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## Christian Kroll-Bryce

# A REASONABLE SENSELESSNESS: MADNESS, SOVEREIGNTY AND NEOLIBERAL REASON IN HORACIO CASTELLANOS MOYA'S *INSENSATEZ*

*Through a reading of Horacio Castellanos Moya's novel Senselessness and Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt's counterinsurgency discourse, I argue in this article that madness, banished from the realm of reason with the rise of capitalism, resurfaces nowadays as a conceptual category able to disrupt the neoliberal manufacturing of bare life. I first examine how subversion was discursively constructed in Guatemala as a mental disease. I then discuss the narrator's behavior in the novel as a reasonable senselessness that by welcoming madness, understood as the moment of extreme doubt, both reveals and reacts against a shift in the locus of sovereignty ensuing from neoliberal reason's tightening grasp of the biopolitical sphere. This shift, I further argue, is increasingly placing most of the population in a relation of exception that resembles the zone of indistinction between life and death in which bare life is caught. I conclude by suggesting that Castellanos Moya's novel ultimately invites us to ponder the possibility of an other reason able to move beyond the extreme moment of certainty that the merging of state and neoliberal reason represents neoliberalism, sovereignty, Horacio Castellanos Moya, Efraín Ríos Montt, Guatemala.*

If our play of the Follies of a Day,  
Has something serious to say,  
It is that folly must have its season  
To give a human face to reason.  
Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*

'Yo no estoy completo de la mente' ('I'm not complete in the mind'), repeats the unnamed narrator of *Insensatez* (*Senselessness*), a novel by the Honduran-Salvadoran Horacio Castellanos Moya.<sup>1</sup> The novel's narrator, a writer himself, is editing and proofreading the 1,100-page-long report prepared by the Catholic Church on the army's massacre and torture of thousands of indigenous villagers during the internal armed conflict in an unnamed Spanish-speaking country. The phrase, 'I'm not complete in the mind,' is taken from the testimony of a Cakchiquel Indian who witnessed how 'soldiers of his country's army scornfully and in cold blood chopped each of his four small children to pieces with machetes, then turned on his wife' (Castellanos Moya, 2). The phrase, the narrator tells us,

So moved me because it summed up in the most concise manner possible the mental state tens of thousands of people who have suffered experiences similar to the ones recounted by this Cakchiquel man found themselves in, and also summed up the mental state of thousands of soldiers and paramilitary men who had with relish cut to pieces their so-called compatriots, though I must admit that it's not the same to be incomplete in the mind after watching your own children drawn and quartered as after drawing and quartering other people's children, I told myself before reaching the overwhelming conclusion that it was the entire population of this country that was not complete in the mind. (2–3)

Even if not explicitly mentioned, it is clear that Castellanos Moya's novel alludes to the Guatemalan peace process that put a formal end to the 36-year-long armed conflict between the Guatemalan military and various insurgent groups. In particular, the novel fictionalizes the editing process and publication of the report prepared by the Office of Human Rights of the Archbishopric, which included testimonies from thousands of witnesses and victims of the army's brutal violence during the war. The report, published on April 24, 1998, as *Guatemala, nunca más* (*Guatemala, Never Again*), blamed the Guatemalan State's armed forces for more than ninety percent of human rights violations committed during the conflict.<sup>2</sup> Numbers of course vary depending on the source but according to Dirk Kruijt, for instance, 'in the period between 1980 and 1985 (the years 1982 and 1983 being the most violent), approximately 100,000 civilians were killed; 450 villages and hamlets were completely destroyed; 60,000 indigenous peasants were "relocated" in "strategic hamlets"; one million people had chosen "internal displacement"; 500,000 migrated abroad; and several thousands were "disappeared"' (49); all of these at a time when the country's population was roughly seven million. It was thus not surprising that Monsignor Juan Gerardi, the report's architect and most passionate promoter, was assassinated on April 26, 1998, that is, two days after he presented the report in the National Cathedral.<sup>3</sup>

Given this sinister historical context, the phrase 'I am not complete in the mind' casts an ominous shadow throughout the novel, a shadow that, paradoxically, sheds light on the State's role in forging a society that is in and of itself not complete in the mind. As Fernando Rosenberg suggests in 'Derechos Humanos, Comisiones de la Verdad, y nuevas ficciones globales,' Castellanos Moya's novel can be regarded as part of a 'narrative corpus that returns to the violence of the dirty wars, during which the nation functioned as the semantic framework of violence and sacrifice, in order to address and analyze their consequences and effects ... including the meta-judicial discourse of human rights that served both to justify and re-constitute the democratic state during ... "la transición" [the transition]' (91, my transl.).<sup>4</sup> This transition from, in most cases, military dictatorships to democratic governments also served, Rosenberg adds, as the 'legitimizing seal that put an end to the geopolitical cycle performed by the dictatorships, that is, the neo-liberalization of the Latin American economies' (91, my transl.). This neo-liberalization of the economy and the State, David Harvey notes, entailed a process of 'deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision' (3) that favored 'strong individual private property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade' (64); a process whose implementation relied, more often than not, on the use of the state's monopoly of the means of violence and a preference 'for

government by executive order and by judicial decision rather than democratic and parliamentary decision-making' (66). Within this framework, Harvey adds, 'the freedom of business and corporations (legally regarded as individuals) ... [is] regarded as a fundamental good' (64).<sup>5</sup>

In what follows my purpose is thus twofold. Drawing on Michel Foucault's historization and analysis of madness, I will examine in the first part of this article how Guatemala's 'semantic framework of violence and sacrifice' was constructed by analyzing Guatemalan Army General and dictator Efraín Ríos Montt's conceptualization of subversion as a mental disease (i.e. madness) whose cure passed through the redeeming qualities of the family and work. This will in turn allow conceptualizing the narrator's apparently paranoid behavior during the novel, particularly his decision to quit his editing job and leave the country, as a senseless yet reasonable decision that acknowledges madness as the moment of extreme doubt that grounds reason. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's distinction between two modalities of reason, the reasonable and the rational, I then discuss in the second part of the article the narrator's reasonable senselessness, which is the more apparent in his relation to his job and the market economy, as both revealing and reacting against a shift in the locus of sovereignty resulting from the neoliberalization of all spheres of life. Relying on Giorgio Agamben's further elaboration of Foucault's biopolitical 'right to make live and let die' as the creation of *bare life*, I then argue that this shift in the locus of sovereignty, resulting from neoliberalism's tightening grasp of the biopolitical sphere, is increasingly placing most of the population in a relation of exception that resembles the zone of indistinction between life and death in which bare life is caught. I conclude by suggesting that Castellanos Moya's novel ultimately invites us to ponder the possibility of an *other* reason able to move beyond the extreme moment of certainty that the merging of state reason and the neoliberal manufacturing of bare life represent.<sup>6</sup>

