

REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN MEXICO:
THE AGUAS BLANCAS MASSACRE.

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In June 1995, seventeen peasants were killed by police forces in Aguas Blancas, Guerrero, Mexico. Although killings are not rare there, this one became a scandal.

In those days Mexico experienced dramatic changes in every order: a deep economic and political crisis and several legal and administrative modifications were to transform Mexican State and its constitutional basement.

Meanwhile, civil society organizations were growing in number and importance and using a number of legal tools to gain recognition of civil rights. The struggle for justice in Aguas Blancas became part of that effort and kept being also a mobilizing *leit motiv* for poor peasantry and social movements.

This paper will explore the several ways in which human rights discourse actualized antique claims for justice and how Aguas Blancas massacre was placed in collective memory as a symbol of impunity and as a landmark in terms of a narrative of social and political change.



In June 1995, seventeen peasants were killed by police forces in the state of Guerrero, Mexico. Killings are not infrequent in Guerrero, usually known as a “wild” place. But this time the massacre became a big issue.

It mobilized public opinion, got into the Inter American Commission on Human Rights and was of concern of the legislative, the executive and the judicial federal powers.

Today, almost nine years later, the Aguas Blancas massacre keeps being remembered in several ways and has gained a prominent place among the few cases of human rights violations which are permanently recalled to stress the poor situation of human rights standards in Mexico and, more than all, the high level of impunity that persists in spite of the major political changes that the country has experienced in the last fifteen years.

1. The happenings

June 28, 1995. It was around 10:30 am when everything started. About 300 peasants were traveling in the back of two trucks, intending to arrive to Atoyac de Álvarez, a little town in the Southern state of Guerrero, Mexico, when they were stopped by a police control point. These men were going to participate in a pacific demonstration to ask for fertilizers and to claim that his fellow, Gilberto Romero, was presented alive. He had *disappeared* on May 24, 1995¹.

The first truck passed the check point without problems. But versions differed about what happened after the unarmed men went out of second one. What then was known for sure is that a massive shooting started and seventeen men were killed in the spot and several more got wounded when one of the trucks was attacked. Everything happened near a small ford known as Aguas Blancas, located between Coyuca de Benitez and Atoyac de Álvarez, in the Costa Grande region.

After the shooting the area was secured by police for the next four hours. During that time policemen put guns in the hands of several of the dead men to pretend that they had attacked first and that the killing had been an unfortunate outcome of a defensive action. Nevertheless, the latter version was disregarded by the families of the victims and representatives of the OCSS (Peasant Organization of the Southern Sierra) to which the victims belonged.

The National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH), the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation and the Inter American Commission on Human Rights would later support the former version.

The CNDH is a public—and somehow perceived as official—commission founded in 1990 which deals with cases of human rights violations. It issued a recommendation on Aguas Blancas (104/95)², establishing that the police body known as “Policía Motorizada” had perpetrated the murder of the 17 peasants.

¹ *La Jornada*, 06/30/1995 p. 1 and 6.

² Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos. Informe Anual 1995. <http://www.cndh.org.mx> (10/17/2003)

This police force depended directly from the Governor of the State, Mr. Ruben Figueroa Alcocer. He openly denied the charges and affirmed that the policemen had only defended themselves against the aggression.

The PRD —the most important of the leftist Mexican parties— soon recognized the victims as its members and stood up for them in the Congress. Being the Major of Atoyac a member of the PRD, the Party soon had information about what happened at the ford and initiated a strong campaign against the Governor.

Meanwhile, the massacre was taken to the Inter American Commission on Human Rights³. Several human rights NGOs supported the case and sent information to the IACHR in Washington DC. Eventually the Commission started a procedure to investigate the facts⁴.

There is no doubt that the massacre was an important event that mobilized popular organizations, political parties and governmental agencies. But it was still confined in the narrow *milieu* of active and organized leftist civil society and political elites. But on February 24, 1996 this was about to change. The TV news program *Detrás de la Noticia* (Behind the news) transmitted a 30 minutes long video recorded during the massacre. The images you are about to see are part of it. The video showed how the second truck arrived to the check point and all the travelers were compelled go down.

There was no warning nor any kind of violent act on behalf of the peasants. Policemen posted at both sides of the road and in front of the truck started shooting at them. Many fell down while others tried to hide.

