

# Microtheodyses and processes of subjectivation: Central American migrants mutilated in their transit through Mexico

## Microteodiceas y procesos de subjetivación: personas migrantes centroamericanas mutiladas en su tránsito por México

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### Abstract

We analyze the experiences of suffering of Central American migrants who suffer mutilations as a consequence of events that occurred in their displacement through Mexican territory using freight trains, destined for the transfer of goods, as a means of transport. Method that has been used clandestinely by irregular migration to reach the border with the United States. The empirical material is the product of a multi-sited qualitative research with an ethnographic approach, during 2016 to 2020, where 12 cases of mutilated migrants were reconstructed through in-depth interviews and participant observations. We reflected on the ways they found to reconfigure their subjectivity since the physical injuries exposed them to death and interrupted their migratory trajectories, sometimes permanently. We will focus on the role that the sacred, as a dimension of meaning that helped to understand the event suffered, played in order to resume their lives.

Keywords: migration, suffering, mutilations, subjectivity, sacred.

### Resumen

Se analizan las experiencias de sufrimiento de personas migrantes centroamericanas que padecieron mutilaciones como consecuencia de eventos ocurridos en su desplazamiento por territorio mexicano al utilizar trenes de carga, destinados al traslado de mercancías, como medio de transporte. Método que ha sido empleado de forma clandestina por la migración irregular para llegar a la frontera con Estados Unidos. El material empírico es producto de una investigación cualitativa multisituada con enfoque etnográfico, realizada de 2016 a 2020, donde a través de entrevistas a profundidad y observaciones

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participantes se reconstruyeron 12 casos de personas migrantes mutiladas. Se reflexiona sobre las formas que hallaron para reconfigurar su subjetividad toda vez que las lesiones físicas los expusieron a la muerte e interrumpieron sus trayectorias migratorias, en ocasiones, de forma definitiva. Se centra en el papel de lo sagrado como una dimensión de sentido que ayudó a inteligir el evento sufrido y a retomar sus vidas.

Palabras clave: migración, sufrimiento, mutilaciones, subjetividad, sagrado.

## Introduction

“Young migrant maimed by ‘the train of death’” is a television report by the Univision news channel that tells the story of Andres, a 28-year-old Honduran migrant, interviewed at a shelter in Arriaga, Chiapas, who, along with other companions, decided to use the freight train to travel north of Mexico and reach the U.S. border. A week later, in the state of Hidalgo, fate pronounced its sentence and “The Beast” carried it out: Andres fell from the train, causing serious injuries to his lower extremities. After several medical interventions in Mexico and an accelerated deportation, he returned to his country of origin with his right leg and left heel amputated and was left in the care of his mother and a sister:

Narrative voice: He left Honduras dissatisfied with the life he had. Ambition drove him to jump on the train of death, ignoring all the signs along the way. Andres Castro defied danger. It was neither the time nor the place. His body, which was complete, suffered a defeat in a confrontation with “The Beast”.

Testimonial voice: —*God, my God. What happened to me? Why did this happen to me, Lord? What am I paying for? What do I owe you for this to happen to me?*

Narrative voice: What Andrés Castro does not understand is how a capricious fate returned him confined to the life he wanted to escape from. (Univisión Noticias, 2016)

The above vignette represents only one record showing the consequences of violence on the bodies of Central American migrants crossing Mexico irregularly. The case of Andres, in its singularity, is representative of those who have experienced the physical consequences to which all those who use the freight train (popularly known as “The Beast”) are exposed, which can lead to the amputation of their limbs. In these scenarios, the promise of better living conditions and security has, as its counterpart, the possibility of returning to their country of origin in a more disadvantageous situation than when they started their journey. Faced with the narrowing of the horizon of hope that migration posed for their personal or family future, and the uncertainty about their new destination, people often wonder about the reason for such misfortunes.

What moral, social, and political logic underpins the *debt* that, as Andres points out before the television camera, he has had to pay with his body? How to understand the suffering cry condensed in the appeal to the figure of God? How to analyze the recurrence of this cry in the context of the intense vulnerability that characterizes current migration dynamics?

Although in journalism stories about the mutilation<sup>1</sup> of migrants are abundant (Ayuso, 2015; Garrido, 2019), there is not enough academic research that delves into the particularities of this type of violence. Studies that account for the hardships and multiple risks involved in migratory transit include such cases as a possibility (Leyva et al., 2016; Red de Documentación de las Organizaciones Defensoras de Migrantes [Redodem], 2019; Willers, 2016), without delving into the specific circumstances in which the events occur, the physical and psychosocial consequences for the people involved, and the various coping strategies that are deployed to survive immediately, nor those necessary for the reconfiguration of a life project disrupted by the borderline experience of surviving death. Likewise, most academic research has been interested in investigating the social, economic, and political conditions that interweave and shape migratory dynamics; however, few address the subjective processes that delineate these experiences and provide meaning to the tragedies experienced by people.

In this sense, this work is consistent with the concept of "autonomy of migration" (Mezzadra, 2005), from which emphasis is placed on migrant subjectivities; knowledge, strategies, and the possibility of self-construction in the face of a practical and discursive order of power that relegates migrants to a subaltern position and to the image of a victim with little or no capacity for agency, that is, incapable of significantly transforming their life circumstances. Following the above, subjectivity is understood as how people (in this case, migrants) experience and give meaning to the world around them based on the fact that they occupy a certain position in social life (Grossberg, 1996).