### **'I'm not complete in the mind'**

'Yo no estoy completo de la mente' ('I'm not complete in the mind') is but one of various phrases the narrator copies from the testimonies he is editing to his notebook and then shares with whomever he happens to meet, phrases such as 'for me remembering, it feels I am living it once more' (135); 'but always so very tired I feel that I can't do anything' (102); 'even at times I don't know how resentment arises or who to take it out on at times' (57); or 'for always the dreams they are there still' (111). These phrases haunt the narrator throughout the novel since they, as he continually reminds the reader, are taken from testimonies that tell of horrendous and repulsive crimes such as machete butchering of entire families, torture, castration and gang rape. Yet, the phrases, unspeakable in their horror, are also unforgettable in their phrasing, having a poetic beauty reminiscent, as the narrator notes, of verses by César Vallejo that twists and defies Spanish grammar and syntax.<sup>7</sup>

The novel's narrator is not only haunted by the strangely beautiful voices but also by the very real danger of his job. After all, the report denounces the horrors committed by the military, which remains very much in power. Caught between the poetic beauty of the phrases, the atrocities these phrases speak of and the very real danger of his job, the narrator nonetheless tries to pursue the life of a young, hip and

sex-obsessed professional: he attends private parties, goes to bars and restaurants, and constantly tries to pick up girls. He, in brief, acts during the first half of the novel as if the testimonies he is editing were not referring to real events, as if these events did not actually take place.

As the novel progresses, however, the narrator will no longer be able to ignore either the ghosts of the victims or the ghosts he believes are trying to silence him. What starts as precautionary measures, using alternative routes to get to his workplace or crossing the street in the middle of the block to lessen the chances of being kidnapped, turns as the novel progresses into full-blown paranoia: he begins to find occult messages and personal threats in news articles, sees army torturers wherever he goes and even begins to believe the Church itself is conspiring with the military to have him killed. By the end of the novel, the narrator is as incomplete in the mind as the victims whose testimonies he has been editing and decides to flee the country convinced that his life is in danger. And we, as readers, never quite know whether his fear and paranoia are substantiated by actual threats or if they are just a product of his imagination; we, to some extent, also become incomplete in the mind, unable to tell fact from fiction, rumors from actual events, rational behavior from irrational impulses.

Yet, the narrator's paranoiac conduct, which at first seems to be pure senselessness, becomes by the end of the novel a reasonable and understandable behavior. In the book's final scene, having already left the country, he remembers that the report he had been working on was published the night before and runs back to the house where he is staying to find out about the report's title and reception. He opens his e-mail account and finds a message from a close friend telegraphically telling him that 'Yesterday at noon the bishop presented the report in a bombastic ceremony in the cathedral; last night he was assassinated at the parish house, they smashed his head in with a brick. Everybody's fucked. Be grateful that you left' (142).

Unmistakably, the bishop's assassination in the novel mirrors the assassination of Monsignor Gerardi, who, as I mentioned before, was the most ardent promoter of the 1998 report and was killed two days after presenting it to the public. Given this context, the narrator's pathological behavior, his ever-increasing paranoia, becomes fully substantiated by both the events in the novel and the very real events that took place in Guatemala during and after the armed conflict. In fact, it is precisely the narrator's paranoia—his senselessness and madness—that allows him to leave on time and escape imminent death.<sup>8</sup> In a sense, he disappears himself before being disappeared, which given the novel's framework and the very real history it refers to is in no way a senseless act but, perhaps, the most reasonable act given the circumstances.

The narrator's behavior and state of mind, however, not only mirror those of a people subjected to State terror and therefore always watching its back, afraid of what it says and does. They also suggest that senselessness and incompleteness of mind are actually the direct result of state (sovereign) reason, expressed in the context of the novel by the Guatemalan State's counterinsurgency practices and discourses, and, more specifically, by Guatemalan Army General Efraín Ríos Montt's recipe for overcoming what he regarded as the country's moral and political crisis caused by the mental disease of subversion.

## Subversion, madness and morality in Ríos Montt's Guatemala

As part of the strategies used to discredit and undermine dissent of any type, the State commonly constructs insurgents and rebels of any kind as amoral, irrational and uncivilized criminals perpetrating senseless acts of violence. This discursive strategy has the obvious aim of situating dissenters outside order and civilization so as to curtail any claims to political legitimacy, as well as justify and validate the need to regenerate, repress or, in extreme situations, physically silence them.<sup>9</sup> This discursive strategy is particularly effective given that neoliberalism has successfully been able to associate the market economy with order, rationality and morality by constructing the market as the ethical organization not only of supply and demand, production and desire, but also of life itself. As Paul Treanor notes, neoliberalism is both a philosophy and an economic theory where 'the operation of a market or market-like structure is seen as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously existing ethical beliefs' (2005).<sup>10</sup>

Correlating the free market and neoliberalism to order, harmony, rationality and civilization, while at the same time associating insurgents, protesters, dissidents and the like to disorder and barbarism thus aims to redirect the discussion and analysis of any type of dissent away from its underlying structural motivations or causes, and on to the sphere of individual actions and personal responsibility. This is precisely what David Harvey means when he notes, in his analysis of neoliberalism's arguments against its detractors, that 'if conditions among the lower classes deteriorate[d], this was because they fail[ed], usually for personal and cultural reasons, to enhance their own human capital ... In a Darwinian neoliberal world, the argument [goes], only the fittest should and do survive' (157). In this way, dissent is constructed and ultimately dealt with not as a political act but as a moral issue, which leads to the conclusion that what is needed is not a rethinking or restructuring of the political or economic model but, rather, a renewed set of moral values. This strategic shift from the political to the moral, which in turn will allow him to construct subversion as a mental disease, is clearly exemplified by Guatemalan Army General Efraín Ríos Montt's counter-insurgent discourse.