The shooting lasted about 15 minutes. After that, the cameraman walked around focusing at the wounded and dead peasants. There it was possible to see several policemen in the procedure of placing guns in the hands of dead and agonizing men. One could hear the screams and watch clearly how many of the wounded were executed in cold blood by the policemen. Then, the seventeen peasants acquired a face, a voice, were subjects again. Their suffering became real in the white shirt soaked in blood and in the incredulous face

³ The IACHR is one of the two agencies of the Organization of American States devoted to assure the respect of human rights in the continent. The other one is the Inter American Court. The headquarters of the Commission are in Washington DC. The Court sessions are held in San Jose, Costa Rica.

⁴ In February 1998 the IACHR finally made public its report on the case. See IACHR. Report 49/97. Case 11.520 Tomás Porfirio Rondín “Aguas Blancas” Mexico.

where one could not tell if fear or pain were to prevail. The video, transmitted at prime time in a nation wide channel, made of Aguas Blancas a symbol of impunity⁵.

More than the massacre itself, the possibility of watching it from the beginning to the end shocked Mexican society. People for every social status in big cities or in small towns soon knew for certain what had happened. This time, the suspicion that the security forces were savage and had no respect for poor peasants became an irrefutable truth: there they were, easily killing and walking among wounded crying men who begged for their lives.

After that, President Ernesto Zedillo⁶ had no choice but to intervene (until then he had intended to keep himself aside from the issue in spite of the well-known fact that he had a close relation with Governor Figueroa and that he had been repeatedly questioned about it). He asked the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN) to investigate.

The Supreme Court did it based in its capacity to investigate facts that “may constitute the violation of any individual guarantee” according to article 97 of the Political Constitution⁷. It had only used this capacity once before, in 1946. As a result of its investigation, the Court emitted a resolution in which stated that a gross violation of individual guarantees had occurred in Aguas Blancas and explicitly pointed out the responsibility of Governor Ruben Figueroa and several of his collaborators.

2. The framing of Aguas Blancas

Recollection of past events occurs through several symbolic devices. As E. Durkheim argued:

“...without symbols, social sentiments could have only a precarious existence. Though very strong as long as men are together and influence each other reciprocally, they exist only in the form of recollections after the assembly has ended, and when left to themselves, they become feebler and feebler; for since the group is no longer present and active, individual temperaments easily regain the upper hand [...] But if the movements by

⁵ Three special prosecutors were consecutively appointed by the Congress in Guerrero to solve the case. Forty eight persons were prosecuted and only six were convicted. However only one remained in jail. He was liberated in 2002.

⁶ Ernesto Zedillo was President of Mexico between 1994 and 2000.

⁷ “La SCJN podrá ejercer su facultad investigadora para esclarecer algún hecho o hechos que constituyan la violación de alguna garantía individual” (the translation is mine).

which these sentiments are expressed are connected with something that endures, the sentiments themselves become more durable”⁸

Aguas Blancas massacred became part of collective memory while being framed both through a community of memory and as what Iwana Irwin-Zarecka has called a remembrance based on place.

From June 28 to the night when the video was transmitted, only a small number of persons had adopted Aguas Blancas as a traumatic common past that built a bond among them: the widows and children of the victims, the social organization to which they belonged (the OCSS), two human rights NGOs and occasionally representatives of the PRD made strong references to the facts and claimed systematically for justice. The peasant organization, the widows and some municipal officials built the memorial on the ford and changed the name of the local cemetery to call it “Martyrs of June 28”⁹.

If the massacre started being a hallmark only for a narrow community, the transmission of the video dramatically widened it and changed the way in which Mexicans perceived governance, politics and human rights in the country.

In April 2003, a well known journalist wrote:

“...It is not honest to defend shootings or imprisonments by themselves, it is of stupid people to do that. To justify them, being killings or jail, to explain them, to rationalize them, is a task of every power, being that in Guantánamo, Iraq, Palestine, Tlatelolco, South Africa, Cuba, Afganistán, Aguas Blancas...”¹⁰

⁸ Emile Durkheim. *The elementary forms of the religious life*. London, George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1976, p. 231

⁹ La Jornada (07/08/1995), p. 14.

¹⁰ Froylán M. López Narváez. *Atrás de la raya. Reforma* (04/16/2003) “No es honrado defender fusilamientos o encarcelamientos por mor de sí mismos, es de brutos hacerlo. Justificarlos, matanzas o reclusiones, explicarlos, racionalizarlos, es tarea de todos los poderes, lo mismo en Guantánamo, Iraq, Palestina, Tlatelolco, Sudáfrica, Cuba, Afganistán, Aguas Blancas...” (translation is mine)

So Aguas Blancas had won a place similar to Tlatelolco¹¹ –until then, the symbol *par excellence* of impunity and barbarian behaviors in contemporary history of Mexico- and became a generation marker in the sense suggested by Irwin-Zarecka¹².

