From De-politicization to Politicization*

Tryno Maldonado is arguably one of the most politically engaged authors of the new generation of Mexican writers. His keen interest in the socio-political reality of contemporary Mexico is, perhaps, the reason behind the scarce distribution of his *oeuvre*, which, in absence of a translation, and in a book market dominated by de-politicized and inward-looking literature, remains virtually unknown outside the Mexican borders (Pollack 242).<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, however, Maldonado's earlier works, such as the novels *Viena roja* (2005) and *Temporada de caza para el león negro* (2009), were defined by the absence of sociopolitical critique (Lemus). In 2008, moreover, Maldonado edited an anthology of short-stories, which Lemus considers a celebration of the apolitical spirit of his contemporaries. The volume, which collects short stories written by authors born between 1970 and 1979, and which is entitled *Grandes Hits. Nueva generación de narradores mexicanos, vol. 1*, falls into the category of those expressions of literary neoliberalism emerging at the end of the 1990s. The emergence of anthologies follows a trend inspired by two specific moments in the recent socio-political history of Latin American literature. The first moment coincides with the emergence of the Mexican literary group *Crack* in 1996, and with the publication of the volume of collected short-stories, *McOndo* (1998), edited by Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez. The second moment, on the other side, coincides with the publication of two volumes of collected short-stories translated into English, the 2010 *Granta's* special issue *The Best Young Spanish Language Novelists* (2010), edited by Aurelio Major and Valerie Miles, and *The Future Is Not Ours* (2012), edited by Diego Trelles Paz (Pollack 228). Both *Crack* works and the anthologies "narran una experiencia de clase media-alta decadente que ha perdido el sentido y experimenta una irreversible angustia existencial" (Pollack 228). In other words, these anthologies, which Maldonado's *Grandes Hits* follows, represent the process of de-politicization of Latin American literature brought about by the fall of real-existing socialism and the advent of global capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Pollack's claim is confirmed not only by the absence of any translation of the work, but also by the fact that the novel is now available mostly in eBook format rather than in its printed edition: <http://www.megustaleer.com/libro/teoria-de-las-catastrofes/MX10576>.

<sup>3</sup> In this regard, the words of the Chilean author Alberto Fuguet are illuminating. In his essay on *McOndo*, "Magical Neoliberalism", he affirms: "Another attack we endured [...] was that we didn't write about "our land" [...], and, instead, wrote about "ourselves". That was true [...] The market reform all over Latin America had to reform ourselves. How could they not? If the point of liberalization was to open the doors, a cultural and social flood had to pour in. And it did" (71). He then adds that the publication of *McOndo* seconded a "certain new Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) sensibility" (73).

However, Maldonado's latest works, in contrast to recent trends in Mexican literature, reveal a sustained social and political critique of the contemporary capitalist system. In a 2015 interview, Maldonado affirmed that in the present historical moment, marked by tragedies like that of Iguala,<sup>4</sup> he feels compelled to write about Mexico's sociopolitical context (ejeCentralTV). His latest book, in fact, the non-fiction work *Ayotzinapa. El rostro de los desaparecidos* (2015), attempts to shed a light on the lives of the 43 disappeared students of the Normal Rural School of Ayotzinapa "Raúl Isidro Burgos", and endeavors to provide a counterweight to the official interpretation of the events of Iguala.

Moreover, in a 2017 text on the *palabra como arma*, propounding a subversion of his early style in favor of politically committed writing, Maldonado proposes a critique of that upper-class sensibility which Sarah Pollack attributes to the de-politicized anthologies that emerged between 1990s and the new millennium:

Las élites acostumbran desacreditar la acción por debajo de la palabra como instrumento de un cambio real. Por debajo de esa palabra dulcorada y pervertida. Por eso es tan frecuente encontrar entre los miembros de las élites posturas ambiguas, apáticas, sarcásticas, acomodaticias o llanamente desmovilizadoras frente a las distintas luchas sociales y ante la crítica de quienes no forman parte de esa élite. (Maldonado, *La palabra*)

Maldonado's recent interventions, in fact, offer a sustained critique of the liberal-bourgeois concept of art as a "supreme object of a minority over and above the circuits of everyday sociability" (Bosteels 207). In a quasi-Sartrean posture, Maldonado rejects the "unhappy conscience (idealism, ineffectiveness)" (Sartre, cited in Bosteels 220) of the bourgeois intellectual and embraces the figure of the Gramscian "organic intellectual", that is the intellectual directly involved with organizations committed to social struggle. Furthermore, taking a stand on the long-lasting polemics about the social role of literature, Maldonado denounces the supposed apolitical literature dominating the mainstream Mexican literary scene as ideologically conservative and, when not overtly reactionary, at least complacent with the dominant system:

No hay literatura que no sea política. Incluso la que finge desmarcarse a nivel anecdótico de todo tema social: novelas "solipsistas" o sobre "el vacío" y "la nada" y "la imposibilidad de escribir"... Los autores de mi generación que se asumen como "apolíticos" no pueden jugar ya a ser inocentes ni a refugiarse en el cinismo y el sarcasmo frente al panorama

