

### Faltan 43: Anti-monuments, Counter-memory, and Memorialisation in Mexico



On the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2014, busses of students from the Ayotzinapa teaching college in Guerrero were attacked by municipal police. They had been travelling to the capital to commemorate the anniversary of the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968. The incident, which took place in Iguala, left 6 dead and 43 students unaccounted for; they simply disappeared without a trace. Sparking nationwide outrage, an extraordinary wave of solidarity ensued.

This was the tragedy that roused a nation.

The slogan: "Nos Faltan 43!" became the movement's central chorus. Emblematic of the entrenched state practice of enforced disappearances, this rally cry assumed a broader significance. In the words of Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussain, the former United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Ayotzinapa case "is a microcosm of chronic problems that lie beneath the relentless wave of violations to human rights...happening throughout Mexico".

In other words, "Nos Faltan 43!" became the "Ya Basta!" of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Enough was enough.

#### **Enforced Disappearances and The War on Drugs: A Background**

Since the introduction of Felipe Calderón War on Drugs in 2006, Mexico has experienced an exponential rise in violence and human rights abuse. According to Amnesty International, the situation is so grave that it now constitutes a public security crisis. Approximately 30,000 people have disappeared since 2006.

However contemporary these issues may seem, they are representative of a longer historical trend. One that emerged during Mexico's Dirty War (1960's-1970's). Borrowing the words of the historian Alexander Aviña, we must look back at this period to formulate "a diagnostic of the present". For it was during Mexico's First War on Drugs in the 1970's that the precedent was set.

During the 1970's, 2 domestic wars intersected: counternarcotics and counterinsurgency. The aim of both was to reassert state control and eliminate internal enemies. The ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), utilised terror and surveillance as formal state practices. Resulting in the gradual normalisation of everyday acts of violence.

For these reasons, the contemporary War on Drugs can be seen as the new Dirty War. The justificatory label of *guerrilla* has simply been swapped with *narco*.

The election of Calderón as President in 2006 marked a break with the past; the Pax Priista had ended after 71 years. Calderón's new hard stance on drugs was a marked divergence from the PRI's

strategy of selective enforcement and corruption. The military occupation of territory, coupled with the adoption of the kingpin strategy, resulted in an explosion of violence. In their attempt to strengthen the rule of law and public safety, the Calderón administration (rather paradoxically) caused its disintegration.

### **The Ayotzinapa Case: Official Explanations**

In 2015, the Mexican Attorney General's Office (PGR) attempted to bring closure to the criminal investigation of the Ayotzinapa case by revealing the "historic truth" of the event. According to the official government narrative, the students had been kidnapped by corrupt police officers and handed over to an organised criminal gang. They were then killed and incinerated at the local dump.

This account has been highly contested.

An independent investigation run by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has revealed an entirely different story; one marked by state complicity and concealment. According to the IACHR, the attacks had been orchestrated by several government agencies, including the federal, state, and municipal police. The Mexican Army were also implicated for their presence at the scene of the crime.

The inquiry's forensic experts refuted the state-endorsed "truth". They regarded the incineration of 43 bodies at the local rubbish dump an impossibility. What is more, they condemned the state for attempting to obstruct their investigation and destroy potential evidence.

To this day, the truth of what occurred remains unknown, as doubts still persist over the basic facts of the case.

### **Silence and Impunity: The Rise of Counter-Memory**

An enduring legacy of Calderón's War on Drugs is the dehumanisation of victims and their families. Founded on the discursive construction of victims as complicit in criminality, and thus deserving of their misfortune, this strategy has enabled the state to distance itself from its most heinous human rights abuses.

This has been described by the sociologist Javier Trevino-Rangel as "the policing of uncomfortable truths: a strategy that seeks to conceal reality (through) an arsenal of rhetoric that serves as a defence mechanism to deny that torture and disappearances occur".

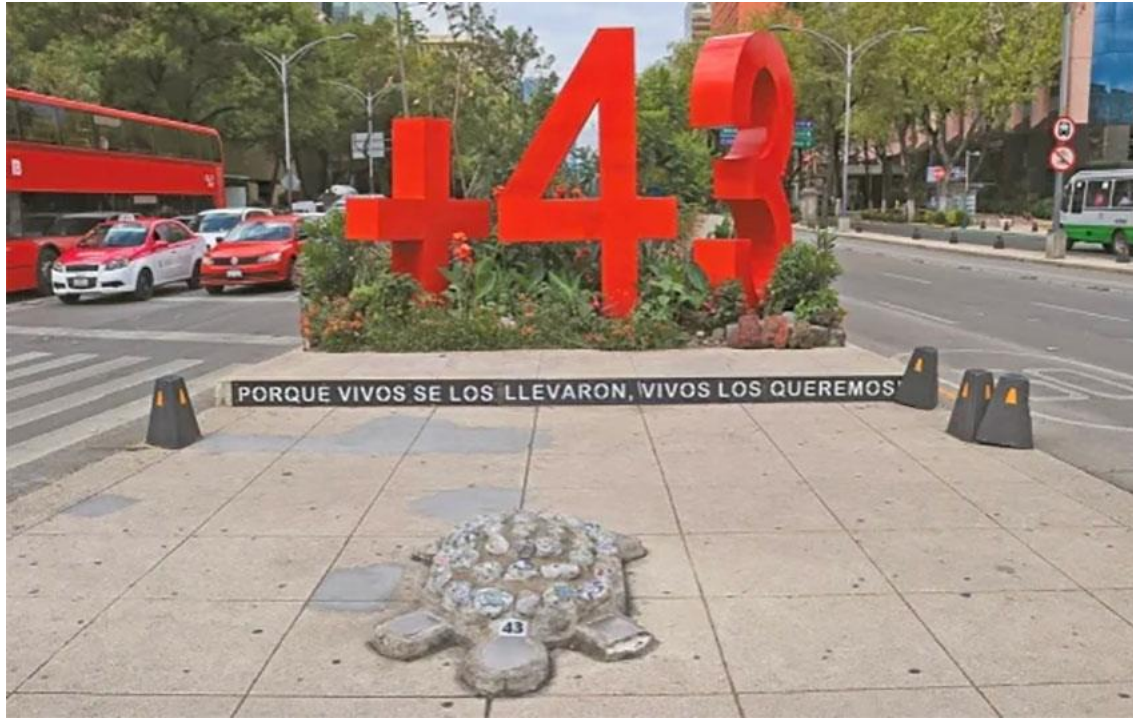
As a result, cases are rarely investigated, and due to government impunity, those that are, rarely seek the justice or recompense they deserve. According to Amnesty International, "the failure to conduct full and impartial investigations has left many families with no effective recourse to (the) truth".