General Ríos Montt came to power through a palace-coup in March 1982. According to *Guatemala: nunca más*, the report on human rights violations fictionalized in Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness*, it was during Ríos Montt's tenure that a large share of the atrocities committed by the armed forces during the conflict took place.<sup>11</sup> Between March and December 1982, however, Ríos Montt regularly addressed the country through radio and national television to share his particular vision for a better Guatemala and to impart, of all things, morality lessons. In the first speech he gave right after taking over power, for instance, Ríos Montt recommended Guatemalans

First, a prayer to God our Lord, so he allows us to continue to develop, in peace, a program we will soon present to you; and second, I ask for your collaboration, your tranquility and peace. The peace of Guatemala does not depend on arms, the peace of Guatemala depends on you Sir, on you Miss, on you boy, on you girl; indeed, the peace of Guatemala is in your heart, once there is peace in your heart, there will be peace at home and in society at large; please, no more drinking or anything else: work, Guatemala needs work. (Ríos Montt, 10; my transl.)<sup>12</sup>

In Ríos Montt's view there was no peace in Guatemala mostly because of individual shortcomings. Prayer, more work, deference to authority and no more drinking was, it seems, all that was needed to pacify and develop the country. Once Guatemalans decided to change their behavior and act morally, peace and tranquility at home and in society at large would magically follow. That there were insurgents fighting against the State; that he, Ríos Montt, was addressing the population in military fatigue and was, in fact, the head of a military regime conducting a violent counterinsurgency campaign that did not make any distinctions between armed insurgents and unarmed civilians were, it seems, minor details that could be rendered irrelevant.

For Ríos Montt, it was the moral decay of the traditional family that was directly responsible for the ongoing crisis of values: 'We have a crisis of values, but this crisis of values has its roots in the family,' he said on May 23, 1982 (47, my transl.). Consequently, the path to the moral, virtuous life that would redeem Guatemala necessarily was contingent upon the strengthening of family relations, as he indicated in a speech of April 30, 1982: 'We need, fundamentally, to consolidate the family, because when we consolidate the family—dad, mom and children—we consolidate society' (39). A week later, on May 30, Ríos Montt was even more explicit, blaming what he called the 'generational divorce' between parents and their children for the political, economic and social crisis of the country:

I tell my daughter that the country's economic, political and social problems are actually the result of the incomprehension and lack of relation between parents and children . . . As a consequence of this misunderstanding, of this [generational] divorce, there is now only one answer: protest, protest; music, poetry, theatre and so many other things that is called the question of the rebellious generation, the question of revenge, and that is a serious problem. Why is it a serious problem? Because these attitudes of generational break up—caused by the adults' lack of responsibility, not the immaturity of the little ones—these attitudes become political movements . . . that are frustrating. It is so frustrating that a son wants a hug, that a daughter wants a kiss, that that is what they need from dad or mom, and they rather give them two quetzals [Guatemalan currency] to go get some ice cream. This is as frustrating as the political movements. (Ríos Montt, 55; my transl.)<sup>13</sup>

In Ríos Montt's assessment, it was the lack of meaningful and moral relations between parents and children, as well as the former's neglect of their filial responsibilities, that had led to dissidence, rebellion and the country's crisis. As he concluded on a different speech on May 23, 'subversion is cooked at home' (48; my transl.).

In *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault argues that 'the art of government' was established to provide an answer to the question of how to introduce the economy, that is to say, 'the proper way of managing individuals, goods, and wealth, like the management of a family by a father who knows how to direct his wife, children, and servants, . . . into the management of the State' (94–95). To govern a state, Foucault adds, would thus entail the application and establishment of an economy 'at the level of the state as a whole, that is to say, [exercising] supervision and control over its inhabitants, wealth, and the conduct of all and each, as attentive as that of a father's



over his household and goods' (95). In this light, the implications of Ríos Montt's diatribes become clear: he was essentially ordering Guatemalan parents to assume and exercise their sovereign right over their families. Just as Ríos Montt was assuming his responsibilities as the nation's Father—that is, just as he was exercising his sovereign right, policing his household (Guatemala), deciding over the life and death of his children (Guatemalans) and introducing a moral economy based on the redeeming qualities of hard work and the family—each and every Guatemalan parent also had to become the true sovereign of his household so as to curtail any subversive inclination among his children. In brief, Ríos Montt was commanding parents (and especially fathers) to establish a state of exception within each household that mirrored the state of exception by means of which he ruled.<sup>14</sup>

This state of exception or siege, as Ríos Montt calls it, was, however, not a bad thing in itself but a joyous affair that had to be taken as a redemptive opportunity for learning. As he explained in his speech of July 4, 1982: 'The state of siege . . . is a state of teaching and it is a teaching from which we all, governors and governed, will learn . . . We spent ten years without a state of siege; yet, over a hundred thousand souls were lost . . . Today we have a state of siege and the state of siege gives us freedom, gives us security and gives us assurance' (82–83; my transl.). The state of siege in the country and each household was for Ríos Montt a liberating experience because it provided Guatemalans with the opportunity to come to their senses, abandon senseless behaviors such as dissent and subversion, and learn to appreciate the benefits of boundless sovereignty and a moral economy. In other words, the state of siege was meant to show Guatemalans that taking part in political and social movements, and even more so joining the insurgency, was pure madness.

Indeed, subversion was for Ríos Montt a disease that was corrupting Guatemala's morality from the inside out, as he made it clear on April 30, 1982: 'The violent ones are sick; violence manifested in the taking up of arms to conquer power is a disease' (40; my transl.). The type of disease Ríos Montt refers to was clearly not related to the body, since the physically ill or disabled would not pose a real threat to the army's fitness. Instead, the disease responsible for subversion and insurgency had to be related to the mind given that, in Ríos Montt's view, only someone who is mentally ill or unable to properly reason would choose to take up arms against the sovereign.