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<sup>4</sup> Forty-three students of the rural normal school Isidro Burgos of Ayotzinapa, who were directed to a demonstration in Mexico City to commemorate the anniversary of Tlatelolco massacre, were disappeared after having been attacked by local police forces in the city of Iguala, Guerrero, on 26 September 2014.

que transita México; tampoco pueden pedir no ser juzgados por la crítica como comparsa de este gobierno y sus instituciones podridas al momento en que deciden participar de sus políticas culturales o simplemente guardar silencio. México atraviesa un momento crítico en que es necesario tomar posturas claras y no andarse con medias tintas. [...] Supongo que autores mexicanos como los antologados en el libro oficial del gobierno *México 20* tienen vidas privadas interesantísimas; yo no: yo prefiero hablar sobre mi comunidad, sobre los abusos que enfrenta ante la violencia de un Estado criminal. Ésa es la tónica de la mayoría de mis libros. Por lo tanto, trato de actuar en mi vida cotidiana en consecuencia. (Zunin and Maldonado, *Tryno Maldonado: No hay un instrumento*)

*Ayotzinapa. El rostro de los desaparecidos* is, in accordance with his “ideological” position, the result of the author’s direct participation in the mobilization of the parents, friends and colleagues of the 43 disappeared students of Ayotzinapa. The Zacatecan author, in fact, follows in the footsteps of the model of the “people’s intellectual”, according to which “[...] there is no other way for an intellectual ‘to be of the people’ than to become ‘people’, through the practical experience of the struggle of that people’ (Althusser 112). Thus, Maldonado’s writing can be conceived as an “artistic social praxis”, to borrow from Brecht’s theory. This artistic/intellectual *praxis* is based on the conviction that “social change[s] ‘are not mastered by keeping silent about them’. They are mastered by exposing them” (Squiers 42). Indeed, the “Brechtian” artist “needs to depict the empirical realities of the present day” (Squiers 42).

Once these realities are understood, once one understands the social environment, one can begin to alter social relations or the relations of social forces. Brecht argues that as history progresses, new social relationships are created and it is the job of the artist to depict these new relationships. (Squiers 42)

*Ayotzinapa. Los rostros de los desaparecidos*, and *Teoría de las catástrofes* to a lesser degree, are therefore the result of the inescapable necessity for an art committed to the understanding of the social forces active in the Mexican sociopolitical landscape. Similarly, Maldonado’s rejection of a “solipsistic” literature echoes Brecht’s complete rebuff of an art which would reproduce the bourgeois *Weltanschauung*’s view of human nature (Squiers 45). Drawing on Gramscian theory, Brechtian *praxis* aimed to help the proletariat achieve class consciousness. In a similar manner, Maldonado’s commitment to socially engaged writing aims to incite his readership to social struggle, as he asserts in *Ayotzinapa*’s introductory essay: “[e]ste libro es para incitar a quien lo lea a luchar para que una atrocidad como la ocurrida el 26 de septiembre de 2014 en la ciudad de Iguala nunca se repita” (16).

While *Teoría de las catástrofes* does not expound the same “militant” approach which distinguishes *Ayotzinapa*, nonetheless, it is a novel which marks Maldonado’s transition to a socially and politically engaged writing. For this reason, I propose a reading of *Teoría de las catástrofes* as a novel of development of class consciousness and a tale of political formation. Moreover, while the traditional *bildungsroman* describes the development of young person from childhood to adulthood, with the latter seemingly associated with the acquisition of the markers of a bourgeois lifestyle, *Teoría de las catástrofes* subverts this motif, as it describes the proletarianization of precariously employed teachers.

Drawing on Ben Parker’s conceptualization of class consciousness as “recognition” and “unmaking of reified objectivity,” which combines Lukács’s theory of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* and the Aristotelian concept of *anagnorisis* (recognition scene) (66), in the context of this essay, I refer to the “acquisition of class consciousness” as the revelation/recognition of the reifying and dominating structure of capitalism, rather than an active recognition of being a working class subject, and the subsequent involvement in social struggles.

Lukács’s chapter, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”, included in the above-mentioned book, draws on Marx’s theory of alienation: workers do not have control over their activity. On the contrary, the laws of the capital, which are alien to their life, control them. Based on Marx’s notion of estrangement, Lukács proposes a conceptualization of the phenomenon of reification. According to Lukács, capitalism turns the life of the workers into a quantifiable “thing” (their performance at work) (90). Since calculation ends up embracing every aspect of their life (91), workers become atomized, incapable of organizing as a class and fight against class domination: “Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man” (93). The atomization of the worker is, however, only “the reflex in consciousness of the fact that the ‘natural laws’ of capitalist production have been extended to cover every manifestation of life in society” (92-93). In *History and Class Consciousness* the emergence of class consciousness (“the dramatic climax” of Lukács’s book) appears as a “moment of self-consciousness arising from the mute objectification of external structures—the coming-to-awareness ‘on the side of the object’” (Parker 69). Class consciousness is, therefore, intended as the unveiling of the structures which turn the worker into an objectified subject: “Class consciousness, then, has to be understood not as the achievement of some potential contents,

but as a void: ‘For it is itself nothing but the contradictions of history that have become conscious’” (Parker 79).

