

# Outside the borders of the state, abandonment. On the new forms of disappearance

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## Abstract

In this article I propose an expanded definition of the categories of “disappearance” and “disappeared” with which to address situations marked by abandonment. In the first movement, I provide a critical description of the scientific literature available about disappearance in several fields, in particular legal and political sociology. Both have gradually constructed an interpretation that, while legally effective, sociologically sensitive, and socially successful, currently find themselves overwhelmed. The second movement confirms that the dominant meaning of disappearance and disappeared has been overwhelmed, and it addresses how that overwhelming affects three of their characteristics: the timeframes of reference for both categories (the past and memory); the anthropological assumptions that underpin the two (the bad death and the (im)possibility of its conventional management); and the normative social frameworks that both take as “a given” (the state and citizenship, and the forms of political agency associated with them). Finally, the third movement deals with different experiences of field research related to very open uses of the idea of disappearance, to gather different efforts of theoretical problematization that currently, and in various fields of social science research, turn disappearance and disappeared into tools for analyzing social forms of abandonment.

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## KEYWORDS

abandonment, citizenship, disappearance, disappeared, state

## 1 | MEXICO, 2018. DAY OF THE DEAD. EXPANDING THE FIELD OF DISAPPEARANCE

In early November 2018, Mexico City hosted the eighth edition of the World Social Forum on Migration. I was there to observe a space somewhat removed from the rest: the First World Summit of Mothers of Disappeared Migrants, a foundational event that its participants would later describe as historic. While held in Mexico, the summit welcomed delegations from Tunisia, Morocco, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Mauritania, and Senegal. All of these participants arrived carrying bags heavy with stories of desert and sea crossings, systematic torture, trains like meat grinders, detention centers, invisibility, human trafficking and more human trafficking, slavery, dehumanization. They were joined by many observers: legal practitioners, activists, forensic anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists. Many of these professionals were not new to me. I had come across them before in Mexico or elsewhere, had heard them speak, or had read them, as I thought about unidentified corpses, about mourning or searches, about guarantees of non-repetition and memory policies, or about social movements and familism.

With the help of many necessary mediators—because these women spoke different languages and there was no one language common to all—, the mothers of disappeared migrants sat through roundtable after roundtable, they listened to expert presentations, and described the lives of their children and what their own lives have been like following their disappearance. While they may have spoken different languages, their stories had common denominators that the categories that brought them together—disappeared and disappearance—seemed to perfectly encapsulate. Dialogue was enabled, contact made possible. A knowing look could be perceived when one woman told her story and another listened. An indigenous woman from Guatemala saw herself in an inhabitant of the Sahel, and women from the Moroccan Atlas Mountains found things in common with the stories told by Salvadoran mothers whose sons had fled the M18 mara. The dialogue expanded to include the Mexican mothers and relatives of disappeared individuals, poor masses of Guerrero, Chiapas, Tabasco, Baja California, or Tamaulipas. There was, however, no one representing the old disappearances, those which we label “political,” at least not any from Mexico. Only toward the end did the maternal shadow of a veteran Mother of the Plaza de Mayo appear, encouraging participants, via video and from Buenos Aires, to continue down a path she knew well and which they were just starting to make their way through. She seemed to think it is the same path.<sup>1</sup>

As they left, some remarked, surprised, how disappeared and disappearance have expanded their scope of application. Several questioned that expansion; others celebrated it. The more conservative arguments contended that it is necessary to restrict that expansion and limit both categories to certain forms of state violence and the reactions and movements that emerge where disappearance occurs. The more open ones preferred to let them go as far as they can, to help illuminate extremely vulnerable lives, such as those gathered in Mexico in that November 2018.

