

Charismatic Leadership in Left Populism:

The Missionary Politics of Andrés Manuel López Obrador

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In Memoriam

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Jonathan Dean, my supervisor at the School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds.

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Abstract

The research discusses the inner workings of charismatic leadership in contemporary populism, based on a case study of Mexico's 65th President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). The purpose of the research is to analyse AMLO's discourse and performance in a variety of settings and to distil from these public appearances elements conducive to conveying charismatic authority to his audience. In contemporary scholarship, charismatic populist leadership is frequently regarded as a form of mass manipulation, designed solely to help personalistic leaders gain and retain power. The research challenges this reading by examining charismatic leadership as a relational phenomenon in which both parties have agency. On the one hand, it analyses the leader's ability to inspire and motivate his followers by constructing a public persona that is simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary; the thesis argues that this holds the key to his charismatic appeal. On the other, it acknowledges the followers' paramount role in assessing the congruence of the leader's discourse and performance, attributing charisma only if the leader's ordinary / extraordinary persona is deemed credible. Offering a novel contribution to the literature, the research discusses the role of faith in the charismatic bond forged between the leader and the led, analysing faith from both secular and spiritual perspectives (the promise of redemption in this life and salvation in the afterlife). It is an aspect that current scholarship tends to overlook, considering it anachronistic, but the research queries this assumption and illustrates how faith in what Margaret Canovan called the redemptive face of democracy still acts as a powerful mobilising factor in modern-day politics. The research applies Pedro Zúquete's concept of missionary politics to a twenty-first century Mexican context, hitherto unexplored. It thus represents a significant contribution to both populism and Latin American studies and would be suitable for publication in either discipline.

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Abbreviations

4T	Fourth Transformation of Public Life in Mexico
AIFA	Felipe Ángeles International Airport
AMLO	Andrés Manuel López Obrador
CDMX	Mexico City
CFE	Federal Electoral Commission
CONAPRED	National Council to Prevent Discrimination
CONEVAL	National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy
CONFRATERNICE	National Fellowship of Evangelical Christian Churches
CoVAJ	Commission for Truth and Access to Justice (Ayotzinapa)
CTM	Confederation of Mexican Workers
EZLN	Zapatista Army of National Liberation
Fobaproa	Savings Protection Banking Fund
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IFE	Federal Electoral Institute
INCB	International Narcotics Control Board
INDEP	Institute to Return Stolen Goods to the People
INE	National Electoral Institute
INEGI	National Institute of Statistics and Geography
INI	National Institute of Indigenous Affairs
INPI	National Institute of Indigenous Peoples
MC	Citizens' Movement
MCCI	Mexicans against Corruption and Impunity
Morena	National Regeneration Movement
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Association
NCIP	National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples
PAN	National Action Party
PEMEX	Mexican Petroleum
PES	Social Encounter Party

PND	National Development Plan
PNR	National Revolutionary Party
PRD	Party of the Democratic Revolution
PRI	Institutional Revolutionary Party
PRIAN	Institutional Revolutionary Party & National Action Party
PRM	Party of the Mexican Revolution
PSDT	Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory
PSUV	United Socialist Party of Venezuela
PT	(Mexican) Labour Party
PVEM	Ecologist Green Party of Mexico
SCJN	Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation
SNTE	National Union of Education Workers

Chapter 1

Populist Charismatic Leadership: A Contested Concept

1.1 Introduction

Latin America is a region that is characterized, among other issues, by high levels of social inequality. This means not only that a large part of the population lives in poverty, but also that it is easy to identify a minority that holds a great amount of economic and political power. Accordingly, populist actors have frequently used the term the people as a discursive weapon by which they seek to mobilize excluded sectors against the establishment, with the intention of breaking the status quo. (Kaltwasser, 2014, p.495)

Populism appears to be having its moment. Whilst the phenomenon is noticeable around the world (Kaltwasser *et al.* (eds), 2017 pp.99-263), I am specifically interested in the current surge of support for left populism in Latin America, the “land of populism” according to Carlos de la Torre (de la Torre, 2017, p.195). The thesis turns its attention to Mexico, a country whose rich history of left populism has not attracted quite as much scholarly attention as the populist traditions of some of its southern neighbours, Peronismo in Argentina and Chavismo in Venezuela being the most frequently cited examples (cf., *inter alia*, Milanese, 2014 and Hawkins, 2009).

Writing in 2017, de la Torre identifies three main factors behind Latin America's twenty-first century turn to the left and radical populism:

The first was a crisis in political representation. (...) The second (...) was widespread popular resistance to neoliberalism. (...) The third (...) was that citizens perceived that politicians and neoliberal elites had surrendered sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the US government." (de la Torre, 2017, pp.200-201)

All three factors hold true for Mexico, whose governments, as Edwin Williams explains, applied exceptional zeal in introducing neoliberal reforms from the mid-1980s onwards, thereby driving a wedge between their administrations and the popular base that had traditionally granted the ruling party (the Institutional Revolutionary Party - PRI) legitimacy through a corporatist quadripartite structure set up by President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), which included industrial workers, farmers (*campesinos*), government workers and the so-called "popular" sector:

In a remarkably brief time span, the Mexican government divested hundreds of public enterprises, deregulated dozens of economic sectors, and by casting aside barriers to trade, transformed the economy from a tightly protected to a much more open one. By the early 1990s Mexico had won broad international acclaim as a model reformer. (Williams, 2012, p.744).

These neoliberal reforms may have been acclaimed by the Bretton-Woods institutions, but to ordinary Mexicans - and in particular, the poorest of the poor, known as *los de abajo*¹ - they produced precious little by way of a trickle-down effect:

The reforms aggravated an already unequal distribution of wealth. Mexico's rich got richer still. (...) The pattern of privatization actually helped concentrate wealth. (...) In short, neither the majority of Mexico's citizens nor its economy had reaped the full benefits anticipated by policy reformers. (Williams, 2012, pp.762-763)

Understandably, this caused discontent and a crisis of political legitimacy among those left behind by the forces of globalisation. Their disenchantment

¹ Title of Mariano Azuela's revolutionary novel of 1916, translated into English as "The Underdogs".

was further compounded by a prevailing sense of political corruption and electoral fraud. Indeed, the hegemonic PRI had ruled the country without interruption for seventy-one years, in what Mario Vargas Llosa called a "perfect dictatorship" ("*dictadura perfecta*") (Vargas Llosa, 1990). Many Mexicans began to look for alternatives to a political model that could no longer be considered fit for purpose. As Jacob Torfing explains, in reference to the theory developed by Argentine political theorist Ernesto Laclau:

A stable hegemonic discourse becomes *dislocated* when it is confronted with new events that it cannot explain, represent or in other ways domesticate. (...) Because of dislocation, the subject emerges as a split subject, which is traumatized by its lack of fullness. The split subject might either disintegrate or try to recapture the illusion of a full identity by means of identifying itself with the promise of fullness offered by different political projects. (Torfing, 2005, pp.16-17)

One of those projects was the one put forward by the Mexican Left, first under the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and subsequently under the National Regeneration Movement (Morena). For many Mexicans, the new movement-cum-party² provided a beacon of hope in an otherwise desolate political landscape, in which the PRI had run out of steam and its historical political rival, the conservative National Action Party (PAN), had failed to live up to expectations after the democratic transition of 2000. Morena's traction owed much to the central figure of its founder, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who went on to become Mexico's President in 2018. It is the political leadership of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) that constitutes the subject matter of this thesis.

Within the "burgeoning literature on populism" (Kaltwasser *et al.* (eds), 2017, p.1), my specific area of interest lies in charismatic populist leadership, a contested and rather elusive concept. Engaging with the existing literature, the

² Morena was founded as a not-for-profit organisation in 2011; it registered as a political party in 2014.

thesis will argue that charismatic leadership is essential to populist politics, with the leader acting as a centripetal force that sustains both the momentum of the political project and the adherence of the populist constituency to said project. With a political trajectory spanning almost five decades and a remarkably loyal following (a popular movement named after its leader: *obradorismo*), AMLO represents an example of left populist leadership that lends itself particularly well to an exploration of the charismatic bond between the leader and the led. In addition, AMLO communicates daily with his support base, thereby providing a wealth of material suitable for academic research in this domain.

Scholars disagree as to the nature of charisma: is it innate, or is it learned? Some query its very existence: is charisma instantly recognisable and identifiable, or attributed only with hindsight? Scholars also disagree about its implications for politics: does charisma stimulate democratic engagement, or does it stifle plurality of opinion? As these discussions continue, my objective is to make a meaningful contribution by analysing the significance and inner workings of charismatic leadership in left populism. Drawing on the theories of Max Weber (section 1.2) and Ernesto Laclau (subsection 1.3.3), the research will explore the discursive construction of the left populist leader's charismatic authority in the eyes of his followers.

The research thus draws on two principal strands of the academic literature: populism studies and charismatic leadership theory. Cas Mudde has argued that there is an "elective affinity" between populism and charismatic leadership (Mudde, 2017, p.14); I would contend that charismatic leadership holds more than just an affinity with populism, and that it is in fact an essential ingredient in the crystallisation of the populist moment. The research builds, *inter alia*, on the work of Laclau (populism as articulatory practice)³ and Benjamin Moffitt (populism as performance),⁴ as well as the theories of Max Weber (the concept

³ Cf. subsection 1.3.3.

⁴ Cf. subsection 1.3.3.

of charismatic authority)⁵ and Pedro Zúquete (the relevance of charismatic leadership in disenchanting times).⁶

Since charismatic leadership provides the backbone of the present thesis, it is worth recalling the origins of this contested concept (section 1.2) before embarking on an exploration of the significance attached to it by different strands of contemporary populism scholarship (section 1.3).

1.2 Charisma

Academic forays into the concept of charismatic political leadership tend to begin with the writings of the German philosopher Max Weber. In *The Profession and Vocation of Politics* (1919), Weber distinguishes between traditional, rational-legal and charismatic authority. He describes the latter as “the authority of the exceptional” leader endowed with a “gift of grace” who is “personally regarded as someone who is inwardly ‘called’ to the task of leading men” and to whom the led submit “not because of custom or statute, but because they believe in him” (Weber, 1994, pp.311-312). Weber’s charismatic leader is a hero, very much in line with Thomas Carlyle’s influential Great Man theory of the time (to which Weber subscribed). There are also strong elements of faith and mysticism in Weber’s depiction of charismatic authority. The charismatic leader believes in his mission and makes considerable personal sacrifices to fulfil it. The followers observe the leader’s heroic achievements (on the battlefield, in the political arena) and attribute supernatural powers to him. Charismatic authority, as described by Weber, is akin to an aura. It is nurtured by the leader’s seemingly miraculous achievements and the awe that his prowess inspires amongst his followers. Conversely, the leader’s aura may be tarnished if he ceases to produce miracles, whereupon he is considered by his followers to have fallen from grace. Charisma is therefore both a gift of grace and a state of grace.

⁵ Cf. section 1.2.

⁶ Cf. section 1.6.

The Weberian definition of charismatic authority has fallen in and out of favour over time. As Jean Hartley observes, until the 1940s, studies on leadership focussed very much on the leader's inherent qualities (Hartley, 2014, p.676), in line with both Weber's writings and Great Man theory. However, since then, researchers have been more inclined to consider leadership as a skill that can be acquired - or enhanced - throughout one's life, for instance by resorting to the services of communications experts (cf. *inter alia* Baur *et al.*, 2016, p.163; Bligh *et al.*, 2004, p.224; Schroedel *et al.*, 2013, p.110). This thesis adheres to Alan Knight's understanding of charisma, according to which charisma is neither innate nor learned, but rather relational, arising from the affective bond forged between the leader and the led:

'Charisma' does not reside, an innate quality, in the bosom of the 'charismatic' leader; it denotes a relationship between leader and followers. Similarly, populism must be understood as a reciprocal relationship, not a top-down imposition. (Knight, 1998, p.231)

In addition, I would point out that Weber's definition of charismatic authority places much emphasis on the extraordinary (indeed: supernatural or superhuman) qualities of the charismatic leader. Whilst acknowledging that the projection of extraordinary leadership qualities contributes to the perception of charisma in the eyes of the followers, this thesis will argue that in the political logic of left populism, which seeks to "construct a *popular* collective subject" (Venizelos and Stavrakakis, 2023, p.293 - emphasis my own), extraordinariness in itself is not enough to project charismatic authority. The left populist leader also needs to be perceived as ordinary, as someone who embodies the people on behalf of whom he makes a representative claim.