Applying this conceptualization of class consciousness to the narrative structure of a few literary works to derive a theory of the novel from *History and Class Consciousness*, Parker’s work draws attention to the revelation of the dominating power structures of capitalism in what the author calls—borrowing the term from Aristotle—“recognition scenes.” These moments of recognition, or revelation, undermine the subject’s place in a world dominated by the power structures of capital, and unfold the possibility of a future self-unmaking (of herself/himself as a reified object) (76). Borrowing from Parker, the concept of class consciousness used in relation to the main characters of Maldonado’s novel is intended here as the recognition/revelation of “the contradictions of history,” the objectifying power of capitalism, rather than the embrace of the consequences of the acquisition of class consciousness through political struggle.

*From the Margins to the Barricades: a Tale of Class Consciousness*

*Teoría de las catástrofes* narrates three parallel stories: the decline of the relationship between Anselmo and his girlfriend, Mariana; the friendship between another couple (Roberto and Phailin) and them, and the development of the conflict in Oaxaca. Another narrative strand is provided by the interaction between Anselmo and a group of young anarchists who have joined the barricades, and among whom a young woman—Julia—plays a central role. A third person omniscient narrator, modeled on the narrating voice of the classic historical novel described by Lukács in his seminal work *The Historical Novel* (1937, 1947, 1962), both depicts the vicissitudes of the characters and provides a chronicle of the *conflicto magisterial* in the city of Oaxaca. The events narrated span from May to November 2006, and thus follow the chronology of the conflict from the first occupation of Oaxaca’s *zócalo* to the removal of the barricades. Even though the two main characters, Anselmo and Mariana, are teachers, they are not unionized, as they reiterate on various occasions when asked by other characters about the protest. In doing so, they overtly intend to distance themselves from the APPO. Indeed, while all around them the revolt flares up, they retain a disengaged attitude toward the protest, its actors and their reasons. Therefore, while the two main protagonists only sporadically talk about the conflict, it is from the narrative voice that we learn about the chronology and the development of the events. The narrator, moreover, introduces the main characters, providing information about their socio-economic and class status.

For instance, we learn that, unlike rural teachers of the CNTE, Anselmo and Mariana come from a typically middle-class background. She comes “por la rama paterna de una familia acomodada de empresarios de la construcción [...]”, while her mother is “una arquitecta de ascendencia alemana bastante más liberal” (Maldonado 14-15). As a complement to Mariana’s description, we learn that she has inherited her mother’s personality traits and liberalism (14).

While the circumstances of her early life are typical of an affluent family, her decision to pursue pedagogical studies deals a heavy blow to the expectations of her parents, who “tenían sembradas en ella expectativas mucho más elevadas que, por no encajar en la óptica mercantil de uno ni en la visión progresista de la otra, una vida como docente según ellos simplemente no alcanzaría a potenciar” (15). However, after completing her undergraduate studies in Mexico, she continues her studies in Berlin, then in Barcelona, and finally in San Diego. However, as her health conditions worsen (because of diabetes), she is forced to abandon her academic career, since her employing institution refuses to cover the costs of a health insurance. Once back in her country, she moves to Oaxaca and, refusing her parent’s economic support, is employed as an hourly teacher.

By contrast, Anselmo is from Zacatecas and belongs to the “[c]lase media baja” (9). Unlike Mariana, he is “[h]ijo y heredero de nada en particular” (9). However, exactly like Mariana, he lives out of “empleos eventuales y mal remunerados. Casi siempre como profesor de matemáticas en secundarias y preparatorias privadas que no [otorgan] ninguna prestación de ley” (9).

While Mariana “[e]l cambio imprevisto en sus planes debió valerle lo mismo que una enérgica sacudida en la que ella sólo alcanzaba a vislumbrar una única posibilidad. La de retroceso” (16), Anselmo “se estaba convirtiendo en un profesional del desempleo” (30) by virtue of countless and fruitless job applications and interviews. In other words, Anselmo and Mariana are members of what some theorists call the “precariat” (Standing), which is essentially the impoverished middle class emerging from the “restoration of class power” (Harvey 17) brought about by the neoliberal project.