Being passive watchers of the killing, Mexicans all around the country could share this experience and became bonded by it.

But, as it was aforementioned, Aguas Blancas was also framed in terms of the place where the massacre was perpetrated. An evident fact is the name of the memory, which follows the one of the small ford in which the peasant were attacked. It, however, seems to have deeper roots than a simple remembrance.

As we will see, the State of Guerrero occupies a very important place in Mexican collective memory. The Aguas Blancas massacre became a collective remembrance while being framed as a follow-up of a long history of resistance, violence and social instability.

The massacre became a mark in terms of a narrative of change. Being the country deeply sunk in a process of dramatic transformations, Aguas Blancas was inserted in a narrative that counter posed human rights and justice to a regime perceived as decadent. As Benedict Anderson would say, Aguas Blancas became part of the genealogy of Mexico, a genealogy rather marked by deaths¹³.

2.1 The thick context

According to the international trend at the time, the period of government of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) had among its basic characteristics a big wave of desestatization¹⁴ of public enterprises. Contractive policies were systematically applied while speculative capital was protected.

The huge apparatus of Mexican State was being disarticulated. So was the corporative structure of organizations which integrated the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary

¹¹ In October 2, 1968 students demonstrating against the authoritarianism of Mexican regime were attacked by soldiers in a square known as Tlatelolco or the Square of the three cultures. There is not an exact account of the dead people there, but it goes from several dozens to hundreds of young women and men, and even children.

¹² Iwona Irwin-Zarecka. *Frames of Remembrance. The Dynamics of Collective Memory*. Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, 1994, p. 53

¹³ Benedict Anderson. *Imagined communities*, p. 205.

¹⁴ Meaning the systematic sale of enterprises belonging to Mexican State.

Party). These organizations, it is good to remember, had made possible the hegemony of the PRI in the long posrevolutionary period (since 1929).

The model above described only continued and deepened changes made by Carlos Salinas' government. It had as a result, among many other things, an important process of impoverishment of Mexican population. Most of the "municipios" of Oaxaca, Chapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Puebla y Yucatán were classified in 1995 as having high indices of social marginality: 84% of the indigenous population in those regions lived in what Mexican government had established as "extreme poverty". 77% of the population over 16 years earned less than one minimum wage (around 70 dollars per month)¹⁵.

In 1993, two years before the Aguas Blancas massacre, the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI) reported that 70% of Mexican population lived in the limits of poverty, that 19% of the rural population had no income and that 61.10% earned between zero and one minimum wage.

INEGI classified Chiapas, Guerrero, Veracruz, Oaxaca, Hidalgo and Puebla as the regions of higher marginality. In June 1995 it was reported that unemployment affected 2, 310,000 individuals in age and condition of working. INEGI stated that between January and May of that year 1,900,000 individuals lost any source of income¹⁶.

In December, 1994 Mexican peso experimented a strong devaluation and a severe crisis due to the large amount of capital that left the country. National economy was badly damaged in what would afterwards be called "the mistake of December". It hurt both Mexican pockets and the image of the new president.

As a parallel process of the economic changes, a series of legal modifications took place between 1993 and 1995. All the changes led to a hardening of penal punishment and a growing use of police forces to guarantee social stability and safety. All these legal and administrative modifications were part of a modernization process that aimed to prepare Mexico in order to be competitive in the just signed NAFTA.

At the same time, and probably driven by the same forces, human rights and democracy were clearly assumed as emblematic causes. Civil society became organized to defend their votes and their rights.

¹⁵ Mario Monroy. *Los saldos de la crisis*. SIPRO, México, 1995, p. 39

¹⁶ Mario Monroy, Op cit., p. 51.

In 1994 a well known uprising took place in Chiapas. The Zapatista Army defined itself as a heterodox guerrilla movement that brought to political arena the long neglected indigenous rights. Intellectuals, artists, peasants, students, churches and many other social subjects supported Zapatista's demands, even if they did not share the idea of using violent methods.

The uprising had two main consequences. The first one is that it situated Mexico in a war. It opened the door to the logic of confrontation and increased the use of violence in governmental responses to social manifestations of dissidence.