It is nevertheless not a coincidence that Ríos Montt's recipe for the moral recovery of the country and his strategy to counter the madness of subversion relied heavily on the strengthening of family values and the moral virtues of work. As Michel Foucault notes in *Madness and Civilization*, the criminalization of madness coincided with the rise of the industrial society, the capitalist mode of production and the bourgeois state, and thus with the association of work, production for exchange and the family with order, harmony and (state) reason. In this context, all types of idleness and non-production, madness included, were regarded as rebellious acts that threatened the very foundations of the new rational order. Madness thus became to be seen as an 'incessant attack against the Father' (254), that is, the sovereign, and had therefore to be removed from public view, punished and confined.

Punishment and confinement, however, also had a moral dimension. In the asylum, the mad were indeed deprived of freedom and forced to work; yet work was regarded as a healing activity able to 'engage [the madman] in a system of responsibility' so as to foster a 'return to the order of God's [i.e., the sovereign's] commandments'



(247–48). For this purpose, the asylum was conceptualized as a family in which the physician was the Father figure and the mad inmates loving brothers caring for each other (252–54). This supposedly beneficial and disalienating exposure to a caring and moral family would in turn allow the mad to join the community of rational brothers by becoming moral and productive beings. In this way, Foucault concludes, the discourse on madness was intrinsically linked with that of the Family.

Given the healing faculties he ascribed to the family and his conceptualization of subversion as a mental disease, it should not come as a surprise that Ríos Montt frequently relied on medical language and metaphors in his speeches. For instance, in the speech I quoted above he sets the stage to introduce the ‘generational divorce’ as the root of Guatemala’s ailments by saying, ‘Putting on our white gloves, we get to the operating room and see here what is the Nation. First, we have to make a diagnosis’ (Ríos Montt, 54; my transl.). The use of medical terminology was probably a way to reach out to his audience by relying on familiar tropes. Yet, it also aimed to give credibility, legitimacy and authority to Ríos Montt’s diagnosis by relying on the paternal connotations of the physician as a rational and objective man of science whose interest is the recovery and well-being of his patients.

Ríos Montt’s conceptualization of subversion as a mental illness that could be ‘cured’ by combining the redeeming qualities of work, the caring yet disciplined supervision of the family and the moral guidance of a Father-physician-sovereign (Ríos Montt’s himself) makes it possible to suggest that Ríos Montt constructed Guatemala as a spatial trope that closely resembled the asylum. As Foucault notes, ‘the asylum sets itself the task of the homogeneous rule of morality . . . denounces everything that opposes the essential virtues of society’ and attempts to extend ‘its rigorous extension to all those who tend to escape from it’ (258). In Ríos Montt’s view, every Guatemalan was always-already suspected of subversion, that is, of being mad. And just as the physician, who ruled as sovereign in the asylum as both father and judge, Ríos Montt regarded his role as Father-physician-sovereign (and urged all fathers to do the same in their households) as a mandate to extend and impose on everyone—insurgents and non-insurgents, combatants and civilians, men and women, parents and children—the redeeming morality that would cure subversion and take Guatemala out of its political and moral crisis. In this sense, Ríos Montt’s vision for Guatemala can be read as the consummation of what Foucault identifies as the dream of bourgeois conscience since the seventeenth century, that is, the establishment of a moral city ‘where right reigns only by virtue of a force without appeal—a sort of sovereignty of good, in which intimidation alone prevails and the only recompense of virtue (to this degree its own reward) is to escape punishment’ (61).

For Ríos Montt, the Guatemalan moral city could only be constructed as an asylum wherein subversion and dissent, madness and senselessness, could be treated and punished even before the patient herself became aware of her own subversive inclinations, of her own madness. In Ríos Montt’s moral city, not everyone was already mad but anyone was potentially mad and consequently had to be constantly policed and disciplined. In this schema, the mad-subversive-insurgent was not to be seen as a fallen, hapless brother who had lost his ability to reason and thus deserved compassion and assistance. On the contrary, the insurgent had to be controlled and punished because he or she carried a contagious disease that threatened to destroy, from within, the very

moral foundations of the city, and, perhaps more importantly, the indivisibility and unconditionality necessary for pure, boundless sovereignty.

What makes madness problematic in the eyes of the sovereign, the disease it introduces in the political, is ultimately its potential capacity to disrupt the very foundation of the sovereign relation: the protection-obedience principle. Given its alleged irrationality and incapacity for language, the mad person is regarded as incapable of performing the calculations and rationalizations necessary to agree to exchange his individual freedom for the sovereign's protection. What the mad person is thus able to introduce in the political is the possibility of a space beyond the sovereign relation, which in our present times necessarily means, as it will hopefully become clear by the end of my argument, a space beyond neoliberal reason. What is more, confronted with madness, sovereign reason also loses its intimidating and coercive force, not because the mad person has somehow become more courageous or desperate but, rather, because he no longer fears his fear, and fear, per Hobbes, is at the very center of the sovereign relation since it is precisely what makes men and women be willing to exchange their freedom for the sovereign's protection. What madness ultimately introduces in the realm of sovereignty is an *other*, different reason, one that lies at the center of Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness*.

### A reasonable senselessness

As I mentioned above, by the end of Castellanos Moya's novel the narrator realizes, by lending a respectful ear to the voices of the testimonies he is editing and letting these voices inhabit him, that he must disappear himself before being disappeared, that he must act senselessly in order to escape the very senselessness of sovereign reason. The narrator's reasonable decision to flee the country, his reasonable senselessness, points to the distinction that Jacques Derrida draws in *Rogues* between the reasonable and the rational:

The *reasonable* would be that which ... will always be *preferable*—and thus irreducible—to the rational it exceeds ... The *rational* would certainly have to do with the *just* and sometimes with the justness or exactitude of juridical and calculative reason. But the *reasonable* would do yet more and something else; it would take into account the accounting of juridical *justness* or exactitude, to be sure, but it would also strive, across transactions and aporias, for *justice*. The reasonable ... would be a rationality that takes account of the incalculable so as to give an account of it, there where this appears impossible, so as to account *for* or reckon *with* it. (158–59)