What is left of the original disappearance (Gatti, 2020), of the old category of disappeared, that which began to be used in the Argentina of the 1980s? And what of the category of disappearance officially recognized by international humanitarian law in 2006 in Geneva, under the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (UN, 2006)? By 2006, these were highly consolidated categories, encapsulating a wealth of accumulated, multidisciplinary, and globally agreed-on knowledge. They were associated with forms of mobilization sustained by slogans that have become global (such as “Present” and “Bring them back alive”), with certain forms of political activism that draws on the family and the victim, with public policies associated with restoring the identity of memory, with a global iconography, such as the white headscarf worn by the mothers. And there are numerous fields of knowledge that have carved out a sub-area to focus on the study of the disappearance of persons: sociology, political science, law, social and forensic anthropology. Disappearance has, indeed, become a firm academic topic, well-known and established, and its study almost a discipline.

But today that whole solid structure is tottering, overwhelmed by the expansion of the uses of the two categories, uses that are increasingly more open, sometimes awkward, as they are stretched so far they border on kitsch: disappeared and disappearance are used for just about anything. I am referring to its social uses. That is, to how different actors, in different places around the world, apply them to very diverse situations, and how all of these—uses, actors, and situations—are, in turn, very different from what these two categories denoted in their original form. They still name a form of state terror that targets citizens who are stripped of the protections afforded by the law. But they are also applied to other things: to situations where there is neither state, nor citizens, nor legal protections; and to events from both a distant past (Spain's 1936 Civil War, the repression in Soviet Russia), the recent past (the wars in Bosnia or Afghanistan, the long history of violence in Colombia, the "war on terror" and its networks of alegal and illegal detention camps), and, especially the most savage present (trafficked women in Uruguay, stateless persons in the Caribbean, the undignified dead in Brazil, lost children in Mexico, invisible beings again in Brazil, or migrants whose mothers gathered in Mexico City in 2018). As before, it qualifies stories with a political tone, with a scent of History, an aroma of Human Rights. But it also names more ordinary histories, the kind that are so common one no longer sees them: people who are lost, people who wait, people who perish in a desert, who drown in the sea, who wander aimlessly around the city, people who freeze.

What does this mean? What thoughts are prompted by such a global use of something so uncomfortable as the terms disappeared or disappearance?

## 2 | THE SUCCESS OF DISAPPEARANCE AND HOW IT HAS BECOME OVERWHELMED

In contrast to those who believe that the existence of the phenomenon predates its Latin American manifestation (Scovazzi & Citroni, 2007), or those who analyze it as a case of broader issues, such as genocide (Feierstein, 2014), I take the position of those who argue that disappeared and disappearance are a historically, legally, and socially unique figure and phenomenon that originated in Latin America (Anstett, 2017; Dulitzky, 2019) and which can also be said to have been globally successful, as they are recognizable at different levels, from the anthropological to the literary, from the iconographic to the political. They are figures that are successful in several ways.

Their success is, first of all, legal: the creation, culminating with the United Nations Convention in 2006, of the criminal category of enforced disappearance of persons, which defines a specific type of state terror, characterized by the systematic concealment of the whereabouts of disappeared citizens and the denial of access to any information regarding their fate. With its adoption, the Convention established a number of standards for assessing, delimiting, and ultimately prosecuting these acts, standards that effectively circulate globally, channeled by very concrete devices—in particular, the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances—typical of a powerful machinery, that of humanitarianism, with an efficacy that is not merely symbolic (Dulitzky, 2019).

But its success goes beyond that. It is aesthetic, as icons, slogans, and figures that are very recognizable globally (the headscarf, the photos carried by the relatives, the "Never Again") are associated with the disappeared (Crenzel, 2012; Taylor, 2001). It is anthropological, as disappearance and the disappeared have attained the rank, if not of archetypes, then of privileged examples of bad death (Azevedo et al., 2020; Robin & Panizo, 2020), of how it must be processed, and of how mourning must be managed (Congram, 2016; Diéguez, 2013; Robledo Silvestre, 2017). And it is also a success with regards to the form adopted by the social response to such acts, a form that is unique in several ways, most notably the work itself involved in the social invention of a name to denote a phenomenon (enforced disappearance) and another for the figure that produces that phenomenon (disappeared), until then unnamed, and the political response, which pushed the relative of the victim into the public space as a type of collective actor that was at the time new (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Fassin 2015; Gatti, 2017), making kinship with the victims and the struggles for memory the basis of their legitimacy.