Left populist leaders thus need to credibly convey both extraordinariness and ordinariness to be perceived as charismatic by the followers. If they were merely perceived as extraordinary, they might command respect, but they would not elicit the affective identification of ordinary people. Conversely, if they

were merely perceived as one of the people, but without any extraordinary leadership skills, they would not be recognised as someone "inwardly called to the task of leading men" (Weber, 1994, p.312).

Therefore, for the purposes of this research, which specifically addresses charismatic leadership in left populism, charisma will be understood as the ability to inspire and motivate one's followers through the discursive and performative construction of a public persona that is both ordinary and extraordinary and which is deemed convincing to the followers who ultimately attribute charisma to the political leader.

Given that charismatic leadership and populism are so frequently correlated in the academic literature, the next section will provide an overview of how different scholars have broached the subject of charisma in the specific field of populism studies.

1.3 Charisma in Populism Scholarship

Numerous academics refer to charisma in passing, describing a populist politician as charismatic, without necessarily unpacking the concept. Amongst those political theorists who have delved deeper into the subject, there are some who consider charismatic leadership to be an important ingredient in populism, others who perceive it as a dangerous form of manipulation, and others still who dismiss it as irrelevant. Subsections 1.3.1-1.3.3 set out the salient features of the three conceptual approaches to populism associated with Cas Mudde, Kurt Weyland and Pierre Ostiguy (Kaltwasser *et al.* (eds), 2017, pp.25-97) - the ideational, political-strategic and socio-cultural approaches, respectively - and situate charismatic leadership within each of these schools of thought.

1.3.1 Ideational Approach

Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Cas Mudde are among the most prominent contemporary proponents of the ideational approach to populism. Mudde defines populism as:

An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. (Mudde, 2004, p.543)

The ideational approach to populism contends that it is an ideology, rather than a political strategy (cf. subsection 1.3.2) or a socio-cultural practice (cf. subsection 1.3.3). Populists rise in defence of the pure people and in opposition to the corrupt elite, which may be defined using either "ethnic or political notions" (de la Torre, 2019, p.4). They are motivated by a worldview that rejects those who are alien to their community, which they deem to be morally superior. The excluded might be migrant agricultural workers, just as they might be foreign investment bankers. Mudde considers populism to be a highly malleable ideology. It may take the form of ethno-nationalism or find expression in anti-globalisation protests. It may position itself on the right or on the left of the political spectrum. It has a versatility that Margaret Canovan attributes to populism's ambiguous and synecdochic definition of the people, who are both excluded and sovereign, whole and part, collective and individual (Canovan, 2005, pp.1-9). Consequently, whilst the them-and-us dividing line that characterises populism is readily observable - just as in Henri Tajfel's social identity theory, there is always an in-group and an out-group (Tajfel, 1974, p.66) - the overarching populist ideology is "chameleonic" and "quintessentially mercurial" in nature, to borrow Paul Taggart's terms (Taggart, 2000, pp.2-4). This is arguably why Mudde and Kaltwasser describe populism as a thin-centred ideology⁷ (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.6) which does not offer a very solid worldview in and of itself but tends to pair up with thicker ideologies

⁷ It is worth noting that Michael Freeden, who coined the concept of thick and thin ideologies, argued that populism is so insubstantial as to be "ideologically too scrawny to be thin!" – in other words, not an ideology at all, but rather a discourse (Freeden, cited in Moffitt, 2000, p.15).

such as socialism or nationalism, adding a moral and antagonistic dimension to the latter.

Scholars who follow the ideational approach tend to be wary of populism. In the broader literature, one finds more nuanced views: Benjamin Arditi, for instance, describes populism as a spectre of democracy, ranging from a friendly visitation to a haunting presence (Arditi, 2007, pp.42-53), and Kaltwasser himself has argued that “populism in itself is neither a threat nor a corrective to democracy” (Kaltwasser, 2014, p.502). Nevertheless, for many of the proponents of the ideational school, liberal democracy is the gold standard against which all other forms of politics are measured, and populism does not fare well in their comparisons. Jan-Werner Müller, for instance, defines populists as not only anti-elitist but also anti-pluralist: “Populists claim that they, and they alone, represent the people” (Müller, 2017, p.3). Didier Van Reybrouck is prepared to tolerate populism’s anti-establishment stance but will have no truck with its anti-parliamentarianism (Van Reybrouck, 2017, p.79). Takis Pappas equates populism with “democratic illiberalism” and deems populism to be “a menace to liberal democracy” because its “impulse is to turn towards autocracy” (Pappas, 2019, p.10). Mudde himself laments the intolerance inherent in populism:

Populism presents a Manichean outlook, in which there are only friends and foes. Opponents are not just people with different priorities and values, they are evil! Consequently, compromise is impossible, as it ‘corrupts’ the purity. (Mudde, 2004, p. 544)

In response, one could counter that populist parties like Spain’s Podemos or Greece’s Syriza pursue a populist ideology, in that they divide society into two antagonistic groups (the people vs. the elite), yet they still play by the rules of pluralist democracy, accepting not only the principle of electoral contest but also that of electoral defeat. Furthermore, unlike right-wing populists, they tend towards civic inclusion rather than exclusion - or to be more exact, towards the inclusion of the disenfranchised (something that ethno-nationalist right-wing populists fail to do, since they exclude the ethnic minority subaltern from their

definition of the people). To use Kenneth Roberts' words, whereas "right-wing populists in Europe conceive of 'the people' in cultural and national terms that are highly exclusionary towards cultural minorities", left-wing populism tends to be "broadly inclusive of subaltern groups" (Roberts, 2017, p.299). However, for every Podemos, there is a Vox, and for every Syriza, a Golden Dawn, and the populist ingredients identified by Mudde – antagonism, moral zealotry and claims to represent the *vox populi* - can therefore lead either to democratically transformative projects or to profoundly anti-democratic undertakings. Thus, although populism can act as an important corrective to the failings of liberalism and technocratic government - Weber's "Iron Cage" of bureaucracy (Zúquete, 2013a, p.263) - the ideational approach will argue that it is not without its perils.

In terms of identifying the place that charismatic leadership holds within the theories developed by scholars who follow the ideational approach, one may start by observing that for Mudde, the charismatic leader plays an important but not fundamental role:

While charismatic leadership is, virtually by definition, an important part of the explanation of popular support for populist actors, it is neither a necessary condition for electoral breakthrough nor a sufficient condition for electoral persistence. (Mudde, 2017, p.40)

Similarly, Mudde and Kaltwasser have together argued that charismatic leadership need not be a defining attribute of populism:

Populism is not always constructed from above – that is, by a powerful leader; many societies count a significant number of people who believe in the populist set of ideas, irrespective of the presence of a populist leader. (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2014, p.386)

In other words, when populism is defined in ideational terms, it is ideology that takes centre stage, not leadership. Scholars like Mudde and Kaltwasser will

point to the Russian Narodniki or the US Tea Party, populist movements with no discernible leadership figures, to illustrate their point. Canovan has also written of the 1989 mass demonstrations in the German Democratic Republic as a rare example of the “electrifying occasions when the myth of the People in action is convincingly enacted before our eyes” (Canovan, 2005, p.129) – a populist moment without a specific leader there to conduct proceedings. As for Müller, he acknowledges the role of populist leaders, but questions the authenticity of their alleged charisma:

It's not that the leader has to be particularly charismatic personally. But he or she has to provide a sense of a direct connection with the "substance" of the people and, even better, with every single individual. (Müller, 2017, p.34)

If anything, the purported charisma of the populist leader is used to shore up strong identification between the leader and the led. Müller cites some of Hugo Chávez' campaign slogans to substantiate his point:

- "¡Chávez es Pueblo!" ("Chávez is the people!")
- "¡Chávez somos millones, tú también eres Chávez!" ("Chávez we are millions, you are also Chávez!")
- "Seamos como Chávez" ("Let's be like Chávez.")

(Müller, 2017, p.34)

Mudde and Kaltwasser point to the same phenomenon, describing populist politicians as “extraordinary leaders who construct ordinary profiles” to deliver “politics for ordinary people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p.78). It is therefore not about radiating innate charisma, but rather about creating an illusion of immediacy (however implausible).

In sum, scholars who follow the ideational approach to populism either play down the centrality of charismatic leaders, or view charisma as a feature that may “facilitate” populism, but does not define it (Mudde, 2004, p.545). Yet it should be noted that leaderless populist movements are very much the exception rather than the rule, and that numerous populist parties are in effect built around the figure of a charismatic leader (cf. subsection 1.3.2).

Furthermore, even strongly ideological populist parties flourish under charismatic leadership, but languish under less inspirational leadership - the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) has not enjoyed the same level of electoral support under Nicolás Maduro as it did under Hugo Chávez, for instance (Buxton, 2016). This suggests that charismatic leadership weighs more heavily in the balance of populism than ideational scholars seem willing to accept. As this thesis will discuss, Mexico offers several interesting insights into the significance of charisma in the dynamics of populist leadership, which challenge some of the views of the ideational school. Whilst I accept that populism is an ideology that divides society into two antagonistic camps engaged in a moral battle, I would nonetheless contend that populists almost invariably go into battle behind a leader – whom they believe in, for reasons which will be discussed throughout this work.

1.3.2 Political-Strategic Approach

Whereas ideational theorists attach relatively scant importance to populist leadership, strategic theorists consider it pivotal. One of the leading contemporary scholars who advocates a political-strategic approach to populism is Kurt Weyland. He defines populism as:

A political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers. (Weyland, 2017, p.50)

For Weyland, it is the “personalistic”, “preeminent” and “powerful” leader who takes centre stage (Weyland, 2017, pp.50-56). Similarly, Roberts associates the “appropriation of popular subjectivity” with the “dominant personality” of populist leaders (Roberts, 2017, p.288). Emerging seemingly out of nowhere, or abruptly breaking with previous political affiliations, populist leaders forge political movements in their own image and put much effort into mobilising potential supporters amongst those whose trust has been eroded by mainstream parties, or whose interest in politics has long been dormant. Taggart writes of voters endorsing such charismatic populist politicians as a protest against catch-all bureaucratic political parties that have long-since ceased to fight for their votes (Taggart, 1995, pp.40-42). According to the political-strategic school of thought, therefore, a charismatic populist leader who reaches out to a seemingly forgotten constituency and addresses their grievances stands every chance of being granted an audience.

The forging of a charismatic bond between the leader and the led (already flagged by Mudde and Müller) is of utmost importance according to the political-strategic approach. It is this unmediated link with the followers that will enhance the populist leader's prospect of success at the ballot box. The populist leader, who is either a genuine outsider or someone who actively cultivates the image of an anti-establishment figure, cannot rely on the support of established party structures or pre-existing support networks - what Weyland calls “special weights” (Weyland, 2017, p.57) - and must therefore rely entirely on their support base. Appeals to the people are thus par for the course, as are outbursts directed against the elite, with the leader carefully positioning themselves on the side of the people (even if they technically belong to the elite).

