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# Postcolonial Apologies, Politics of Regret and Temporal Manichaeism: A Theoretical Analysis Through the Case of the Conquest of Mexico

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### Abstract

The article analyzes the forms of temporality and morality which operate in the request for postcolonial apologies in modern democracies, focusing on the Mexican case. There is already rich literature on the changing mnemonic and historiographical interpretations of the Conquest in Mexican history up to the present day. In this paper the Mexican case serves as factual support to discuss theoretically the modes of temporal consciousness that underlie postcolonial apologies and the moral relations to the past that these entail. We will examine the topic in light of the “ethical turn” proposals found in historical theory. We will critically address the assumptions regarding historicity behind the so-called “politics of regret,” questioning the ideological premises that frame the request for apologies and the decolonial theories that support them. Finally, we will approach the problem based on moral philosophy works that have studied collective apologies’ paradoxical nature. The questions to answer are: does retrospective recrimination of colonial processes make sense? Can we reclaim apologies from history? We conclude that the postcolonial apologies demanded by President López Obrador depend on a mythologized vision of the past, which reproduces a logic of temporal Manichaeism, with a scant epistemological basis to judge historically the event that it condemns.

### Keywords

Presentism. Moral. Temporalities.

## Introduction: of conquests and pardons

History, politics, and ethics have gone side by side for decades. Their overlapping relationship has not restricted academic interdisciplinarity dynamics. On the contrary, it has frequently appeared as a relevant social life factor. In 2019, within the context of the commemoration of the five hundred anniversary of the Conquest – specifically, the fall of Tenochtitlan at the hands of Cortés and his army of around 600 Europeans (mainly Spanish) and thousands of indigenous people (mostly Tlaxcalans) –, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, President of Mexico, sent letters to Felipe VI, King of Spain, and Pope Francis, head of the Catholic Church. The presidential letters affirmed that these leaders should apologize for the, in their words, “invasion” that occurred centuries ago (MINDER; MALKIN, 2019). The refusal of both States to give a public apology has not discouraged López Obrador’s revisionist campaign. The Mexican presidency has built an entire institutional structure to commemorate the “Conquest of Mexico.” Such a structure has centered its discourse on claiming the rights of “native peoples”.

The Honorary Advisory Council of Historical and Cultural Memory of Mexico, coordinated by the president’s wife, Beatriz Gutiérrez Mueller, a writer and historian, has led the commemorative efforts. Gutiérrez Mueller advocated for a reinterpretation of the Conquest that incorporates the perspective of indigenous epistemology (ITESO, 2019; GUTIÉRREZ MUELLER, 2018). The institutional discourses of the platform she directs depict the Spanish-Aztec war – a term by Mathew Restall (2019)<sup>1</sup> – as the starting point of the dark side of Mexican modernity: an episode that inaugurated the systemic denial of the moral and material dignity of the indigenous communities and the popular classes of the country. This narrative presents itself as an instrument of symbolic reparation. In a new letter addressed in October 2020 to the Papacy, on the occasion of Gutiérrez Mueller’s institutional visit, President López Obrador reiterated the particular historical-mnemonic account of his administration:

I take this opportunity to insist that, on the occasion of this ephemeris, both the Catholic Church, the Spanish Monarchy, and the Mexican State must offer a public apology to the native peoples who suffered from the most disgraceful atrocities to loot their property and lands and subdue them, from the Conquest of 1521 to the recent past. They deserve not only that generous attitude on our part but the sincere commitment that never, ever, acts disrespectful to their beliefs, cultures will be committed and, much less, they will

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<sup>1</sup> This expert on the events surrounding the occupation of Tenochtitlan by Cortés’ troops, has coined the term of “Spanish-Aztec war”, to give the idea this was more than just a conflict between conquered and conquerors, it was a battle between two alliances ethnically diverse led by Spanish and Aztec powers.



be judged or marginalized for economic reasons or racism. In particular, I think that it would be an act of humility and, at the same time, of greatness for the Catholic Church, independent of the debate on whether Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla was excommunicated or not, vindicates the historical deed of the Father of Our Country [...] (LÓPEZ OBRADOR; GOBIERNO DE MÉXICO, 2020, p. 1).

It can be appreciated how the Mexican leader argues that the tripartite apology for the “Spanish colonial invasion” to the “native peoples” is capable of changing the structural relations of inequity, dispossession, racial discrimination, and violence that trace their origins to the Conquest. This oversimplifying narrative assumes that the contemporary problems afflicting ethnic communities in Mexico stem from the same historical milestone, linearly projected onto the present. Significantly, López Obrador includes in his petition an explicit recognition of the heroic role of Miguel Hidalgo by the Papacy. Thus, the president demands to identify the classic reference of Mexican nationalism as a representative of the bright side of modernity: a popular-style catholicity would have defended the indigenous people’s moral dignity in the face of the segregating legacy of the Hispanic empire (GONZÁLEZ SALINAS, 2016, p. 101-124), turning the independence of the Mexican Republic, which is assumed to have been initiated by Hidalgo, into the inaugural milestone of a process of redemption of the conquering moment. It is not by chance that López Obrador culminates his plot of Mexican history by placing his political project as the final motive of the emancipatory process from the colonial legacy:

I represent a government that is carrying out a profound process of transformation whose hallmark is honesty, justice, and austerity, as well as respect for others, a precept that I consider is the essence of humanism. The most important historical and noted events in Mexico inspire these convictions and principles. They are the great lessons that our people and their leaders have received at different stages [...] (LÓPEZ OBRADOR; GOBIERNO DE MÉXICO, 2020, p. 1).

Thus, the Mexican president’s epistolary speech establishes an obvious ideological link between the symbolic recognition of ethnic communities, postcolonial apologies, and the construction of a nationalist political myth capable of identifying indigenous communities with the republic’s government (BELL, 2008, p. 151).<sup>2</sup> Claims of this type are not an isolated phenomenon.