Derrida's distinction between these two modalities of reason, the reasonable and the rational, can be read as a further elaboration of the aporetic relation between madness and reason he first analyzed in 'Cogito and the History of Madness,' his critique of Foucault's *History of Madness* (first translated in abridged form into English as *Madness and Civilization*). In 'Cogito,' Derrida's critique hinges on Foucault's interpretation of a passage in Descartes' first meditation (in *Meditations on First Philosophy*) in which he establishes the relation between reason and various forms of

delusion or doubt, among these sensual illusion, dreams and madness.<sup>15</sup> In Foucault's interpretation of Descartes' argument, man can still go mad yet, 'thought, as the sovereign exercise carried out by a subject seeking the truth, can no longer be devoid of reason' (*History of Madness* 47). This categorical differentiation between madness and reason led Foucault to conclude that after the Renaissance a certain previous promiscuity between madness and reason was lost and, in turn, a new dividing line appeared that excluded madness from the realm of reason. For Derrida, however, Descartes never excludes madness from the Cogito but rather presents it as the extreme moment of doubt (doubt being the precondition for rational thinking). As such, Derrida suggests, madness is always-already internal to reason: 'Even if the totality of what I think is imbued with falsehood or madness, even if the totality of the world does not exist, even if nonmeaning has invaded the totality of the world, up to and including the very contents of my thought, I still think, I am *while* I think' ('Cogito' 56). In Derrida's view, then, there is no categorical separation between madness and reason; on the contrary, madness, the extreme moment of doubt, is inherently present in the Cogito, in reason itself; therefore, madness and unreason are not and cannot be synonymous.

It is in this light that Derrida's differentiation between the rational and the reasonable should be read. In *Rogues*, Derrida criticizes the prevailing connotation of reason as ratio, calculation and unconditionality, which he regards as inherently intertwined with sovereignty understood not only as 'one of the traits by which reason defines its own power and element,' but also as 'the concentration, into a single point of indivisible singularity . . . of absolute force and absolute exception' (153–54). Derrida's aim throughout the book, particularly in the second essay, is thus to explore the possibility of positing a reason that 'lets itself be reasoned with' (159); that is, a reason unconditionally open to madness, to this extreme moment of doubt, that would in turn allow 'to separate sovereignty from unconditionality' (84). This reason that lets itself be reasoned with, Derrida claims, does not demand a doing away with calculation, unconditionality and certainty but, rather, ought to keep them in an ongoing aporetic relation that *accounts for* and *reckons with* the incalculable and the uncertain. For Derrida, the *rational* is precisely the modality of reason that excludes doubt and grounds sovereignty. The *reasonable*, on the contrary, is the modality of reason that opens itself up to doubt, even in the extreme mode of madness, and is therefore able to honor the aporetic operation between the conditional and the unconditional. It is, ultimately, the type of reason that 'lets itself be reasoned with' by being able to *account for* and *reckon with* the incalculable.

Seen in this light, the very fact that the narrator in Castellanos Moya's novel is telling the story and has thus survived the calculations of the State, that he is *accounting for* or *reckoning with* his descent into State violence and sovereign reason, suggests that his senselessness and incompleteness of mind were not irrational but ultimately reasonable and sense-full. The *accounting for* or *reckoning with* of the narrator's reasonable senselessness, which in Derrida's formulation also strives for justice, is thus entirely other than the *accounting for* or *reckoning with* of the State: if the latter favors rationality, calculation and unconditionality, the former is grounded in doubt, uncertainty and incalculability. It is precisely this *other* reason that the testimonies the narrator copies in his notebook articulate; testimonies that gradually transform the narrator's initial rationality and detached attitude into a reasonable

senselessness that allows him to escape the calculations of the sovereign. Not incidentally given that the novel takes place in the midst of the neoliberalization of the Guatemalan economy, the narrator's transformation during the novel is the most apparent in his attitude towards his job and the market economy in which he participates and from which he benefits.

Even if the narrator concludes from the very beginning of the novel that he must also be incomplete in the mind for having accepted the job, his conclusion is, more than anything else, just a rationalization of the job he has; an unconventional and risky job perhaps, but a job all the same, one he accepted mostly out of economic imperatives. Therefore, he remains during the first half of the novel largely immune to the full implications of the testimonies and phrases. His decisions, moreover, remain within the constraints of the capitalist economy and bourgeois society. This behavior becomes the most evident when he decides at the beginning of the novel to withdraw his labor until he receives the advance payment he was promised for editing the manuscript: 'I was not willing to correct even one more line of those one thousand one hundred pages if they didn't pay me my advance right now per our agreement . . . getting paid as promised ha[s] a value above and beyond everything else' (Castellanos Moya, 24–5). At this point in the novel, the narrator's decision to withdraw his labor clearly responds to the rational calculations of neoliberal reason.

Yet, as the narrator lets the phrases inhabit him, he becomes increasingly unable to separate his work and bourgeois reality from the gruesome reality the testimonies and phrases speak of. Wherever he goes, the voices from the testimonies start to haunt him. His behavior, moreover, turns paranoid: he chooses a different route each day to get to work, runs away from a party when he believes he recognizes an army general accused in many testimonies of being a torturer, sees secret service agents anywhere he goes, starts to believe that the Church is also conspiring to have him killed and even reads newspaper articles and editorials as personal death threats. By the end of the novel, as he attempts to finish editing the report in seclusion, the narrator's initial immunity and calculated behavior have given way to senselessness and paranoia, as he himself acknowledges in the penultimate chapter of the novel:

But on the fourth day, I have to admit it, my mind went out of control and I no longer had any moments of relief, the barbarities I read about again and again . . . were sinking in so deeply that by then I was beside myself, and when my eyes were not following the text on the screen it was my mind that was transported to the theater of events and then it was no longer mine, if it ever had been, but rather wandered, of its own free will, like a journalist, around the village commons, where the soldiers, machetes in hand, chopped up the bound and kneeling residents; or it entered a hut where the brains of the baby were flying through the air; or it descended into the mass grave among the mutilated bodies. (127)

At this point in the novel, the testimonies and phrases—which the narrator had praised during the first half of the novel from a purely literary perspective—have finally led the narrator to sovereign reason's heart of darkness, thereby introducing in the narrator's initial rationality a reason entirely other that does not speak of calculations, order or exchange but, rather, of sorrow, pain, uncertainty, grief and memory; of the incommensurable and incalculable consequences of sovereign violence: 'My children

say: Mama, my poor Papa where might he be, maybe the sun passes over his bones, maybe the rain and the air, where might he be? As if my poor Papa he was an animal. This is sorrow . . .’ (36).