It coincides, on the other hand, with the work of Veena Das, which highlights the need for and commitment to studies that account for the violence and social suffering that has been imposed on certain groups, recognizing them as the main object of the social sciences; in her words:

(...) giving meaning to suffering remains a task of the first order. This is partly because, to some extent, a society must hide from itself the suffering it imposes on individuals as the price of membership, and the social sciences are perhaps in danger of mimicking the silence society maintains in the face of this suffering. (Das, 2008, p. 437)

This text focuses on the reconstruction of two cases in order to analyze the process of transformation of subjectivity in the framework of an experience of suffering, such as mutilation caused by the train, to which will be added other testimonies of migrants interviewed. The idea is to consider the resources migrants had to deal with the tragedy by taking into consideration their place of vulnerability. In this way, as a dimension of meaning, the sacred will have special relevance for this work since it was a recurrent aspect, although not the only one,<sup>2</sup> from which relief was produced according to

<sup>1</sup> The term mutilations or mutilated migrants has been widely used in the media in Mexico to refer to the wounded or migrant victims of this type of physical injury, and is also used in institutional language. See Secretaría de Gobernación (2020). *Acciones de protección a migrantes efectuadas por los Grupos Beta, 2002-2020*. [http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/work/models/PoliticaMigratoria/CEM/Estadisticas/Series\\_historicas/4a\\_BETAS02\\_20.xls](http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/work/models/PoliticaMigratoria/CEM/Estadisticas/Series_historicas/4a_BETAS02_20.xls)

<sup>2</sup> It is also possible to recognize a process of political subjectivation in the framework of organizational experiences that have taken place both in Honduras and in the United States, where the affected people recognized their condition as victims, not only of God's wrath or chance, but also, or above all, of an unjust social, political, and economic order.

the narratives to which access was granted. This perspective of analysis approaches both a personal hermeneutic delimited by the biographical trajectories and religious beliefs of the subjects themselves and a social and political hermeneutic that places the migrant subject in a sacrificial position from which his or her suffering operates, in Agamben's (2006) terms, as a mechanism of inclusion through exclusion.

Thus, at first, the focus is on the context in which the tragic experiences of migrants tend to occur and which refer to their irregular crossing on freight trains. Subsequently, some methodological notes are pointed out to develop a conceptualization of suffering related to the sacred. Finally, the specific cases of migrants who suffered some kind of accident that left them mutilated while passing through Mexico are considered in order to construct a proposal for analysis that helps to understand how these migrants were able to deal with the suffering resulting from their accidents, using a dimension of meaning that involved the sacred.

### Context of expulsion and migratory transit: the journey on “The Beast”

Accounting for the characteristics of Central American irregular migration in Mexico is a task that requires considering the socio-historical, economic, and political changes that have marked its flows, taking into account the specific events in the expelling countries, as well as those of transit and destination. The conditions of the expulsion of its inhabitants today differ substantially from the first exodus recorded in the 1980s. The causes related to these displacements have varied and multiplied over the years, delineating diverse profiles of the migration issue: political persecution, poverty, natural disasters, generalized social violence, search for improvements in well-being and quality of life, and, as recently described by Saskia Sassen, a massive loss of habitat (Sassen, 2017).

For over three decades, the focus has been on the growing vulnerability people are exposed to during their irregular transit through Mexico (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, 1996). Intense exposure to violence, both from organized crime and other criminal groups, as well as from the state security and migration control apparatus, is the feature of the current narrative that characterizes the situation of people who decide to enter Mexican territory. Between the imperative need to migrate—whether for economic reasons or to safeguard their lives—and the increasing precariousness of the spaces of displacement, people experience multiple forms of violence,<sup>3</sup> some of which are so intense that they can have irreparable effects on their psyche and physical integrity.

Given their irregular status when entering and moving through Mexican territory, migrants sometimes seek alternatives that distance them from the protection and assistance networks provided by the many shelters and migrants' homes, as these are also the most visible routes for crime and state security mechanisms, so they venture down unexplored paths. They also use clandestine movement methods, which increases the

<sup>3</sup> See the reports of the Documentation Network of Migrant Defender Organizations that have been published since 2013. Available at <https://fm4pasolibre.org/informes-de-investigacion/>

possibility of achieving their objectives without being arrested but entails other risks. Given this scenario, the material and symbolic resources people have to make this journey will be fundamental to modulating their exposure to violence.

Among the strategies employed by people migrating from Central American countries to the United States is using the “The Beast” freight train as a means of transportation. The privatization of Mexico’s railroad system in 1995 is recognized as part of the neoliberal economic policies implemented in the country. Through *concessions*, private companies—national and foreign—took control of the extensive railroad network and dedicated it exclusively to the transportation of goods. However, they faced an unexpected result: its use by migrants to shorten the distances involved in the trip from south to north.

After the natural disaster caused by Hurricane Mitch that devastated Central America in 1998 (particularly Honduras), the train was used by hundreds and thousands of affected people trying to migrate in conditions of poverty and became the main point where migrants were victims of various crimes. Thus, the train made it possible to travel long distances through Mexican territory, even for the most economically disadvantaged. Although it is not the main method of travel,<sup>4</sup> it has been in constant use despite the various security measures employed by the companies themselves to prevent it, among which are the installation of concrete posts at strategic points to prevent unauthorized boarding or alighting, as well as the hiring of private security forces with military training and intelligence teams. Both situations have been denounced as a direct cause of events that have resulted in the death and mutilation of migrants.

At present, the intensity of the risks involved in the journey is due to multiple situations: assaults, kidnappings, and rapes at the hands of criminal groups; raids and immigration controls by the National Migration Institute and other state security agencies; hostility from the private security forces of the railroad company guarding the merchandise; extreme environmental conditions; not to mention the physical and mental exhaustion experienced by the migrants. All of the above combine to result in events that, in the public and governmental view, are mostly considered “accidents”.<sup>5</sup>

## Brief methodological notes

The empirical material that supports this work is the product of multisite qualitative research with an ethnographic approach at different points between 2016 and 2020,

<sup>4</sup> According to Emif surveys, only 18% of people reported having used it, with buses and private vehicles being the main means of transportation. See: Colegio de la Frontera Norte (2020, June). *Encuestas sobre la Migración en las Fronteras de México*. <https://www.colef.mx/emif/>

<sup>5</sup> In Alquisiras, L. (2020). *Mutilaciones en el orden Neoliberal: migrantes centroamericanos en tránsito por México* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, it is maintained that the exercise of “biophysical violence” on people who make use of the freight train as a method of travel causes such physical and psychic wear and tear that it can lead to death. In this type of violence, both social forces and various elements of the territory in which the trips take place act on people’s bodies and expose them to serious risks. Consideration of the spaces where migration occurs as innocuous natural settings leads to the depolitization of the events surrounding the mutilation of migrants, which, by being considered “accidents”, are presented as situations where there is no social or political responsibility. Regarding the concept of biophysical violence, see Escudero, V. (2015). *Post/humanitarian Border Politics between Mexico and the US: People, Places, Things*. Palgrave Macmillan.