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2 The definitions by Duncan Bell will be adopted regarding the definition of political myths: “Myths, in this anthropological work, are highly simplified narratives that attribute fixed and coherent meanings to selected events, people and places. They are easily intelligible, communicable and help to constitute or reinforce particular visions of oneself, society and the world.”

They have become more common in recent decades. Many self-considered “historical victims” have demanded a process of recognition and public apology for a perceived past of torts and abuses (ROTHERMUND, 2015, p. 12-33). Faced with these demands, many countries in the world have developed the so-called “politics of regret.” Jeffrey Olick (2013, p. 122) coined the latter term, presenting it as “the variety of practices by which societies confront the toxic legacies of the past.” However, this definition has been criticized for its breadth, ignoring other forms of interaction with problematic historical inheritances, such as oblivion or apology.

Mano Toth (2015, p. 553) has proposed a narrower definition of politics of regret and, incidentally, more aligned with the present study’s objectives. According to Toth, the term can ascribe to the process by which the representation of a problematic past becomes dominated by certain voices of apology, which generally recognize the role of States or specific sectors of society in atrocities committed against a specific group. For this author, who assumes Duncan Bell’s (2006, p. 5-11) interpretation respecting mnemonic stories as his own, the politics of regret are carried out based on mythical narratives and characterized by a claim to simplify the past and socialize a normative version of it (TOTH, 2015, p. 554).

In its practical aspect, politics of regret translate into public apologies accompanied by the granting of resources, media spaces, and commemorative, patrimonial, and holiday recognitions to victimized groups, such as indigenous and afro-descendant communities, postcolonial immigrants, religious minorities, and individuals affected by dictatorial regimes and armed conflicts. Lea David (2020, p. 186-213) has recently explained how, through such institutional initiatives, governments, supported by the ideological rhetoric of “human rights”, have tried to obtain political advantages through the support of these mnemonic agents grouped around identity demands. We should understand López Obrador’s request for repentance as part of this transnational ideological phenomenon.

The debate over the Conquest of Mexico often revolves around a multivariable comparison. Was the Spanish occupation of America worse or better, morally speaking, than the British? Was it better or worse than previous processes, such as the Roman conquest of the Iberian Peninsula or the Mongol conquest of China? Was it worse or better than later processes like slavery in the US or the Jewish holocaust in Nazi Germany? (ROCA BAREA, 2016). This article will not address this debate or others like it. There is already rich literature on the changing mnemonic and historiographical interpretations of the Conquest in Mexican history up to the present day (KALIL; FERNANDES, 2019, p. 71-103). In this paper, the Mexican case serves as factual support to reflect theoretically on the forms of temporal consciousness that underlie postcolonial apologies and the moral relations to the past that these entail. We aim to query the discussion itself and ask





ourselves whether the question's posing makes sense and how it should be understood. We will try to answer the questions: does this kind of recrimination to the colonial past make sense? Can we demand apologies from history? From what temporal assumptions and under what logic can contemporary societies challenge the past?

## The Ethics of Recognition, Temporal Manichaeism, and Historical Mediation

As can be seen, the approach carried out so far is closely linked to historical theory's most recent research agendas. Among these, the one headed by Mark Day (2008, p. 417-427) and Herman Paul (2015, p. 450-458) stands out, who have claimed a theory of history defined by its interdisciplinarity and its object transversality, studying the entire range of "relationships" (epistemological, affective, material, preservative, and moral.) that human communities (be they disciplinary, partisan, ethnic, family) establish with the past. In this area, several authors, who had participated in the so-called "ethical turn," have proposed to unravel the precise nature of the relationships between historical knowledge, collective memory, and ethics (RANGEL; ARAUJO, 2015, p. 333-346). When we analyze the "politics of regret" promoted by López Obrador, we deal precisely with the moral relations that link the present with the chronological past. We examine how the subjective signification of historical temporality impacts ethical judgments about history.

Current interest in the ethical dimension of the past's public uses is closely related to the academic concern for historical memory from the 80s. Some scholars, such as Pierre Nora (1997), Terence Ranger, and Eric Hobsbawm (1992), then critically addressed the need for contemporary national societies to construct historical metanarratives. In their view, the purpose of these collective memories or invented traditions was to build a sense of moral identification between present societies and their ancestors. At the same period, Marc Ferro (1985) made an effort to highlight the dynamics of politicization and mythologization of the past incurred by school textbooks and commemorative speeches worldwide. Jörn Rüsen (2005, p. 24-25) has later suggested that the forging of cultural certainties aims to alleviate the ontological disorientation produced by the context of temporal hyper-acceleration and values crisis of the postmodern world, especially from the 80s.

In the 90s, a paradigm was structured that privileged the vision of professional historiography as an epistemological guardian to combat the politicized distortion that historical discourses promoted from the State tended to. Several initiatives have proliferated in this context, among which the still operative *Network of Concerned Historians* stands out, headed by Belgian



historian Anton De Baets (2009, p. 23-29). This platform links professional historiographic criticism to politicized historical accounts with the defense of human rights. This objectivist position is committed to the scientific delimitation of an objective historical truth (traceable in its evidence and refutable) to combat the past's instrumentalization by groups of power. The Belgian author adopts the language of human rights, assuming that a responsible, objective and scientific historiography must favor a democratic ethic of pluralist respect for difference. In turn, it promotes the values of multicultural internationalism (DE BAETS, 2015, p. 35-38).

