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DISCUSSION

Dense Struggle (III): The Modern Uncanny

LUIS ESLAVA — 28 September, 2015



This post appeared first on Critical Legal Thinking.

In the last two posts I have argued that the *longue durée* of capitalist modernity has implied an expansion of a material and social global ordering, and that this process is far from being free of emotional forces, even of an uncanny dimension. In my account, this expansion of capitalist modernity – with its patterns of global accumulation, wealth distribution, jurisdictional realms, administrative procedures and legal forms – has been accompanied by an immaterial, all too human excess. This excess is formed and fuelled by the spirit of capitalism and its imaginaries and representations, all of which are constantly clashing and intermingling with their subaltern alternatives. In this

process, the aspirations and violence endured by peripheral subjects has been often managed, but never fully neutralized. We have been left, as a result, with a set of serious struggles over the distribution of global resources – struggles that include vernacular expressions of contained resistance permeated by this very immaterial excess.

Once one works with this premise in mind, it ceases to be surprising that our present is marked by the emergence of new forms of re-enchantment, and by the rise of new occult economies and allegations of witchcraft. Such a starting premise also makes it possible to understand why ghosts and phantoms have come to populate those same spaces created in, and by, our current global order: from “new developmental states”, to the rapidly globalizing cities of the South, to “gated communities”, to “native” jurisdictions and “ethnic” villages. [1]

As Jean and John Comaroff have explained it, this new uncanny side of our present is the outcome of the contradictory effects of the current political and economic order and its culture. In a moment in which consumption has come to occupy a central place in social reproduction, political dissent is readily managed, and when very few are legitimately enriched while many others are impoverished (or brought just above the poverty line), consumer culture runs high, social sacrifice on behalf of economic proficiency is seen as a public good, and state action is reduced to the task of coordinating political discourses but without sufficient means to respond to social needs or actually to curb private power. In this scenario, the occult has come to play a crucial role in public and private life. And the occult has returned (as it has always done) in order to incarnate that very unspeakable violence, aspirations and fears laying

beneath of what first appears as prosaic, everyday life (photo. 12). [2]



Photo. 12. IDPs at Parque Tercer Milenio (May, 2009). L. Eslava.

The effects of this configuration of forces became clear to me when members of the group of IDPs I followed in Bogota began to tell me that a ghost had begun to appear during nighttime in the refuge in which they had been housed by the local administration when they accepted to leave Parque Tercer Milenio. The entry of the uncanny into their protest at this point was, as I learnt, a response to the way in which the refuge suddenly came to symbolize the inability of the current order to respond to the needs of the group and their experience of violence and displacement.

Soon after the group arrived at the refuge they became aware that they had moved from a moment of open confrontation with the administration to a stage of early regularization and incorporation into the dynamics of the official state. They were, of course, already part of the state and the official order. As a matter of fact, they were

committed to presenting themselves according to the official concept of IDPs. The difference was, however, that before arriving at the refuge, this visualization of themselves as IDPs was still open-ended. It was an unfulfilled claim and, for this reason, it was somehow full of potential.

Their claim to be IDPs and their fight to obtain the rights promised by this category had ignited their protest, and had given them a purpose for which to keep demonstrating on the streets of the city. For this reason, on the day the administration offered them the refuge, they were thrilled. I was with them at that moment, and the ambience was tense but it was also, above all, a time to celebrate. It was an occasion to take photographs, to feel proud of their efforts, and to leave behind, at least in part, the marginal position they had been occupying up to that point. They were happy to be recognized by the official state as subjects of special attention (photo. 13). But as soon as they arrived at the refuge their feelings started to change (photo. 14).



Photo. 13. Leaving Parque Tercer Milenio (May, 2009). L. Eslava.



Photo. 14. Arriving for the first time at the refuge (May, 2009). L. Eslava.