In the nineteenth century, the introduction of machinery was central to the process of proletarianization of the workers. Since work is reduced to handling tools, “the use-value of the worker’s labor-power vanishes, and with it its exchange-value. The worker becomes unsaleable” (Marx 470). Today, as “a consequence of the rise in productivity brought about by the exponentially growing impact of collective knowledge” (Zizek), that is, the “general intellect” or the objectified power of knowledge (Marx 706), something similar is happening:



the proletarianization process has begun to spread into professions traditionally associated with the petty bourgeoisie and white-collar workers. As their exchange-value decreases, these workers have been offered lower wages and worse working conditions. The commodification of knowledge has spread to the education sector too. In the current socio-political climate, dominated by “[a] market-infused approach to education,” knowledge is sold as a “commodity whose exchange value is measured crudely by comparing the cost of acquiring a degree (tangible certification of ‘product’ acquisition) with the financial earnings the degree supposedly enables” (Schwartzman 42). The application of a market approach to education has, in turn, prompted the control of corporate capitalist bureaucracies over teachers. Consequently, in recent years we have witnessed the emergence of an “audit culture” (Tuchman), which involves both the implementation of standardized teaching strategies (such as standardized tests) and the “quality review” of teachers. Market-based policies and centralized control have inevitably led to the de-professionalization of teachers and, in turn, to their proletarianization.

Widespread commodification of education is something the teachers of the CNTE had been fighting for a long time. In Summer 2016, they took to the streets to protest about Peña Nieto’s education reform, which intended to introduce auditing measures such as a national teacher evaluation (La Botz), allegedly to assure teaching quality, but really led to forms of social control accompanying the commodification of education. However, unlike rural teachers, whose training includes the history of class struggle and “political theories relevant to proletarian societies” (Favela 65), Anselmo and Mariana, while equally subject to the effects of neoliberal governance, do not conceive the struggle of the rural teachers as their own.

When teachers, organized under the insignia of the CNTE, begin to occupy Oaxaca’s city downtown—“[d]e oeste a este [...] las calles estaban tomadas”—Anselmo, totally unaware of the CNTE’s tradition of social struggle, shrugs his shoulders when a woman hands a leaflet to him on the occupied *zócalo* of Oaxaca, turned into a “ciudadela dentro la otra” by “[m]iles de profesores de todo el estado” (19-20). He does not recognize the reasons for the protest, and, even worse, he is on the verge of becoming a tool of the authorities to break the teachers’ strike. Invited to an interview for a teaching job in a local school, he receives the news that has he been given the job and that he is supposed to start the following day:

Mañana mismo, dijo la directora con firmeza. Los alumnos de su materia van a cumplir dos semana sin profesor. Nuestro muchachos están

perdiendo clases desde que los revoltosos del sindicato emplazaron a huelga y no hacen nada más que holgazanear y vandalizar en el zócalo. Deberían correrlos todos si no quieren trabajar. (32-33)

On the one hand, the school Principal voices the well-rehearsed refrain of the “official” version of the facts surrounding the protest, which is based on the following anecdotes: a group of teachers who belong to both Local 22 and to independent movements staged a sit-in to demand higher wages for themselves. While the governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz has been generous in bargaining, striking teachers have decided to “dig in” (Stephen 6).

On the other hand, the urgency to fill the job vacancy has more to do with the necessity of deploying a strategy against the strike than with Anselmo’s qualifications or skills. In fact, the Principal confirms that the school’s board has decided to hire him “a pesar de que no tiene título universitario” (31). The real aims of the school’s authorities are confirmed when it appears that there has been a mistake in processing Anselmo’s application for the post. The Principal believes that Anselmo applied for a position for a literature teacher, yet his specialty is mathematics. When the misunderstanding is clarified, the Principal asks him to take on the position anyway, notwithstanding Anselmo’s unpreparedness. Thus, Anselmo is, in the eye of the capitalist educational institution, nothing more than a member of a “reserve army of labor” (Marx), the unemployed or underemployed population, hired by the capitalists to lower workers’ bargain power. In other words, capitalism requires “multiple situations of misery and enforced idleness” (Jameson 151), which results, if they are suitably managed, in a docile and easily governed workforce deployable against strikes and social struggles. However, neither Anselmo nor Mariana are aware of belonging to the “reserve army of labor,” nor do they seem to recognize that the striking teachers are fighting against the commodification of the education system. On the contrary, since the traffic is slowed by the occupation of the city’s central square, they consider the strike no more than a nuisance: “[h]ay un plantón de maestros en el zócalo. Lo mismo de todos los años. Una lata” (47).

Their annoyance is, indeed, symptomatic of their bourgeois spirit. Anselmo and Mariana, like the petit-bourgeois described in Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte*, imagine themselves “elevated above all class antagonism” (Marx 54). Indeed, the petty bourgeoisie is a “transition class,” a class that mediates between the interests of the bourgeoisie and the working-class. Therefore, the interests of each class “become simultaneously blunted” (Marx 54).

“Nosotros no estamos sindicalizados,” Mariana insists, to distance herself and Anselmo from the conflict.