The conceptualization of professional historiography as a scientific artifact focused on repairing "historical injustices" constitutes a moral project that converges with the demands that identity groups have stated since the 1980s, opposing their mnemonic stories to the hegemonic meta-narratives fed by the State. Finally, it seems that this position does not fully achieve the objective of maintaining historiography's autonomy from the spheres of politics and morality. As Aleida Assmann explains, this position converges with a bundle of perspectives born in the 80s and 90s, which have conceptualized the historian's role as an auxiliary who can give evidential power to the mnemonic rhetoric of trauma and reparation by the victimized groups (ASSMANN, 2018, p. 17-23). These claims match the approach of some discourses emitted from the field of memory studies, which have shown the tendency to take for granted an inherent historical truth – although considered relative to a specific perception and affectivity– connected to the narratives of the victimized mnemonic collectives. Some authors tend to link public commemoration and historiographic certification of the horrors of the past to forms of transitional justice and the achievement of social harmony (CHARTIER, 2007, p. 99; SOUTHGATE, 2017, p. 489-505).

Parallel to this argumentation line, a tendency has emerged that links history's ethical content with an interpretative or constructivist position. From Anton Froeyman's point of view, any form of historical narrative, whether professional, amateur, or overtly political, is an ethical activity. It gives subjective moral meaning to contemporary societies' relations with the "others" of the past. The historical interpretation would have moral content as long as it would consist of an interpersonal relationship. In an approach to historicist hermeneutics' positions, the author points out that the relationship with the past would not entail a mechanistic explanation of the historical object but an interpretive dialogue with historical subjects (FROEYMAN, 2016, p. xii-xv). According to Froeyman, when describing the past, we cannot avoid evaluating other human beings' acts, which necessarily had an ethical dimension, based on a range of moral choices. Levinasian theory inspires Froeyman to defend that the ethical function of historiography implies a particular "ethics of representation" based on recognizing the otherness of the values and moral



codes which guided past agents as a requirement to achieve an understanding of their choices (FROEYMAN, 2016, p. 59-73; 226-229).

Froeyman approaches the narrative theory of Ville Erkkilä (2015, p. 602-620), which breeds from cognitive psychology to define the historical account as a symbolic device that allows mitigating the otherness of the past through the coherent ordering of social temporality and the cultural translation of the moral universes of the past to the codes of the present. This work of temporal synchronization and metaphorical translation, also diagnosed by Helge Jordheim (2014, p. 498-518; 2019, p. 43-56), would have the ability to generate a sense of familiarity and identity with a strange past. The problem would lie in maintaining the intricate balance between identity and otherness: a “responsible” relationship with the past would necessarily imply making it intelligible and familiar to the contemporary interpreter, but without making its differences concerning the present invisible. On the contrary, an “irresponsible” relationship with it would consist of a total appropriation. The interpreter would celebrate or condemn the “other” from the past, narratively transforming it into a timeless object. In other words, ethically speaking, there would be two divergent modalities of historical thinking. The responsible one would involve articulating a historical narrative that accommodates the past’s complexity, negotiating with its otherness. The irresponsible one would construct a historical myth (unilinear, ultra-simplifying, and normative), obscuring the contingent, fragmentary, and polyhedral way the past relates to the present.

François Hartog (2020, p. 273-289; 2015, p. 15-22; p. 193-204) identifies this logic of symbolic appropriation of the past by the present with the “historical memory” model prevailing from the 1980s. Hartog states, somewhat taxonomically, that the “modern regime of historicity” bequeathed by the 19th Century - characterized by highlighting the differences between the past, the present, and the future to sustain its progressive teleology - would have transitioned to a presentist temporality. The presentist regime of historicity would privilege anachronism: the conceptual abolition of ethical distances between the past and the present<sup>3</sup>. The temporal imaginary of presentism would have favored the identitarian building of memory policies, providing a language of legitimacy to groups that demand collective rights, public recognition, and material reparations in the name of the traumas and historical injustices suffered by their ancestors. This global phenomenon hides the distinctive character of the contexts that framed other epochs’ moral decisions, oversimplifying the ethical relations between the past and the present.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be clarified that this is one of the many meanings that historiographical discussion has reserved for the concept of “anachronism”, although it is the most widespread. although it is the most widespread. See: (GONÇALVES, 2022, p. 288-296)

Berber Bevernage (2015, p. 342-347) offers a very suggestive analysis, in which he tries to demonstrate the weight of “retrospective politics” in the contemporary public sphere, exposing how most of these interpretations of the past ironically incur in “Temporal Manichaeism”; that is, the moral simplification of the past and its binomial opposition to the present. The appropriation of historical facts to serve the ethical needs of social groups that perceive themselves as victims would create a logic exculpatory of contemporaneity in the face of a past perceived as a reservoir of humanity’s evils. In this sense, Bevernage affirms that the retrospective politics related to the public apology to the victimized collectives would not differ structurally from the temporal Manichaeism of the philosophies of history that triumphed in the wake of the Enlightenment. Both linearly associate the evils that occur in the present time with the past; either by identifying historical adversaries that are symbolically associated with an outdated and surmountable world (the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the conquerors) or by abstracting the past as a narrative substance that would in itself become synonymous with oppression, violence, and evil. Ultimately, Bevernage concludes that presentism logic requires a conceptual dichotomization between past and present that contributes to general teleological and uncritical political thought frames:

The problem with dominant retrospective politics — its anti-utopian character and its tendency to create a double standard — should not be situated in the fact that it focuses on the past per se, but rather should be related to a specific underlying philosophy of history that is based on a particular antinomic or even dualist vision of temporality that opposes the past to the present and the future and tends to be used for a specific function: that of a secular theodicy that exculpates us contemporaries in relation to chronologically past, as well as chronologically present evils and injustice (BEVERNAGE, 2015, p. 350).