The second one is that the uprising became part of social imaginary and became an agglutination point of many collective manifestations of discontent.

But 1994 would also be remembered by other things. It was a federal election year and in March a presidential candidate was assassinated. He was Luis Donaldo Colosio, candidate for the PRI.

In September, the General Secretary of the PRI was also killed. They both were shot to death. These deaths made more vivid the already deep sensation of violence and destruction, mainly because the death of Colosio meant the breaking of an old political ritual as well as the destruction of a mythical symbol.

It is important to remember that the presidential institution in Mexico has been until very recent days similar to absolute power. The candidate was "the chosen one", and was considered virtually the new president from the moment in which his candidacy was public. The election of successor made by the president was a well known practice that the murder of Colosio was about to stop.

Another important factor in explaining the way in which Aguas Blancas is remembered is the recurrent mobilization of security forces related to anti-narcotic efforts and policies. In 1995, the destruction of plantations of marihuana and poppy grew by 40% in comparison with the previous year. And Guerrero was considered the major producer in the country, with some 22.63% of national production¹⁷.

¹⁷ Larrainz Altuna Gabilondo. *Violencia política institucional en Guerrero (1989-1999)*. Masters thesis, Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales, UNAM, 2001, p. 80.

2.2 The echoes of history: resistance and rebellion in Guerrero

As I mentioned before, the assassinated peasants were part of a social organization, the OCSS. This organization was rather new: it was born in 1994. However, they had appropriated an old history and had given continuity to a narrative relating repression, human rights and poverty in the Sierra.

The first massive mobilization of the OCSS took place in Atoyac on May 18, 1994. They were asking for an audience with the president (in those days, Carlos Salinas de Gortari). They wanted to raise the situation of the relatives of men who were *disappeared* twenty years before¹⁸, during the “dirty war” against guerrilla groups in the state. They were also demonstrating to commemorate the anniversary of an strong repression carried out against peasantry in Guerrero in 1967, that led to a violent uprising.

The OCSS demanded that the more than 600 persons disappeared in the 70s were presented alive, that the perpetrators of those crimes were punished, that political prisoners were released.

The Aguas Blancas massacre was thus linked in collective memory to the guerrilla struggles and, more generally, the social resistance in Guerrero. In an article appeared just one week after the killing, the analyst Carlos Montemayor wrote:

”There (in the Sierra of Atoyac) Vicente Guerrero entrenched himself against the royal army. There Juan Alvarez fought against the conservative and imperialist forces. There the zapatista groups, commanded by the grandfather of Lucio Cabañas, resisted to the attack of the armies of Porfirio Díaz, of Madero and finally of Carranza. A town called El Quemado is a memory of those military incursions: it was totally set in flames to cancel the popular support to the zapatistas”¹⁹

The name of the article itself is interesting: “Guerrero, again” brings up a pattern of remembrance and frames the massacre as part of a never ending story of repression and seeking for justice.

The historian Armando Bartra has suggested that killings seem to be marks of historical change in Guerrero. In 1960 15 people were executed by the forces of the governor, Caballero Aburto. He had to resign after that; Seven dead peasants in Iguala (1962) started the radicalization process of the well known Asociación Cívica Guerrerense;

¹⁸ Maribel Gutiérrez. *Violencia en Guerrero*. La Jornada Ediciones, México, 1998, p. 107.

other seven on May, 1965 were the trigger to the already mentioned uprising of Lucio Cabañas. The massacre of the “copreros” in Acapulco (1967) and, finally, the massacres of Aguas Blancas and El Charco have been some of the more significant bloody events in Guerrero.

All along the 60s and the 70s two peasant movements came to being in Guerrero. They became more and more radical until they started an armed uprising that was quickly responded by the military.

The army kept the state under surveillance and military occupation for more than 10 years. The 600 *disappeared* people whose presentation was demanded by the OCSS are part of the outcome of military presence in Guerrero during those days²⁰.

3. Remembering Aguas Blancas.

In October 1995, four months after the massacre, a memorial was built in the ford. The names of the 17 dead peasant were listed in the body of a big white cross. According to Yves Terson in his book *L'Etat Criminal*, one of the most important characteristics of massacres is that victims lose their individual identity. They become part of an anonymous cipher and identity suffers what Juan Carlos Segura has named a shifting (*desplazamiento*)²¹.

However, in the Aguas Blancas Memorial no space was left for anonymity. The years of birth and death of every one of the peasants grant access to their identity as individual victims.