Scholars who adhere to the political-strategic school view populism with suspicion. Lacking any clear ideological orientation, they deem populist parties to be unpredictable. The populist leader, so central to their definition, is regarded as a careerist. The personalistic leader's attempt to present themselves as the embodiment of the general will of the people is considered fraudulent:

While populism in its discourse claims to empower “the people”, in reality it immediately delegates this popular sovereignty to a personalistic leader – and thus effectively disempowers the citizenry! (Weyland, 2017, p.53)

Along the same lines, Yves Mény and Yves Surel point out that although populism fêtes the power of the people, it relies primarily on "seduction by a charismatic leader" (Mény and Surel, 2002, p.17). Thus, while the political-strategic approach to populism attributes great importance to extraordinary leadership, it is arguably also the most critical of it, viewing it as largely opportunistic. Unlike the ideational approach, which at the very least attributes a thin-centred ideological orientation to populist leaders, the strategic approach credits populist leaders with hardly any ideological convictions at all:

Populist presidents are not committed to a systematic ideology or clear program, but govern as they see fit, depending on their own tactical considerations, sudden ideas, and even whims. (Weyland, 2017, p.60)

The political-strategic approach to populism is thus ideally suited to explain the policy U-turns of some populist leaders, such as Peru’s Alberto Fujimori, who “notoriously registered under a new party label for every election cycle in which he stood for office” (Roberts, 2017, p.296), flitting between economic expansionism and neoliberalism to suit his immediate political ambitions. The Peruvian example is comparable to that of other Latin American countries (including Mexico), where political parties and electoral coalitions are formed and disbanded quite rapidly, for reasons of political expediency and, in some cases, owing to a lack of strong historical institutionalism. According to the political-strategic approach, a populist leader’s ideology may be virtually non-existent, provided their persona attracts sufficiently broad support within the electorate:

Charisma is not a definitional component of populism, but a widespread belief in a leader's amazing, extra-ordinary, and "supernatural" capacities is a prime way in which the connection between leader and followers can acquire a special intensity that gives rise to and sustains populism. (Weyland, 2017, p.59)

Weyland's reference to belief reconnects with Weber's original definition of charismatic authority, whereby the followers submit to their leader "not because of custom or statute, but because they believe in him" (Weber, 1994, p.312). In Weber's account, the followers attribute charisma to their leader on the strength of at least one observed or reported heroic deed; in contrast, today's political-strategic scholars would argue that it is the populist leader who seeks to incite such devotion by dint of manipulation.

In sum, the political-strategic approach to populism attaches great importance to personalistic / charismatic leadership but regards it primarily as a vote-winning tactic on the part of the populist leader. The political-strategic approach scarcely credits charismatic populist leaders with any genuine ideological commitment at all. Yet, while populist leaders may indeed use personalism to forge an affective bond with their supporters in the hope of consolidating their electoral support base - indeed, as political outsiders, they have no other constituency to fall back on - ideology still matters, as evidenced by Latin America's twenty-first century left populist turn known as the *Marea Rosa* (Pink Tide) (Ellner, 2020). To name but one example: Hugo Chávez may have been a highly personalistic and charismatic populist leader, but he also pursued a deeply ideological political agenda (Venezuela's socialism of the twenty-first century).

Ideational and political-strategic scholars seem to approach populism from opposite ends of the spectrum: for the former, ideology trumps leadership, whereas for the latter, leadership opportunistically elbows ideology out of the way. I would argue that both ideology and leadership matter in populism. The ideology may be thin-centred - it need do little more than divide society into two

antagonistic camps engaged in a moral battle - but it cannot be entirely absent. Morality and antagonism are the hallmarks of populism; without them, a political project is no longer recognisable as populist. Equally, the populist leader's charisma may be natural or engineered, but without that charismatic leadership, the populist message will struggle to make headline news. To quote the Italian Five Star Movement founder Beppe Grillo: "Folks, it works like this: You let me know, and I play the amplifier" (Müller, 2017 p.35).

The ideational and strategic approaches are thus complementary, to some extent. Both share a cautious approach towards populism and charismatic leadership, fearful of the risk that populist mobilisation might turn into the "nemesis of democracy" (Arditi, 2007, p.8). There is, however, a third school of thought which views populism and charismatic leadership with greater equanimity, namely the socio-cultural approach.

1.3.3 Socio-Cultural Approach

As seen above, the ideational school underscores the importance of populism's Manichean worldview, whilst according relatively limited importance to charismatic leadership. The political-strategic school emphasises the centrality of personalistic leadership, whilst querying the sincere ideological commitment of populist leaders. What the socio-cultural approach brings to the equation is a marked emphasis on the importance of discourse as a socially and culturally embedded practice in populism. I would argue that discourse in fact holds the key to both the ideational approach (it is discourse that draws, and re-draws, the antagonistic dividing line of populism) and to the strategic approach (it is discourse that helps build the sense of a shared identity between the leader and the led). The socio-cultural school furthermore recognises the importance of charismatic leadership without necessarily impugning its motives. Some of its advocates even embrace the potentially positive role of populist charismatic leadership, in a way that ideational and strategic scholars tend not to. As Jonathan Dean explains, for Laclau "populism (...) has the capacity to give voice to the downtrodden and challenge oppressive hegemonic formations" (Dean,

2023, p.6). For Chantal Mouffe, the crystallisation of the populist moment revolves around the figure of a centralising leader:

To turn heterogeneous demands into a collective will it's necessary to have a figure that can represent that unity, and I don't think there can be a populist moment without leadership. (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016, p.109)

The leading proponent of the discursive approach to populism is Ernesto Laclau. As Kaltwasser and Hauwaert explain, for Laclau:

Populism is a discourse that seeks to generate a "chain of equivalences" articulating social groups with different ideas and interests in order to construct not only a common will but also a common enemy. (Kaltwasser and Hauwaert, 2020, p.3)

For Laclau, and for those who adhere to the post-structuralist discourse theory (PSDT) that he developed with Mouffe, all things are discursively constructed. "All social phenomena can be analysed using discourse analytical tools", as Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips explain (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002b, p.25). Applying the principles of post-structural linguistics, Laclau and Mouffe argue that meaning is never fixed but always contingent. One could illustrate their point by using Mudde's example of the pure people and the corrupt elite: these concepts do not have a fixed meaning - as Mudde himself would readily admit - but acquire different meanings according to how they are positioned in relation to each other and to a whole web of other signs.⁸

⁸ In semiotics, a sign is composed of two elements: a signifier, i.e. the physical form of the sign (e.g.: a word), and a signified, i.e. the meaning associated with the signifier. According to PSDT, the signified is always contingent. Thus, a signifier such as 'the people' may be attributed a variety of different meanings, depending on the discourse being articulated (cf. Margaret Canovan's *pars pro toto* illustration).

By emphasising the contingent nature of all meaning, the discursive approach invites researchers to deconstruct what Laclau calls the populist moment - in which "politics-as-populism divides the social scene into two camps and produces a frontier or antagonistic relations between them" (Arditi, 2010, p.489) - and to search for the contested meaning that may be attributed to its different elements. In Laclau's definition of populism, these elements include an "equivalential chain" of unmet demands, the constitution of an "internal frontier" within society and the construction of a "popular identity" (Laclau, 2005b, p.77). In Mudde's definition, they include a pure people engaged in moral battle with a corrupt elite. In Weyland's conception, they involve a direct and unmediated relationship between a personalistic leader and their unorganized followers. None of the above concepts have a fixed meaning, *per se*; all of them may be understood as constructs, and thus provide ample scope for discursive inquiry. The same holds true for the central concept of this thesis: charismatic leadership. The charismatic leader represents what Laclau would call an empty signifier, taking on different meanings according to the articulatory practices that form around it. Rather than dismissing charismatic leadership as irrelevant or suspect, discourse theory therefore approaches the phenomenon more openly, analysing the different ways in which discourse might construct a populist leader's charisma in the eyes of their followers.⁹

Laclau and Mouffe, who combine post-structuralism with the Gramscian concept of hegemony in their theory, are not the only scholars to attach great importance to discourse in populism. Among those who focus specifically on the rhetoric used by charismatic leaders, one finds Canovan, who has argued that the discourse used by charismatic populist leaders reflects the redemptive, rather than pragmatic, face of democracy: it is romantic and utopian, offering salvation through politics (Canovan, 1999, p.8) and it is essential in mobilising enthusiasm for the populist project. Pierre Ostiguy writes of a "fusional discourse" / "discourse of love" between populist leaders and their followers (Ostiguy, 2017, p.83). David Bell points to the importance of rhetoric in winning

⁹ NB: Discourse is here understood in the broad sense of the term and includes "language, semiotics (latent meaning in text), and conventions found in a variety of written, oral, and visual 'texts'" (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p.335).

over an electorate: “Political leadership depends on the ability to persuade” (Bell, 2014, p.93).

Some of these authors, and others besides, have extended the concept of discourse to cover non-verbal forms of communication, moving beyond pure rhetoric and oratory skills. Bell, for instance, observes that the world of politics is replete with non-rational and sub-rational symbols, expressed through language, images and signs, which are all elements of discourse in the broader sense of the term. He argues that these, too, merit careful analysis (Bell, 2014, p.93). Ostiguy extends the concept of discourse to encompass performance, which includes “issues of accent, levels of language, gestures, and ways of dressing” (Ostiguy, 2017, p.77), which are all designed to appeal to specific sociocultural categories of the population. Paulina Ochoa Espejo describes populism as “a type of performance of political relations” (Espejo, 2017, p.619). Collectively, these scholars - and a host of others - have helped shape what Moffitt calls the discursive-performative approach to populism (Moffitt, 2020, pp.21-25). It is an approach that is particularly helpful in terms of unpacking the inner workings of charismatic leadership in left populism and will be relied on throughout the thesis.

In subsequent chapters, the research will analyse the discursive construction of the “popular identity” (Laclau, 2005b, p.77) that unites the populist leader to their followers. The case study chosen for this research is taken from left populism, and it is worth noting that there are some differences between the ways in which right-wing and left-wing populists construct the people in their rhetoric. Regarding the discourse of right and left populism, Laura Grattan highlights their diametrically opposed aspirations:

Laura Grattan distinguishes “the cruel aspirations” of right-wing populism - which is fuelled by resentment and displaces the people's aspiration to power by acclaiming the rule of demagogues - from what she theorizes as “aspirational democratic populism”. (de la Torre, 2019, p.2)

Whereas right-wing populists will generally draw the distinction between the people and the non-people along ethno-nationalist lines, left-wing populists will tend to draw the distinction between the subaltern and the so-called 1% (the wealthiest members of society). The former will exclude certain subaltern groups, whereas the latter will bring them in from the margins of society. To illustrate this point, the two short quotes below provide an indication of the kinds of terms used by right-wing populist Jair Bolsonaro and left-wing populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador when referring to their countries' indigenous populations (economically subaltern in both cases):

He [Bolsonaro] has referred to native peoples as 'stinking Indians, uneducated and non-speakers of our language', noting that 'Afro-descendants don't do anything, [I don't even think] they are any use as breeders.¹⁰

(Zanotti and Roberts, 2021, p.41)

We will give special attention to the indigenous peoples of Mexico. It is an ignominy that our native peoples have lived for centuries under oppression and racism, under the yoke of poverty and marginalisation.¹¹

(López Obrador, cited in Gutiérrez Falcón, 2021, p.15)

Although these examples are taken from opposite ends of the spectrum, such discourses illustrate the fact that right-wing and left-wing populists do not construct the people (in this case: indigenous communities) in the same way at all (uneducated and useless for the former, marginalised and oppressed for the latter). Nor will right-wing and left-wing populist leaders necessarily resort to the same type of discourse to forge a collective identification with the people on

¹⁰ "Se ha referido a los pueblos nativos como 'indios hediondos, no educados y no hablantes de nuestra lengua', señalando que 'los afrodescendientes no hacen nada, [creo que] ni como reproductores sirven."