Elevated to the rank of a social, legal, aesthetic, anthropological, and political type, the category of enforced disappearance and the figure of the disappeared have been able to travel around the world, with enormous success,

landing in very diverse territories (Ferrándiz, 2010), and providing, in those territories, a name for phenomena that before their arrival were neither thought about nor named or seen. An enormous power, which is manifested in Mexico, where very diverse forms of violence are grouped under the name “disappearance”; or in Colombia, where situations that until the use of those categories remained unnamed and now obtain standards of legal protection. And the uses are expanded: they are applied to lost children in Europe or America (Luiselli, 2019); to bodies exposed to trafficking throughout the world (Martínez and Aedo Avila, 2022); to elderly people abandoned in nursing homes in Spain (Rubio & Villar, 2022); to women murdered in Mexico (Fregoso, 2017) or in reservations in the United States and Canada (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). An enormous success, then, that overwhelms what the dominant meanings of the categories of disappeared and disappearance used to name, meanings that today do not fit what is denoted by them: either because it is not the state that is the disappearing agent, or because there is no disappearing agent, or because those who are disappeared were never recognized in the first place as citizens, or because the disappeared are living persons. And yet the name is used, and increasingly so.

### 3 | FATAL CONFUSIONS: DISAPPEARED IS NOT (ONLY) PAST, DEATH, STATE

If one wants to work on these expansions of the use of the categories of disappeared and disappearance based on the dominant meanings of one and the other, of the inherited categories, those formed with the original disappeared in mind, one runs the risk of falling into what, paraphrasing Robert K. Merton (1968), I would call three “fatal confusions”, namely: associating disappearance with (1) past and memory, (2) death, and (3) the state.

#### 3.1 | First confusion: Disappearance is a thing of the past

The original disappearance is expressed in the past tense, and the disappeared, in its first versions, is a figure associated with an earlier time. That association may be considered logical given the first manifestations of the phenomenon, when there was no concept even for it. Were they being tortured? Had they fled? Were they being held captive? Were they dead? Naming them, reacting, demanding—these are actions taken after the fact by the relatives of the direct victims and by the activists or professionals who managed the consequences, directing their gaze back to the past when what was now being named happened. Memory became a key word. This does not mean that social studies on memory are historical studies (Jelin, 2003), but it does mean that disappearance is addressed as a present reaction to *events that came before*.

However, this directing of academic and political sensitivities toward that time is more difficult to sustain when observing phenomena for which those terms are currently used. Migrants who vanish in their journeys to Europe or to the wealthy America in the north, women and children lost in trafficking networks, citizens erased from all records... thinking about all of these requires verbs in the present continuous tense, denoting that *they are disappearing*. For today's disappeared, the tense is no longer the past; it is, instead, a bizarre present.

#### 3.2 | Second confusion: Disappearance is no longer necessarily equated with death

According to the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, or EAFF), disappearance is “a new state of being,” an ambiguous state between life and death (in Gatti, 2014): between one and the other, and neither one nor the other. The disappeared are ghosts, specters (Gordon, 2008; Kwon, 2013). In the original disappeared that impossible position was resolved by pushing toward the acceptance of the obvious: that those who had been targeted by state violence were dead. Theirs was a bad death, an unfinished death, a death

with no body to show, a death without mourning, without a grave (Da Silva Catela, 2001), but a death all the same. This opened the door of this social field to what has been called the “forensic turn” (Dziuban, 2017), that is, a host of practitioners—forensic anthropologists, psychologists, archeologists, geneticists—under whose guidance the “bad death” took center stage.