As days passed in the refuge, the group realized that they had lost the public visibility that they had enjoyed in the Plaza de Bolívar and Parque Tercer Milenio. They also began to experience the uneasiness that anyone might feel living and sleeping in a big, enclosed and empty industrial shed. Entry – and exit – controlled, with high walls, bare ceiling, large spaces, collective toilets, and organized almost like a labyrinth, the architecture of the shed was formally soulless but emotionally charged. It transmitted to the group the manner in which the state, and more generally the current global order, was prepared to deal with them: through formal, bureaucratic procedures, and as second-class subjects only (photo. 15).



Photo. 15. Main entrance to refuge (North-Zone) (June, 2009). L. Eslava.

These feelings seemed to be confirmed by two additional facts. The refuge was located at the edges of city center: in a dilapidated and violent area, occupied by automobile and motorcycle repair shops and brothels, and controlled primarily by petty drug dealers. Secondly, the facility had been used in the past by the local administration as a shelter

for homeless people and stray dogs. For the group of IDPs the new feeling of isolation, and the architecture, location and institutional memory of the refuge, was emotionally devastating.

In addition to these features, the general organization and daily running of the refuge was disconcerting. The refuge was divided into two large zones, each of them of equal size: a South-Zone and a North-Zone – where the group was housed. Each of the zones had their own entrance on the opposite sides of the large block in which the refuge was located. A thick wall divided the two zones, and only two small metallic doors connected the South-Zone and the North-Zone. These doors were permanently locked and were only used by the officials in charge of the refuge (photo. 16 – 17).

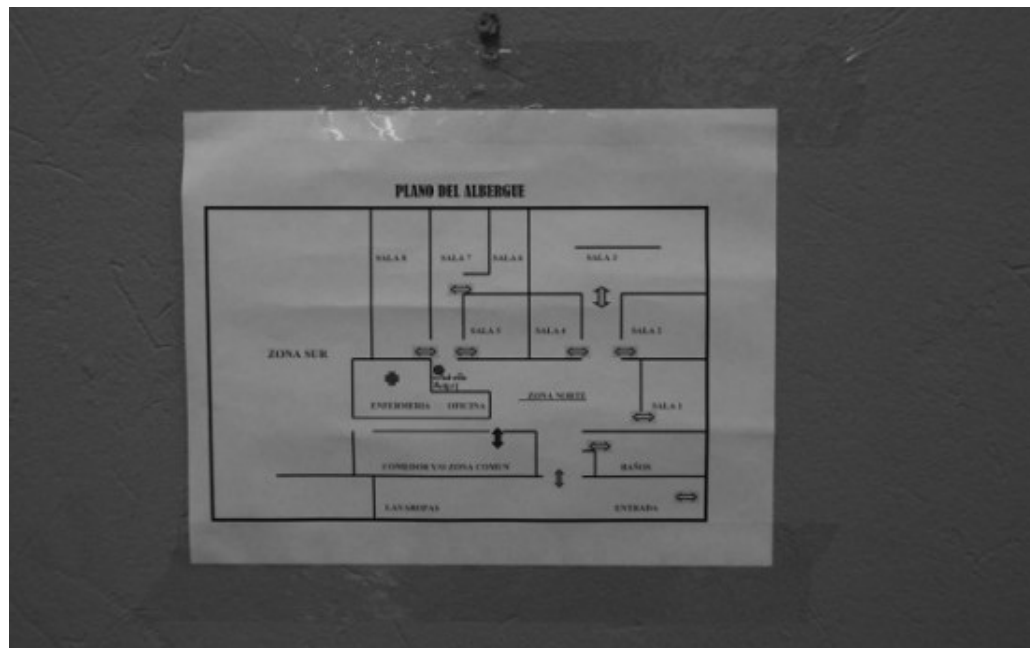


Photo. 16. Organization of the North-Zone section of the refuge, according to one of the maps put up by the administration on different walls of the facility (May, 2009). L. Eslava.