¹¹ "Vamos a darle atención especial a los pueblos indígenas de México; es una ignominia que nuestros pueblos originarios vivan desde hace siglos bajo la opresión y el racismo, con la pobreza y la marginación a cuestas."

behalf of whom they make a representative claim. The right-wing populist leader may emphasise wealth and personal success, since this enhances their perception as an extraordinary and admirable leader in the eyes of their followers, who expect their leader to understand them, but not necessarily to share their (modest) socio-economic status.¹² The left-wing populist leader, on the other hand, needs to convincingly portray themselves as extraordinary (exceptionally capable) whilst at the same time emphasising their ordinary (approachable and down-to-earth) side, because their followers are more likely to trust them if they perceive them as one of their own, not as someone whose social status puts them on a par with the elite. It is a point that will be discussed further in the thesis; for now, it is simply worth noting that right and left populism differ in their conceptualisation of the people, and that this has a bearing on the popular identity that their discourse seeks to construct (equality and social justice being more prevalent in the discourse of the Left).

Having outlined the background to the present research and the strands of scholarship to be engaged with, the next section sets out the problem encountered in the existing academic literature.

1.4 Problem Identified in the Literature

Within the existing literature, all too often, charismatic populist leaders are dismissed as manipulative demagogues and opportunists, and their voters are portrayed as incapable of making informed political choices. As Ostiguy puts it:

Normatively, it is difficult to avoid a conception of populism in light of which its followers cannot but be apprehended as "lacking sophistication", whether because they easily fall for simplistic

¹² Donald Trump is a good illustration of this phenomenon: an extremely wealthy right-wing populist whose discourse consistently defends ordinary people and who has gained the unwavering support of his followers, difference in social status notwithstanding. Similarly, the Le Pen family are known for their great personal fortune, and their less affluent support base stands by them regardless.

Manichean categories (as in Mudde) [or] are easily led astray by ambitious and not overly scrupulous leaders (as in Weyland).
(Ostiguy, 2017, p.73)

It is an approach that appears to overlook the possibility of charismatic populist leaders actually pursuing a political project that might be beneficial to ordinary people. Furthermore, it seems to deny populist constituencies any agency in the matter. It fails to acknowledge that charismatic populist leadership speaks to the electorate, particularly to the disengaged and the disaffected - "those who have no part", to use Jacques Rancière's terms (Rancière, 1999, p.14).

Charismatic populist leadership wins votes. It may even win elections. It may, ultimately, effect societal change - in either positive or negative terms, which is why it is both a significant and relevant area of contemporary political research. It should certainly not be hastily dismissed or derided; rather, it is a phenomenon that warrants careful analysis. The aim of this thesis is neither to criticise nor to endorse this style of leadership, but rather to conduct an open exploration of how it works in practice.

The Mexican case study presented in this research, a contemporary example of Latin American left populism, challenges some of the assumptions made by the academic literature, many of them based on European examples of right-wing populism. It shows that charismatic populist leaders are not invariably a danger to democracy but may in fact stimulate democratic engagement and facilitate a transformative political agenda. As for their supporters, the case study reveals that they are keen to play their part in the life of the *polis*, without necessarily requiring "clientelist handouts"¹³ (Turcott, 2022, p.11) in exchange for their "mass political support" (Müller, 2017, p.596).

Although a century has elapsed since *The Profession and Vocation of Politics* (Weber, 1919), this thesis argues that there is something profoundly Weberian

¹³ "Dádivas clientelares."

about the leader-led relationship in contemporary populism, in which leaders are regarded by their followers as "inwardly 'called' to the task of leading men" and the led submit to the leader "not because of custom or statute, but because *they believe in him*" (Weber, 1994, p.312 - emphasis my own). Indeed, as evidenced by a number of examples from Latin America (Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Pedro Castillo in Peru), populist followers will remain loyal to their leader, even against the odds, because they perceive the leader as a saviour figure with the wisdom and courage to lead them forward in times of uncertainty and crisis (the dislocation of which Laclau speaks). This faith is arguably central to the phenomenon of charismatic populist leadership. Conversely, those sceptical of charismatic populist leaders will dismiss the leader's every claim, even when these are grounded in facts. In other words, the attribution of charismatic authority owes much to the faith of the beholder.

Owing to the moral dimension attached to populism - described by the ideational school as a battle between the pure people and a corrupt elite - populist leaders are particularly reliant on the faith of their followers, who need to believe that they are engaged in a fight between good and evil, and that their leader represents what is right as opposed to what is wrong. In Laclauian terms, the dividing line of populist logic needs to be antagonistic; there can be no middle ground between the discursively constituted people and the constitutive outside against which it is defined (Panizza, 2005, p.356). As Mouffe would put it, "there is no 'we' without a 'they'" (Mouffe, 2016). Politicians of all hues aspire to be perceived as credible in the eyes of their electorate, but according to Weyland, populist politicians strive for an actual "identification of the leader with the people, and vice versa" (Weyland, 2017, p.59). This requires a more absolute commitment on the part of the supporters. The discourse of charismatic populist leaders therefore tends to involve a stronger appeal to the followers' faith, as this thesis will discuss.

Faith is understood here primarily in the secular sense, as conceptualised by Michael Oakeshott: "man is redeemable in history" (Oakeshott, 1996, p.23). The charismatic populist leader offers their followers a path towards worldly

redemption through personal sacrifice and effort, under their enlightened guidance and following their exemplary conduct. Nevertheless, in profoundly religious societies - such as Mexico, and indeed most of Latin America - it should be noted that the populist leader may also refer to spiritual faith, obliquely or openly inviting their followers to trust in "divine providence for the salvation of mankind" (Oakeshott, 1996, p.23). This thesis therefore discusses the ways in which populist leaders elicit a secular faith in their charismatic leadership (in the Oakeshottian sense), but it also incorporates the question of spiritual faith into the discussion, since it would be impossible to disregard the fact that "Mexicans value religion highly" (Camp, 1994, p.76) and that a spiritual discourse resonates with many Mexican voters.

A populist leader who is capable of inspiring faith in their charismatic leadership is well placed to defeat their political opponents at the ballot box, even if the latter come across as being more experienced in the political arena. Heroic deeds provide the starting point for the leader's perceived charisma. Weber spoke of "revelations, heroism, or other qualities of leadership" of the "prophet" or "war-lord" (Weber, 1994, pp.311-312). In the case of modern-day politicians, to whom the labels prophet or war-lord do not tend to apply, this heroism may take the form of courage, sacrifice and perseverance in the face of adversity. However, heroic exploits are not an everyday occurrence, and populist leaders therefore need to punctuate their public appearances with words and deeds that help sustain the perception of their charismatic aura. Discourse and performance provide the political leader with valuable tools to construct such a charismatic persona before their audiences.

Having set out the problem identified in certain strands of the existing literature, in which "populism is seen as a sort of manipulative tactic by which skilful political entrepreneurs are able to seduce and conduct 'the mob'" (Kaltwasser, 2014, p.496) - an account that fails to recognise the relational nature of charisma, in which both parties have agency - the next section introduces the conceptual framework that will be used to structure the research, namely Zúquete's theory of missionary politics.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

Missionary politics is a concept developed by the Portuguese political scientist José Pedro Zúquete, who has applied the notion to Jean-Marie Le Pen, erstwhile leader of the French Front National (Zúquete, 2013b), Umberto Bossi, formerly the leader of Italy's Lega Nord (Zúquete, 2007), Sá Carneiro, who oversaw Portugal's transition to democracy in the 1970s (Zúquete, 2011b), and Hugo Chávez, the President of Venezuela who sought to radically transform his country under the banner of a Bolivarian¹⁴ revolution (Zúquete, 2008). Exploring both the politicisation of religion and the sacralisation of politics, Zúquete arrives at a concept which he defines as follows:

Missionary Politics is a political religion that has at its center a charismatic leadership, a narrative of salvation, ritualization, and the creation of a moral community invested with a collective mission of combating conspiratorial enemies and redeeming the community from its putative crisis. (Zúquete, 2013a, p.263)

Zúquete's concept of missionary politics provides an ideal conceptual framework for the exploration of the subject matter of this research. It incorporates both Weber's concept of charismatic authority and Laclau's discourse theory (the discursive creation of the moral community), adding to them an element of faith (a narrative of salvation and redemption) which this research will explore to gain a better understanding of charismatic populist leadership. In his writings, Zúquete makes a distinction between the "material" demands of populist constituencies - for example, their expectations regarding "social programmes targeting the poor - subsidizing food, healthcare and education" (Zúquete, 2008, p.93) - and their "nonmaterial" motivations, such as "feelings of love, brotherhood, idealism, and righteousness" which bring them together as a "moral community" (Zúquete, 2017, p.458). The concept of faith,

¹⁴ Named after the independence fighter Simón Bolívar.

which is central to the present research (cf. research question below), falls squarely within what Zúquete calls the "nonmaterial" realm.

1.6 Research Question

Based on the above, and using the Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador as its case study, the thesis will seek to answer the following research question:

What role does faith play in the discursive construction of left populist charismatic leadership?

Faith is a matter of personal trust (*fiducia*). It is a phenomenon that surpasses understanding. Faith is neither knowledge nor certainty; it is belief without proof or evidence (in biblical terms: "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" - Hebrews 11:1). The thesis does not propose to explain it (a task better left to philosophers, anthropologists and theologians), but rather to apply it in context. Nor is its aim to prove that populist followers have faith in their charismatic leader (an impossible task, since faith, by definition, cannot be proven), or to gauge the extent to which this faith is warranted or misplaced, but rather to explore whether faith is a salient element in the discursive construction of charismatic populist leadership, how this faith might be elicited by the leader and how the followers might express it. The thesis will discuss faith under a number of different guises (spiritual faith, but also secular faith - faith in humanity, faith in politics, faith in enlightened leadership) and will explore it from different angles, examining the extent to which the followers' faith (in all its different guises) contributes to their perception of the leader as charismatic, and conversely, deciphering the ways in which the leader's words and deeds draw on the underlying faith of the followers (in all its different guises) in an attempt to convey his own charismatic authority.

Having set out the background to the research, the scholarship with which it engages, the problem identified in the literature and the research question that the thesis will seek to answer, the next section provides an overview of the remaining chapters of the thesis.

1.7 Thesis Outline

In its literature review, chapter two engages with the existing academic scholarship to explain the appeal of missionary politics in twenty-first century Mexico. It starts by reviewing the changing but ever-present religious backdrop to life in Mexico, notwithstanding the country's secular constitutional order. It explores the extent to which AMLO's expressions of religiosity differ from those of his predecessors. The chapter also discusses the phenomenon of political religion - "political movements that show characteristics of traditional religions" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.270) - both in the context of the Mexican Revolution and in AMLO's self-proclaimed Fourth Transformation of Public Life in Mexico (4T). The chapter furthermore explores the prevalence of charismatic leadership in Mexican political history, drawing on the example of one of AMLO's most significant role models, President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). The chapter concludes by arguing that charismatic leadership, political religion and religious fervour have shown themselves to be powerful mobilising forces in Mexican politics, and that Mexico therefore constitutes an enlightening case study for the exploration of missionary politics.

Chapters three, four and five present the main findings of the research, based on an in-depth exploration of three key concepts that form the backbone of Zúquete's definition of missionary politics: the moral community (chapter three), the collective mission (chapter four) and the charismatic leader (chapter five). Each concept is analysed against the background of a particular type of discourse: the president's meetings with local constituents (chapter three), his press conferences (chapter four), and his formal addresses (chapter five). The methods used to analyse the primary data (AMLO's discourse and performance) are inspired by Laclau's post-structuralist discourse theory (cf.

subsection 1.8.1) and Jeffrey Alexander's theory of cultural pragmatics (cf. subsection 1.8.2).