where 12 cases of mutilated migrants were reconstructed through in-depth interviews and participant observations. Their injuries were sustained in Mexico in the context of a migration attempt that used the train as a means of transportation. In most cases, the interviews were conducted during periods of convalescence and rehabilitation in the same country, weeks or months after the event,<sup>6</sup> while they were protected in shelters, migrant homes or other organizations dedicated to the protection and assistance of this group. In other cases, the events had occurred years earlier, and the individuals were awaiting new prostheses or medical interventions related to the injuries sustained at that time. Of the 12 reconstructed cases, four were minors. In terms of gender, there were two women and 10 men. The women were Guatemalan nationals, and the men were from Honduras.

Within the network of shelters and migrant homes found throughout Mexico, three specifically aim to assist people who have suffered physical injuries during their migratory journeys, which were the ideal settings for the fieldwork. The first of these, the “Jesús el Buen Pastor” shelter, located in the city of Tapachula, Chiapas, in the south of the country, was established by its founder, Olga Sánchez, in 1990. More recently, in 2015, the “ABBA” shelter, located in the city of Celaya, Guanajuato, dedicated space in its facilities to receiving injured migrants. Likewise, since 2014, the Red Cross of Ciudad Serdán, a small municipality in the state of Puebla, has maintained the “Aid to migrants” program that provides medical care at the roadside and, more recently, since the end of 2021, rehabilitation services. Short visits and volunteer work (lasting approximately three weeks) were carried out at the sites mentioned above. In addition to carrying out the research activities, the participants undertook daily tasks to repay the facilities provided.

### The meaning(lessness) of suffering: migrant subjectivities

When Jacques Lacan was asked in an interview what the work of psychoanalysis consisted of, he did not hesitate to affirm that everything had to do with dealing with the real. The psychoanalyst then added: the real is suffering, that is, that which swallows up meaning, which does nothing but engulfs the latter again and again. Suffering will then be incapable of inscribing itself in subjectivity, a remainder that refuses to integrate itself into the parameters of meaning (Krichman, 2015).

Along the same lines, Levinas (2001) understands suffering as something “unbearable” that appears in the context of a certain “psychological” and sensorial content that becomes “excessive” for the subject. Its phenomenal character will not be quantitative but qualitative. It will be, in short, a “denial and refusal of meaning that imposes itself as a sensitive quality” (2001, p. 115). According to the above, suffering can be thought of as a kind of *béance* forged in the heart of subjectivity, which causes understanding to always remain in suspense. Suffering will have to do with a “weight” that

<sup>6</sup> It is necessary to mention the cases of people who returned to their communities of origin or who undertook other journeys and currently reside in the United States, which, given the limitations of this research, it was not possible to explore in greater depth.

produces bewilderment. However, as an inapprehensible gesture, suffering will always have a social mark insofar as the circumstances that provoke it and the means available to deal with it will never cease to be situated in specific historical and social contexts. The subjectivities that experience it, in the same way, will be singular according to the frameworks of their production. Hence, how can the suffering experienced by migrants who have suffered physical injuries be considered? From which socio-historical coordinates should the “meaninglessness” they have gone through due to the events they have suffered be thought about? How can their subjectivities be understood in such a way that, at the same time, it is possible to arrive at intelligibility due to the particular ways in which they were “hit” by suffering and were able to counteract it?

### *The contours of pain and suffering in the mutilation of migrants*

The first element to take into account, as a social circumscription of migrants' suffering, is precisely the migratory act. It is especially interesting to think of migration as a form of contemporary social reality that covers suffering (Fassin, 1999), and which can only be tied to singular experiences. This implies that although what defines suffering as a psychic and sensorial quality is the absence of meaning, as mentioned above, this absence is inscribed in structural conditions that in some way envelop it and explain the morphology of its appearance and the possibilities of getting out of it.

The first thing to consider when thinking about this type of migration is that it takes place in a clandestine environment that is explained by the need of certain individuals to leave their country of origin in search of safety or better living conditions, which makes them cross the political or territorial borders of nation-states in order to do so. This is when the first act that explains these migrant subjectivities occurs. There is in them an intention to overcome certain conditions of precariousness. In this sense, thinking about the cases of mutilated migrants involves considering how such an aspiration for improvement suddenly transitions to a deepening of the precariousness/vulnerability that it was intended to confront in the first instance.

The migrants' journey is then cut short by physical damage that imposes an interruption, sometimes definitive,<sup>7</sup> in their search for a better life in the United States, when their physical strength and dexterity, which are part of the few resources they have to move, are tragically diminished.

It is this same physical damage that disrupts the body, the primary tool that can sustain the work activities that will allow them to improve their living conditions in their destinations (generally the United States). Therefore, bodily injuries call into question their expectations, projects, and desires. Faced with the cruelty of this experience, faced with the suffering they endure as their hopes are curtailed, and seeing themselves repeatedly deprived of the possibilities or resources for a dignified life,

<sup>7</sup> Although injuries force them to stop their journey during the time of convalescence, the trajectories of mutilated migrants are very diverse and include the possibility of trying to reach the United States again, either immediately after their physical recovery in Mexico, or after their return to their country of origin.

even survival, as they are confronted with death in their attempt to live, people ask themselves questions such as: *Why me? What did I do to deserve this?* These questions somehow delineate the uncertainty inherent to the experience of suffering resulting from physical injury.

### ***Why, my God? Spirituality and the sacred***

What needs to be analyzed in greater depth through two particular cases of migrants who have suffered physical injury is one of the specific ways they have dealt with their suffering. This form corresponds to the dimension of the sacred.

