

## STATE VIOLENCE AND GENDER in San Salvador Atenco, Mexico

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*Translated by María Vinós*

How can any honest woman in Mexico, regardless of her ideology, remain silent?

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May third and fourth of 2006 will be remembered as some of the saddest and most violent days in the modern history of San Salvador Atenco. This small town, home to 33,000 people who still depend on a peasant economy, witnessed a violent clash between 300 unarmed civilians, members of the Frente de Pueblos en la Defensa de la Tierra (People's Front for the Defense of the Land), and some 4,000 policemen from various agencies. The police put the demonstration down and terrorized the whole community, raiding houses, and breaking down doors. Two hundred seven people, including children, women, and the elderly, were arrested without warrants. At the end of the day, twenty people had been seriously injured, and a young boy was dead.

What had started as a demonstration to support eight street vendors from the neighboring town of Texcoco became a violent clash, which most of the media described as the "return to the rule of law" after the arbitrary actions of a "radical group." The image of a group of peasants from Atenco battering a fallen policeman was shown again and again to justify the state's use of violence. The loss of control and violence by a few was used to disqualify a whole movement and to characterize it as a destabilizing and dangerous force

for the Mexican government and the population in general. The attack on the policeman should have been punished according to the law. Considering there were plenty of images of the event, it would have been possible to identify the attackers. Instead, state and federal authorities chose to unleash the full force and violence of the state on innocent people, many of whom do not even belong to the group the authorities aimed to disband.

The testimonies of the men and women arrested over these two days, which are known thanks to human rights organizations, speak of physical and sexual violence on par with the worst days of the dictatorships in South America. But why use such a show of violence against a group of unarmed, poor peasants? Why use sexual violence against the women in the movement? Was it not against the state's own interests to issue such a repressive response now that Mexico has been chosen as founding member of the United Nations' recently created Human Rights Council?

Scholars who have studied the social effects of violence and terror have pointed to the difficulty of analyzing and explaining them from an academic point of view. Australian anthropologist Michael Taussig has referred to the effect of terror by stating that initially the stories of violence he encountered created for him an interpretation problem, until he realized that the problem of interpretation is essential for the reproduction of terror. The difficulty of representation not only makes it very difficult to create an effective counterdiscourse; it, at the same time, empowers the terrifying aspects of death squadrons, disappearances, and torture, because it causes demobilization and limits people's capacity to resist. Since terror depends so much on interpretation and meaning, it ends up feeding on itself by destroying any evidence of sense and rationality (Taussig 1987, 27). In the same way, the disproportionate violence faced by those arrested at Atenco has the double

effect of demobilizing and inspiring skepticism about what happened. It has made it difficult to create a counterdiscourse, break the silence our indignation has left us, and shake off the indifference that has crept in after some of the political prisoners were liberated.

**A Symbol of Resistance: Frente de Pueblos para la Defensa de la Tierra**

The representations the news media has constructed around the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra portray a violent and intolerant movement, while, at the same time, minimizing the numbers of its adherents and discrediting their leaders and their politics. These representations bear little resemblance to the men and women I had the opportunity to meet in a month prior to the violence in Atenco. The people I met appeared to be a cheerful, supportive, and inclusive group that was well organized and capable of complex political thought. I met them just a few weeks before the fateful clash in La Cañada de los Sauces, a neighborhood in Cuernavaca, Morelos, in one of the most festive, socially inclusive resistance demonstrations I have ever attended. During the memorial festivities honoring Emiliano Zapata, I was among the supporters of *La Otra Campaña* awaiting the arrival of Sub-Comandante Marcos to the town of Tetelcingo in Morelos.<sup>1</sup> Suddenly it was announced that the meeting was moving to La Cañada de los Sauces, in the residential neighborhood of Tabachines, where police were about to force out a group of residents and environmental activists who had chained themselves to trees. They were protesting the construction of a road that would cross in their community and require cutting down the ancient willow trees. The arrival of *La Otra Campaña* at La Cañada forced out the police and the bulldozers that were ready to bring down the trees and their guardians.