Chapter three discusses an empty signifier (in Laclauian theory: a sign that organises discourse, but which is only given meaning through its articulation with other signs) that lies at the heart of AMLO's political rhetoric, namely the people. It explains how AMLO discursively constructs the people as a moral community that includes both the morally righteous leader and the morally upright people, arguing that it is Mexico's indigenous communities who find themselves at the heart of the president's construction. It discusses the affective identification required to sustain this particular construction of the people as a moral community. In a detailed analysis of a meeting held with Mazahua and Otomí indigenous communities in Atlacomulco on 8 February 2020, the chapter scrutinises the interaction between AMLO and his audience and places particular emphasis on the elements conducive to eliciting and expressing faith in the discursive and performative construction of the people as a moral community. The chapter concludes by arguing that it is through his construction of a public persona that is both ordinary and extraordinary - one of the people, yet at the same time a *primus inter pares* - that AMLO is able to inspire and motivate his audience to join his moral community.

Chapter four discusses another empty signifier at the heart of AMLO's discourse: the 4T (Fourth Transformation of Public Life in Mexico). In AMLO's narrative, the 4T represents a collective mission designed to lead the Mexican people from crisis to salvation. The chapter illustrates how the 4T is articulated with a number of different policies and values in the president's discourse, whilst observing that it is most frequently associated with the fight against corruption (which is therefore considered as the essence of AMLO's collective mission). The chapter goes on to explain the format of AMLO's weekday morning press conferences (*Mañaneras*), explaining their significance against the backdrop of AMLO's historically fraught relationship with the Mexican media. It argues that the *Mañaneras* are designed to ensure daily media reporting on AMLO's collective mission, the 4T. The chapter carefully scrutinises one particular press conference, held on 23 February 2023, which I

was able to attend in person. It analyses the content of AMLO's discourse at this *Mañanera*, highlighting the elements that serve to construct the 4T as an eminently moral collective mission. It also looks at AMLO's performance on this occasion and discusses the challenges of seeking to create an affective bond with an audience of journalists who attend the *Mañaneras* in a professional capacity and who may be either receptive to or sceptical of the president's charismatic appeal. The chapter concludes by noting that despite the somewhat adversarial nature of these press conferences, AMLO nevertheless uses these opportunities to try to elicit faith in his collective mission, encouraging his audience (both in the room and at the receiving end of his daily broadcasts) to join him in the transformative endeavour that is the 4T.

Chapter five focuses specifically on the figure of the charismatic leader, the means by which he inspires and motivates his followers to believe in him as someone who is both like them (ordinary) and unlike them (extraordinary), and the inner workings of the charismatic bond that may be observed in the interaction between the leader and the led at large-scale rallies. The chapter analyses AMLO's first public address as President on 1 December 2018 and all his subsequent government anniversary speeches. It begins by examining the staging of AMLO's government anniversary speeches and how this *mise-en-scène* contributes to the projection of AMLO's extraordinary persona. It goes on to unpack the discursive elements of AMLO's public addresses on these occasions, exploring the ways in which they are used to portray AMLO as an ordinary Mexican citizen, yet at the same time an extraordinary Mexican President (a "citizen president" - "*ciudadano presidente*"). The chapter identifies the recurring themes that form the backbone of AMLO's government anniversary speeches, as well as some of the variations over time. The chapter also analyses the president's performance, both on and off stage, and how the crowds respond to it. The president's 2018 speech is dissected in particular detail to reveal the discursive and performative construction of AMLO as a providential leader. The chapter concludes by arguing that the expressions of awe and enthusiasm that may be observed at these large-scale gatherings point towards the centrality of affect and trust in the charismatic bond between AMLO and his followers.

Drawing together all the concepts examined above, chapter six conducts a final in-depth examination of a significant event organised in the fourth year of AMLO's presidency, which drew record numbers of AMLO supporters to the streets in support of their leader. The event took place on 27 November 2022. Marching together through the centre of Mexico City, the president and his supporters symbolically embodied the moral community on its collective mission to defeat the conspiratorial enemies of the people and to lead the country from crisis to redemption and salvation. The chapter discusses AMLO's ability to convey authenticity through a performance in which he invites his followers to perceive him as one of their own. It also discusses AMLO's centrality to the event, his perseverance and the courage he shows by immersing himself in the crowd on this day without any security detail, elements that enhance the extraordinary side of his public persona. The chapter furthermore examines the followers' own expressions of affective identification with their leader, as well as their agency in subverting an opposition narrative that depicts AMLO supporters as manipulated and misguided masses (known in Mexico as *chairos* - guileless supporters of left-wing populist leaders). Through their discourse, the followers make clear that they are neither naive nor motivated by free hand-outs (the clientelist argument advanced by their detractors), but rather inspired by their faith in AMLO's leadership and in his transformative political project, the 4T. The chapter concludes by arguing that AMLO's ability to construct a public persona that is both ordinary and extraordinary, and which is deemed to be convincing in the eyes of his followers, allows him to inspire and motivate them, as evidenced by their enthusiastic participation in the event and their expressions of affect towards the leader. The case study thus supports the view that "beliefs, emotions, and nonmaterial forces, such as symbolism" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.263) matter in the populist leader-led dynamic.

In contrast with previous chapters, which used the leader's discourse as their point of departure, chapter seven examines the phenomenon of charismatic leadership by focussing specifically on the discourse of the led. This is in keeping with the socio-cultural and discursive approach adopted by the thesis, which considers populism as "a two-way phenomenon, centrally defined by the

claims articulated and the connection established between the leader and supporters" (Ostiguy, 2017, p.73). The chapter analyses the results of an anonymous online survey conducted in the final year of this research, in which AMLO supporters were asked to formulate their main reasons for backing the president, in their own words. The primary data is analysed with the help of Lester *et al.*'s (2020) method of thematic analysis (cf. subsection 1.8.3). The chapter organises the survey data into overarching themes that provide valuable insights into the supporters' own perception of the moral community, the collective mission and the charismatic leader. The chapter concludes by noting that many of the respondents' replies corroborate the overall research findings set out in previous chapters.

Chapter eight is the concluding chapter of the thesis. It summarises how this research has contributed to a better understanding of charismatic leadership in left populism, with findings that provide an original contribution to ongoing academic debates in this field. The chapter provides an answer to the original research question and indicates areas for possible future research.

1.8 Methods

Before concluding this introductory chapter to the thesis, the present section provides an overview of the three methods used to analyse the primary data collected for the purposes of this research. Indeed, the thesis uses a mixed methods approach, drawing on the works of Ernesto Laclau, Jeffrey Alexander and Jessica Lester to analyse the data from different angles and to provide a nuanced response to the research question.

All three methods listed below are suitable for the analysis of qualitative data, albeit in slightly different ways: Laclau's post-structuralist discourse theory (subsection 1.8.1) is best suited to discourse analysis, Alexander's theory of cultural pragmatics (subsection 1.8.2) lends itself particularly well to

performance analysis, and Lester *et al.*'s method of thematic analysis (subsection 1.8.3) is designed to assist with the interpretation of survey data.¹⁵

1.8.1 Post-Structuralist Discourse Theory

Laclau's post-structuralist discourse theory (PSDT) is the method drawn upon for the discourse analysis conducted in chapters three, four, five and six. The transcription of all the speeches that served as the primary data for this discursive analysis may be found by using the link in Appendix A.

Each of these chapters is structured around what Laclau would call an empty signifier: the moral community, the collective mission and the charismatic leader, respectively. As Jørgensen and Phillips explain, empty signifiers are "privileged signs" which are "empty in themselves" but "around which a discourse is organised" (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002b, p.28). The meaning of each sign is "contingent" and "determined by its relations to the other signs" (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002b, pp.25-26). Empty signifiers are invested with meaning through the "chains of equivalence" of other signs that coalesce around them (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002b, p.50).

Chapters three, four, five and six dissect the empty signifiers listed above and the thesis uses the following questions to guide the analysis:

- What signs does AMLO articulate these empty signifiers with?
- What meanings are constructed through these articulations?
- What alternative meanings are excluded?
- What identities are constructed through these articulations?

¹⁵ NB: Chapters one (introduction), two (literature review) and eight (conclusion) did not necessitate reliance on any of the three methods set out in this section.

- What is the constitutive outside against which these identities are constructed?
- What discourses does AMLO draw on?
- What discourses does AMLO seek to displace?

In addition, since the thesis focuses specifically on charismatic leadership, each chapter also pays particular attention to the question of affective identification between AMLO and his supporters and the ways in which these supporters are interpellated by his discourse. Chapters three, four, five and six therefore also explore the following questions:

- In what ways does AMLO's discourse encourage affective investment in the empty signifiers analysed in each chapter?
- How do AMLO's supporters express their identification with these constructions?

1.8.2 Cultural Pragmatics

Having used Laclau's PSDT to analyse AMLO's discourse (in the linguistic sense of the term) in chapters three, four, five and six, the research turns to Jeffrey Alexander's theory of cultural pragmatics (Alexander, 2004) to analyse AMLO's performance in the same chapters. The video recordings of all the speeches that served as the primary data for this performance analysis may be found by using the link in Appendix B.

Alexander makes a distinction between "de-fused" and "re-fused" social performances, which include the public performances of politicians (Alexander, 2004, p.529). De-fused performances come across as "artificial and contrived", whereas re-fused performances appear "convincing and effective" (Alexander, 2004, p.529). Alexander argues that "social performances (...) can be analogized systematically to theatrical ones" and that "in a fused performance,

audiences identify with actors, and cultural scripts achieve verisimilitude through effective *mise-en-scène*" (Alexander, 2004, p.527).

In operationalising Alexander's theory, Théo Aiolfi's 2022 Political Performance Analysis Questionnaire provides a useful lens through which to analyse social performance. Aiolfi unpacks performances using the following categories:

- background symbols and foreground scripts ("the immediate discursive component of the performance that imbues it with meaning" - Aiolfi, 2022b, p.81);
- actors, audience and *mise-en-scène* ("the set of aesthetic and dramaturgical choices allowing the performance to take place in a specific time and place" - Aiolfi, 2022b, p.101).

Using Aiolfi's questionnaire as a point of departure, the research explores the following questions in its analysis of AMLO's public performances:

- What are the main background symbols used during AMLO's performances? Why might they have been chosen? What associations do they conjure up?
- What are the main themes and narratives developed in AMLO's foreground scripts? How do they relate to the background symbols? Are the scripts improvised or rehearsed?
- Who are the main actors in the performance? What is their role? How are they dressed? What impact does their presence on stage have on the overall performance?
- Who speaks (and how)? What can one infer from their tone of voice, their body language, their gestures - including their unintended/spontaneous actions or utterances?
- Who is the intended audience of the performance (both *in situ* and beyond, by means of broadcasting)? Does the protagonist make a

representative claim on behalf of the intended audience, and if so, by what performative means?

- To what extent do the actors and audiences interact in the performance? What may be gleaned from these interactions (what are the dynamics / what expressions of affect can one identify)?
- What are the key strategic and aesthetic decisions taken in the choreography of AMLO's performances (*mise-en-scène*)? How are the performances staged (layout, props, visuals, acoustics, lighting, etc.)? What is the overall effect generated by these choices? To what extent do the actors and audiences contribute to the *mise-en-scène*?

(Adapted from: Aiolfi, 2022b, pp.82-96)

1.8.3 Thematic Analysis

Finally, Jessica Lester's method of thematic analysis (Lester *et al.*, 2020) is the approach relied on in chapter seven, which analyses the results of an anonymous online survey organised in the final year of the research. Lester *et al.*'s method of thematic analysis helps researchers produce "broad descriptive statements" that reflect their "overall understanding of the data" emerging from their survey (Lester *et al.*, 2020, p.98). The method allows researchers to apply inductive reasoning to the data collected, taking the participant responses as their starting point, "moving from isolated cases to broader interpretations" (Lester *et al.*, 2020, p.101) and gradually engaging with the research question in an increasingly meaningful way.