Mircea Eliade said about the relationship between the sacred and the believer:

(...) the sacred is the real par excellence, and at the same time, power, efficiency, source of life, and fecundity. The religious person's desire to live in the sacred is equivalent to the eagerness to situate oneself in objective reality, not to be paralyzed by the endless reality of purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and efficient world and not in an illusion. (Eliade, 2014, p. 8)

According to Eliade, the sacred for the believer has to do with the constitution of a solid world capable of sustaining itself based on an authority situated precisely in the sacred. There is talk of an "eagerness", of resistance to "allowing oneself to be paralyzed" by "purely subjective experiences" proper to the believer, which leads one to think that there persists in the subject a kind of agency that mobilizes him to seek a sense of the world that is beyond the profane space that surrounds him. This is a far cry from an idea of belief where the believer is conceived as a passive receiver who hopes to find consolation for his discomfort in the divine. The type of world that the sacred constitutes for the believer is not illusory; on the contrary, it is an "efficient", "real" world, as Eliade himself affirms. From this perspective, mutilated migrants who give a sacred meaning to their experience do not necessarily produce its concealment or avoidance but seek to find "reality", "objectivity" and "efficiency" in a profane world that has been disrupted by tragedy.

### ***The punitive intervention of God***

Olvin was interviewed at one of the migrant shelters in Celaya, Guanajuato. At the time, he was a beneficiary of the "Humanitarian Assistance to Amputees, Seriously Injured and Sick Migrants" program of the International Committee of the Red Cross (from now on, ICRC). It has established alliances with various actors in Mexico in order to provide its services. This shelter provides food and lodging to the migrants, physical rehabilitation is provided at the state government's Rehabilitation Hospital facilities, and the ICRC donates prostheses.

At the shelter, Olvin did not agree to the initial request for an interview. However, as the days went by familiarity grew and it was possible to initiate conversations with

him and accompany him during his visits to the hospital for rehabilitation sessions and the fitting of his prosthesis. At none of these times did Olvin share details about the events that culminated in his falling off the train. What was obtained were snippets of memories that came up when the subject was discussed. A Red Cross paramedic arriving in a car to transport them to their medical check-ups provided some more details about the case. It transpired that he had fallen near Silao, Guanajuato, while trying to board the moving train, fell into some bushes, and feared that no one would hear his cries for help. It took about 30 minutes before a passerby saw him and called for medical help. Despite the voluntary or involuntary omission of further information about his train ride, he was very detailed in his reflection on the meaning of that experience and its consequences.

Olvin was 18 years old when he left a small community in Honduras to reach the United States. It was his first attempt. He decided without consulting his mother or anyone in the Christian congregation to which he belongs. It seems that this previous link with the congregation explains to a large extent the meaning that Olvin himself constructed concerning the events, as will be described below. This closeness to a spiritual expression, such as Christianity, will be interpreted as part of a *habitus*, in Bourdieusian terms.

The *habitus*, as a field of practice, is situated between structure and agency. That is to say, it is a modular concept from which it is possible to analyze how negotiations take place in the field that is concretized through the exchange of different types of capital: social, cultural, and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1997). Such negotiations are eminently subjective since exchanged capitals acquire different importance or value in each field. In the context of the shelters set up throughout the Mexican Republic to assist Central American migrants and run by religious institutions or people linked to them, divine explanations will find a good reception, that is, an audience that values these stories and somehow supports them.

The apprehension and subsequent use of these divine explanations, in the cases of the migrants to whom access was granted, can then be read as part of a *habitus* to the extent that they provided a particular symbolic capital that helped to produce an agency from which a sense of the suffering experience was constituted. On the other hand, these same explanations were part of a structure when thought of as "accessible" to migrants according to their social status.

Prior to the trip, Olvin was engaged in farming and masonry work. He had never traveled outside his community, but he felt no fear. The process of adapting to the prosthesis had been complicated because he reported intense pain wearing it. In the prosthesis workshop, they explained that the skin of the residual limb was still very thin, but with the friction of the prosthesis it would thicken. In colloquial terms: "a callus has to form". He could bleed and experience great pain. However, he had to get through that phase, or he would never stop experiencing discomfort. As analyzed in the previous section, it can be seen here how the experience of pain does not end with survival but is prolonged beyond it and is interwoven with the affective intensity of suffering.

To help him overcome the discomfort derived from rehabilitation, it was proposed to accompany him every day for a walk outside the shelter toward a park about six

blocks away. There, Olvin walked in circles around the circumference of a basketball court several times. He had lost weight during his convalescence in the hospital, which was detrimental to the proper fit of the prosthesis to his leg. In general, he seemed to be a young man of a quiet character, somewhat self-absorbed and solitary. During the walks, he gave the impression that he was following a soliloquy, his voice was quiet, and it was hard to hear what he was saying.

Once, while sunbathing on a bench, the question arose, do you find any meaning in what happened? The answer was framed in his religious beliefs: it was a punishment for having acted of his own will and not of God's will. For Olvin, his attempt to leave his community and go to the United States had been an expression of his will, of something he wanted for himself, perhaps money to help his mother or simply a different life. However, something was there that would change his life in the opposite direction to God's designs, so his journey had to stop in that way. In some sense, Olvin had not only challenged his social status and place in the geopolitical coordinates dividing the global south and north, but he had also challenged God and the destiny that had already been written for him and where his aspirations had no place.

In Olvin's case, the relationship with the sacred is marked by his membership of the Christian congregation. This relationship precedes his decision to seek his fortune in the United States. In such a situation, how the sacred imposes itself as a dimension of meaning that surrounds what happened to him in his transit through Mexico seems to speak of a way of understanding the world that was already there before the accident, but that is reinforced by it, thus constituting Olvin's particular interpretation of what happened to him. Ultimately, it all had to do with a challenge to the sacred designs. His destiny was already mapped out, but Olvin decided not to accept it; the punishment for this action was the mutilation he suffered. His eagerness to find a better life was set against the life to which he had to resign himself. The god Olvin speaks of, then, is a punitive one who does not hesitate to punish aspirations beyond what he had already decided. The experience of pain and suffering that Olvin went through tries to be sealed under a gesture of resignation that is consistent with divine punishment. His world wants to be objectified from this idea and thus find order and meaning again.