A little while later, about 200 men and women peasants from San Salvador Atenco arrived, marching in order and keeping time with the metallic

clatter of their machetes. They came in support of the people of La Cañada de los Sauces, just as they had supported the indigenous community of Cacahuatpec, Guerrero, which opposed the construction of a dam that would expropriate their communal land. In the days prior, they also offered their solidarity to the people of Cuernavaca, who resisted the construction of a Costco store in order to protect the historical murals of the old Casino de la Selva, and to the people of Texcoco, who protested the construction of a Wal-Mart across from the ancient pyramids of Teotihuacan. The peasants of Atenco supported the struggle of these communities and shared with them their experiences and strategies, such as their success in 2002, when they managed to stop the government's building an international airport that would have expropriated 5,000 hectares of farming land. That victory had made them into a symbol of resistance against the blows of globalization. What they shared with these other local struggles was a search for alternative ways of development that respect the nature and the historical heritage of communities. The success of the movement in Atenco was proof that it is possible to say no to the neoliberal economic model that is indifferent to people's well-being and excludes the majority of them.

This was the message that the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra brought to the residents of La Cañada in Cuernavaca, a message that encouraged them to continue resisting. In their speeches, they said that the struggle to defend the old trees of La Cañada was similar to the struggle of many indigenous and peasant peoples in Mexico. The words and songs they brought seemed to melt the barriers between social classes. The meeting became a great popular gathering. The housewives of La Cañada cooked and fed everyone, the workers of the Pascual Boing co-op handed out fruit drinks, and the peasants from Atenco enlivened the evening singing *corridos* about their struggles. The women danced in pairs, clashing their machetes high

above their heads in a slow, ritual dance reminiscent of religious dances in indigenous communities. These were strong, extroverted women, who shouted out resistance slogans and wielded their machetes with the ease of those who use them in everyday tasks. Watching all this, I could not help thinking of the Zapatista women and of many other women who are fighting from the bottom of society to build a fairer life. I felt inundated by their political energy. I would never have guessed that a few weeks later I would see these same women beaten, bloodied, humiliated, silenced. The political energy I felt that evening in April 2006 was a danger the government aimed to eradicate.

As an analyst of social movements, I was impressed by the organizational expertise the Frente de Pueblos possessed. I was awed by their ability to systematize the history of their struggle in songs; by the strength of the women, who seemed to play a central role in the movement; and by the obvious influence the group had over the young students who were at the gathering. In the crowd, I had the opportunity to witness an informal passing-of-the-torch ritual in which an elder from Atenco gave his machete to a young female student from the University of Chapingo. A group of young people crowded around, cheering and shouting slogans, while the man made an improvised speech to the girl, who received the machete in recognition of her solidarity with the peasant movement. I wonder now if that girl was among the women who were raped and abused in the jail of Santiaguito. Could it be that this was the punishment for taking on the torch of solidarity?

At the time I thought it would be a good idea to have one of my students analyze this movement. Perhaps the teachers at the National School of Anthropology and History had the same idea. Two of their students are now facing criminal charges for being in Atenco on May 4.

That afternoon at La Cañada de los Sauces, the police stayed away, and eventually the residents were able to negotiate with the government to save the willows. The political cost of upsetting a residential community or breaking through the home of a public attorney who lives in that neighborhood would have been too high. But repression did come later, in the lands of poorer people, where it seems it is easier to silence complaints and break down a movement in the name of the rule of law.