Lester *et al.*'s seven phases (Lester *et al.*, 2020, pp.98-103) were applied as follows:

- 1) Downloading the raw data from the online survey tool (Jisc™) through which the online survey had been created and responses from anonymous respondents collected.

- 2) Transcribing the raw data (verbatim) into a single Word document.
- 3) Reading through and conducting an initial analysis of the data corpus, recording a few early reactions.
- 4) Producing memos in response to the data (question marks, potential contradictions, insights, etc.).
- 5) Coding the data, in three stages: First, creating a series of descriptive codes to capture the survey data. Second, revisiting these descriptive codes and reflecting on additional codes that could potentially connect the data to the overall research framework. Third, finalising the coding process by creating new codes that explicitly connected the data to the theoretical framework of the research.
- 6) Developing categories to map the ways in which different codes related to one another and producing themes that reflected the content of all underlying categories, as well as the relationships between them.
- 7) Mapping the analytic process. To this end, the raw data was imported into NVivo™ (a qualitative data analysis software package), with the gradual addition of notes, memos, codes, categories and themes developed through the thematic analysis.

(Adapted from: Lester *et al.*, 2020, pp.98-103)

1.9 Conclusion

This introduction has set out the background to the research, as well as its overall purpose and design. In chapter two, the thesis will turn its attention to Mexico. Kaltwasser has observed that “Latin America is probably the region which has the richest tradition of populists leaders, movements and parties” (Kaltwasser, 2014, p.501). Yet in the overall Latin American context, Mexican populism has received comparatively little academic attention (notable exceptions notwithstanding - cf. *inter alia*: Béjar, 2006; Bruhn, 2012; Ellner, 2020; Kiddle and Muñoz, 2012; Knight, 1998; Loaeza, 2007). Mexican political religion, Mexican religiosity and Mexican charismatic leadership (both past and

present) form the subject matter of the next chapter, a literature review designed to explain the appeal of missionary politics in twenty-first century Mexico.

Chapter 2

The Appeal of Missionary Politics in Mexico

I propose a new politics (...) to halt the decline and bring about the rebirth of Mexico.¹⁶ (López Obrador, 2017, pp.9-10)

2.1 Introduction

The present chapter explains the reasons why I chose Mexico and its current president as a case study of left populist charismatic leadership and missionary politics. Based on a literature review, the chapter will discuss three key factors I have identified which help explain the appeal of missionary politics in twenty-first century Mexico and the reasons why this research is warranted.

Zúquete defines missionary politics in the following terms:

A political religion that has at its center a charismatic leadership, a narrative of salvation, ritualization, and the creation of a moral community invested with a collective mission of combating conspiratorial enemies and redeeming the community from its putative crisis. (Zúquete, 2013 a, p.263)

In this chapter, I discuss three concepts contained in Zúquete's definition of missionary politics: political religion (section 2.2), a narrative of salvation (section 2.3) and charismatic leadership (section 2.4). It will argue that each of these concepts fits well into a Mexican historical and socio-cultural context and help explain the popularity of AMLO's twenty-first century missionary politics. The chapter will also refer to two former Mexican presidents: Vicente Fox

¹⁶ "Planteo una nueva política (...) para frenar la decadencia y lograr el renacimiento de México."

(subsection 2.3.1), whose religious aesthetics make for an interesting comparison with AMLO's manifestations of religiosity, and Lázaro Cárdenas (subsection 2.4.3), whose charismatic leadership may be said to have inspired AMLO's own presidential style.

2.2 Political Religion: A Known Concept in Mexico

For Zúquete, missionary politics constitutes a political religion, which he defines in the following terms:

Political religion refers to political movements that show characteristics of traditional religions such as an emphasis on faith, ritual, communion, dogmas, and an overall ideology that seeks not just piecemeal change but regeneration and, ultimately, salvation. (Zúquete, 2013a, p.270)

The political religion to which Zúquete refers is a secular phenomenon, but one that superimposes itself upon a religious template, with its own dogmas, rituals and ideals. This section will argue that notwithstanding continued widespread adherence to Christianity since the Spanish conquest and generally high levels of religiosity (a point to be developed further in section 2.3), Mexicans were also exposed to what I would call a political religion around the time of the Mexican Revolution. The concept of a political religion is therefore not unknown to a Mexican public. The section will end with an overview of the reasons why AMLO's 4T may also be understood as an attempt to introduce a new political religion for Mexico.

2.2.1 Church and State at the Time of Mexican Independence

Religion has, more often than not, been the power behind the throne of Mexico (Carrasco, 1994; Lira and Muro, 1994). Temporal and spiritual authority have traditionally been wielded together, both in ancient Mesoamerican civilisations,

where military rulers also officiated as high priests, and in the Viceroyalty of New Spain, which incorporated the Catholic clergy into government by Royal Patronage (*Patronato Real*). Upon Mexico's independence in 1821, the initial assumption among the country's political leaders had been that the Catholic Church would continue to play an integral part in state affairs. The first Constitution of 1824 explicitly declared Mexico's state religion to be "Roman, Catholic, Apostolic". It pledged to defend it by law and to prohibit all other religions (UNAM, 2023).

However, as Jennie Purnell explains, with rising resentment over church wealth and privilege, a movement towards secularisation began to gain momentum in some political circles:

Nineteenth-century liberals and twentieth-century revolutionaries believed, above all, that modernization required the secularization of Mexican society and politics. (Purnell, 2006, p.223).

2.2.2 Rising Tensions during Mexico's Reform Period

As part of the effort to curb ecclesiastical influence, liberal governments began publishing a series of political catechisms instructing children “on the merits of republican (and constitutional) government, [...] on the need to temper liberty with duty and obedience, and on the meaning of the nation/patria” (Thomson, 1991, cited in Garner, 2016, p.46). Manuel Ceballos Ramírez writes of early liberal attempts to shape a new secular consciousness:

It was a process of overlapping and displacement from Catholic religiosity to the new religion of the nation. (...) They tried to spread secular values, but dressed up in religious ceremonial and using

concepts of religious origin: civic prayer, altar of the nation, martyrs who gave us a nation.¹⁷ (Ceballos Ramírez, 2000, pp.101-102)

In 1857, under the presidency of Ignacio Comonfort, Mexico's liberal government enacted a new Constitution which abolished church privileges. A civil war, known as the Reform War (1857-1861), immediately broke out between liberal and conservative forces who fought, *inter alia*, over the anti-clerical provisions of the new Constitution. The Republic was re-established in 1861 and under the leadership of Benito Juárez, Mexico's liberal government enacted a series of laws, collectively known as the Reform Laws. These explicitly side-lined the church from civil registry matters (births, deaths and marriages) and suspended the celebration of religious holidays, whilst at the same time respecting individual freedom of worship.

Theoretically, it could be argued that the separation of Church and State enacted through these laws simply rendered unto Caesar what was Caesar's and unto God what was God's (dividing the temporal from the spiritual). Breaking with the previous system of church patronage (Schmitt, 1984), the State would no longer protect the established church, but nor would it interfere with its daily work (Carrasco Altamirano, 2000). In practice, however, the Church stood to lose much of its societal influence by being forced underground (Ugarte, 1993), and conservative forces rallied in its defence, both at home and abroad. The Reform War was thus soon followed by a French-led foreign intervention in 1861 and the imposition of a Habsburg Emperor, Maximilian I, supported by Pope Pius IX. However, the monarchist experience turned out to be short-lived: the Second Mexican Empire collapsed in 1867, and President Juárez returned to govern from Mexico City until his death in 1872. The country subsequently found some form of stability during the 34-year-long rule of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911), who brought a degree of reconciliation to church-state relations. However, Díaz' insistence on clinging to power, despite

¹⁷ "Fue un proceso de traslape y desplazamiento de la religiosidad católica a la nueva religión de la patria. (...) Intentaban difundir valores seculares, pero revestidos del ceremonial religioso y usando conceptos de origen religioso: oración cívica, altar de la patria, mártires que nos dieron patria."

assurances that he would not stand for re-election (a promise he broke six times) eventually led to a revolt, with a presidential challenge lodged by Francisco I. Madero and the outbreak of what became known as the Mexican Revolution. Church-state tensions returned to the surface yet again, this time with renewed force.

2.2.3 Church-State Conflict during the Mexican Revolution

Mexico's protracted civil war was not fought exclusively along clerical / anticlerical lines; land distribution and sovereignty were also central to the conflict. Nevertheless, the question of the position of the Catholic Church in the young Mexican Republic constituted a major source of discord. As Anthony Gill observes, most revolutionaries viewed the church hierarchy as "unremitting enemies of the Revolution" (Gill, 1999, p.770), and the church's support for the 1913 counter-revolutionary coup - the Ten Tragic Days (*Decena Trágica*) that saw the capture and assassination of liberal President Francisco I. Madero, an estimated 5,500 casualties and the appointment of General Victoriano Huerta as the country's new president - only served to confirm their suspicions. The church was clearly on Huerta's side, according to historian Alan Knight: "Sermons were preached and Te Deums sung to welcome Huerta's supposed restoration of order" (Knight, 2016, p.93). When returned to power, in 1914, the revolutionaries would not forget this betrayal. Mindful of the fact that "an appeal to religion is a potentially powerful means of social mobilization" (Gill, 1999, p.765), Venustiano Carranza's triumphant Constitutionalists were determined to wrest power away from the Catholic Church, once and for all (Wójtowicz-Wcisło, 2016). The Constitution they promulgated in 1917 reflected this resolve:

As punishment, the 1917 Constitution not only incorporated the provisions of the 1857 Constitution and the *Leyes Reforma* (1874), but further denied basic civil liberties to the clergy, specifically the freedom to vote and criticize the government. The new constitution also prohibited foreign clergy, outdoor religious celebrations, property ownership by religious organizations (including schools), and recognition

of degrees earned in seminaries. The capstone was the refusal to recognize the legality of any religious organization, effectively denying the church and its personnel due process before the law. (Gill, 1999, p.770)

Expropriating the Catholic Church was clearly not sufficient for the post-revolutionary governments of Mexico, particularly not for the so-called Sonoran dynasty: Presidents Venustiano Carranza (1917-1920), Álvaro Obregón (1920-1924) and the "jubilantly atheist" (Krauze, 1998, p.405) Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928). Their efforts were designed to sap the moral authority that the Catholic Church still commanded over vast swathes of the Mexican population. As Knight puts it:

What was at stake was not simply legal privileges or property rights, but mass allegiances, the hearts and minds of the Mexican people, men, women, and children. (Knight, 2008, p.259)

This concerted effort may be qualified as the introduction of a political religion for Mexico, as will be argued in the next subsection.

2.2.4 The Mexican Revolution as a Political Religion

It was President Calles who seemed particularly determined to uproot Catholicism from the Mexican soul. As the Mexican historian Enrique Krauze puts it: "For Calles, the battle against religion, the crusade for his version of secular enlightenment, had apocalyptic importance" (Krauze, 1998, p.421). Calles' influence would extend beyond his own four-year term of office (1924-1928) into a period known as the *Maximato*¹⁸ (1928-1934), during which he continued to direct government policy from behind the scenes. His strict

¹⁸ In reference to Calles' nickname as the *Jefe Máximo* (supreme leader) of the Revolution.

enforcement of anticlerical laws provoked fierce retaliation on the part of ordinary Catholics (known as *Cristeros*), who interpreted the government's actions as a form of religious persecution (Ugarte, 1995) and who defied the government by declaring their allegiance to Christ the King (*Cristo Rey*). As Ingrid Bleynat describes it, "Catholic peasants went to war against the state in 1926 and fought to the death to keep their religion at the center of their way of life" (Bleynat, 2021, p.72). According to Julia Young, the three-year Cristero War (*Cristiada*: 1926-1929) represented the "culmination of almost two decades of tension between the Catholic Church and the anticlerical Mexican government" and the "single most persistent challenge to state consolidation" during this period of Mexico's history (Young, 2013, p.69).