However, three occurrences trigger a radical change in their perspective and the awareness of the socio-political and historical context. These three events are in fact the catastrophes to which the novel’s title refers. The title alludes to catastrophe theory, which in mathematics is a “set of methods to study and classify the ways in which a system can undergo sudden large changes in behaviour as one or more of the variables that control it changed continuously” (Britannica). In the words of the novel’s narrator:

En matemáticas, toda destrucción de formas puede describirse por la desaparición de los atractores que representan esas formas iniciales y su remplazo por otros. Lo mismo ocurre entre individuos y entre comunidades. Estos procesos son conocidos como catástrofes. Los únicos acontecimientos importantes en la vida de un individuo o de una comunidad son esas catástrofes. Las catástrofes son lo último que se borra de nuestra memoria. (9)

On a social level, the “catastrophe”—the sudden change which alters the stability of the system—is certainly the teachers’ protest, its power to mobilize a wide range of social actors, from indigenous organizations to anarchists, from students to artists, and the possibility of building a different social, political and economic system. The protest, in fact, reflects a new kind of political culture “characterized by horizontal relationships, consensus decision making, mutual aid, self-empowerment, self-sufficiency, and the belief that *how* something is achieved is as important as or more important than *what* is achieved” (Stephen 245).

On the personal level, the first two “catastrophes” are the chance encounters between Anselmo and Mariana and Roberto and Phailin, and between Anselmo and Julia. It is by fortuitously coming across these strangers that a third and fundamental catastrophe happens, which will put Anselmo and Mariana face to face with the legacy of repression and authoritarianism in Mexico.

Finally, the catastrophes mentioned throughout the novel and triggered by the encounters with other characters more directly involved with the social struggle in Oaxaca, represent those “recognition scenes” previously discussed, in which the characters are confronted with revelation of the dominating structures of Mexican capitalism.

Anselmo first meets Julia and other members of a brigade of anarchists, “provenientes del centro del país” (74), while, sitting on a bench in Oaxaca’s *zócalo*, waiting for his umpteenth job interview. After playing in a soccer game with them, Anselmo befriends the young woman.

The anarchists “[a]unque habían llegado a apoyar al sindicato de profesores [...], se autogestionaban, hacían acción directa y mantenían en todo momento su independencia.” Along with other organizations, such as the Marxist-Leninists, they represent “[u]na especie de cuadros o juventudes de la izquierda subterránea más radical del país” (74-75). They are, moreover, parts of an “autonomy” emerging within the barricades erected by the APPO:

As people at the barricades networked with one another and coordinated their actions to protect key installations such as Radio Universidad, a different kind of political culture began to emerge—particularly among youth [...]—which many loosely identified with the concept of autonomy. (Stephen 245)

Julia’s group is characterized by its active participation in the defense of the barricades around the occupied area. Initially erected to defend protestors from the daily “ataques furtivos de pistoleros, [...] caravanas de la muerte, que arrasaban y levantaban a quien tuvieran delante” (Maldonado 87), “the barricades became ad hoc cultural centers, serving as important sites for debates, the sharing of testimonials, the development of ideas” (Stephen 87).

As the relationship between Anselmo and Mariana erodes, he increasingly begins to spend more time with the anarchist brigade, and to attend the meetings of the APPO, where he meets Julia. And it is in this way that he becomes familiar with the APPO, this “public working-class and resistant political subjectivity” (Stephen 87) emerging on the streets of Oaxaca.

When the police attempt to remove the barricades and to dislodge the occupiers from the downtown, Anselmo is involved in skirmishes with the security forces and paramilitaries. The proximity with Julia and other members of the movement also gives Anselmo a privileged perspective on the repression brutally unleashed by the state on 14 July, when “un total de tres mil activos incursionaron armados alrededor de las cuatro de la madrugada, mientras los maestros y manifestantes aún dormían en las tiendas de los campamentos” (124). By cracking down on the *comuna*, the authorities aimed to suppress “a more inclusive and participatory political vision” (Stephen 95).

During the events of summer to fall 2006, in fact, “at least twenty-three people were killed, hundreds were arrested and imprisoned, and over twelve hundred complaints were filed with human rights commission” (Stephen 95). While news of the brutal repression remained hidden to most Mexicans, several testimonies have shed a light on the repressive machine built by state apparatuses to quell the revolt. In *Teoría de las catástrofes*, these accounts of violence and repression take the form of long sections dedicated to the descriptions of the

repression occurred in July, when snipers began to appear on the scene, shooting at protestors from helicopters and nearby buildings (126-127), and when the sound of tear gas grenades was replaced by “el sonido irrevocable conjurado por las balas de verdad” (129). While protestors thwarted police’s attempt to dislodge the occupation and “[e]l centro de Oaxaca fue recuperado por los profesores el mismo día del desalojo” (139), violence intensified throughout summer, peaking in August. “Hacía años que no se tenía noticia en México de un mes tan violento como lo fue ese negro agosto oaxaqueño,” the narrator confirms (195). As a response to the “endurecimiento de la guerra sucia del Estado, las medidas de seguridad y contraofensivas de la brigada de Julia se vigorizaron” (198). At the same time protestors begin to employ guards on the barricades to avert the danger posed by the “rondines de las caravanas clandestinas” of the paramilitary forces (198). By this time, after having witnessed the violence unleashed by the state against protestors, and “marchas multitudinaria de un enorme colectivo de mujeres” (194), Anselmo begins to be actively involved in the activities of the APPO, mounting guard on the barricades (232). It is at this moment that Anselmo recognizes the historical role of the APPO: “[e]stamos frente a un momento [...] histórico en el que, como parte de un sujeto colectivo, tendríamos el poder de modificar nuestro entorno de manera inusitada. Volcar la pecera” (289), he says to Roberto.