These interpretative positions, critical of the paradigm of historical memory, do not reject the inevitable existence of an ethical and political relationship with the past. On the contrary, they argue that the complex game of continuities and ruptures that determine ontological, symbolic, and epistemological connections with the historical past necessarily has moral content. The works of Hartog and Bevernage relate to the boom in temporality studies, whose developments are relativizing the linear vision of the relationships between the past, present, and future (FRYXELL, 2019, p. 285-289). The new temporality theories have contributed to updating the Braudelian idea of historical time as a complex interweaving of eventual, circumstantial, and structural processes endowed with different duration and susceptible to changing readings. According to David Carr (2014, p. 47-64) and Reinhardt Koselleck (2010, p. 54-63), the past would be projected ontologically onto the present in the form of natural (seasonal cycles, ecosystems,



natural resources), social (institutions, legal codes, cultural systems, political traditions, ideas), and material (technologies, architectural structures, objects) repetition structures that frame human activities. Carlos Navajas (2013, p. 32-50) affirms we could be facing a “dense” or “extended” present, a present-day not constituted as a mere instantaneity detached from the past, but as the complex superposition of a whole range of continuities and contingencies of various durations.

Coincident are the arguments of some authors who have aspired to complete Hartog’s perspective, such as Chris Lorenz (2019, p. 34-36). He has insisted on the fact that the “past,” the “future,” and the “present” are culturally constructed categories. Societies would live within multiple temporalities experienced simultaneously. The temporal experiences thus raised could only become historical knowledge once subjected to a process of rationalization. The post-narrativity theory defended by Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen (2015, p. 131-147) is in line with these postulates. It defends that the historiographical work consists of an interpretation of the historical evidence based on empirical inference and argumentative intervention. This dissection of the past comprises a “situated universal rationality.” That is, the rationality used by the historian would always be circumstantial or situational. A given historical argument’s epistemic authority would depend on the temporal and social context of the enunciator. It also would depend on his capacity to establish a systematic dialogue with the contexts and values that frame the otherness of the past’s testimonies. Ultimately, the historian would “construct” history as the product of an intersubjective mediation with the historical actors’ discourses.

From this point of view, and in line with the ethics of recognition recommended by Froeyman, historical thinking would not be a question of finding the univocal meaning of an objectified past. Instead, it would entail a mediation with historical testimonies to construct an argumentative and rational interpretation of contemporaneity’s links with the societies that preceded it (KUUKKANEN, p. 168-197). This does not imply, as Durval Muniz de Albuquerque Jr. (2020, p. 36-37) explains, that the historian should not judge the past. On the contrary, the objective historian would assume a judiciary attitude, since his work would consist of making a critical judgement on past events based on the mediation between his own analytical rationality and the rationality of the historical actors he interprets.

Under the revised assumptions, the past would neither be an objectified “other” of the present nor a continuation. On the contrary, it would function as a temporal fluid category, whose “distance” would be capable of being hermeneutically negotiated without the need to fall into a simplistic anachronism, accesible through a “situated objetivity” (BELVEDRESI, 2020, p. 219-223). In this regard, Mark Saber Phillips (2013, p. 1-20) has proposed to rethink the “historical distance.” Phillips affirms that it is possible to transcend the positivist objectification of the past

as an entity dissociated from contemporaneity without giving in to the mythical temptation to blur the temporal contingencies that preside over collective life. To do this, he advocates recovering the Gadamerian idea of a dialogical hermeneutics, exploring ways of understanding the complex relationships of otherness and sameness that link the interpreter to the historical events he addresses. Phillips's position, which is close to Froeyman's "ethics of recognition" mentioned above, is similar to María Inés Mudrovic's (2016, p. 20-22) theory. This author has affirmed that historical interpretation's ethical dimension would lie in maintaining a critical attitude, which dissects the complexity of the connections between different temporal and generational contexts. As a consequence, the ethics of historical discourse could only be negative. By conceptualizing the present as a "historical present," it is possible to become aware of the constitutive contingency of the values that preside over it, avoiding linear historical judgments.

Javier Fernández Sebastián (2021, p. 106-113) has recently taken up this line of argument, reflecting on the interactions between historiography, memorial history, and law. The author has recalled that the epistemological position of the historical interpreter is intrinsically liminal. He who thinks historically finds himself necessarily situated on unstable ground, which leads him to oscillate between the logics of the past that he studies and those of the present in which he lives. The historiographic virtue would lie in the ability to make its object of study intelligible, without falling into the sins of antiquarianism -a total assumption of the languages and values of its object- and anachronism -the translation of contemporary problems to the historical world that is analyzed -. In particular, it is the anachronistic temptation that Fernández Sebastián associates with the presentism proper to memorial history, called "chronocentrism." This term would express the tendency of making current concepts and beliefs retroactive to past eras. The author explains that the last centuries' historiography has traditionally advocated conceptualizing time as *irreversible*, identifying evident divisions between the past and the present. The discourses associated with historical memory, on the contrary, would be based on the significance of time as an *irrevocable* entity, in which the past would persist in the present, conceptually abolishing the chronological, moral and socio-political distance that separates them. In order to avoid these extremes, and particularly presentist "chronocentrism," Fernández Sebastián recommends: "a demanding awareness of historicity and the differences between times, contexts and circumstances, and on the other, always taking into account the principle of conceptual non-retroactivity, which is an effective antidote to retrospective illusion" (FERNÁNDEZ SEBASTIÁN, 2021, p. 113).

According to these theories, the Spanish-Aztec war would not be a merely past event but a milestone whose consequences would necessarily be constitutive of the current world. Therefore, it would have specific ethical implications in contemporary Mexico. In this respect,



as Rafael Pérez Barquero (2020, p. 71-75) claims, it is necessary to assume that historiography does have an ethical commitment concerning the legacy of traumatic pasts such as the conquest: the mere act of interpretation entails the remembrance and significance of the event in a present scenario of socio-political struggle that is concerned with its own historical roots. However, suppose the revised “ethical turn” contributions were incorporated, ethics of recognition should necessarily mediate the interpretation of the Conquest’s moral legacy. This epistemological position would imply not to annul the historicity of the event mythically and not fall into the temporal Manichaeism Bevernage has denounced. Do the problems that currently afflict the ethnic communities of Mexico come linearly and exclusively from a single historical event? Are the evils of contemporaneity concentrated in the Hispanic past? Are the postcolonial apologies demanded by López Obrador legitimate and practical? Could the historical present dispense with that past that it intends to condemn?