Figure 1: Cristeros (FSSPX, 2019)¹⁹

¹⁹ NB: All photographic sources are fully credited in Part 4 of the References section.

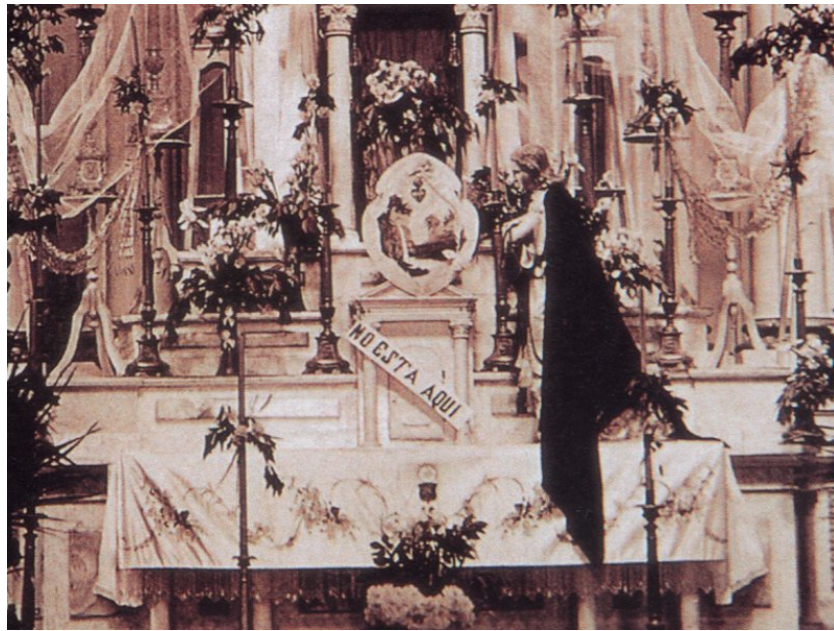


Figure 2: Abandoned Sacrarium (Rosary Chapel, 1997)

Calles was firmly convinced that if Catholicism - "a tissue of superstitions which bemused credulous Mexicans (women especially), retarded progress, divided the nation, and obstructed the redemptive work of the Revolution" (Knight, 2008, p.230) - was to be removed from the Mexican public sphere, it would need to be replaced by another creed. Indeed, as theorists of political religion would argue, in the absence of traditional religion, human beings will tend to "look to new religions that sacralise the human" and "the sacralisation of politics can be interpreted as a modern manifestation of the sacred" (Gentile and Mallett, 2000, p.31).

The post-revolutionary Calles administration went to great lengths to construct a new secular faith around the signifier of the Mexican Revolution. The new political religion had:

- its articles of faith: the Republic and the 1917 Constitution;
- its rituals: an almanac of secular holidays, e.g. Constitution Day (commemorated every 5 February in Querétaro), Labour Day (1 May, introduced by President Álvaro Obregón in 1923) and Mexican Flag Day

(a ritual initiated by President Lázaro Cárdenas, celebrated every year on 24 February);

- its communions: marches and events organised to commemorate Mexico's Independence (the ringing of the bell of Dolores on 16 September to recall Miguel Hidalgo's call to arms against Spain), Reform (the celebration of Benito Juárez' birthday in Guelatao on 18 March) and Revolution (a march organised in Mexico City every year on 20 November to remember Francisco I. Madero's uprising against the *Porfiriato*, the 34-year-long rule by Porfirio Díaz);
- its dogma: the 1917 Constitution, with its unequivocal commitment to the Republic and to the separation of church and state;
- its ideology of salvation - summarised by Knight as follows: "the 'truth of science' [will] sweep away the cobwebs of religion and irrationality" (Knight, 2008, p.260).

These elements chime with Zúquete's definition of a political religion cited in the introduction to this section. Calles' efforts thus constituted an attempt to construct a secular religion designed to entice Mexicans away from the (in his view: reactionary) dogma of the Catholic Church and towards the (in his view: progressive) ideals of the Mexican Republic.

Calles was a teacher by training, and therefore fully aware of the leverage to be gained from educating the young in secular, republican and revolutionary values. The republican school curriculum rolled out by the post-revolutionary governments of Mexico - much to the chagrin of the Catholic clergy, who had long enjoyed a monopoly in the sphere of education - reflected Calles' vision and mission. Knight goes so far as to claim that the State "sought a secular, even 'socialist', citizenry, devoted to the *patria* and loyal to the revolutionary regime" (Knight, 2008, p.263). The pedagogical approach evolved over time, but the aim remained unchanged: educating the masses. While the first post-revolutionary education minister, José Vasconcelos, had sought to introduce Plato and Goethe to a largely illiterate Mexican population, his successors adopted more pragmatic - and arguably less idealistic - methods:

The school (...) became an engine of acculturation and political mobilization; and the school curriculum mirrored the nationalist and class-conscious concerns of the regime. (Knight, 2010. p.243)

However, it was not just the national education system that was called in to help convert the population to Mexico's new political religion: "In addition to the school, the regime of the 1930s could deploy the press, radio, film, sport and public events to disseminate its 'mythic' message" (Knight, 2010, p.257). Rebecca Jarman notes how "in revolutionary Mexico, filmmaking was adopted as a mechanism for securing consensus among populations who had not always had the opportunity to elect their governmental representatives" (Jarman, 2023, p.83). Krauze highlights the particular importance of muralists in this concerted proselytising effort:

In 1921, under Vasconcelos's initiative, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Jean Charlot, Fermín Revueltas, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Roberto Montenegro, and other muralists took over the walls of venerable colonial buildings to express the social gospel of the Revolution. (Krauze, 1998, p.394)

In what might be termed a culture war designed to displace the religious rituals ordinarily celebrated by Mexican families, the revolutionaries also "experimented with secular rites of passage" such as "'socialist' baptisms and marriages - which would break the ideological thralldom of Catholicism" (Knight, 2008, p.261). "The death of Madero, the death of Zapata, the outbreak of the Revolution" (Knight, 2010, p.254) became the new official anniversaries of the republican regime. The literature indicates that post-revolutionary government administrations tried out a variety of methods, such as the appropriation of "Christian language and analogies in order to transfer religious feelings to the Revolution" (Benjamin, 1988, p.313), or the repurposing of religious symbols for their cause in the hope of reaching a broader audience: "The reified Revolution (...) even appropriated Catholic symbols in its manufacture of a public religion"

(Knight, 1992, p.140). This type of appropriation for a new cause was in fact a tried and tested method: the insurgent leaders of Mexican Independence, fathers Miguel Hidalgo and José Maria Morelos, and two of the military leaders of the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa, had also rallied their troops around the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe, long the signifier of the Spanish Crown's spiritual authority over New Spain, now a most "*Mexican* virgin" (Krauze, 1998, p.73) and the "Queen of Mexico" (Hamnett, 1999, p.134).



Figure 3: Miguel Hidalgo (Economista, 2023)



Figure 4: Villa and Zapata (Prensa Latina, 2022)

The efforts deployed by the post-revolutionary leaders of Mexico to spread a new secular gospel appeared to bear fruit and the literature suggests that the new political religion was assimilated quite rapidly by the population:

By the 1960s (...) many Mexicans had internalized the values (...) of the Mexican Revolution. The early surveys show that, while Mexicans entertained a healthy scepticism about politicians, trade unions and (above all) the police, they still placed faith in the goals and aspirations of the Mexican Revolution. (Knight, 2010, p.261)

However, Calles' prediction that "each week without religious ceremonies will cost the Catholic religion 2 percent of its faithful" (Krauze, 1998, p.421) did not come to pass (as section 2.3 will illustrate). Mexicans' "baseline religiosity" is well-documented (Tuckman, 2012, p.142) and hard to displace. The new political religion did catch on, but it did not displace the old spiritual religion. Catholicism had "deep and ancient reservoirs to draw upon" (Knight, 2010, pp.258-259) and Calles' persecution of the clergy "had neither eroded religion nor broken the Church" (Knight, 2016, p.101). As the historian Jesús Silva Herzog puts it: "We, the Mexicans, have two deities: Our Lady the Virgin of Guadalupe and our Lady the Mexican Revolution" (Herzog, cited in Florescano, 1995, p.21). Most Mexicans embraced the ideals of the Revolution without surrendering their spiritual beliefs, as Roderic Ai Camp explains:

Both in school and at home, Mexicans typically have been raised in a contradictory social milieu that indoctrinates young people in nineteenth-century Mexican liberalism while providing them with moral points of reference within the dominant Catholic-Latin culture. (Camp, 1994, p.7)

The Mexican Revolution had been a hard-fought battle and the revolutionaries, albeit ultimately victorious, were keenly aware of the risk of further "conservative reaction" against their "political and ideological offensive" (Rivera, 2013, p.585). It was not until President Lázaro Cárdenas' term of office (1934-1940) that a truce was finally reached. Rather than provoking the Catholic

Church as Calles had done, Cárdenas preferred to keep the clergy in check by using more subtle means. Anticlerical provisions remained on the statute book, but Cárdenas soft-pedalled their enforcement; the provisions acted as a backstop, lest the clergy should show renewed signs of rebellion against the post-revolutionary secular state. An accommodation was thus reached, with constitutional guarantees protecting the individual right to freedom of religion, whilst at the same time prohibiting elected officials from using religion for political ends, and forbidding members of the clergy from voicing political opinions.

To safeguard this pragmatic accommodation, the Revolution needed its praetorian guard. Government business could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the "conservative reaction" (Rivera, 2013, p.585), lest the hard-won principles of the Revolution (including secularism) be lost. Since Francisco I. Madero's principle of non-renewable terms for political officeholders was considered sacrosanct by the new regime - it was, after all, the spark that had set the Revolution alight - thoughts began to turn to the institution of single-party rule, instead. As Steve Ellner notes, this tactic proved successful, albeit at the cost of free and fair elections:

The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party - PRI), which remained in office until 2000, cultivated an image as the heir to the Mexican Revolution in order to enhance its legitimacy and compensate for its status as a perpetual ruling party without real competitors. (Ellner, 2020, p.5)

The political religion centred around the signifier of the Mexican Revolution was thus kept alive by the PRI. However, over time, corruption, fraud, violence and social injustice eroded the myth of the revolutionary state (the so-called "revolution made government").²⁰

²⁰ "Revolución hecha gobierno".

2.2.5 The 4T: A New Political Religion for Mexico?

The political religion constructed around the Mexican Revolution had proven effective for a while, and its lasting legacy may still be seen in the fact that most Mexicans, whilst predominantly Christian, refuse to accept church interference in political life (Camp, 1994, p.8). The *modus vivendi* established under the Cárdenas regime, which marked a truce between the Catholic Church and the secular Mexican Republic, was largely adhered to during the first few decades of the post-Revolutionary government, with the PRI working hard to consolidate the secular legacy of the Mexican Revolution without deliberately antagonising the Church. It was a pragmatic accommodation designed to keep the peace.