Another “catastrophe” takes place during the fortuitous encounter with a person connected with the social struggle in Mexico. Anselmo meets Roberto on his way back from the unsuccessful job interview in which he has been offered a position to teach literature. After a brief exchange, the Italian man proposes to hire him as a private teacher for his son Devendra, who has been expelled from his school because of his aggressive behavior in class. When Anselmo explains that his partner Mariana specializes in special educational needs, Roberto offers to hire them both. Thereafter, they become regulars at Roberto’s house, where they also meet his wife Phailin, a Thai-British woman. Roberto and Phailin seem to hold negative views of the protest. As restaurant owners, they affirm that “le iba de maravilla hasta antes del conflicto de los maestros” (64). However, Roberto eventually reveals that he is a former member of a Mexican left-wing guerrilla group. Moreover, thanks to his first-person experience with social struggles in Mexico, he also shares with Anselmo a privileged perspective on the history of repression of dissent. During a conversation on the conflict, Anselmo asks him if, in his opinion, the government is going to declare a state of seige and Roberto replies:

Este país ha vivido en estado de excepción discrecional desde hace ochenta años, por si no te habías dado cuenta. Estos policías tan aliñados, sus tanquetas y sus helicópteros están aquí para el noticiero de las diez y media. Los que de verdad asesinan ni siquiera usan uniformes. [...] Todos asesinos de élite entrenados por el Estado. [...] A los que éstos matan nadie los cuenta. (286-287)

What Roberto refers to is the history of state-sanctioned violence and repression. Following the 1968 massacre in Tlatelolco and the crack down on student organizations, several social movements which were articulating legitimate demands for economic and political inclusion for the poorest rural areas of the country, disillusioned by the state's violent response to the widespread call for social reforms, decided to take up arms and commit themselves to guerrilla warfare. While initially the authorities dismissed the existence of guerrilla groups, later, when forced to acknowledge their presence, they responded by institutionalizing arbitrary arrests, torture, extra-judicial executions, forced disappearances and irregular trials. Moreover, while there has not been any effort to carry out a comprehensive census of the victims, it is estimated that around 3,000 people were executed or disappeared (Herrera Calderón and Cedillo 8). Moreover, repression occurred in complete silence. Before 2000, for example, there was no mention of the dirty war in academic literature. “[S]tate repression was not denounced because nothing was known about it. [...] there were no media outlets or committees that would report on the dirty war various official agencies had undertaken” (Mendoza García 137).

Directed mainly against the members of the guerrilla organizations, the dirty war was denied for years, and in the government's discourse it never existed. The discourse sought to justify it as a struggle against criminal organizations. While at first the guerrillas were ideologized in an attempt to contain them, later their annihilation with depraved methods was simply denied. The government took a chance on social oblivion, clearly assuming that these events existed only in the discourse of the opposition and enjoyed little credibility. (Mendoza García 136)

The victims of the dirty war are the “dead no one counts” that Roberto mentions, those secretly assassinated by state security agencies, the dead who will never appear in the official statistics. By referring to this practice, widely used in the 1970s, Roberto is clearly linking the repression in Oaxaca to that of the past, referencing the massacre of Tlatelolco and with the dirty war against the guerrilla groups. In other words, the implication is that what is happening in Oaxaca is

only the continuation of an authoritarian project which imposes the logic of capitalism through violence and by erasing the voice of the victims.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, while several cases of human rights violation are the subject of numerous testimonies (Stephen 95-120) and numerous works of visual art,<sup>6</sup> *Teoría de las catástrofes* is the only novel which focuses on state violence erupting from the conflict in Oaxaca. The novel, in fact, draws attention on the systemic violence of capitalism in Mexico by connecting the dots between the past and the present.

The encounter with Roberto is the narrative mechanism which connects these historically distant phases of the repression of dissent. The Italian man, in fact, “lends” his gun—a Soviet Makarov—seemingly a relic of his past as a *guerrillero*, to Anselmo, so that the latter can use it if needed, given the dramatic upsurge of violence in the city. While initially Anselmo hesitates, he eventually accepts it and places it in his backpack (212-213). One November night, once the Federal Police and paramilitary units have begun their final attack on the APPO, Anselmo and Mariana, hastily attempting to reach their home to save it from the widespread looting carried out by paramilitaries amid confusion spreading throughout the city, are stopped by a group of policemen who rob them of their possessions. The couple is eventually subject to brutal beatings and sexual harassment before they are allowed to go (358-366). However, when one of their persecutors follows them and demands more money, his request to revise Anselmo’s backpack precipitates another “catastrophe.” A fight between the policeman and Anselmo breaks out. Anselmo is soon overwhelmed by the officer, who pulls his gun ready to shoot him. At this point, Mariana shoots the police officer down using Roberto’s Soviet Makarov (366-367).

