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Marta Lamas*

Mexican Feminisms Today

The great variety in the political landscape of Mexican feminism is noticeable at a glance. However, despite the country's many feminisms and their different political positions, they all agree that the central axis of their protests is violence against women. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminicides were not known as they are now, nor were women's daily lives threatened by the terror of being kidnapped or disappeared or by the tension of being on the receiving end of different kinds of violence, as they are now. It was in the beginning of the 1990s when one of the most painful and scandalous tragedies to affect our lives became public knowledge: the murders in Ciudad Juárez of poor women, many of them

adolescents who worked in the maquila plants. These crimes have continued to replicate nationwide and have given rise to the criminal category of "femicide" and the term "youthicide."¹ For Lucía Melgar, the term "femicide" refers to all the murders of women for being women, which go unpunished and in which the state has a responsibility either through action or omission.

The denunciation and fight against violence against women has become the great battle of most feminists and has brought into the public eye the magnitude of a social problem and its naturalization in society. The feminist struggle has become very visible and has been highly supported by people all along the political spectrum, by all governments, and by all churches. No other feminist cause has achieved more laws, resources, and propaganda than the fight against violence against women. Feminist activism has focused not only on denouncing

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brutal feminicides, but also in researching them and accompanying the victims of violence and their families in the quest for justice, protection, and reparations.²

Much remains to be done before women can live tranquil lives, both in the street and in their homes. That is why, together with other demands and proposals, Mexican women have joined the worldwide cry of “Enough!” In recent years, most of the demonstrations that have brought out thousands of women—mainly young women—have been to protest against this state of things. Thus, enormous numbers of indignant young women in pain have carried out a variety of actions, particularly marches and demonstrations, where they express their repudiation and how fed up they are with macho violence. These protests have brought together women from different social sectors, a variety of occupations, and different ages: from the mothers of disappeared teens to professional women, including many, many young women, sick of the existing impunity in the case of feminicides and of the sexual aggressions they experience daily, demand a political change, not only from the authorities, but from society as well.

One of the characteristics of the new feminisms, not only in Mexico, but throughout Latin America, is that the vast majority tend to be anti-system. Their reflections denounce the unspeakable effects of neoliberalism in the hemisphere, and the particularly disseminate the demands of the indigenous, Afro-descendent, and marginalized populations, focusing on the racism and continuing existence of the colonial model in people’s subjective lives. Young feminists who consider themselves anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-patriarchal question the powerful, commercial cultural dissemination of a liberal feminism that today is expressed in the media and in some best sellers. Not only are women “fashionable” and do their problems make for important news—the press publishes articles about wage inequality or sexual abuse that in the past would not have been news—, but even traditional women’s fashion and beauty magazines include topics about feminism. Saying you’re a feminist is a sign of being progressive, and a phenomenon is flooding the media: celebrities from the entertainment industries and figures from the worlds of art, culture, and politics proudly proclaim themselves to be feminists.

For years now, feminism as a radical idea and egalitarian aspiration has had a presence in Mexico,³ and it has very effectively mobilized groups of women writers, sci-

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entists, artists, government officials, and politicians. Young women, who have taken on the intersectional perspective,⁴ are very aware that they live in a patriarchy and in capitalism, and this molds their activism. And although their best-known sphere of action is the street, they carry out internal work among themselves. This includes cultural forms of solidarity (bartering services, collective kitchens, fanzines), that go beyond their merely expressing their dissatisfaction. Many “do their feminism” in a different way and, as is to be expected, certain of their activities and political protests (like their *escraches*,⁵ take-overs of university institutions, destruction of property in the street) are not shared by other feminist tendencies. Differences even exist in the terms used in their narratives, and some of their indignant statements can be interpreted as the complaints of victims or proclamations of unquestioning support of anything women do.