The implications of this turn prompt several criticisms. One such criticism can be found frequently in social anthropology works that have analyzed that turn with critical rigor, focusing on the failure to take local differences in the interpretation of dead bodies properly into account, on the universalized treatment of corpseless bodies (Anstett & Dreyfus, 2015; Delacroix, 2020; Ferrandiz & Robben, 2015; Robin, 2021), on the procedural management of nameless corpses, with no regard to the where or when of the disappearance (Garibian et al., 2013).

But I am more concerned about another implication of that turn: namely that it does not allow us to see that disappearance and death are not necessarily correlated, that, today, when we say “disappearance” or “disappeared” we are thinking of the same state of being as before—ambiguous, liminal. Today’s disappeared, however, are not thought of as close to death, but as a life that is not a life. Should we ignore those who in Melilla, Tenosique, Montevideo, Tijuana, or Cúcuta say that their life is death? Should we not believe those who call themselves “zombies” or “living dead”? While disappearance still remains in its old place, between life and death, it now seems to also lean more toward the side of life, even if it is in forms that appear to negate it, bizarre forms (Kobelinsky, 2020), bad lives (Butler, 2012).

### 3.3 | Third confusion: Disappearance does not just happen in the sphere of state-defined relations

Legal practitioners take a cautious approach to the expansion of the category of enforced disappearance to denote situations far removed from the legal type. If used carelessly, they contend, there is a risk of jeopardizing the quality of the standards of justice that have been achieved and of endangering the gains obtained with a tool capable of measuring, like few others, state terror when it is unleashed on the state’s own citizens. They are right in pointing that out, and in expressing it as a mandate (“the definition continues to require a state connection” (Dulitzky, 2019, p. 427)), as what has been gained is substantial. Moreover, it is not strange that, for many in the social sciences who work on this issue, the state connection should be the *sine qua non* condition for legitimately applying the category of disappearance, given that it was in the reaction to state violence that the most representative social movements in this field were formed, namely, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, *las Buscadoras* or Searchers in Mexico (Irazuza, 2017), the Mothers of the False Positives in Colombia (Aranguren et al., 2021), in short, the relatives as political actors, and kinship ties as the bond that legitimized the emergence in the public space of that actor. It is very characteristic of this field, a true invention (Pallares, 2014; Sosa, 2014; Vecchioli, 2013; Zarrugh, 2022). This is not just something from the early period. Even today, the political subject of disappearance is created in that territory, challenging the agents of the disappearing power—the state—(Calveiro, 2019) and demanding rights and acknowledgment from it.

However, that is no longer the only way it happens, and that limit must now be reconsidered. First, because the disappearing agents now include private powers, whether national in scope or not, sometimes in collusion with state forces, but not always, as is the case, for example, of forms of power exercised in lawless areas (Brun, 2006; Martínez, 2018). Second, because disappearance is not just an effect of the action of power, whatever its origin. It is also an effect of an omission of action, of the failure to protect, when the protection of citizens is not seen as a responsibility, when they are neglected or left out in the cold (Schindel, 2020). This is a particularly relevant point, so much so that it is being considered in the reports of the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance (Citroni, 2017; Duhaime & Thibault, 2017; WGEID, 2016). And third, because limiting observation to the scope of the state’s action, to what, drawing on Hannah Arendt, we can call the “public sphere of appearance” (Butler, 2015; Tassin, 2012), we will certainly be able to understand the original forms of the phenomenon, which are

closely related to political disputes and to the modern construction of citizenship, and also their reactions, which took place in that territory, but will not be able to understand the contemporary forms, which have exceeded the limits of that sphere. Indeed, many of those who disappear today had either never before appeared in that space, because they never attained the recognitions that come with being a citizen or the condition of subject in its liberal sense (Butler, 2015), or, if they did form part of the body of citizens, they were expelled from it (Sassen, 2014). The state does not define their worlds, nor does it contain them; they live in another territory, one of abandonment.