This is the precise moment which prompts the third “catastrophe,” the radical change which, in turn, completes the process of development of socio-political “recognition.” The killing of the police officer forces Anselmo and Mariana to confront the history of repression and the brutal methods deployed by security agencies to quell insurgency and subdue dissent. The Soviet gun, a relic of

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<sup>5</sup> In absence of official history of the Dirty War, the 1991 documentary novel of Carlos Montemayor, *Guerra en el Paraíso* attempted to bring to light this untold history. The novel became a substitute for an official historical account of the events surrounding the Dirty War in Guerrero, as well as in other Mexican states, since its history had been banned from the public discourse and banished to oblivion. In this regard, see Cornelia Gräbner, “Beyond Innocence: Mexican Guerrilla Groups, State Terrorism, And Emergent Civil Society in Montemayor, Mendoza, and Glockner”, *A Contracorriente* 11.3 (2014): 164-194.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, the work of Gabriela León’s video-performance *Paseo dominical por el zócalo de Oaxaca* (2008) features the artist wearing a dress made of scraps of material from the violently cleared barricades and “samples from the bloody, lashed backs of martyrs tied to stakes” (Stallings 134).

the Cold War, is the symbol which turns Anselmo and Mariana into the uncounted victims of state violence mentioned by Roberto. The assassination of the policeman and the sympathy they have developed toward protestors in light of the brutal violence the authorities are deploying against them, lead to severe consequences. The punishment they receive for not complying with the rules of the class to which they originally belonged is to be treated like working class and indigenous people who commonly rebel against the capitalist system. Just like the middle-class students of the 1968 movements who ended up being victims of state repression for associating themselves with the causes of the subaltern classes, and ended up imprisoned in Lecumberri, Anselmo and Mariana are pulled into the vortex of state-sanctioned torture.

*Repression in Oaxaca: the Ghost of the Past*

While Anselmo and Mariana are recovering from the shock from what just happened, a group of five officers in plainclothes arrives at the scene. The officer in charge lends a sympathetic ear to Anselmo and Mariana. Subsequently, after having reassured them that they will be taken to the police station only for routine questioning, he gives them an order to get in the car (373). However, it does not take long for Mariana and Anselmo to understand that they will not be taken to the police station for routine questioning. Once in the SUV, they see Julia, who “no conseguía sostener la cabeza y daba bandazos contra el sujeto sin oreja amordazado a su lado” (374). As the car moves towards the outskirts of the city, they understand that something terrible is about to happen.

Once they reach an isolated location in the countryside, the officers take Julia and the other young man to an unknown location, shoot them and bury them so that they will appear in official records and statistics as disappeared (379). Anselmo and Mariana are separated from each other and taken to two different locations. From this point on, the novel focuses only on Anselmo’s tragedy, while the reader relies on Anselmo’s speculations to find out about Mariana’s fate.

Anselmo is escorted to a detention center, where he is locked into a completely dark room. There, surrounded by animals’ excrement and carcasses, and insects, he cannot even distinguish day from night (383-386). After a few days, he is first beaten up by one of his jailers and then interrogated by the man in charge of the group of officers. For a few more days, he remains imprisoned amid regular vexation and psychological and physical torture, and asked to give information he does not possess (386-399). Torture

does not happen because the victim possesses some information that the torturer might find useful. [...] The questioning is never there for some



pragmatic reason, that is, to elicit the revelation of a piece of information. The interrogation is not something that, once resolved to the torturer's satisfaction, would signify the end of the other's subjection to torture. [...] [T]he moment of interrogation is constitutive of the infliction of pain. That is to say, questioning is justified not because it produces truth, but because it produces pain. (Avelar 31)

Perhaps, the torturer hopes that the person who is tortured will incriminate someone else "in a perennial circle of guilt" (Avelar 31). That is why, upon release, Anselmo and Roberto, who have also been kidnapped and brought to the detention center, are placed face to face, and asked if they know each other. Eventually, after being repeatedly asked to confirm if he knows Anselmo, and how the Makarov has ended up in his possession, Roberto is assassinated. By torturing, the authorities do not aim to obtain any relevant piece of information, but to implement a "pedagogical dimension" (Avelar 27). Torture has nothing to do with "past offence but with future disorder" (Foucault 93). In other words, it is implemented in order to avert the possibility of future dissent. As those who are tortured will renounce their claims to social justice, the goal achieved through the implementation of torture is silence. Moreover, state-sponsored torture is always employed in the name of justice (Avelar 26), so that the voice of the tortured can be dismissed as the voice of the guilty. In the case of the novel, we read that Anselmo's torturer asks him:

¿Crees en el estado, hijo?  
[...]  
¿Crees que sea necesario que la gente le conceda el monopolio del poder y de la fuerza al Estado para mantener el orden de las cosas?  
[...]  
¿Confías en las estituciones de este país? ¿Confías en el legado de la Revolución, en sus instituciones, en su partido? (407)

After some moments of doubt, Anselmo only answers that "la verdad es que me da lo mismo" (408). While the ordeal he has experienced would impel him to give a different answer, torture has silenced him. His dissent is annihilated. Similarly, Mariana, who has been tortured, badly injured and sexually assaulted, eventually decides to withdraw the complaint she has made to the court against the security forces due to the victim-blaming approach employed by the investigators (424). However, while the authorities achieve the goal of silencing Anselmo and Mariana, they have become conscious of the systemic violence of capitalism in Mexico.