It is obvious that feminist activism is also the result of a subjective process, and each generation produces its demands and gives them new meanings. What is happening in Mexico among many young feminists is a worldwide generational phenomenon called the Fourth Feminist Wave. Prudence Chamberlain talks about the feminist wave being open to the affect of its time and ready to take the form that the momentum of public sentiment gives it, and that this is one of indignation, pain, and rage against violence, and, at the same time, one of the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that they use to call for and accompany their protests, making it possible for the mobilization not to only take place in the street, but also virtually. ICTs have facilitated a process of collective action that goes beyond borders, inaugurating atypical modes of intervention, different from previous forms; and this powerful tool for dissemination is characteristic of what has been called the Fourth Wave of feminism.⁶

In the marches, the demand “We want us alive!” has been accompanied by placards that repeat “You’re not alone.” “One of us is all of us.” “I march with my daughters so I don’t have to march for them.” “You’ll never have the

convenience of our silence.” Other heart-wrenching signs remember the murdered and disappeared women by name: “I’m missing my sister Valeria.” “Where is Maribel?” New slogans have emerged: “Yes, we’re the Nazis,” “Why are we the ones who die?” “Being born in a macho family made me a feminist,” “I’d rather be violent than dead,” and “I dressed as a wall so that now you can be indignant if something happens to me.” As was to be expected, many women who had never before gone out to protest have taken the opportunity to do so against the government: “The oppressive state is a macho rapist.” And, alluding to Andrés Manuel López Obrador, “Mr. President, forgive us for bothering you: they’re killing us.” The mix of emotions in the marches is awe-inspiring: expressions of pain, rage, enthusiasm, joy, indignation, curiosity. While some groups of young women sing, “Now that we’re together, now you see us; down with patriarchy, it’ll fall, it’ll fall,” others put out a combative message: “Let’s defend joy and organize rage.”

Groups of hooded young women dressed in black carrying spray cans and mallets have also appeared, and they have broken windows, set fires, and even attacked police-women. Their organized actions in small, fast-moving, well-coordinated groups is one of the most novel, spectacular aspects of recent feminist demonstrations. This appearance of the “anarchists,”⁷ dressed all in black, hooded and masked, destroying things along their way begins to be considered “feminist violence.” A few days ago, Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum said in an interview with *El País*, “I don’t understand this idea of destruction associated with the feminist movement. I don’t agree with those who say that since we women have suffered violence, we have the right to be violent.” I agree: violence cannot be solved with violence.

The rejection, the surprise caused by these hooded young women who set fire to or destroy installations involves the break with “the feminine.” Political theorist Amneris Chaparro interprets what is happening as also an

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“epistemological break,” that is, an opening to signify and re-signify the place people occupy in conditions of subordination. Amneris, an academic from the UNAM’s Center for Gender Research and Studies (formerly the PUEG), states that this break has different aspects. Among them is the challenge to traditional forms of femininity and women’s appropriation of the public space through symbolic and/or violent interventions.

Rosana Reguillo has described two narratives often applied to young people: demonization or exaltation. Today, both are present when talking about young feminists in general, and especially about the hooded ones: there are those who classify them as “vandals” and those who see them as “heroines.” Years ago, political scientist Wendy Brown pointed out that our era is facing a large number of political dangers, many of which have been deepened by an inappropriate understanding of the specifically post-modern forms of power. We should ask ourselves if it our understanding of the intense, conflictive protests of many young feminists is appropriate.

I’ll use as an example what happened in August 2019 in Mexico City and became a paradigmatic expression of young feminists’ activities. A leak to the press that a young woman had been raped by four policemen as she returned home in the early hours resulted in an enormous outpouring of protests. Young women’s fury was unprecedented: on August 12, they broke a glass door at a police office and created other damages and threw pink glitter on the police chief. It was starting with that highly-reported action that the police began to talk about “vandalism,” underplaying the feelings of being under threat that many young women experience every day when on the street and the absolutely legitimate distrust that they have of male police officers.

Manuel Castells uses the term “explosion” to describe exactly when a political or social movement arrives at a point when it comes to an impasse with the institutional system, when it is faced with denial and more repression and it explodes. And the explosion is violent! Not all of them explode, but there is a sufficiently serious margin for violence and counter-violence to erupt.