The idea that the events that produced his physical injuries were divine interventions cropped up in other interviews. Whether they are recognized as accidents or the product of direct or indirect violence, underlying them is the belief that the interviewees were "saved" from a worse fate. Jason states it clearly:

—I see you are a strong believer; do you think the accident had any meaning in your life?

—I do not know. Only God knows why things happen. As several pastors have mentioned, maybe in the accident I lost my legs because God did not want me to go any further up, because maybe if I had gone any further up, I would not have lost my two legs but my life. And if God left me like this, it is for a great purpose that he has for me

—Of course, have you thought about what that purpose is? What do you want to do now?

—I don't know, I really don't know what God says. I ask God to show me.  
(Jason, Jesus the Good Shepherd Shelter, June 20, 2017)

At 17, Jason left Honduras to join his older siblings in New York City, USA. After 14 days of travel, in Huehuetoca, State of Mexico, he fell from the train while trying to board it, which caused the amputation of both legs above his knees. Perhaps the strength that others saw in Jason in facing his difficult situation resided in his certain faith that, to quote Eliade, allowed him: "not to be paralyzed by the endless reality of purely subjective experiences", which kept him away from the suicidal thoughts manifested by other people, some of them soon after their injuries when they understood the seriousness of the physical damage, others after medical interventions that resulted in amputations, or before the forced return to their communities of origin. One such was Oscar, another young mutilated migrant. A 17-year-old Honduran national, Oscar lost one of his feet when he tried to board a moving train after a long journey that ended in the state of Puebla.

It's been complicated having to deal with this kind of difficulty at my age. I could not believe it at the beginning. But everything passes... there is always something. God always has a way of showing things, what he has for you. When it comes from God, it is always perfect. Moreover, maybe something isn't right, something didn't suit me and he had to stop me here. He had a way of doing it. I've understood it that way, and that's how I'm getting over it. (Oscar, Ciudad Serdán, Puebla, November 26, 2017)

Despite the punishment, divine intervention protects the subject from death, transforming them into survivors with a mission to carry out in some cases. In addition to providing meaning to that particular event, these narratives, understood as microtheodicies, lay the foundation for a life beyond the injuries: a life with meaning, even if it remains long hidden or is revealed only *a posteriori*.

The mission, understood as a call from God, has sometimes led to political activism on behalf of migrants. A clear example is José Luis Hernández, leader of the Association of Returned Migrants with Disabilities (Amiredis), who agreed to be part of this research. How his life was saved despite the seriousness of his injuries has been integrated into a testimony where elements of religious discourse, but also political discourse, are present.

José Luis fell off the train in 2007, at 17, on his second attempt to reach the United States. Regarding the trip, he said that it had been 20 days since he left his country, and he had experienced countless situations that wore him out physically and mentally, such as cold, thirst, hunger, long walks, and persecution by immigration agents. At one point, while he was trying to take off his shoes to rest his feet, the train went into a tunnel, everything went dark, and he fell. The consequences were the amputation of his right leg and arm, as well as the fingers of his left hand.

He received help from a Red Cross paramedic, who at the time was driving a pickup truck and waiting for the train to pass, a situation he interprets as a miracle. With his knowledge and expertise, this person prevented José Luis from bleeding to death while the ambulance arrived: "an angel who was there to save my life".

His survival in such circumstances was viewed with admiration by those who treated him in the hospital and continues to amaze those who listen to his story. José Luis attributes a religious sense to it. There was a task that he still had to fulfill in life, and, although he does not say so explicitly in the interview, over time, he assumed as a “mission” to help other people who were going through the same experience:

They took me to the hospital, and even the doctors told me, “Well, what is this boy supposed to do? How is it possible for him to be alive after what happened to him?” And I still say, my God, what will be my mission on earth? How is it possible that I am alive? It is incredible. (José Luis, Los Angeles, California, February 1, 2018)

The return to his country of origin is narrated as an extremely difficult moment for him and his family. However, his involvement with the Committee of Relatives of Disappeared Migrants (Cofamipro) made a substantial difference and allowed him to meet with others in the same condition. According to the interview, in his hometown (El Progreso, department of Yoro, Honduras) there had been numerous cases of people returning with physical disabilities due to migratory transit. José Luis played a significant role in the formation of Amiredis, as recognized by other members and people involved in the process, which culminated in the initiative to undertake the journey to Mexico and the United States, known in the media as “The March of the Mutilated”.<sup>8</sup>

Such semantic variety is recognized in other spaces/people that are part of shelters or migrant houses belonging to the Catholic Church in Mexico (Parrini Roses & Alquisiras Terrones, 2019; Solano, 2017) as the “Corridor of hospitality” (Olayo-Méndez et al., 2014). Although it is not the purpose of this article, it is considered important to point out some aspects of this case capable of exemplifying the transit or superimposition of a spiritual subjectivation to a political one.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Microtheodicies: “Only God’s government protects us”*

As time went on, Olvin became increasingly anxious about his near future. The process to obtain a humanitarian visa had not been successful. Once the rehabilitation was completed, he could be returned to Honduras. He was looking to spend time at the lodge sharing the word of God. Although most avoided him, he had his roommates and those who occasionally dropped in as captive listeners. Among the ideas he repeated, one, in particular, stands out: “The government of man, here on earth, has abandoned us, only the government of God protects us”, a phrase that expresses the precariousness to which migrants are exposed without the protection of the State,

<sup>8</sup> See: Univision Noticias (2015, March 6). *Caravan of mutilated people confronts “The Beast”*. Available at: <https://youtu.be/yw8oDczHo6Y>

<sup>9</sup> In his work *The survivors of the train: disability, testimony, and activism in migrants with disabilities* (Unpublished dissertation, 2022), C. Morales elaborates on the reconstruction of this case by pointing out in detail the elements that confirmed the testimony of José Luis.

and whose only redoubt of protection is faith and spirituality. Here, the absolute mark of the sacred can be expressed as the last refuge of meaning that appears in the face of an evident social vulnerability. Olvin does not hesitate to affirm that man's government has failed, and the only thing left is the government of God, the same God who punished him. His experience of suffering seems to have led him to that conclusion. This experience calls for another form of governance, one of a sacred kind that may be punitive but just, and perhaps causes less suffering if one can decipher, when one must, the nature of its designs.