#### 4 | THE EXPANSION OF THE SCOPE OF THE CONCEPTS OF DISAPPEARANCE AND DISAPPEARED AND THE GROWING VARIETY OF ITS USES. (FAR) BEYOND THE LIMITS OF THE STAT

Social sciences must be receptive to the undeniable fact that the uses of disappeared and disappearance are growing and that their scope extends far beyond the limits within which they were conceived. And that growth should be taken seriously, as it reveals the existence of phenomena, subjects, and ways of constructing identity, meaning, and agency for which available categories do not work and which need to be named, and which are even demanding a new epistemology (Sassen, 2014). That is why I want to argue in favor of the use of disappeared and disappearance to think about situations that are otherwise not easily named or are *badly* named; I believe it is a good strategy for enabling us to be academically sensitive to what escapes us. I am thinking of situations where life is at its limit, situations that affect extremely vulnerable individuals and populations; extreme forms of de-citizenization; civil death; lives that unfold at the edge of death. I am thinking of situations that are in the present, not in the past, which do not necessarily involve repressive action on the part of the state, or systematic extermination plans, or concentration camps, or even death. Situations in which there is an ongoing dynamic of neglect and abandonment, of extreme lack of protection.

I said that other categories named these situations "badly", but I should qualify this because it is not true: in the social and human sciences we have good concepts available, both old and new, for understanding what life is like when it does not work, we have powerful instruments for understanding poverty, marginalization, precarity, vulnerability, violence, pain, breakdown, or catastrophe. The list is long, monumental. So are the debates that propose new terms, that revise old ones, that implement solutions. There are so many that to think we can draw up a complete list is as pretentious as it is useless. There are concept for social inexistence (Châtel, 2007), for pain and suffering (Das, 2008; Wilkinson & Kleinman, 2016), for vulnerability (Laugier, 2012; Martínez, 2019), for social death (Das & Han, 2015), and for precarity (Paugam, 2007). But when we use them they leave us unsatisfied, we feel there is something that escapes them, something important. They may be very sophisticated theoretically, but their sensitivity to the territories where they land is scarce, as their field incursions are far from the common uses, and they impose themselves without perceiving how they are consumed, transformed, redefined, in short, how they are appropriated by those who are thought of by them. They are at times powerful instruments for managing, well tested, proceduralized, well thought out, but their sensitivity is deactivated when it comes to acknowledging the need for tools that are more malleable than those with which things are thought about, tools that can engage better with diversity.

They are not bad concepts. That is not it. But I do believe that, in short, they lose sensitivity when they touch ground. And that is not the case with "disappeared" or "disappearance". The two are global, they land with astonishing speed and ease in very diverse situations, they are used with remarkable flexibility, sometimes alone, sometimes together with other categories. They adapt to almost anything and are capable of being sensitive to what other concepts are not: abandonment in its current appearances, which are numerous.

Sometimes, as in the case of the Dominican Republic, the use is prompted by intuition. In others, like Mexico, there are thousands of different uses and there does not seem to be a pattern unifying those uses. There are tactical uses and uses that deny the legacy. Some of those uses coexist and are in conversation with each other; others, however, deny any uses different from their own. Sometimes there are committees, rapporteurs, commissions mandated with

ensuring that the uses of the category conform to the letter of the law. In many other cases, there are none. There is nobody supervising, nor is anyone expected to. Neither is anything expected besides the use itself. In some places, the origins of the category are evoked and the special, even unique, legitimacy of the early uses is invoked. In others, there is no awareness even of what that is, because there are no initial times and the disappearances are happening and continue to happen; there is no knowledge of what they are or who perpetrates them, only that they happen.