What the phrases and testimonies ultimately reveal and stand against, the knowledge the novel’s narrator can no longer ignore or silence with binge drinking, sex or rationalizations, is what [Michel de Certeau](#) calls ‘the conviction that Reason must be able to establish or restore a world . . . of *producing* an order so that it can be *written* on the body of an uncivilized or depraved society’ (144). What the phrases from the testimonies reveal and attest to is precisely the writing of sovereign reason in the mind and bodies of ‘uncivilized,’ ‘depraved,’ ‘barbaric’ and ‘criminal’ Indians who had forgotten, according to Rios Montt’s discourse, the moral dimension of boundless obedience and opted instead for the madness of subversion and its incessant attacks against the Father.

In this sense, the narrator’s reasonable decision to flee the country and escape imminent death is largely the result of his encounter with sovereign reason, the madness and incompleteness of mind it begets and the incalculable sorrow it produces. Yet, his decision to flee necessarily implies another decision: that of withdrawing his labor. This time, however, he no longer decides according to the mandates and constraints of bourgeois society and the neoliberal, capitalist economy. Even if withdrawing his labor puts in jeopardy the report’s publication, which he had recognized as a noble cause, his reasonable senselessness at this extreme moment of doubt can no longer place the dictates of work, exchange and the market economy above the hidden and silenced knowledge he now possesses; consequently, he makes the reasonable decision to escape not only the sovereign relation, but also, as I will presently argue via a biopolitical detour, neoliberal reason understood as the extreme moment of certainty.

### Neoliberalism and the return of madness

[Foucault](#) introduced the concepts of biopolitics and biopower in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, as well as in a series of lectures published later as *Society Must be Defended*. In these he argued that sovereign power, ‘the right to decide life and death’ (*The History* 135), evolved in two basic forms: a disciplinary power centered on the body, which Foucault calls ‘the right to take life or let live’; and a regulatory or biopolitical power concerned with the control of the population and centered on life itself, which Foucault conceptualizes as ‘the right to make live and let die’ (*Society* 241). Yet, [Foucault](#) did not fully develop these concepts, not even in *The Birth of Politics*, the series of lectures whose theme, as Foucault acknowledged in the course summary that accompanies the published lectures, ‘was to have been “biopolitics”’ (317). In fact, this series of lectures morphed instead into an analysis of German and American neo-liberalism because, as Foucault explained, ‘it seemed to me that these problems were inseparable from the framework of political rationality within which they appeared and took on their intensity. This means “liberalism”’ (317). Foucault’s need to trace the origins and development of liberalism before being fully able to conceptualized biopolitics and biopower seems to me indicative of what Foucault, writing in the mid 1970s at the beginning of the neoliberalization of life, was able to realize but not fully grasp,

namely, neoliberalism's increasing and ever-tightening grasp of the biopolitical sphere during the last four decades or so.

It is, instead, Giorgio Agamben's further elaboration of Foucault's biopolitical 'right to make live and let die' as the creation of *bare life* that provides the key to understanding the relation between neoliberalism and the biopolitical sphere. As he argues in *Homo Sacer*, bare life is life caught outside the law and, therefore, life that can be terminated without the mediation of the law or the protection it confers. In this sense, it is life trapped in 'a continuous relation with the power that banished him precisely insofar as [it] is at every instant exposed to an unconditional threat of death' (183). In other words, bare life is caught in a relation of exception—that is, 'the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion' (18)—whose production lies at the very center of biopolitical power.

Is not bare life, in its most concrete sense, precisely what accumulation by dispossession—the neoliberal process through which an elite centralizes wealth and power by dispossessing people from their wealth, land, jobs, culture and even dignity (Harvey)—produces?<sup>16</sup> In other words, does not neoliberal reason produce bare life, that is, life exposed to the constant threat of being put outside production, consumption and exchange, and, consequently, in the extramural realm of poverty, criminality and amorality? The association is perhaps inevitable given that, just as Agamben's bare life is caught in a zone of indistinction between life and death, the worker/citizen of neoliberalism seems to live in a similar and almost permanent relation of exception with regard to the neoliberal market, never quite sure when she will be disposed of and let die.

Even if the appearance of a distinguishable neoliberal reason—as ideology, economic theory and an ethics—can be traced back to the early 1970s, it did not become hegemonic until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, an event that must be understood as symbolizing the moment in which neoliberalism was left without a serious contender and therefore could be fully implemented without constraints (Harvey; Klein). Given that the fall of the Berlin Wall was also regarded as signaling the failure of centralized economies, neoliberal policies were disguised, as Naomi Klein makes clear, as 'an attempt to free the market from the state' (15). Yet, Klein clarifies, in every country where neoliberal policies 'have been applied over the past three decades, what has emerged is a powerful ruling alliance between a few very large corporations and a class of wealthy politicians . . . Far from freeing the market from the state, these political and corporate elites have simply merged' (15).

This merge of political and corporate, i.e. neoliberal, reason is nevertheless grounded on an unequivocal distribution of functions, by which political reason now mainly responds and acts according to the needs and demands of neoliberal reason. The old sovereign right 'to take life or let live' remains in the hands of the (political) sovereign but has nonetheless acquired an almost exclusive policing dimension whose most obvious incarnation is the security apparatus that has flourished during the last three decades, and especially so after September 11, 2001, with the purpose of fostering what is euphemistically called 'a good business or investment climate' (Harvey 70), that is, the optimization of the conditions necessary for neoliberal accumulation.<sup>17</sup> This securitization of life, however, mostly responds to the production of neoliberal reason, which, faithful to its own ideology and 'ethics,' has left the reproduction and management of life in the hands of the free market and the moral



sphere of individual responsibility. If before the rise of neoliberalism the political sovereign relied on economic reason to care for the population, now the population, in good neoliberal fashion, is left to care for itself.