In the essay "Useless Suffering", Levinas wonders if every experience of suffering, which presents itself as unbearable for the subject who lives it, does not imply in a certain way "a demand for original help, a request for curative aid, an aid from another, another whose otherness, whose exteriority promises salvation" (2001, p. 117). The author is thinking of forms of suffering linked to "painful illnesses of psychically disinherited beings, marginalized, diminished in their vital relationships and their contact with others" (2001, p. 117). Although Olvin does not suffer from any type of disease, he did have an intense experience of pain and suffering linked to the body, which left its indelible mark on it. On the other hand, the marginal position in which he found himself at the time of the encounter with him cannot be denied: physically handicapped while trying to get the mutilated limb to adapt satisfactorily, but inevitably painfully, to the prosthesis, waiting for a humanitarian visa that never arrived; far from his country and his family; living in a shelter with others who, like him, suffered some kind of physical injury in their attempt to improve their living conditions. Accordingly, the call that Levinas speaks of for an otherness that is capable of providing "an original help", a "healing aid", and a "salvation" seems perfectly coherent in someone who experienced what Olvin experienced. Furthermore, such a call is even more coherent when considering Olvin's deeply held religious beliefs.

In such a way, the otherness to which the call is made will have a sacred character. Moreover, this otherness has become present and now rules the world, at least Olvin's. Perhaps the greatest proof of this lies in the mutilation he suffered, the punitive manner through which God's rule was made manifest.

For Durkheim, religious expressions are fulfill the essential role of being a symbolic refuge where the believer finds, from ritual and the construction of meaning linked to the sacred, a way to deal with the evils of the world that beset him, or with the misfortunes and sufferings through which he may pass (Durkheim, 2019).

Religion, therefore, can be seen as a social invention with a determined function: to objectify suffering through the sacred, to resituate it symbolically so that it is capable of having a collective meaning that in some way neutralizes it. In such a case, the sacred exists because evils exist in the world and not the other way around. This leads the author to rethink the old idea of a theodicy, which would have to do with explaining the evils of the world from the designs of sacred actors, and instead replace it with the idea of a "sociodicy", where what is at the center of everything is what societies themselves constitute, rather than supposed beings or forces of a sacred nature (Durkheim, 2019).

This vision of the governmentality of the world offered by Olvin, where the government of man has succumbed, and in its place, only the government of that punitive god remains, does it not lead in some way to this dispute between a theodicy and a sociodicy?

For Olvin, things seem to be clear: the world makes sense when ordered by a theodicy because what prevails are the sacred designs, like the one he suffered through his accident. On the other hand, the government of man is lost, and so arguably is society. While Olvin did not give too many clues as to why he considers the man's government to be misguided, it can be intuited that the essential proof of this lies in the tragic experience he went through. Accordingly, Durkheim's approach is pertinent since the world's misery seems to have strengthened Olvin's religious sense of it. Within this framework, it is possible to think that for many subjects who find themselves in conditions of accentuated social precariousness, the dimension of the sacred acts as the last redoubt of meaning in the face of the burden of suffering that is situated in clear social and cultural coordinates. Accordingly, it is feasible to think of socially situated microtheodicies that are lived on the surface, which emerge as a response to the lack of order in the world: "The government of man, here on earth, has abandoned us". The idea that they are microtheodicies is related to the fact that these are deeply experiential and personal narratives that tend to affirm or reaffirm the existence of God and the sacred based on a certain subjective position in the world, and not on some kind of metaphysical-religious grand narrative.

Nowadays, it is likely that Durkheim's way of dividing things between theodicy and sociodicy is at least incomplete since it should be considered that the persistence of social life occurs to different degrees according to each subject's place in it. In Olvin's case, his vital persistence began when he ventured out of his country to overcome certain conditions of social precariousness, only to meet with the accident that curtailed his aspirations. The latter forced him to redouble his capacity for vital persistence and, in that context, to construct this microtheodicy that, although occurring under a punitive god, does not cease to be an essential part of that same persistence.

In the last days of volunteering at the shelter, Olvin said he wanted to work and earn some money. He hoped someone would want to hire him or to be employed "even if it's just selling *aguas frescas* or candy at a highway intersection". He did not want to return to Honduras to avoid burdening his mother. He was the eldest of many siblings, so he took on the responsibility of financially supporting his family. Regarding his plans, he was thinking of options to extend his stay in Mexico and, after completing his rehabilitation, to try again to reach the United States. He said: "My dreams are on hold to build a little house. But they have to get going again." Months later, it was learned that he left the shelter to follow the migrant caravan that passed through Guanajuato in October and was probably in Tijuana, although no one had been in communication with him. How did Olvin reconcile, on the one hand, divine punishment as a consequence of his desire to migrate and, on the other hand, his persistence in pursuing his *dream*? Has he found his mission in the United States? Did he expect a merciful end after facing so much pain and hardship? Although there are no answers

to these questions, what can be inferred from these experiences and their approach to the spiritual realm is their mobilizing potential as the construction of meaning capable of alleviating people's suffering.

*Abandonment and spiritual subjectivation:  
"I have had a better life after the accident"*

As noted in the previous section, spirituality may be part of a *habitus* that the subject previously possesses and is reinforced by the pain and suffering experienced as a result of mutilations. In addition, this discourse is recognized as part of a symbolic capital in the context of support and care in shelters, given its frequent linkage with religious institutions. These spaces, where the mutilated migrant is welcomed, are not only provided by formal organizations but also by individuals or families motivated by a moral code of helping others or the neediest. Their presence in the moments of greatest vulnerability and fragility of the subject can have a powerful effect on the configuration of a new sense of life, as seen in the following stories. Unlike the previous cases, spirituality will have a transformative quality, as it is the symbolic framework in which the help received is explained and justified. Not only does it entrench a belief, but it also leads to forms of signifying that may be new to the subject or at least contrast with his or her previous way of thinking.