### **State Violence: Breaking Down the Movement**

My previous encounter with the group Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra made me feel suspicious of the images of extreme violence that showed some people of Atenco beating on a policeman. Even to this day, the media has failed to give the names or the histories of the attackers, and it is not that far-fetched to think that the movement could have been infiltrated by provocateurs who would then provide the cue to unleash a campaign of repression. It may also be that years of accumulated grief and struggle exploded in an incident of irrational violence for which the movement will have to pay a high price. I do not know what happened, but what is plain and what we have to say over and over again is that nothing justifies police violence or the violation of the human rights of those taken into custody. The state's legislature had significant foresight when it approved, in February 1994, the Law to Prevent and Punish Torture, which states that any public officer who inflicts "blows, mutilations, burns, physical or psychological pain, or who withholds food and water" from a person in custody is guilty of torture, as is "any public officer who instigates, compels, authorizes, orders or consents to the aforementioned...torture is considered a crime and *this is not affected by exceptional situations, such as internal political instability, urgent investigations, or other circumstances.* Neither can it be excused because it was carried out under superior orders" (Codigo Penal del Estado de Mexico, emphasis added).

During the police raids in Atenco, houses were broken into and destroyed without search warrants, 207 people were taken into custody without arrest warrants, a minor was murdered, twenty people were severely injured—one of whom (a twenty-year-old undergraduate student of the National University [UNAM]) died a few weeks later. There were twenty-three sexual assaults on women, including seven rapes. The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) has received 150 complaints from residents of Atenco. The municipal, state, or federal authorities have, so far, failed to accept responsibility for what happened, and President Vicente Fox justified the use of violence by the police as “the means to bring peace to the people of this community in the midst of rising violence” (Hernández Navarro 2006, 7).

Of those arrested on May third and fourth, seventeen were freed, 144 were charged with damage to public property, a misdemeanor for which they can be released on bail, and twenty-eight, including the leader of the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra, Ignacio del Valle Medina, as well as his son, César del Valle, have been formally indicted under charges of false imprisonment and damage to public property. While authorities use the law at their discretion against social leaders, those responsible for the violations to human rights in Atenco are still shamelessly speaking of the rule of law.

We need to take the government’s discourse about using the full weight of the law in the case of Atenco and make it our own. We must demand the just punishment of government officials responsible for the abuses.

### **Gender Violence: Subjugating Women Social Leaders**

If the women of Atenco waving their machetes in the air had become a symbol of peasant resistance, their bloodstained faces and bodies now represent the shame of a repressive state that seeks to have the monopoly on violence in

Mexico. The accounts that have come to public light show the specific form that violence takes in patriarchal systems, in which women are still considered war booty. Both the National Human Rights Commission and the Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro A.C. have direct testimonies from the women being held in custody that describe the sexual attacks they suffered. Most of the victims have preferred to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals, but Valentina Palma from Chile, Samantha Diezmar from Germany, and Christina Valls and María Sastres from Spain, the deported foreign students have denounced the sexual assaults they suffered, as well as those to which other women were subjected. The testimonies made public by the human rights organizations show that the attacks were not isolated cases but rather a strategy of sexual violence, which was a key part for the police operation:

They started clubbing us on the head. Then they were touching my breasts, my buttocks. Then I felt a hand touching my vagina and penetrating me with the fingers.

There are cases such as that of a fifty-year-old woman who was forced to perform oral sex on three policemen in order to get them to set her free. Hiding her face in shame and pain, she says she had gone shopping for a gift for her son when policemen in uniform grabbed her. She says they told her “you have to give us each a blow-job if you want to go back home.” She was afraid they would hit her, like they had done with the other women, so she did what they asked. In the end they set her free...

They shut the door of the van where they had us and one said “that bitch needs a wedgie” and started pulling on my panties. He realized I was having my period, because I was wearing a sanitary pad, and shouted to the rest “look at this bleeding bitch, let’s get her even dirtier” as he shoved his fingers in my vagina, many times. I was not really there



any more, but I remember I could hear myself saying, “My God, what are they going to do to me?” (Ballinas and Ramirez Cuevas 2006, 8)<sup>2</sup>

Alicia Elena Pérez Duarte, the special attorney in charge of crimes against women, said that upon hearing about these testimonies, she tried to get in touch with the women held in custody, but the local government representatives said there were no women in custody (Castillo García 2006). This lie points to a web of complicities that made possible a police strategy of terror and sexual violence. Carlos Abascal, the minister of interior at the time, minimized the relevance of the women’s complaints and doubted their veracity. Other lesser officials, such as the regional police chief, Wilfredo Robledo, and the speaker of the Department of State of Mexico, Emmanuel Ávila, disregarded the testimonies as part of a legal defense strategy. Meanwhile, the human rights organizations have pointed out that because this type of crime is prosecuted by the state, and it is the job of the public attorney to initiate the investigations.