Those uses are sometimes in the sphere of academia: in works by archaeology professionals, who draw on both categories to analyze “homeless” populations in Europe or Brazil (González-Ruibal, 2020; Hattori, 2020), or the traces left by the passage of undocumented migrants in North America (De Leon, 2015). Culture studies also resort to them to analyze documents that put bodies of uncertain substance at the center of their proposals—zombies or other semi-living/semi-dead entities (Girona, 2022; Labrador, 2022). They are found frequently in chronicles of situations so densely complex they defy conventional language (Polit, 2019): hidden migration routes (Tervonen, 2019; Washington, 2020) or individuals whose identities do not matter and who are turned into animals in spaces of trafficking and prostitution (Martínez, 2018).

Admittedly, the recourse to the categories of disappeared or disappearance is not very systematic among academic essayists, such as Le Breton (2015) or Minh-ha (2016), who use them with unsubstantiated flexibility to discuss, for example, Alzheimer's disease or happy migrations. In contrast, the works of social anthropologists such as João Biehl (2013) and Angela Garcia (2017) make an extremely rigorous and suggestive use of both figures to characterize lives in a state of extreme abandonment and lacking language and visibility, in Brazil (the former) and in Mexico or southern United States (the latter). Moreover, what stands out in both cases is how the idea of disappearance is used to develop an appropriate methodology for existences whose language and agency move in uncertain, undefined, and indeterminate territories (Biehl and Locke, 2017). And I find impressive how two practitioners from the fields of political science and philosophy—Jenny Edkins (2011) and Etienne Tassin (2012)—use this category. The former systematizes a broad catalog of cases of disappearance—spanning from the Argentina of the 1976 dictatorship to the New York of 9/11, from post-war Europe to today's so-called “disappeared with no apparent cause”—gathering them under a single definition: a disappeared person is anyone unaccounted.<sup>2</sup> In that theoretical movement Edkins manages to bring the category closer to the living and put it to work in the present. Tassin, for his part, drawing on Arendt, discusses the connection between shared existence and the political, and proposes that disappearance be thought of as their separation. The “public space of appearance” (Butler, 2015)—the sphere of the political—is the space in which a subject is acknowledged. Disappearance, he argues, is the action of removing somebody from that space. That removal can be done through the elimination of a political enemy (as in the Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s) or by erasing or concealing (as occurs in the current liberal democracies of Europe or America with migrants or precarious populations). But the result is the same: the disappeared are those who are expelled from the shared space, who are stripped of their condition of subject.

When thought of in this way—expanded—the categories of disappearance and disappeared gain enormous analytical power. But it would be a mistake to turn them into *catch-all* tools. Given the contexts in which they operate—fragmented, precarious, broken contexts, which resist totalizing analyses and require, instead, flexible gazes capable of compromising (Tsing, 2015)—a good option would be to make them collaborate with other concepts that observe phenomena with similar characteristics: social death (Patterson, 1982), the coloniality of being (Wynter, 2003), or unbearable (Bradley, 2019) or precarious life (Butler, 2004). But they are good for that too. They interact well and help shape an arsenal of enormous value for the theoretical and empirical study of abandoned life.

## 5 | BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: THINKING ABOUT ABANDONMENT

Disappeared and disappearance are successful, global, traveling categories. They are used in different disciplines, on multiple scales. Outside academia too. And profusely so. If we were to draw a map of all these uses, a first plane would show the strictest definitions, that is, those that fall under what international humanitarian law establishes

(a form of state terror, violence that targets citizens, concealment of the whereabouts of the victims, withholding of information regarding their fate). That plane would also reflect what has been said in other disciplines, particular in anthropological studies concerned with bad death and its management and sociology and political science studies focused on the reactions (resistance, demands, memory struggles) of the victims turned into political subjects. In this map we would clearly see how the categories departed from Geneva, traveled firmly down the moral and practical highways paved by humanitarian law, and reached places where there were or are manifestations of that state terror, similar to the original Argentine reference. We would see that when they land in those places they mobilize local intelligentsias committed to denouncing complicities between powers, they point the finger at the negligence and indifference of public authorities, they expose the state when it abandons its citizens and leaves them at the mercy of other powers. Those movements go from Geneva to Spain, to Serbia, to Syria, to Ingushetia, to Nepal. These are journeys with perfectly delineated trajectories, clear and direct, orderly.