Castells sees “social explosion” as revealing and symptomatic and also points out that it can be —and is— destructive. However, this explosion of young women, which also had the playful component of the pink glitter, is different from the systematic activities of the “*anarcas*.” This

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“anarchism,” which Carlos Illades describes as the entry on scene of young, hooded people dressed all in black, who paint the walls, use blowtorches, and destroy the symbols of global capital and the state, is a far cry from the anarchism of a feminist figure like Emma Goldman. And instead of distinguishing between the spontaneous actions of young women in the face of others more closely linked to the phenomenon of “insurreccional anarchism,” the reactions in the media have been to repudiate what they classify as “vandalism.”⁸ However, if we compare what happened at the demonstration organized four days later, on August 16, to the lack of attention or interest paid to previous feminist mobilizations, we get the impression that these “acts of vandalism” are “required” to ensure that media analysts and writers do not ignore the protests. That is exactly what a young woman interviewed by Elena Poniatowska said in 2020, who argued that if they weren’t violent, no one would pay any attention to them. But it also seems that in these protests where the slogan shouted is “We want us all alive,” not only political objectives are shared, but also forms of communality, survival strategies, and personal hopes develop.

It is obvious that the phenomenon of the feminist explosions is unfolding together with other political processes happening in our country. Considering this, many feminist sisters discuss and differ about the limits of protest: Does the end justify the means? While some think that you can’t fight violence with violence, others affirm that without violence, they won’t be heard. Marisa Belausteguigoitia has said that the slogans like “We want us all alive,” painted on walls reveal monumental pain and rage, and at the same time she recognizes that, while she has empathy for these wounded young women who want to burn it all down, she is convinced that “nothing arises renewed from ashes.” And, she doesn’t believe that “punishment, blind radicalism, and not keeping your word” lead to a profound, sustained change, capable of bringing down something “as sophisticated, complex, and structural as the patriarchy.” Now that this researcher at the

School of Philosophy and Letters has taken on the directorship of the CIEG, she proposes to work toward academia linking up better with feminist activism. Her proposal is that it is essential to explore what mechanisms and practices must be set in motion to strengthen academia as a space that resonates with and can build what is common, equality, and justice next to activism. Her work plan puts forward the idea of “slipping in the sound and fury of activism in academia and the rhyme of academia in activism,” opening up the doors to critical debate and encouraging artistic practices. To achieve such a complex task, Belausteguigoitia assumes “respons-ability,” a term coined by Donna Haraway (2019), giving new meaning to the classic “responsibility,” since it introduces “the ability to respond.” And, yes, we must develop a great ability to respond to the demonstrations of indignation and pain, and be able to channel them toward more productive forms of protest. In Mexico, the diversity of feminisms has achieved many important things. However, all social movements, when they have achievements, when they grow and spread more widely, face new challenges. Perhaps with creativity and respons-ability it will be possible to collaborate in the effort to channel the pain, indignation, and rage that mobilizes so many of our young feminists in more politically productive ways. **NMM**

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Notes

- 1 In Mexico, many feminists have concentrated their political and intellectual energy on researching, denouncing, and trying to understand violence against women, and in particular its most brutal expression, feminicide.
- 2 In this vein, the work of the organization Catholics for Choice with the National Femicide Citizen’s Observatory has been very important.
- 3 Espinosa and Lau’s compilation offers a good overview of this. See it and other references for feminism at the end of this article.
- 4 Crenshaw states that the intersectional perspective, which consists of analyzing how other elements (social class, ethnic condition, skin color, age, sexual orientation, etc.) intersect, emerges from a feminist analysis of the fact that the violence women experience is different for black women.
- 5 *Escraches* are demonstrations protesting the actions of an individual usually at his home—in the case of feminists, usually a man—or place of work. They were first used in Argentina and then spread to other places in Latin America. [Translator’s Note.]
- 6 Historian Gabriela Cano has pointed out that we should be critical of conceptualizing “waves” because, on the one hand, using that metaphor does not allow for complexity, overlaps, and how some aspects coincide over time, and it also makes the conflicts among feminists seem like a generational issue.
- 7 Not all the feminists who consider themselves anarchists (*anarcas*) are part of the “Black Bloc” of insurrectional anarchism analyzed by Carlos Illades.
- 8 All the press reported the case. The front page of *Reforma* on August 17, 2019 cried, “Protest, Fury, and Vandalism”; *Milenio* shouted, “March for Gender Equity Ends in Vandalism”; and *La Jornada* stated, “Fury Explodes in March against Violence against Women.”