### Decoloniality and identity victimization

Therefore, the question should focus on the precise nature of the continuities and ruptures that determine the Conquest’s ethical implications. In this sense, the decolonial theories that have flourished within Latin American thought - notably tuned to the López Obradorian discourse frequency – have articulated an ethical reading based on an interpretation of the structural legacy of the “Conquest” of the Americas. To this end, thinkers such as Walter D Mignolo (2000, p. 111-115), Enrique Dussel, Mabel Moraña, Carlos Jáuregui (2008, p. 1-22), and Juan José Rossi (2015, p. 69-87), inspired by dependency theories and postcolonial theories, have resorted to the term “coloniality.” The category designates a set of biopolitical governance practices based on racial segregation, symbolic domination, and economic exploitation originating from the Spanish colonial model to contemporary republican realities. The discourses based on this concept linearly connect Spanish occupation, the articulation of the colonial system, the insertion of Latin America as a peripheral actor in the modern world capitalist market, and the failure of the republican states to combat the inequities of the neoliberal model. They thus present contemporary Mexican problems as the causal perpetuation of colonial relations, rooted in the “trauma” of the Spanish Conquest.

In this context, Santiago Castro Gómez (2019, p. 13; 27) has proposed a two-fold conceptualization of the legacy of modernity. He has dissociated coloniality (understood as the dark side of the historical process) from a republican and democratic tradition representing modern history’s bright facet. This universalist horizon pretends to bring together the very diverse emancipatory projects of contemporary identity collectives. Thus, Castro Gómez proposes a

republican “transmodernity” that should eradicate the inheritances from the “colonial” structures of the past, rescuing at the same time the emancipatory achievements of liberal democracies.

Castro’s position implies a uchronic idealization, as long as it assumes that the present could have been such regardless of colonial inheritances. Even more relevant: decolonial stories seem partially detached from the “ethics of representation” demanded by Froeyman since they do not consider the moral otherness of historical subjects and tend to dichotomize them as “colonizers” and “colonized.” These historical actors do not stop appearing in their narratives as a retrospective projection of the present’s identity collectives. The comparison between the Aztecs of the 16th Century and the ethnic communities of today responds to a mythical form of moral bonding between the past and present collectivities that, as Bernard Yack (2012, p. 29-33) explains, is typical of the founding teleologies of modern ideologies such as nationalism. Decolonial rhetoric shares comprehensive schemes with presentist readings of historical memory and, by extension, with mythical history evocations.

This is not to say that decolonial theories are equivalent to nationalism. On the contrary, the authors cited in this section have pursued a primarily critical objective. Their works have focused on critiquing the essentialist meta-narratives, which, from the Spanish domination through the Republican periods, have sought to justify the epistemic and material inequalities of Latin American societies. In practical terms, the decolonial paradigm has struggled to break the assimilationist moulds of modern nationalism. It also contributed to generating forms of historical memory recognising ethnocultural diversity and promoting the human rights agenda. However, as David Lea (2020, p. 186-213) argues, these counter-hegemonic forms of moral remembrance often risk being instrumentalised by states and collectives. Such actors tend to interpret them from an essentialist logic to generate victimised identities that historically justify their political goals. The problem with decolonial theories is thus not their attempt to critically revise the epistemological legacy of conquest, but the risk of an excessively linear and dehistoricised interpretation of that legacy.

In fact, within postcolonial theories themselves, criticisms have emerged that point to these interpretive flaws. Ann Laura Stoler (2016, p. 1-36) has reported that the studies grouped around this paradigm tend to take for granted the total continuity between the moments of imperial domination and the present’s political-economic and cultural problems. In this sense, decolonial studies tend to ignore the specific duration of each of the historical issues they address and also their spatial dimension (they usually assume that many evils that *de facto* extend to “metropolitan” spaces are only typical of postcolonial societies). Thus, Stoler calls for the construction of critical genealogies capable of historicizing postcolonial theory’s ethical reflections. She aims to detach





decolonial theories from their simplifying and normative drive (mythical, in short), which would put them at the service of the rhetoric of identity groups, the political elites of postcolonial states, and the tourist consumer market.

A similar critique of the linear views that have emerged within specific interpretations of postcolonial and decolonial theories has recently appeared in the dossier of *History and Theory* recently coordinated by Warwick Anderson (2020, p. 369-375). Specifically, the article by Vanita Seth (2020, p. 349-358) suggests that medievalists who currently make contemporary racism retrospective to the Middle Ages incur an openly anachronistic interpretation, caused by no small extent by a politicized attempt to value their knowledge in the context of open identity tensions associated with the rise of right-wing populisms. To this end, Seth recycles the contextualist theories of the Cambridge School, suggesting that medievalists who wish to demonstrate the millennial origin of racism incur all the epistemic faults that Quentin Skinner attributed to the teleological history of ideas represented by Arthur Lovejoy: the reification of certain doctrines and present realities and their de-temporalized projection to the past; oversimplification when characterizing past languages and contexts; and the “mythology of prolepsis,” that is, the uncritical identification of remote events as foundational moments of suitably contemporary problems endowed with complex genealogies. The author concludes that certain historians’ effort to find racism in medieval testimonies is due to a presentist exegesis, conditioned by a political will to build continuities favorable to the emancipatory discourses of the ethnic communities of the present. However, this kind of revisionism makes the otherness of the medieval past invisible. It occludes the existence of radically different ethical universes from those that frame the conflicts of our time (SETH, 2020, p. 359-367).