Neoliberalism's take on the 'administration of bodies and [the] calculated management of life,' to use Foucault's conceptualization of the biopolitical sphere (*History of Sexuality* 140), was succinctly articulated by Friedrich Hayek during an interview for the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* back in 1981, that is, during Augusto Pinochet's implementation of the neoliberal recipe in Chile: 'A free society requires certain morals that ultimately are reduced to the maintenance of life: not to the maintenance of all lives because it might be necessary to sacrifice individual lives in order to preserve a greater number of other lives. Therefore, the only moral rules are those that carry up the "calculus of life": property and the contract' (quoted in Hinckelammert, 88; my transl.).<sup>18</sup> The neoliberal management of life is thus based on an alleged moral calculation that, as Hayek remarks, entails the commodification of all spheres of life and even of life itself, which presumes, as David Harvey notes, 'the existence of property rights over processes, things, and social relations, that a price can be put on them' (165). Under neoliberal reason, everything can be subsumed under the sphere of rational calculability; it is, in fact, reason at the moment of extreme certainty.

As I discussed above, with the rise of the capitalist mode of production, madness was no longer perceived as harmless inactivity but as a rebellious withdrawal from the new world of rationality, order and exchange. Madness had to be removed from public view, criminalized, isolated and punished not only because it became a dangerous reminder of a bygone era in which working, production for exchange and consumption were not the necessary conditions for inclusion in the community of brothers. Perhaps more importantly, reason, to be sovereign, had to construct madness as its radical other so as to disassociate itself from that which was, as Derrida argues, internal to it: the moment of extreme doubt: madness. It is perhaps not a coincidence, then, that madness—the extreme moment of doubt repressed during the rise of rational capitalism—resurfaces at this extreme moment of certainty that neoliberalism, financial capitalism and the merge between state and corporate reason represent; a certainty that increasingly produces bare life and therefore is gradually placing almost everybody always-already in a relation of exception.<sup>19</sup>

Read in this light, Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness* thus reveals and reacts against this shift in the locus of sovereignty from the strictly political (state reason) to the economic (neoliberal reason). The narrator's reasonable decision to quit his job and escape thus becomes a sort of inversion of the primal exclusion of madness from the realm of reason, signaling thereby, perhaps, the coming to an end of a historical cycle in which madness now returns as the extreme doubt that bears witness to the devastating consequences of state reason and the neoliberal hollowing out of life. In this sense, *Senselessness* suggests the possibility of a space beyond the (neoliberal and sovereign) relation of exception and its creation of bare life; a space made possible in the novel by the narrator's reasonable senselessness resulting from his encounter with sovereign reason's heart of darkness (as expressed in the testimonies) and his decision to escape the moral mandate of neoliberal reason (as expressed in his determination to quit his job).

In *The Ticklish Subject*, Slavoj Žižek argues that 'when Hegel determines madness as withdrawal from the actual world . . . he all too quickly conceived of this withdrawal



as a “regression” to the level of the “animal soul” (34). Žižek instead suggests that this withdrawal might, ‘on the contrary, designate the severing of the links with the *Umwelt*,’ and, as such, as ‘the founding gesture of “humanization” . . . which, as Derrida pointed out in his “Cogito and the History of Madness”, also involves a passage through the moment of radical madness’ (34). What the phrase ‘Yo no estoy completo de la mente’ (‘I’m not complete in the mind’) that haunts the narrator and casts an ominous shadow throughout the novel ultimately invites us to ponder, then, is the possibility of transforming this reasonable senselessness—these other ways of thinking, seeing, feeling and relating to each other—into a collective moment of extreme doubt that serves to sever the links with the neoliberal ‘Umwelt,’ allowing thereby for the construction of an *other* reason that bears witness to and dispenses with the absolute sorrow produced by sovereign reason and the neoliberal manufacturing of bare life.<sup>20</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 Castellanos Moya’s novel was originally published in Spanish as *Insensatez* in 2004. It was translated by Katherine Silver and published in 2008 as *Senselessness*. In what follows, all English quotes are from Silver’s translation.
- 2 For a detailed account of human rights abuses by the Guatemalan military, see Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica, *Guatemala: Nunca Más* (Guatemala: Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, 1998, Vol. 2); and Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio* (Guatemala: F&G Editores; 1999, Vol. 2 and 3).
- 3 For a meticulously researched account of Monsignor Gerardi’s assassination, as well as the trial that followed, see Francisco Goldman’s *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?* (New York: Groove Press, 2008).
- 4 Besides Castellanos Moya’s *Insensatez*, Rosenberg includes in this corpus literary works such as Alonso Cueto’s *La hora azul* (2005), Santiago Roncagliolo’s *Abril rojo* (2006), Carlos Franz’s *El desierto* (2005) and Daniel Alarcon’s *Lost City Radio* (2007). As he notes, these novels are overtly critical of both human rights discourse and state violence. For Castellanos Moya, for instance, state violence became during Latin America’s dirty wars society’s ‘sole cohesive element’ (Francisco Marin, Horacio Castellanos Moya and Élmer Mendoza, ‘Un diálogo sobre la violencia en América Latina,’ *Guaraguao* 7:16, 62).
- 5 As David Harvey convincingly argues, neoliberalism can be interpreted either ‘as a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism, or as a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites . . . The second of these objectives has in practice dominated’ (19). In Latin America, the neoliberal turn that