The criminal law of the State of Mexico (Estado de México) in which the raids took place defines the crime of rape in Article 273 by specifying that “also guilty of rape is the person who by force, whether it be physical or moral, introduces any part of the body, object or instrument other than the penis in the vagina, anus or mouth of the victim, regardless of gender.” Article 274 of the same law establishes that the participation of multiple attackers, that is, more than one person taking part or supporting the aggressor, constitute an aggravating factor (Codigo Penal). Under these definitions, the experiences described in the testimonies quoted above are not just sexual assaults, but rape, and as such should be prosecuted by the state. The attacks on the women of Atenco add to the long list of women who have been the victims of sexual violence for political motives in the last two presidential terms (Hernández Castillo 2006). For the more conservative sectors of Mexican

society—both mestizo and indigenous—any show of organization among women in any community or region has become synonymous with Zapatista influence. Organized women, whether they are Zapatistas or not, are a symbol of resistance and subversion, and for that reason are placed at the center of political violence. The political use of sexual violence was one of the issues discussed during the first series of talks between the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army; EZLN) and the government in October 1995 in San Cristóbal de las Casas. At the Women's Session of this meeting, the people invited by the government and those brought by the EZLN agreed, in spite of their political differences, that rape should be considered a crime of war as described by international law. There have been no efforts, however, to act on that agreement.

Gender analysts from other militarized regions, such as Davida Wood in Palestine and Bette Denich in Sarajevo, point out that in contexts of political military conflict, feminine sexuality tends to be transformed into a symbolic space of political struggle, and rape is instrumentalized as a way of showing power and dominion over the enemy (Denich 1995; Wood 1995). Atenco was not an exception. Police repression has affected women in particular, as we can readily see from their testimonies. In a patriarchal ideology that still considers women sexual objects and repositories of family honor, the rape and sexual torture of women constitutes a way of attacking all the men on the enemy's side. Just like Serbian soldiers, the policemen of Atenco "take possession of women's bodies one after another, as objects of sexual abuse and as symbols in a fight against their male enemies, thereby reproducing traditional patriarchal patterns where the male inability to protect their women, to control their sexuality and their reproductive capacities, is considered a symbol of weakness in the enemy" (Denich 1995, 61).

In spite of the effectiveness of fear in disintegrating social resistance movements, it is evident that the women of Atenco are determined to continue fighting for their rights as women and as members of a community. Their testimony before human rights organizations proposes a counterdiscourse that can break the silence of terror. It is our turn to echo their voices and demand that justice be done.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *La Otra Campaña* (“The Other Campaign”), is the term used to refer to the EZLN tour of the nation during the 2006 election year, which has as its main goal to support grassroots organizations that seek alternative ways of doing politics. According to the Zapatista proposal set out in the “Sixth Declaration from the Lacandona Jungle,” the *Otra Campaña* aims to create a broad front made up of “indigenous people, campesinos, students, teachers, and employees... in other words, workers from the city and the country,” to design a national program of anticapitalist struggle, and reestablish ways of doing politics that are antimaterialistic, honest, and in service of others. Finally, they hope it will lead to a constitutional convention to write a new national constitution. For more information, see [www.ezln.org.mx](http://www.ezln.org.mx).

<sup>2</sup> For more testimonies of sexual attacks and the report, titled *Atenco, un Estado de Derecho a la Medida*, see [www.centroprodh.org.mx](http://www.centroprodh.org.mx).

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