These qualifications converge with the critical approach to the politics of regret that Mano Toth (2015, p. 564-565) has proposed. From his perspective, politics of regret respond to a need for mythical re-legitimation of modern States in the cultural context of postmodernity, which would have turned identity victimization into the new grammar of group mobilization and demand for rights. In the same vein, David Enrique Valencia Mesa (2017, p. 88-89; p. 95-99; p. 112-113) argues that victimized identities and retrospective politics are a form of biopolitical government that legitimizes modern consumer societies by directing collective demands towards particularistic logic. Such demands, moving away from utopian horizons aimed at substantive political transformation, would be compensated in the identity market by granting private rights to specific groups. Daniel Bernabé (2018, p. 145-147), from a Neo-Marxist perspective, has joined this Foucaultian diagnosis, considering the identitarian discourse supported by the reification of diversity as a triumph of the governance logic of neoliberalism.

These authors converge with the interpretations of Gilles Lipovetsky (2015, pp. 9-15) and Francis Fukuyama (2019, p. 47-50). Both thinkers have diagnosed the relationship between the rise of identity mobilizations and the State's consolidation as an instance of therapeutic recognition. Therapeutic logic would constitute, in their opinion, the ultimate expression of a tendency to individuation implicit in the philosophical project of postmodernity.

In any case, these authors reinforce Francesco Benigno's (2013, p. 39-55) thesis, indicating that victim identitarianism would not consist, as it affirms, in the unveiling of historical truth in the face of modernity's metanarratives. On the contrary, it would function as a new form of historical mythologization, consisting of the victim's iconization as the depository of historical rights derived from the past sufferings. Benigno suggests that, contrary to the heroic cult typical of modernity's founding ideologies, the victim's reification does not favor a logic of voluntarist transformation of the social relations system that surrounds it. Instead, it would incentivize passive demand, which awaits the victim therapeutic compensation through legal recognition and institutional protection. Both solutions would, by the way, require the perpetuation of the social actor in the condition of the victim. Daniele Giglioli (2017, p. 45-46) has also alerted about the "wave of victimhood" that has proliferated in the Western world since the 90s. In addition to reiterating the tendency of victimizing historical narratives to favor identitarian and particularistic demand, the author warns of their connection with new forms of political correctness that tend to reduce the space for rational deliberation and enjoyment of civil liberties that is inherent to a democratic public sphere.

According to these criticisms, theories anchored in the paradigm of "coloniality" would respond in full to the ideas of presentism and temporal Manichaeism that the authors of the previous section diagnosed. The fundamental epistemological shortcoming does not lie in their search for the historical roots of the problems that affect the Latin American present. López Obrador's rhetoric faces a fundamental difficulty: in order to identify the origins of current injustices, it opts for a mythical discourse that holistically roots the present's evils in the Conquest. This discourse renounces the search for specific genealogies of inequities and injustices of our epoch, discarding at the same time a dialogical mediation with the Conquest's legacy to serve ideological projects that, based on victim iconization, seem to favor personalistic and immobile logics of social demand. The mythical retrospection that coloniality proposes ends up generating uchronic demands, which bet on eliminating contemporaneity features that they consider morally execrable, saving the aspects of the past they idealized in their rhetorical constructs. Could it not be suggested that these forms of historical interpretation end up constituting a vanishing point, which only aspires to escape from the complexities of the historical present? Moreover, would it



be possible to speak of the historical present that constitutes our possibility to exist, eliminating from it the aspects that seem reprehensible to us?

## The paradox of the apology and counterfactual evasion

Considering López Obrador's claims from the prism of the ethical turn in historical theory and the criticisms of the politics of regret helps us analyze the multifaceted issues we have in a more detailed and concrete way been discussing. If history is determined to embrace the "ethical turn" that we mentioned initially, we must use the tools of moral philosophy and face these debates with argumentative depth.

An antecedent to the approach that we have intended to give to the problem in this article is the discussion held by Janna Thompson (2000, p. 470-475) and Neil Levy (2002, p. 358-368) some years ago. In her "The Apology Paradox," Thompson delimited the central problem we have approached using moral philosophy tools. This author wonders in her text if there is no paradox in demanding apologies for actions on which our existence causally depends. Can López Obrador demand an apology for the "invasion" of Cortés's army when its existence depends on it? Would López Obrador have preferred that the Conquest never took place and he never existed? Thompson explores different solutions to this paradox, such as the possibility of interpreting the apologies as something concerning the States or institutions; or that apologies do not necessarily imply wanting the past to have happened differently.

Nevertheless, all these exits are ultimately unsatisfactory. Thompson's solution, of which she is not entirely convinced, is that we could distinguish different apology aspects. When someone apologizes (or feels bad) for having obtained an unfair benefit –like access to a better education due to a higher socioeconomic level–, "They do not regret that they have these things, but that they came to have them in the way they did." It can be interpreted, by applying the same logic, that the repentance and apologies demanded by López Obrador should not be understood as the expression of a wish that those events had never taken place (and, therefore, that current Mexico and with him all his inhabitants should never exist). Instead, these demands express "Our preference [...] for a possible world in which our existence did not depend on these deeds." (THOMPSON, 2000, p. 475) This idea fits the reasoning of Castro Gómez. By demanding a transmodernity that rescues the republican and egalitarian legacy of modernity - discarding the darker side inherited from the Conquest - he is not demanding the non-existence of societies characterized as historical victims, but rather their existence in a different scenario of the historical present that frames them. According to Castro Gómez, we could eliminate the "bad" part of the present – the oppressions, inequities,

and structural violence rooted in the Conquest – preserving the “good” part, that is, the legacy of freedom, equality, and dignity linked by the author with republicanism.