The memorial is important not only because it reminds the viewers the facts but because it has also been the stage of protests vigorously rooted in Guerrero's history. Demonstrations themselves have continuously given new symbolic meaning to Aguas Blancas and have contributed to keep it in collective memory.

The marking of the physical site of the killing was in fact a political gesture that aimed to avoid the massacre to be forgotten. The fact that the memorial was built by opposition groups makes even clearer the conflictual origin of it: while these groups wanted

¹⁹ Carlos Montemayor, “Guerrero, otra vez” *La Jornada*, 07/04/ 1995, p. 1 (translation is mine)

²⁰ Armando Bartra. *Guerrero bronco. Campesinos, ciudadanos y guerrilleros en la Costa Grande*. Era, México, 2000, p. 112.

to remember, the government (both at the state and federal level) wanted Aguas Blancas to be forgotten as a political event.

The memorial itself was thus a victory for those demanding justice. Commemoration had from then on a physical frame.²²

In 1996, while commemorating the first anniversary of the massacre, a huge number of people concentrated in the ford, besides the memorial. A mass was performed and representatives of NGOs and many popular movements both from Guerrero and other parts of the country spoke there demanding justice for the victims and full respect for human rights in Mexico. It was a commemoration like many others before. But at one point it surprisingly turned into a radical political demonstration: a new guerrilla army, the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (EPR, Popular Revolutionary Army) had chosen that opportunity to be known by the media and civil society.

Since then, every June 28 a convoy leaves the *zócalo*²³ in Mexico City. Those who assist carry crowns of flowers, traditional flower arrangements to furnish gravestones. People commemorates Aguas Blancas massacre, which has been deeply linked to human rights situation in Mexico, and make claims regarding their own present demands of justice. In terms established by Irwin-Zarecka, collective memory concentrates on the “relationships between the past and the present”²⁴ and updates past situations to re build social identities.

So, summing up, social remembrance gave Aguas Blancas a meaning in close relation to past events that for a long time had been used to shore up the identity of resistance and rebellion. Poor peasantry constructed a narrative out of these events that operated as a claim for justice.

As we have seen, the mere fact that the massacre was transmitted on TV, dramatically altered its boundaries. Media effect produced a broadened community of

²¹ Juan Carlos Segura, “Reflexión sobre la masacre” in Susana B. Devalle *Poder y cultura de la violencia*. El Colegio de México, México, 2000, p.38.

²² This situation has been noticed in many other similar cases. It is interesting to compare to the reflections made by Elizabeth Jelin and Susana Kaufman about the Argentinean “dirty war” and what they have called “layers of memory”. See David E. Lorey (ed.) *Genocide, Collective Violence and Popular Memory*, Wilmington, 2002.

²³ The *zócalo* is a huge square located in down town Mexico City. Surrounded by the National Palace, the Metropolitan Cathedral, the municipal building and the ruins of one of the most important Aztec monuments, it is the symbolic heart of Mexico.

²⁴ Irwin-Zarecka, Op. Cit., p. 101.

memory that was shocked not only by the violence of the killing but by the certainty that that was actually happening in a so called democratic and pacific country.

4. Interpreting Aguas Blancas as a human rights issue.

Aguas Blancas was —and still is— one of the symbols of impunity in Mexico. It became what Bronislaw Baczko has called “strength idea” (an idea around which both social imaginary and collective action are organized). It was interpreted relating in two main dichotomies:

Authoritarianism-Democracy. (Old- new) Being impunity, violence and authoritarianism conceived as main features of what we could easily call the Old Mexican regime, Aguas Blancas and the struggle for the compensation of the victims, and for the punishment to those responsible of the crime came to be seen as part of a new symbolic horizon, the one of democracy and rights, the rule of law and the civility of relations between the State and its citizens. The existence of a public sphere (civil organizations, independent media and a growing sense of an autonomous civil society) made possible the Aguas Blancas case. Human rights were to be interpreted according to international standards and abandoned the narrow perspective of the westfalian sovereignty of the State to encompass a broader and much more inclusive relationship between State and civil society.

Stability and chaos. Given the many violent events Mexican political scene had experienced in the period between 1993 and 1996, Aguas Blancas and its outcome were interpreted regarding to the perceived extreme weakness of public institutions and governmental agencies. In this sense, the strengthening of institutions became a main issue and human rights were understood in terms of the ability of the State to govern and to preserve itself.

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