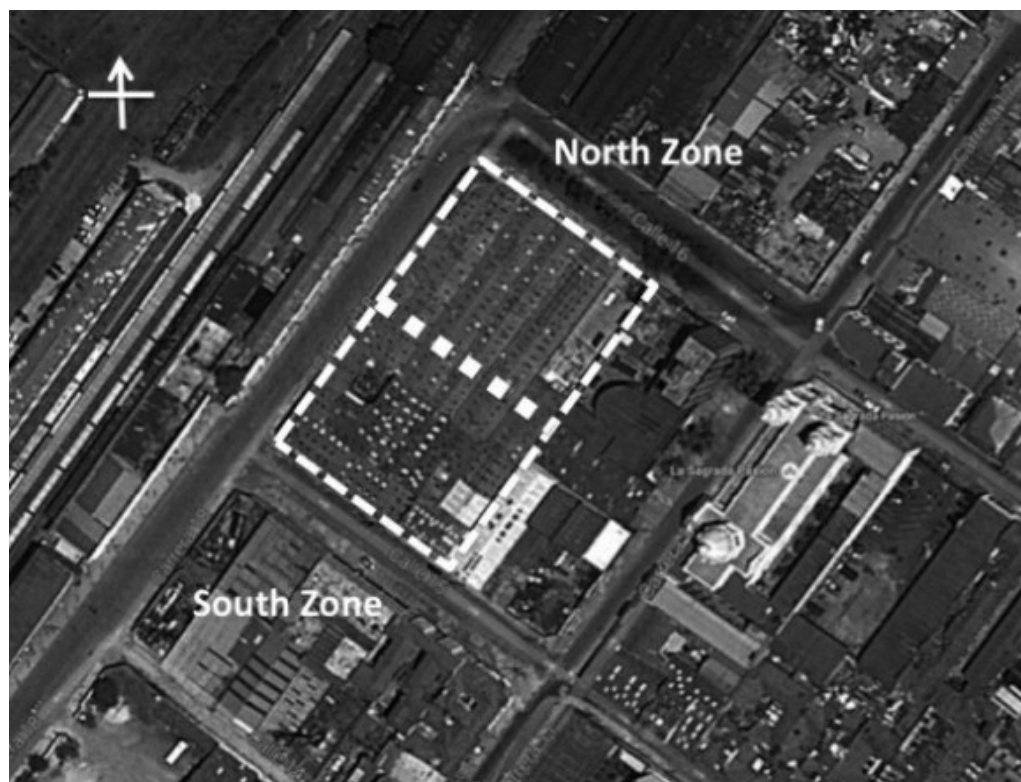


Photo. 17. Aerial photograph of the refuge. Google Maps.

When the group first arrived at the refuge, the whole facility was empty. However, a few days after their arrival, the local administration started to house other IDPs in the South-Zone. These were mostly IDPs with an Afro-Colombian background, who had been also protesting in Parque Tercer Milenio.

The group I was following and the newly-arrived IDPs were advised by officials to avoid contact with each other. According to the officials, the administration was negotiating the demands of each group separately, and mingling with each other would only cause trouble and confusion.

I was impressed that both groups stuck to this order. But the fear of ruining what little rapport that they had established with the authorities, as well as tensions between the groups based on assumptions about race, and a general suspicion on

the part of each about the other, in a situation of competition for scarce resources, was enough to keep them separated. The problem was, however, that they were all living under the same roof, and their daily lives were separated only by a wall. This made IDPs on both sides anxious about the possibility that the other group might be receiving preferential treatment from authorities, and hence about how the other group was handling their negotiations. Common noises and the occasional scream from people arguing on the other side of the refuge were the only response that they got to these anxieties and the many questions they entailed.