However, this argument needs a counterfactual (a world in which we exist for different reasons) that does not seem viable. If we admit that this world is not possible, that were the past actions and only those actions that led to our existence, the paradox persists and retains all its force. It is not implied in this line of thought that counterfactual history is not valid to address the past. Richard Evans (2013, p. 11) has argued that counterfactual history involves the imagination of alternative versions of the past based on an alteration in the timeline leading to our present. As Evans argues, supported by other authors such as Caroline Guthrie (2019, p. 339-361) and Marnie Hughes-Warrington (2019, p. 268-283), evocations based on conditional thinking have the potential to relativize deterministic and simplifying views of the past, as well as to establish the range of possibilities that were available at the time, highlighting the agency of historical actors. However, these authors defend that counterfactual thinking must meet several requirements to have any epistemological value. Among these, the construction of plausible scenarios based on enough evidence stands out. In the same way, counterfactual history must be self-aware of its fallibility and fictionality. In short, counterfactuality and even uchronia could constitute, as Ivan Gaskell (2013, p. 35-40) also defends, beneficial experimental forms of thought to meditate on the possible courses of historical causality, but provided they maintain their character of intellectual mediation that aspires to understand the past better.

The problem of the uchronic horizons invoked by the retrospective politics of López Obrador and the decolonial theories is twofold. They do not aspire to understand the past but take its meaning for granted based on a simplifying mythologization of the conquering milestone's negative consequences. Therefore, the president's intention is not to experiment with historical causality but to propose a substantial alteration of it as a condition of possibility for a salvific future. This way of thinking leads squarely to the paradox identified by Thompson: the realization of a uchronic construct based on a mythical historicization of the past is desired, pretending to preserve the existence of individuals who exist in the actual historical present. If we consider the historicity of the present, this is an intentional fallacy. A past different from the one that has given rise to our present would alter it holistically, preventing the existence of the individuals that exist today. An alternative past, historically considered, would prevent the very existence of those who today we identify as victims of that factual history associated with trauma and injustice. The rejection of the conquering and colonial past that prevails in the politics of regret would constitute, strictly speaking, an abandonment of American societies from themselves, a refusal to mediate with their polyhedric and problematic past and take responsibility for their historical present.



This criticism brings us back, once again, to the need to articulate complex mediations with the historical past. It reminds us of the usefulness of ethics of recognition recommended by Froeyman. Moral philosophy has also spoken out in this regard. Ethicist Neil Levy joined this debate with an interesting contribution. In a direct response to Thompson's article, Levy advocates for what he calls a "time-indexed solution." We must take into account the temporal perspective when judging the goodness or badness of actions. The key is that the same action can be valued positively or negatively depending on the temporal perspective we assume.

Levy (2002, p. 365) gives an example that can be clarifying. He asks us to imagine a lottery, like the ones we commonly find in many countries, but each ticket costs \$ 500 instead of 5. Keeping the prizes and the level of participation the same, it is clear that paying such a high price to play is a wrong decision. However, if we buy the ticket, play, and end up winning the lottery, should the excellent outcome change our negative view of the action of purchasing the ticket? Should we regret having bought the ticket and having won the millionaire prize?. What Levy explains is that the answer depends entirely on the perspective we take. If we place ourselves before playing the lottery, we must judge the decision based on the expected utility or profit. Since the ticket price is so high and the odds of winning so low, the decision to play must be judged as wrong and objectionable from this *forward-looking* perspective. However, if we adopt a *backward-looking* perspective, we consider the action based on the actual benefit produced, not based on their expected benefit. Since we won the lottery and benefited us enormously, there is no reason to regret that decision.

Levy does not seem to recognize the implications of this example and its background reflection for the historical cases discussed. It does mention that, for example, when we criticize slavery, what we are doing is to covertly and temporarily move "to a particular, long past, moment in time, the time at which the choice was made to adopt the institution of slavery" (LEVY, 2002, p. 365). Although, inadvertently, what is generally understood as a historical and therefore retrospective debate, becomes an ethical debate, that is, a prospective one. The question "was X okay?" would surreptitiously become, "would you do X if you saw yourself in the same situation?" Levy does not delve into this question and remains silent about the implications of these digressions. Thus, from the retrospective viewpoint, looking back from the consequences already known (and among these consequences, precisely the existence of those descendants of slaves), it seems that criticism would be out of place.

From the argumentation developed by Levy, it would appear that López Obrador and current Mexicans would have no reason to demand an apology for the actions of Cortés, the Spanish conquerors, and their indigenous allies. Perhaps the activities carried out in the Conquest context

were reprehensible from a prospective perspective if we place ourselves at the moment before its realization. However, seen from the present moment, contemplated, as is López Obrador's case, retrospectively, it seems that, according to Levy, it would only make sense to congratulate himself on his fortunate outcome. Congratulations on the good luck that these actions (criticizable from a prospective perspective) ended up being so beneficial (from hindsight) – beneficial insofar as these actions favored López Obrador's and the current Mexicans' existence.

## Conclusions

The conclusion drawn from the previous reflections is that the postcolonial apologies demanded by President López Obrador in the context of the fifth centenary of the Conquest of Mexico depend on a mythologized vision of the past, which reproduces a logic of temporal Manichaeism, with a scant epistemological basis to judge historically the event that it condemns. The recent request for an apology from the Spanish invasion does not fully conform to the paradigms conveyed in recent decades by the politics of regret and decolonial theories. Following a presentist logic, López Obrador contends that the public repentance of the perpetrators' apparent institutional heirs (Spanish State, Vatican State, Republic of Mexico) will therapeutically compensate the apparent heirs of the conquered. This claim, based on the retrospective projection of the identity collectives of the present, understands apologies as a symbolic repair that would lay the foundations to establish a salvific *uchronia*: the elimination of the traumatic dimension of the past would allow the preservation of selective legacies of it, generating a horizon of citizen equality, self-determination and social justice that ironically resembles the project of republican and democratic modernity.