It is in relation to the above that it is proposed to speak of a spiritual subjectivation, which is understood, in a Foucauldian sense, as the process of inscription and constitution of an "I" concerning certain discourses, institutions, or knowledge, which place the individual within a particular framework of intelligibility and self-understanding (Foucault, 1988), which, in this case, is linked to spiritual forms of meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Wilson was interviewed in Tapachula. For the second time, he was waiting for prostheses for his two legs, which had been amputated nearly at the hip. He used a wheelchair occasionally, moving with great dexterity using only the strength of his arms and hands, which attracted the attention of any visitor. He seemed a very sociable and cheerful young man.

A Honduran national, his hometown is Comayagua, the country's former capital. Although his origins are rural, he notes that he spent most of his life in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. When his parents abandoned him at a very young age, he became homeless and, not long after, traveled to Mexico. He lost his legs when he fell from a train in Torreon, Coahuila, in December 2014. His account of the circumstances of his

<sup>10</sup> There is an extensive literature linked to the sociology of religion on the difference between spirituality and religion. In general terms, what this literature shares is the idea that the phenomenon of spirituality differs from that of religion to the extent that the former poses a fundamentally individual experience that transgresses, or at least goes beyond, the institutional frameworks of belief, which would be characteristic of religion (Cornejo, 2012). For the purposes of this paper, the religious refers to the already instituted discourses around the sacred, which migrant believers "made their own" to construct a sense of their suffering experience; the spiritual, on the other hand, will have more to do with this last form of appropriation.

fall was very brief. He only stated that it was because he had “tightened his backpack too much”. At that time, he was treated by the Red Cross, and after some time, he received his first prosthesis:

My parents split up (divorced) when I was eight years old. Unfortunately, I grew up without a father and a mother. Each went their own way. And as I say, because of the situation we are going through right now in my country. Over time I suffered and suffered. I decided to be here in Mexico, to come here. When this accident happened to me, it was not easy. But the same suffering made me strong because I knew that it was not the first time I had suffered. From there, I drew strength and courage. (Wilson, Jesus the Good Shepherd Shelter, July 20, 2017)

The suffering experienced throughout his life is positioned as an attenuator of the pain experienced later. Beyond that, it is appreciated as a strength that allowed him to endure and move forward despite his new life circumstances. For Wilson, a person who had not suffered in his life would hardly be able to cope with the experience of being a mutilated migrant. From a different analytical point of view, Wilson's reflection opens up several questions: one could question the recurrence of pain and suffering in certain subjects or ways of life, that is, about the structural disposition that generates the conditions for certain people or populations to experience suffering repeatedly. On the other hand, it could be asked whether suffering generates a *habitus*, that is, a set of dispositions socially acquired and internalized by subjects exposed to processes of precarization. Finally, one could also ask about the contexts, or fields, in Bourdieu's terms, where these sufferings or bodies are configured as one more of the capitals that the subject puts up for negotiation, perhaps the only one supported or recognized by the institutions or people who provide help. Although the materials collected in this work are insufficient to support such interpretations, it is important to point them out as interpretative hypotheses.

To return to Wilson's story, he decided to stay in Mexico thanks to the help of several people who heard about his case, specifically in Chihuahua. At the time of the interview, he was selling candy at fairs and other social events and thanks to this, he has achieved economic independence and the admiration of the people who helped him in the beginning.

One aspect that stood out in Wilson's life was his deep-rooted faith; he said that he approached the Christian religion some time after he was mutilated:

—Now I am going to a church. I go to the Christian church in Chihuahua.  
After the accident, I have had a better life than I had back there.

—After the accident, has your life been better?

—Yes, now it's better. On condition that... not financially, not physically, but there have been many changes in my life. I don't drink. I don't smoke at all. I mean, a very special change because I searched for God. I was no longer a vagrant. I no longer wandered in the streets. (Wilson, Jesus the Good Shepherd Shelter, July 20, 2017)

Amid the surprise caused by this assessment of his past and present life, Wilson explained that he used to use drugs and alcohol and did not believe in God. He led a “disorderly and aimless” life. Later, he met supportive people who cared for him, which allowed him to establish the emotional bonds he had lacked as a child. Moreover, he sought job opportunities and finally had the possibility of providing his family with financial support.

One of the questions asked in almost all the interviews was about the difficulties that people had experienced after the mutilation suffered, to which Wilson comments:

—Accepting myself, accepting my situation. And knowing how I was going to get ahead. Because I was in a moment of *shock*, I didn’t feel I had the capacity. I felt weak. But not now, look, I am so cool (laughs).

—And how was the change? How did you make that change?

—Letting myself be guided on my own, accepting myself and resigning myself to living with what had happened to me. And listening to other people, seeing other people just like me, who told me that I would have a different life and that there was a reason this had happened to me. And yes, now I am well. I have lived it. I don’t have a rich life but a full life. I want to keep going, to keep fighting because my previous life was no longer living. I don’t have that life anymore. I take it as if I were born again. I am no longer affected. (Wilson, Jesus the Good Shepherd Shelter, July 20, 2017)

In this case, resignation and acceptance have been an essential part of the re-signification of his experience. The events that culminated in his wounds are endowed with a kind of inevitability against which the subject who resists will never emerge victorious. Knowing that there was nothing in their power to prevent it leads to acceptance, which is not necessarily passivity, but an adjustment to the new life circumstances. In Wilson’s words, it is a matter of “accepting” the latter. From this perspective, where a type of death takes place, the reborn subject will be strengthened and able to endure greater suffering. Mutilation as a catastrophic and definitive event leaves the subject no other choice but to become another, to be reborn. Guidance from others who have experienced similar suffering is relevant in constructing meaning.

For Joao Biehl, life trajectories that speak of forms of abandonment or suffering, as could be the case of Wilson, are a good analytical tool insofar as they reveal the different plots and juxtapositions involved in empirically resolving the relationship between a subject and the social life that is concomitant with it (Biehl, 2013). It would shed light on the “subjective process by which the abandoned person, againsts all odds, keep anticipating another chance at life.” (Biehl, 2013, p. 401).