The daily experience of living in the refuge became, as a result, oppressive for the IDPs I followed. And it was characterized by endless, circular discussions about their future. On some occasions during these discussions, members of the group would fantasize about what they could do if the authorities decided to fulfill their rights – fantasies that ranged from returning immediately to their places of origin, to throwing a big party to commemorate the occasion. Yet, on many other moments, the common topic of conversation was the authorities' disinterest in them and the idea that their relocation to the refuge had been a strategy to silence their dissatisfactions and hence to erase the violence that underpinned their personal stories of displacement. Anxiety, fear, and a deep sense of shame about having placed their hopes of fighting the official order in the hands of that order itself began to surface at these moments. These feelings were only aggravated by the poverty of their daily lives, and the fight amongst local, national and international authorities about who was the one responsible for the group's fate.

It was in this context of strong obfuscation that the group began to tell me that a ghost had started to appear in the refuge at nighttime. According to them, the eerie figure of a tall, white woman, with long hair had been sighted by several members of the group coming into the North-Zone through one of the small metallic doors that connected the two sections of the refuge. The ghost had been seen walking near the collective toilets and occasionally entering into the areas of the refuge that were used as dormitories. Several of those who had reportedly seen this ghost claimed that it resembled other IDPs who had been at some point part of their protest, or who were still part of the group but who were not sleeping in the refuge that particular night. The ghost was, in this way, a creolized western figure in distress – one occupying a transient position, very much like the IDPs themselves. During this time, children in the refuge began to suddenly cry at night, and adults were having intense nightmares (photo. 18 – 19).



Photo. 18. One of the two connecting doors between the South-Zone and the North-Zone of the refuge (May, 2009). L. Eslava.



Photo. 19. Section of the collective toilets (May, 2009). L. Eslava.

The ghost became a regular feature of life at the refuge for several weeks. Even police officers stationed at the refuge began to share their own version of these events, confirming that they, too, had seen the ghost. Interestingly, the arrival of the uncanny at the protest at this point became something that everyone in the group agreed upon and

related to the difficult situation that they were experiencing. And this was significant, given that the group was already going through intense internal debates about whether they had lost the track of their protest by accepting to move to the refuge, and whether local, national and international agencies were ever going to be willing to recognize their rights.

The ghost became, for them, a collective confirmation that their situation had reached a new low, and that being in the refuge had exacerbated their sense of powerlessness in relation to the authorities. Even though I never saw it myself, the ghost acted for me as an entry point, allowing me to understand the group's deep frustrations with a system that, instead of responding to their demands, was instead asphyxiating their aspirations and silencing their memories of violence.

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Read the other parts of the essay here:

[Part I: “Dense Struggle \(I\): Violence and the otherworldly”](#)

[Part II: “Dense Struggle \(II\): Oh yes, that, our world”](#)

[Part III: “Dense Struggle \(III\): The Modern Uncanny”](#)

[Part IV: “Dense Struggle \(IV\): The Ghostly Real”](#)

This text appeared first on Critical Legal Thinking.

Footnotes

[1] See e.g., Arjun Appadurai, 'The Ghost in the Financial Machine' 23(3) *Public Culture* 517; Matt Tomlinson, *In God's Image: The Metaculture of Fijian Christianity* (University of California Press, 2009); Joel Robbins, *Becoming Sinners: Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society* (University of California Press, 2004); Catherine S. Dolan, 'Gender and Witchcraft in Agrarian Transition: The Case of Kenyan Horticulture' (2002) 33(4) *Development and Change* 659; Kevin Lewis O'Neill, 'I Want More of You: The Politics of Christian Eroticism in Postwar Guatemala' (2010) 52 *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 131; Erica Caple James, 'Witchcraft, Bureaucraft, and the Social Life of (US)Aid in Haiti' (2012) 27(1) *Cultural Anthropology* 50; Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, 'Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony' (1999) 26(2) *American Ethnologist* 279; Andrew Alan Johnson, 'Progress and its Ruins: Ghosts, Migrants, and the Uncanny in Thailand' (2013) 28(2) *Cultural Anthropology* 299.

[2] Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, 'Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony' (1999) 26(2) *American Ethnologist* 279.

ISSN 2510-2567

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