While "the repression of the social movement [the APPO] involved targeted assassinations, intimidation through unjustified detentions, torture, and the leveling of false charges against those detained" (Stephen 53), this section of

the novel also evokes the specters of past repression, the massacre of Tlatelolco and the repression which followed, and the 1970s-dirty war against guerrilla movements such as Lucio Cabañas in the state of Guerrero. However, the circumstances of Julia's forced disappearance also evoke a more recent tragedy, which has shaken Mexican collective consciousness: the forced disappearance of 43 students of the Normal Rural School of Ayotzinapa.

In today's Mexico "the movement of '68 is one more [...] specter, one of the many unredeemed and sleepless specters that haunt our land" (Paco Ignacio Taibo II 9). The final catastrophe of the novel produces a connection between the past (Tlatelolco 1968, the dirty war of the 1970s), the present (the repression of the commune of Oaxaca in 2006) and the future (the tragedy of Iguala in 2014), and between the specters of those events. It is precisely the awareness that repression, torture, forced disappearance can happen to anyone who dares dissent, that triggers Anselmo's final social awareness.

When the security forces are finally dislodging the protestors from the city center, Anselmo, who had fallen asleep in his house, is awakened by the sound of sirens, detonations and helicopters hovering above. It is precisely in that moment that Anselmo "cobró consciencia [...] de que el mundo estaba en movimiento y que el estaba vivo con él" (431).

While Anselmo's participation in the activities of the APPO does not go beyond the symbolically charged expressions, as it appears driven by his desire for Julia rather than by the involvement in the creation of a radical alternative due to the acquisition of awareness of his own role in society, the moment when he "cobró consciencia" can be interpreted as the "recognition scene," the moment of revelation and recognition of the reifying and dominating structure of capitalism. He is alive in a world that moves, but which is out of his control. In other words, Anselmo understands that he is "an isolated particle [...] fed into an alien system" (Lukács 90). Just as the teachers and the APPO activists, he is a disposable object at the hands of the state apparatus.

However, Anselmo acquires the potential for the "unmaking of reified objectivity", that is, the potential to recognize his role of precariously-employed member of the working class, and to join the struggle of the subaltern classes. "Hasta donde sé no hay revoluciones de seda. Una revolución es por definición eso. La disrupción violenta dentro de un sistema lineal de continuidades. Una catástrofe. No se puede andar con sutilezas. Son matemáticas. Es Simple" (290), Anselmo tells himself while mulling over the praxis of radical politics.

Nonetheless, “the destiny of future self-unmaking, is in a sense unrepresentable [sic], projected beyond the novel form” (Parker 79). The novel’s open ending (we do not know what the characters will do afterwardsi what they will make of their experience) hints precisely at the unrepresentability of the “future self-unmaking.” The radical possibility offered by the moment of recognition lies outside and beyond the novel form. It is, perhaps, embraced by the author himself, who, in a sort of self-reflexive exercise, made aware of the violent and objectifying power of capitalism during the days of the repression in Oaxaca, which he had witnessed, realizes the necessity of associating his intellectual labor with social struggles.

### *Conclusion*

The “spectrality” of the events of the *2 de octubre* (the massacre of Tlatelolco) is determined by the possibility that the massacre can happen again in the future, rather than being a one-time event (Bosteels 159-172). *Teoría de las catástrofes* narrates the return of this specter. The novel focuses on the systemic violence of the capitalist system and on its response to the challenge coming from below, from the working class, indigenous people, students, and more generally those permanently relegated to the margins of society. However, *Teoría de las catástrofes* is also a novel of political formation as it narrates the journey from a depoliticized position to sociopolitical awareness. It is a novel of class consciousness as it not only deals with the characters’ acquisition of social awareness, but also because it marks Maldonado’s transition to a Brechtian interpretation of literature as social practice.

Class consciousness is “neither the psychological consciousness of individual members of the proletariat, [...] the (mass-psychological) consciousness of the proletariat as a whole; but it is, on the contrary, *the sense, become conscious, of the historical role of the class*” (Lukács 73). In this regard, both characters’ acquisition of class consciousness in the novel and its author own, who had witnessed the emergence of the APPO on the streets of Oaxaca and the state’s violent repression, is based on the understanding of the historical role the APPO as “working-class and resistant subjectivity,” which challenges the skewed logic of capitalism and its violent manifestations.

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