

Gómez Unamuno, Aurelia. *Entre fuego, memoria y violencia de Estado: los textos literarios y testimoniales del movimiento armado en México*. A Contracorriente, 2020. 578 pp.

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Entre fuego, memoria y violencia de estado investigates state violence in Mexico in the 1970s, and as such, offers an important contribution to ongoing conversations in Mexican and Latin American Studies. The book develops a theoretical approach to state violence by assessing the vocabulary that has been used to describe state violence in Mexico. Its author, Aurelia Gómez Unamuno, then analyzes the documentary and literary evidence that testifies to this state violence and describes its brutal effects on people throughout Mexico. Her work also brings literary, historical, and archival evidence of state violence in Mexico into conversation with other important tendencies in Latin American studies, such as the more well-known studies of state violence in the Southern Cone and the development and critique of the *testimonio* genre in Central America.

Gómez Unamuno's work is also in dialogue with the recent re-evaluation of that time period, joining recent works such as Susana Draper's *1968 Mexico: Constellations of Freedom and Democracy* (2018) and Enrique C. Ochoa and Jaime M. Pensado's edited collection, *México Beyond 1968: Revolutionaries, Radicals, and Repression During the Global Sixties and Subversive Seventies* (2018), which deal with the repercussions of state violence throughout the country. It also relates to Gareth Williams's *The Mexican Exception* (2011), which confronts with this type of violence in the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca. In short, *Entre fuego, memoria y violencia de estado* makes historical, theoretical, archival, and literary contributions to Mexican and Latin American studies.

A brief introduction contextualizes the monograph and underlines the importance of studying the 1970s to gain a better understanding of the nature and effects of state violence in Mexico. Gómez Unamuno establishes that her wide-ranging book will address a number of theoretical and historical questions over the course of three sections constituted by chapters.

The first section, titled "Violencia de Estado y Memoria," expands on the introduction and develops Gómez de Unamuno's vocabulary regarding the type of violence that occurred in Mexico, offering an in-depth discussion of the historical context. This is a significant contribution because it

ties what happened in Mexico to the Cold War, and thus, to other examples of US intervention in Latin America.

This chapter offers important contributions to the vocabulary scholars use to describe state violence. She surveys the ways that different scholars have employed the terminology of state terrorism, forced disappearances, and state violence. *Entre fuegos* concludes that in the 1970s, the Mexican state was engaged in “violencia de Estado sistemática,” (79) or systematic state-sponsored violence. This is a helpful term as it points to the array of violent techniques employed by the state and, for scholars in the US, removes the word terrorism, which can have implications in law enforcement, intelligence, and the purported need for “counter-terrorism” measures.

The chapter also sheds light on two paradoxes in this historical context that help us understand why a discussion of the complex nature of state violence in 1970s Mexico has only been recently undertaken. Gómez Unamuno reminds us that in this decade, Mexico’s presidents were all affiliated with the PRI political party, and thus, ostensibly connected to the country’s revolutionary heritage. At the same time Mexico’s leaders employed this rhetoric, they were accommodating the interests and intervention of the US government. This became known as the *pax priista*, in which the government continued to deploy revolutionary rhetoric as it acceded to US intervention.

This chapter also explores a related paradox pertaining to the way that the Mexican government has evaluated its actions in the 1970s. In the twenty-first century, the government has recognized some of its crimes—particularly its role in the forced disappearance of some activists and guerrilla fighters in the state of Guerrero. While the government claims that these were exceptional occurrences, acknowledging them gives it some credibility. Yet, as Gómez Unamuno goes on to show throughout *Entre fuegos*, it engaged in forced disappearances of people throughout the republic.

The second chapter, “Las disputas por la memoria en México,” deals with the question of memory and why the Mexican government has acknowledged some of its crimes but not others. Gómez Unamuno offers a very thorough review of philosophers and theorists who have dealt with the questions of memory, pain, and trauma as she develops an understanding of historical memory that applies to 1970s Mexico. She contextualizes her understanding of memory from political theories by Jacques Rancière and the interpretation of these ideas in the Southern Cone by Idelber Avelar. She contrasts these tendencies with John Beverley’s theories of testimonio, as well as Elaine Scarry’s ideas of pain and Dominick LaCapra’s understanding of trauma and the Holocaust. Their ideas inform her analysis of what Gómez Unamuno calls the first phase of memory reconstruction in films produced during the tenure of President Luis Echeverría (1970-1976). Social sciences and oral histories later

expanded on these early films. Then, in the 1990s, these sources were re-evaluated through the lens of testimonio. During this decade, the Mexican government also set up the CNDH (National Human Rights Commission) and absorbed these accounts through a state-sponsored framework. It is clear that the Mexican government has sought to appropriate and disseminate historical memory in order to control the message about its own atrocious actions.

The second section of *Entre fuegos* reminds us that the armed struggle against oppression in Mexico did not begin or end with the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968. The first chapter in this section, “De arrepentidos y conversos: deslinde teórico y rectificación,” surveys recent debates on testimonial literature and reminds us of the fiction of democratic transition (142-43). It compares the situation in Mexico to dictatorships in the Southern Cone and to Nicaragua, and establishes that Mexico was distinct because it did not receive as much international attention. Gómez Unamuno notes that this era led to several types of literature in Mexico, ranging from internal criticism of the armed struggle, to autobiographies and works with a didactic or pedagogical dimension (156-57). Gómez Unamuno makes important contributions to theoretical and critical debates; though the discussions of existing criticism and theory in this and other sections are so extensive that they overshadow her literary analysis.

The final section of the book, “Romper el cerco del silencio,” remedies this oversight in part, as it focuses almost exclusively on the literature produced by this period. Its chapters deal with several types of writing that portray the horrors of living under systematic State-sponsored violence surveying narrative fiction and poetry written in Mexican prisons. The sixth chapter of *Entre fuegos* highlights how poetry represents violence and allows us to understand the effects of prison on those who are incarcerated. Gómez Unamuno notes that writing can be a practice of survival, and that this type of writing is different from writing that is designed to capture state violence and represent it for those who have not experienced it (353). The seventh chapter then deals specifically with memoirs and memories that validate people’s experiences and offer a genealogy of resistance to state violence (421). The final chapter of her monograph analyzes recent memoirs that note the many failures of the Mexican legal system to comply with international law (429).

Entre fuegos places these events alongside struggles in Central America and the Southern Cone, and as its epilogue reminds readers, state violence occurred throughout Mexico in the 1970s. In this way, Gómez Unamuno corrects an oversight within Latin American studies and situates itself within a growing body of work within Mexican studies that reminds us that the struggles of this era were not confined to one or two regions in Mexico. Her work will be useful for scholars and students of 1970s

Mexico, and those interested in researching or teaching about the questions of history, memory and testimonio in Latin America.