- started in the 1970s (in Pinochet's Chile) can thus be regarded as a (mostly successful) process of restoration and consolidation of (upper) class power that served to counteract the pressure exerted by guerrilla or revolutionary movement and increasing popular demands for democratization.
- 6 As an anonymous reviewer suggested in a previous version of this article, Castellanos Moya's novel can be read as 'the dissolution of an occidental subject by the written encounter with the realities of race in an exterminatory project.' This might perhaps be the case; yet, in what follows, I do not undertake a 'racial' or 'identitarian' reading of the novel mostly because I think that what the novel does is precisely the opposite, that is, treating the ethnic or racial other not as *other* but as same, as subject of both language and history.
  - 7 This reference to Vallejo should not only be taken as a way to inscribe the other, in this case the indigenous, within a known literary tradition. Instead, in Castellanos Moya's novel, Fernando Rosenberg notes, 'the signifier "Vallejo" is mobilized not to group a new identity, but rather to refer to that other that constitutes literature but is not literature; that *other* that literature itself finds incomprehensible' ('Derechos Humanos' 111). This is exemplified in the novel by the difficulty the narrator has during the first part of the novel with framing these phrases as poetic utterances. In a sense, his sharing of the phrases with whomever he happens to meet can be read as an attempt to understand not only the mind-incompleteness of the speaker but, perhaps more importantly, to comprehend them as language. In this sense, the narrator's reading of the testimonies as resembling Vallejo's poetry, which implies the possibility of an *other* language able to decenter the hegemonic subject, anticipates in the novel the narrator's decentering of sovereign reason.
  - 8 The possibility of understanding 'insensatez' as a type or modality of madness is somewhat lost in its translation into English as 'senselessness,' a word that does not fully correspond to the latter. In Spanish, 'insensato' (senseless) is the antonym of 'sensato', which the Royal Spanish Academy (<http://www.rae.es>) defines as 'prudente, cuerdo, de buen juicio', that is, as someone who is cautious, sane and rational, and, as such, is thus capable of sound judgment. In translating 'insensatez' as 'senselessness', the emphasis on the person's inability to cautiously and rationally exercise sound judgment is greatly lost.
  - 9 Equating dissenters of any type to disorder and criminality is of course hardly a new strategy; it is, in fact, a version of the discursive opposition between civilization and barbarism that, as official reaction against the recent wave of protests and demonstrations around the world (2011–13) shows, has not lost its currency. For instance, right after the height of the protests in London in August 2011, the United Kingdom's Home Secretary Theresa May stated in a speech to the House of Commons on August 11, 2011, that 'As long as we wish to call ourselves a civilized society such disorder has no place in Britain . . . Those who . . . engage in criminality, must be identified, arrested and punished.' Likewise, on October 7, 2011, Eric Cantor, the Republican U.S. Representative serving at the moment as House Majority Leader, referred to protesters in New York as 'the growing mobs occupying Wall Street and the other cities across the country.' Both speeches can be found online.
  - 10 As Naomi Klein notes in *The Shock Doctrine*, one of the problems that arise when speaking about neoliberalism is that 'the ideology is a shape-shifter, forever changing its name and switching identities. [Milton] Friedman called himself a "liberal," but his

U.S. followers ... tended to identify as “conservatives,” “classical economists,” “free marketers,” and, later, as believers in “Reaganomics” or “laissez-faire.” In most of the world, their orthodoxy is known as “neoliberalism” (14). In what follows, I will also use the term “neoliberalism” to refer to the dominant contemporary economic system of beliefs.

- 11 On May 10, 2013, Ríos Montt was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity by a Guatemalan court, and sentenced to 80 years in prison. Ten days later, however, the conviction was overturned by Guatemala’s Constitutional Court and several appeals are expected. At the time of writing (October, 2013), it remains unclear how this trial will be resolved.
- 12 Ríos Montt’s speeches are full of convoluted, bombastic rhetoric. In the English translations provided here I have tried to remain as faithful to the original as possible.
- 13 It is worth noting here that Castellanos Moya’s novel opens with a visceral account of the military’s butchering of precisely the sort of idealized family Ríos Montt celebrates in this passage, pointing thereby not only to Ríos Montt’s discursive inconsistencies, but also to the differential treatment of indigenous and non-indigenous citizens underscoring the genocidal drive of the Guatemalan State’s counterinsurgency strategies and tactics.
- 14 During his first months in power, General Efraín Ríos Montt, among other measures, suspended the 1965 Constitution, closed the National Congress, imposed a state of siege to prevent political activities (Decree-Law 24–82) and set up Special Tribunals (Tribunales de Fuero Especial) (Decree-Law 46–82) to judge political cases in summary trials. These tribunals were made up of judges directly appointed by Ríos Montt and whose identity was never disclosed. For the best analysis of General Efraín Ríos Montt’s ‘presidency’ and persona, see Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala Under General Efraín Ríos Montt, 1982–1983* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010).
- 15 A thorough discussion of Derrida’s critique of Foucault’s book and the polemic that followed goes beyond the scope of this article; for an insightful discussion of the main arguments see Slavoj Žižek, ‘Cogito, Madness and Religion: Derrida, Foucault and then Lacan’ (Accessed September 25, 2013; <http://www.lacan.com/zizforest.html>).
- 16 For David Harvey, accumulation by dispossession is the specific neoliberal process of capital accumulation achieved through the implementation of four intertwined practices, namely, privatization of public assets and commodification of all spheres of life; financialization; the management and manipulation of debt and financial crises to rationalize the system and redistribute assets; and state redistribution of wealth aimed to reverse the flow of wealth from upper to lower classes that had previously occurred under Keynesian liberalism (160–65).
- 17 As Harvey notes, in order to foster a congenial business climate, ‘the [neoliberal] state must resort to persuasion, propaganda or, when necessary, raw force and police power to suppress opposition to neoliberalism. This was precisely [Karl] Polanyi’s fear: that the liberal (and by extension neoliberal) utopian project could only ultimately be sustained by resort to authoritarianism. The freedom of the masses would be restricted in favour of the freedoms of the few’ (70). As violent state reaction to the recent wave of protests shows, time seems to have confirmed Polanyi’s fear.
- 18 The interview was conducted by Renée Sallas and was originally published in the Chilean newspaper *El Mercurio* on April 19, 1981.

- 19 Concrete examples of this shift in the locus of sovereignty abound but consider, for instance, the attempts to regulate the Internet and fight online trafficking in copyrighted intellectual property such as the Stop Piracy Online Act introduced in the U.S. Senate in 2011; the capture in New Zealand, following an indictment filed in the United States on criminal copyright infringement charges, of Kim Dotcom, the owner of the on-line sharing site MegaUpload; or the series of economic sanctions, such as blocking monetary donations to Wikileaks through MasterCard, Visa and PayPal, that followed the arrest of Julian Assange in relation to a sexual assault investigation in Sweden.
- 20 As an anonymous reviewer rightly noted, there is throughout this article an ‘absence of sustained reflection on the indigenous questions,’ which was for her or him ‘a source of discomfort.’ This ‘absence’ is wholly intended given that I am not seeking to substitute Western-cogito with another (Indigenous or not) cogito, as this would only result in replacing one cogito with an other—which then would be sovereign—instead of working towards a multiplicity of cogitos (so to speak) that complement and doubt each other. The discomfort the reviewer speaks of might thus be a reflection of our own incapacity at this moment to fully imagine or conceive a future without sovereign reason.

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