Enforced disappearances have long been denied a place in Mexico's national memory. Condemned to the margins of society, relatives must therefore assume the roles of activist and investigator. It is in these peripheral spaces of resistance that counter-memories flourish.

Spaces of memory become spaces of rehumanization.

Through art, social media, hashtags, protest, and sculpture, the prevailing government narrative is actively challenged. By “combing history against the grain”, the struggle of victims is legitimised and saved from state-sponsored oblivion.

### **The Anti-Monument: The Marriage of Memory and Activism**



This sculpture was erected on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 2015 on the Paseo de la Reforma in Mexico City, exactly 7 months after the disappearance of the Ayotzinapa students. It was created by the families of the missing, and built without the permission of the authorities. Situated centrally, and in close proximity to other historically significant statues, this anti-monument subverts traditional memorial conventions. It act's as both a site of memory and political protest.

In this way, memorialisation is not just personal but political. Although this sculpture acts as a point of spatial memory for the Ayotzinapa case, it's symbolic value extends further to all of Mexico's *desaparecidos*. This is illustrated in the plus sign and slogan: “because they were taken alive, we want them returned alive”. Harking back to Mexico's Dirty War, this motto encapsulates the movement's persistence in calling for justice.

According to the sociologist Elisabeth Jelin, justice and memory are entangled in cases of violence “because the meaning of the past that is being fought about is, in fact, part and parcel of the demand for justice in the present”. This is epitomised by the +43 sculpture.

Publicly challenging the state-endorsed “truth”, the anti-monument acts as a vehicle for memory. Passers-by are not only prompted to remember the event itself, but also the counter-narratives that incriminate the state. Activists regularly gather at the site to protest and remember the victims by name.

According to oral testimony from the families of the disappeared, the anti-monument was established as a temporary measure to amplify their demands. It was intended to place pressure on the state, in the hope it may accelerate the investigation and yield some positive results. However 6 years later, the sculpture remains a permanent feature of Mexico City's landscape. Although

successive governments have expressed solidarity with the cause, the investigation of enforced disappearances remains tainted by a lack of funding and governmental will. For disappearances since 2006, there have been no federal prosecutions. Thus, the statue persists.

The location of the +43 sculpture is significant. The Paseo de la Reforma can be characterised as a space of collective (or perhaps selective) national memory, in which heroes such as Cuauhtémoc are celebrated. According to the historian Brian Ladd, “Monuments are nothing if not selective aids for memory: they encourage us to remember some things and to forget others”. Therefore, the construction of the anti-monument in this area seeks to uncover the obscured. It stands in direct opposition to the other statues to expose the corruption and brutality that lie at the heart of the state. By doing so, it disrupts the prevailing victor’s narrative of the Paseo, and inserts counter-memory into the national discourse.

### **Nos Faltan 41: A Look Towards the Future**

It has been 6 years since the attacks of the 26<sup>th</sup> of September 2014. Of the 43 students, only the remains of 2 have been unearthed. Continuing to captivate the hearts of the nation, this case has become an “exemplary memory”: it speaks to the experience of the approximately 30,000 people forcibly disappeared since 2006.

The significance of the +43 anti-monument cannot be underestimated. It has set a precedent for successive social justice movements, such as the recent action against gender violence and femicides. As a result, human rights have been reinserted into the public domain after years of concealment. This is a testament to the endurance of counter-memories and grassroots action.

Barred from accessing traditional memorial practices, the families of the 43 disappeared students created their own. Through the marriage of memory and protest, the stories of their loved ones live on in the public imagination.

The +43 sculpture highlights an emerging shift in Mexican human rights. The fact that this statue has not been removed by authorities speaks to this; its permanence emphasises the permanence of the movement. The enactment of Mexico’s 2017 Law on Disappearances proves that the state can no longer ignore its history of human rights abuse. Although this incipient change is positive, investigations continue to be plagued by the amnesia and impunity of the past.

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(Images hyperlinked).

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