The article has collected a whole series of well-founded criticisms of this interpretive framework of intense teleological tones, whose postulates have been revealed as a fertile field to reflect on the subtle relationships between ethics, temporality and historical thought. In the first place, the "ethical turn" contributions have made visible the presentist and unilinear bias that has dominated the retrospective politics centered on the paradigm of historical memory. In this context, a decisive question has been whether the past embeds ontologically in the present. That is, if we inhabit a present endowed with duration, historicity, and therefore if the historical interpretation necessarily has moral and political connotations. Faced with the metahistorical and simplifying bias of the politics of regret, Froeyman, seconded by others such as Bevernage, Mudrovcic, and Phillips, recommend an ethic of recognition: the establishment of intellectually complex and responsible mediations with the otherness of the moral universes of the past. To this end, these authors have opposed the retrospective politics that prevail in today's public spheres.



The vindicated an ethical practice of historiography based on the critical identification of the ruptures and continuities that constitute the historical present.

Critics of the decolonial theories discussed in the third section argue along the same lines. These have shown that, far from being based on a responsible evaluation of the concrete causalities that explain the evils of the present, the politics of regret act based on ideological projects that compensate the needs of state governance and group vindication in the context of postmodernity. In this regard, the line that separates the ethical anachronisms from the politics of regret and other mythical frameworks typical of modernity, such as nationalism and communism, seems very thin. Finally, our critical review has recovered valuable contributions that, from moral philosophy, have reflected on the apology's logical foundations. In harmony with recent theorizations regarding historical temporality and counterfactuality, Thompson and Levy have contributed to exposing the weakness of the uchronic horizons proposed by victimizing identitarianism. The mythologized claim to eliminate the traumatic past would logically amount to denying the victim's very existence. It would constitute more than a thoughtful gesture towards the ethical content of history, concealment of its legacies' complexity, and an evasion of the need to diagnose and responsibly confront the historical present's problems.

In response to these digressions, it is legitimate to ask whether, in the context of its fifth centenary, there is some way of dealing publicly with the memory of the Conquest being consistent with the ethics of recognition proposed by Froeyman; also with the evidential and critical standards of a democratic debate. We dare to answer positively. As a result of the article's course, it is possible to argue that postcolonial apologies would have the same kind of effect as a rhetoric of imperial glorification of the Conquest: they would tend to put the past at the service of partisan, teleological, and not very fruitful projects. Having ruled out the logical, historiographical, and ethical basis for the politics of regret, the possibility remains to explore other types of retrospective politics. Considering the ethical turn proposals, it would be interesting to suggest an alternative to the conquering milestone's presentist appropriation. From this perspective, it would be possible to favor a dialogue around the concrete genealogy of the historical problems derived from the Spanish-Aztec war. For this, it would be necessary to assume an attitude of hermeneutical mediation to take charge of the historicity of the past's moral decisions and, in turn, to accept that they were necessary for the very existence of the historical present that we inhabit.

However, it is highly recommendable to consider an essential difference between the ethical and historical views. The ethical perspective is essentially *forward-looking*. On the contrary, the historical gaze is essentially retrospective, turned *backward-looking*. Ethics seeks to guide us in present problems whose consequences are unknown. History aims to clarify what happened,



understand the past and, in any case, explain how it becomes constitutive of the present. In this sense, we must realize that moral actions are determined by the specific temporality that frames them.

For this reason, as has been argued, cooperation between ethics and history must be carried out with the necessary precautions. As Froeyman (2015, p. 208) explains, we can only ethically approach the past when we generously and authentically put ourselves in the shoes of these historical actors and recognize their “contingent” character. Only by applying what this author calls “practical wisdom” can we realize that those people had to make the decisions they made at a specific time, with particular conditions and, above all, ignoring the future that would take place. As can be seen, this perspective is practically the opposite of the politics of regret, which operate in lousy faith, assuming that the future that took place was known and desired by those who shaped it. They also presuppose that judging, directly and without mediation, the actions of historical agents from the present is legitimate. We must aspire to a mnemonic policy that is more respectful of the complexity of the problem addressed. Indeed, it would be possible to argue that such a debate is taking place. The 500th anniversary has fuelled a rich historiographical discussion that has made two prominent contributions:

1. It has unmasked the silences and ideological motivations behind the different versions of the conquering milestone (NAVARRETE, 2022, p. 241-266; SALAFRANCA; PÉREZ VEJO, 2021; VILLELA; LOAEZA, 2022);
2. It has demonstrated that the Spanish-Aztec war was not a simplistic confrontation between binary civilisational blocs but a complex process involving the configuration of interethnic alliances and processes of transculturation (RESTALL, 2019; RINKE, 2021).

Such debates respond to the kind of retrospective politics proposed by Froeyman and critical decolonial thinkers. The problem, common when it comes to the relationship between history and memory, is that such digressions rarely condition the retrospective policies of the institutional actors and groups that preside over public debate. In such cases, mythologising and temporal manichaeism predominate. A better dialogue of historiography with mnemonic discourses would potentially contribute, in the context of the fifth centenary of the Conquest, to socialize a series of historical diagnoses capable of favoring democratic reflexivity. It would also contribute to stimulating critical thinking and perhaps even articulating substantive policies that tend to social justice, thus partially fulfilling the desire expressed by Anton de Baets.



However, the truth is that this recommendation carries lots of uchronic in itself. In the current context, the myths surrounding an event of the Conquest of Mexico's dimensions continue to provide political symbols challenging to disregard for various ideological tendencies in dispute. As empirical analyses of cultures of memory in contemporary Mexico demonstrate, this politically contested character of the indigenous and colonial past has been a condition of possibility for the country's subaltern groups to reinterpret the national past according to their own experiences and cultural sensibilities (LEGRÁS, 2017; HERNÁNDEZ REYNA, 2019). Therefore, it is not a question of discarding myths from the public sphere. The desirable horizon would be limiting their hegemonic claims through a constant reminder of the past's otherness, surprising nature, and resistance to unilinear readings.

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