In Wilson’s case, his trajectory of abandonment would imply considering, first of all, the events that are parts of a suffering life, such as his abandonment by his parents and the social precariousness in which he grew up. On the other hand, there would be the moral lapses in which he was involved, such as “drinking”, “smoking”, “taking drugs” or everything that has to do with “vagrancy”. Thirdly, there was the accident

he suffered, which was the spearhead that allowed him to reach redemption and the apparent suffering immunity linked to his encounter with God. In this framework, the spiritual subjectivation of which Wilson speaks operates through an inner transformation where all the suffering he went through becomes, at the end of the road, the strength that gives him the possibility to deal with the misfortune of his accident and in turn gives him "strength" and "courage" to counteract any misfortune that may come his way in the future.

Accordingly, Wilson can be understood as a kind of contemporary Job who, after going through multiple misfortunes (which are crowned by the accident he suffered), is finally rewarded by a spiritual and moral "improvement" that ends up embracing his whole life. The notable joviality that he conveys and his affable and casual manner seem to be consistent with the reality of this new Wilson, whose emergence was through the fatal alteration of his body as if the latter had entailed the sacrificial price that the materiality of the body had to pay for the inner transformation to become a fact.

### Final reflections: the sacrificial meaning of migrant mutilations

For René Girard, "sacrifice has always been defined as a mediation between a sacrificer and a divinity" (1995, p. 14); the sacrificial victim is inserted between these two agents. However, in the case of Wilson and other migrants who follow this logic of sacrifice, where one type of evil is endured and overcome under the assumption that a greater evil was avoided, the place of the sacrificer seems to be occluded at first glance. On delving deeper into this point, it is possible to think that this place is occupied by a situation rather than by a character since it is the context of precariousness and social violence that led them to the tragedy that played the role of sacrificial agent. In this framework, the body and its materiality bear the damage experienced as the sacrifice that prevented a possible death.

At another point, Girard establishes that sacrifice and its violence always imply a certain ignorance about their motivations. "The faithful do not and should not know the role played by violence" (1995, p. 15). In Wilson's case, the role of the tragic violence he suffered appears *a posteriori* and is the fruit of the spiritual subjectivation he experienced.

The ignorance regarding the reason for the violence of sacrifice of which Girard speaks can then be placed in the context of suffering when the future of the migrant subjects appeared in a cloud of bewilderment and confusion when tragedy presented itself in the flesh and rejected any possibility of meaning. In that context, sacrifice was not sacrifice, but simple tragic violence. Sacrifice and its meaning appear once the tragic event is read in a religious key or when a spiritual subjectification is experienced, as was the case with Wilson. Hence, it is believed that one of the key aspects of the role played by the sacred dimension in the particular cases of suffering that were reviewed was reached, which has to do with signifying that which caused the suffering as part of a sacrifice that is imposed from a sacred design, which can only have a salvific character, although it is difficult to understand at first.

Of course, this is not to say that sacrificial meaning is the only way in which religious belief is combined with experiences of suffering, such as those of the injured migrants, but its recurrence was clear in the cases analyzed. This makes it necessary to place in a broader framework the role played by beliefs, religious behaviors and sacrificial logic, all aspects reflected in the cases reviewed. In this sense, René Girard states:

Religious and moral behaviors aim at nonviolence in everyday life, and in a mediated way, often in ritual life, through the paradoxical intermediary of violence. Sacrifice encompasses the whole of moral and religious life, but at the end of a quite extraordinary detour (...) We begin to glimpse why it appears simultaneously as a blameworthy action and as a very holy action, as illegitimate violence, and legitimate violence. (Girard, 1995, p. 28)

The violent, paradoxical, and salvific intermediation of which Girard speaks, in the case of migrants, seems to be on the side of the accident suffered, which is capable of generating a "legitimate violence" linked to the avoidance of death. The process of relief drawn from the experience of bewilderment inherent to the suffering may have to do with this "quite extraordinary detour" that has as its point of arrival the sacrificial sense of the encounters with violence that the migrants suffered on their way to the United States.

If this notion of sacrifice in migrants is expanded further and placed more deeply in the context that is proper to migrants themselves, it may be valid to say that it is the intermediation of the sacred that makes the lives of migrants "sacrificial". This idea is reinforced if the absolute vulnerability of this type of migration in its passage through Mexico is considered since it has the characteristics reviewed at the beginning: migrants whose transit is motivated by the profound economic precariousness they experience in their countries of origin or by the intention of fleeing from a context of violence. In short, it would be a matter of considering how these religious devices end up giving "value" to lives that, within the framework of a certain social structure, seemed to have no value, even more so if one considers the diminution of physical strength and capacity suffered. In other words, it would be a matter of making "sacrifiable" bodies that seemed "unsacrifiable."

Of course, the latter has to do with a hypothesis that would have to be reviewed in greater detail since, on the other hand, one could think about the effect that an exaggerated sacralization of tragedy can have in the case of migrants, such as, for example, absolute naturalization and depoliticization of what was suffered, where the only thing that persists is the sacred designs of a god who exercised a type of violence to avoid a greater, perhaps deadly, one. In this sense, a case where the tragic experience and suffering undergone turned into a type of political activism in favor of the rights of migrants who suffered some type of physical injury is briefly mentioned above. However, focusing on such cases would exceed the purpose of this paper.

It would also be necessary to think more carefully about the nature of the "value" that the religious spectrum gives to the lives of migrants if it moves toward a different position that makes migrants more than sacrificial victims whose existence was violated

as well as saved. Alternatively, if this value can only use the intensity of the suffering experienced as a form of measurement, it becomes the cost of inclusion that operates through the convergence of a moral, social, and political order that does nothing more than fix migrants as perpetual subjects of assistance, something similar to what Fassin (2015) describes regarding the establishment of a moral economy in the case of the refugee crisis in Europe, which limits itself to arousing feelings of compassion or admiration for personal tragedies.

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