And there is another plane on that map that is more dynamic and traces more irregular and scattered trajectories. It describes the movements that lead to disappearance or disappeared naming much more than what they could name originally. We should pay attention to this plane, take it seriously. What can be seen in it sometimes looks like the old enforced disappearance: because in it there is a systematic element or an element of concealment (in cases of trafficking or femicide), because the state is involved (in mass migrations, in situations of neglect, in collective expulsions). But more often than not, it is not easy to find something that evokes the disappearance of the initial era, or the original disappeared. Such is the case when it is applied to lost minors, when it describes a population excluded from a census, when it is used to refer to dead indigenous women in reservations, when it qualifies the corpses of the homeless or populations living in abject poverty. Many uses of these categories. It is not surprising that many would seek them out, would want the protections afforded by them. They need them so that they may be acknowledged, accounted for, that is, counted, as in the annual reports of Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International, narrated, as in humanitarian literature or in fiction or in activist efforts, and taken into account, as is done by any type of institution with the capacity to protect.

Two planes, then, in which to situate disappearance today. The diversity of situations that came together at the Mexico City event with which I opened this text calls on us to consider that neither of these two planes should be ignored or dismissed, that the coexistence of the rigorous uses of the first with the less controlled uses of the second is not necessarily a problem. On the contrary, it is a clue: it indicates how global-scope concepts, which are as academic as they are ordinary, work today. That is the case with disappeared and disappearance. They both move in a “world system” (Serres, 2015). They circulate through networks of power and knowledge that act as vehicles for them. They are addressed by various areas of expertise and professions, different institutions and lobbying groups, and many people, in different places, with diverse purposes. The movements occur on different scales. Some are global, monumental, and highly institutionalized (major conventions, humanitarian law). Others unfold in local structures that are very firmly institutional and lasting (national legislations, national struggles). And others are only small appearances in ordinary lives outside the more visible and spectacular manifestations of the global world. It is a contradictory simultaneity of organized journeys and inconsistent movements, which do not necessarily cancel each other out, but can and do collaborate on a global board of highly entangled movements. Michel Serres (2015) thought that our era was filled with “world objects”—entities that circulate on different scales and in global networks without losing their shape: soccer, the Coca-Cola logo, a satellite. They move around, land in some places and stay there, while in others they fail to take root. Disappearance and disappeared are part of those world objects. They can be found wherever there is a need to name forms of abandonment for which many of the tools we inherited for that purpose (poor, miserable, marginal, anomic...), are no good because those forms overwhelmed them.

In sociology we have long needed tools to think about the living who have no life; to perceive them. Thus it seems advisable that we take the varied, scattered, even kitschy proliferation of social and sociological uses of these very powerful categories—academic or otherwise—seriously, and that we observe their collaborative work for thinking about masses that do not even qualify as populations, that share a living space with us, but that we neither see nor feel. They have no name, no account, they are not registered anywhere. They are the product of trickle-down neglect,



of the discounting that has left millions without protection, invisible, out there. They are the result of a general catastrophe that erases many or does not let them into the frameworks that make it possible for them to be recognized as subjects. That appears to be disappearance today: abandoned life in a world that produces it systematically.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The materials supporting this research are protected by confidentiality commitments. Exceptionally, some of them may be accessed upon duly justified request to the author.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> In the *Disappearances* project and in some text stemming from it (Casado Gatti, Irazuzta and Martínez, 2021; Gatti, 2020, 2022; Gatti & Peris, 2022; Schindel and Gatti, 2020) this definition is expanded to include the idea of counting and accounting in narratives and records: the new disappeared are those who are not countable, because they are not recorded anywhere, and who are not accounted for, because they are not included in any narrative and because they do not count and are not taken into account, because they are not cared for.

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