However, owing to an increasing cognitive dissonance between the rhetoric of the institutional revolutionary state and its lived experience, the political religion of the Mexican Revolution eventually began to lose traction. Alternative forces started rising to the surface and exposing what Tanalís Padilla has called the "myth of the Pax Priísta" (Navarro, 2011, p.107). In rural areas, this took the form of indigenous resistance movements, which organised to protest against the "continuing disconnect between official rhetoric that supported the revolutionary ideal of land reform and official actions that denigrated or blocked it" (Navarro, 2011, p.108). The Catholic Church - specifically its liberation theology wing, which sought to "empower the poor and disenfranchised to understand the structural reasons for inequality and find ways to overcome them" (Doyle, 2022, p.189) through its community-based pastoral work - also "found itself, at times, in opposition to the state, not in the defence of its own interests, as had been the case in the various waves of anti-clerical reform, but in the interests of social justice" (Doyle, 2022, p.186). Evangelisation offered succour to many disenchanted Mexicans, and the proliferation of evangelical churches from 1992 onwards (cf. section 2.3) - especially in the southern states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche and Quintana Roo - confirmed this trend in later decades. For those looking for salvation in this life rather than the next, there was also the alternative of a new political religion, "an overall ideology that [would seek] not just piecemeal change but regeneration and, ultimately, salvation (Zúquete, 2013a, p.270). AMLO's alternative project for the nation, the

4T, contained many of the salient elements listed by Zúquete in his definition of political religion (cf. section 2.2):

- its articles of faith: the various leitmotifs that run through AMLO's public discourse (to be discussed extensively in chapters three, four, five and six) - to name but one example, the firm belief that the fight against corruption will redeem the nation;
- its rituals: the president's *Mañaneras* (cf. chapter four) and his weekly meetings with constituents around the country (cf. chapter three);
- its communions: the large-scale rallies at which 4T supporters come to express their support for the president (cf. chapters five and six);
- its dogma: AMLO's mantra of always putting the poor first ("*primero los pobres*"), in all areas of governance - a phrase that bears more than just a passing resemblance to liberation theology's "preferential option for the poor";²¹
- its ideology of regeneration and salvation, reflected in the name of AMLO's party, Morena (National Regeneration Movement) and in its slogan (Hope of Mexico).²²

The 4T may therefore be understood as an attempt to introduce a new political religion for Mexico. It is too soon to gauge whether it will find the same acceptance as the one constructed around the signifier of the Mexican Revolution, but what one can state at this point is that it captured the imagination of the electorate in 2018, providing a landslide victory for both AMLO and Morena. At the time of writing, AMLO is approaching the end of his presidential term, but the president-elect, Claudia Sheinbaum, who campaigned on a pledge to "keep making history" ("*sigamos haciendo historia*") that echoed AMLO's own 2018 campaign slogan "together we will make history" ("*juntos haremos historia*"),²³ won an even larger landslide victory than her predecessor

²¹ "Opción preferencial por el pobre."

²² Esperanza de México.

²³ In 2018, Morena stood on a coalition platform with the PT (Labor Party) and PES (Social Encounter Party). In 2024, Morena is running in coalition with the PT and the

in the polls on 2 June 2024. This would indicate that the proposed new political religion has not only gained but also retained quite a number of followers.

In conclusion, the argument advanced by this section has been that political religion is not an unknown concept in Mexico, and that despite their "high levels of religiosity" (Camp, 1994, p.7), Mexicans have proven receptive to a political religion in the past. AMLO's 4T may be interpreted as an alternative political religion for the country, in accordance with Zúquete's definition. At this point, judging by the opinion polls, the majority of Mexicans seem willing to adhere to it. The 4T has already introduced a number of changes to the way in which the country is governed (the principle of government austerity - *austeridad republicana* - being one obvious example); however, it is too early to determine whether it will actually bring Mexico "regeneration" and "not just piecemeal change" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.270).

The next section will discuss the significant role played by religion in Mexico, which acts as a second factor contributing to the appeal of missionary politics in modern-day Mexico. Following an overview of the status of religion in contemporary Mexican society and the significance of Mexico's secular Constitution of 1917 (still in force today), the section will move on to discuss AMLO's appeals to the religiosity of his electorate. Indeed, throughout his many years in the public eye, from his early engagement with politics in his home state of Tabasco to the culmination of his political career as Mexico's President, AMLO has not refrained from using religiosity as an element in the construction of his public persona. Like any other Mexican president, he knows that a religious register resonates well with a Mexican electorate, thanks to what Richard Holloway calls "the residual power of Christianity in our society" (Holloway, 1999, p.139). One of the issues identified in the literature is that AMLO seems to have been more harshly criticised than his predecessors-in-office for his manifestations of religiosity. Section 2.3 will discuss why that might be.

2.3 Narrative of Salvation: Appealing to Mexican Religiosity

"Let no one be alarmed when the word Christianity is mentioned. Christianity is humanism."²⁴ (López Obrador, 27.10.2019)

Religion has traditionally occupied a central position in Mexican society, and spiritual religion continues to play an important role in the everyday lives of Mexicans. The 2020 population census revealed that 77.7% of the population identified as Roman Catholic, with another 11.2% declaring a Protestant or Evangelical faith, 8.1% stating that they subscribed to no religion and 2.5% not specifying any particular religious affiliation (INEGI, 2020).²⁵

²⁴ "Que nadie se alarme cuando se mencione la palabra cristianismo. Cristianismo es humanismo."

²⁵ INEGI: National Institute of Statistics and Geography.

<u>Grupo religioso</u>	<u>Población</u>
Católico	97 864 218
Protestante/ cristiano evangélico	14 095 307
Judaico	58 876
Islámico	7 982
Origen oriental	29 985
Raíces étnicas	33 372
Raíces afro	40 799
Espiritualista	36 764
Otras religiones	40 391
Sin religión	10 211 052
Sin adscripción religiosa (creyente)	3 103 464
No especificado	491 814

Figure 5: 2020 Census (INEGI, 2023)

As Charlene Floyd points out, "Catholicism is a key component of Mexican national identity and has been for almost 500 years" (Floyd, 1996, p.144). As seen in section 2.2, the influence of the Catholic church was viewed with much suspicion by many of the country's revolutionary leaders (in particular, the northern generals who formed part of the Sonoran dynasty and who went on to lead the country after the armed phase of the Revolution). The battle between pro- and anti-clerical forces had led to a huge loss of lives in the Cristero War; therefore, in order not to open up the wounds of the past, Church and State reached a pragmatic accommodation under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). The Catholic Church largely kept out of national politics under the

first cluster of PRI governments (1940s-1970s), turning its attention to community-based social justice instead. It was only with the advent of more neoliberal PRI governments from the mid-1980s onwards that it began to make its voice heard again on the national stage. For instance, when the government of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) proposed to legalise abortion, the Catholic Church was quick to organise resistance, and the proposal was withdrawn. Similarly, when Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) proposed to introduce same-sex marriage in 2016, Cardinal Norberto Rivera made public the Catholic Church's opposition to this initiative, and the bill failed to obtain the required majority in the legislature.

Conversely, on the strength of its community work, the liberation theology wing of the Catholic Church began calling out human rights violations committed by the Mexican State. The intervention by Bishop Samuel Ruiz García in defence of indigenous communities in Chiapas and his role as a mediator between the PRI government and the insurgent Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in 1994 made headlines around the world.

Protestant churches, long since sidelined both by the Mexican State and by the Catholic majority, also became more vocal over time, demanding the effective recognition of their equal rights as religious congregations, more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Technically, President Calles had placed Protestant churches on an equal footing with the Roman Catholic Church during his term of office, but it was not until the liberalisation of religious practice introduced by President Salinas' Regulatory Act of 1992, and the advent of modern communications platforms, that their proselytising work could begin in earnest. As Gill points out:

The biggest benefactors from a strict application of the LR [Regulatory Act] would be the evangelical Protestant churches that have already gained a foothold in Mexico. By legalizing religious organizations and declaring freedom to worship as one chooses, the LR effectively

grants evangelicals equal protection before the law, something that they have always lacked. (Gill, 1999, pp.780-781)

What the Protestant churches had to offer their faithful was appealing: spiritual salvation in the afterlife, but without the historical baggage of the Catholic Church. Just over a tenth of the Mexican population now belong to a Protestant church, which includes both historic Protestant denominations (Presbyterians, Baptists, etc.) and more recent Evangelical congregations (in particular: Pentecostals) (de la Torre *et al.*, 2017, pp.185-187).

Suffice it to say that religion is alive and well in Mexico. Consequently, in a country where approximately 90% of the population identifies as Christian (INEGI, 2020), giving voice to one's religious convictions seems an obvious way for a politician to signal that they are one of the people, and to thereby form an affective bond with said people. The problem is that constitutionally, Mexico is a secular country, which renders this particular form of collective identification problematic for any Mexican political leader. On the one hand, article 24 of the Mexican Constitution guarantees freedom of religion:

Every person has the right to have freedom of ethical convictions, of conscience and of religion, and to have or to adopt, as the case may be, the one of her preference.²⁶

On the other, it prohibits the use of religion for political ends:

No person is allowed to use these public acts of religious expression with political ends, for campaigning or as means of political propaganda.²⁷

²⁶ "Toda persona tiene derecho a la libertad de convicciones éticas, de conciencia y de religión, y a tener o adoptar, en su caso, la de su agrado."

²⁷ "Nadie podrá utilizar los actos públicos de expresión de esta libertad con fines políticos, de proselitismo o de propaganda política."

This principle, which dates back to the liberal reforms of President Juárez, puts Mexican political officeholders in a quandary. Most Mexican politicians subscribe to a religion - overwhelmingly: Catholicism - as do most Mexicans, but in the public domain, politicians must uphold the values of the secular republic and eschew religious manifestations. In practice, the pragmatic accommodation between Church and State reached under Cárdenas, which compelled politicians to observe a dichotomous split between private belief and public office, posed quite a challenge for his successors, many of them keen to show their Catholic colours to their electorate. The tension proved untenable, and from the 1970s onwards, Mexican presidents began to fall into temptation, crossing the constitutional line and indulging in displays of religiosity, even though they were technically forbidden from doing so. Pictured below, in Figures 6-11, one may see Presidents Luis Echeverría (1970-1976), José López Portillo (1976-1982), Carlos Salinas (1988-1994), Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) in their publicly documented meetings with the Pontiffs of their times.



Figure 6: Echeverría / Pope Paul VI (Quién, 2022)



Figure 7: López Portillo / Pope John Paul II (Vanguardia, 2022)



Figure 8: Salinas / Pope John Paul II (Cambio, 2018)



Figure 9: Zedillo / Pope John Paul II (Milenio, 2024)



Figure 10: Calderón / Pope Benedict XVI (Notimérica, 2012)



Figure 11: Peña Nieto / Pope Francis (Huffpost, 2016)

2.3.1 Vicente Fox's Religiosity

The Mexican sociologist Bernardo Barranco has repeatedly expressed his concern about lax constitutional compliance on the part of modern-day Mexican presidents: "If the President doesn't comply with the law, then nobody else will feel compelled to do so, either"²⁸ (Barranco, 2018). In the long succession of Mexican presidents keen to be photographed with the Pope (see above), there is one example that warrants particular attention: President Vicente Fox (2000-2006), who crossed the constitutional line on several occasions during his mandate (and seemingly without hesitation).

In the year 2000, Fox was elected as Mexico's first non-PRI president in over seventy years. It was an important moment in Mexico's history, signalling a transition to genuine democracy and free and fair elections. Fox was the candidate of the PAN, a party formed in 1939 as a specifically Christian conservative opposition party to the hegemonic PRI. Fox was quick to transgress against the country's secular Constitution, nailing his religious colours to the mast straight away. During his election campaign, he would proudly unfurl a banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe, shouting "death to bad

²⁸ "Si el Presidente no cumple la ley, nadie más se siente obligado a hacerlo."

government!", thereby referencing the Catholic priest Miguel Hidalgo who had led the Mexican War of independence (cf. subsection 2.2.4).



Figure 12: Fox Campaign (Nación321, 2024)

On the day of his presidential inauguration, Fox stopped off for a prayer and took communion at the Basilica of our Lady of Guadalupe, before making his way to Congress to pledge his oath to the country's secular Constitution.

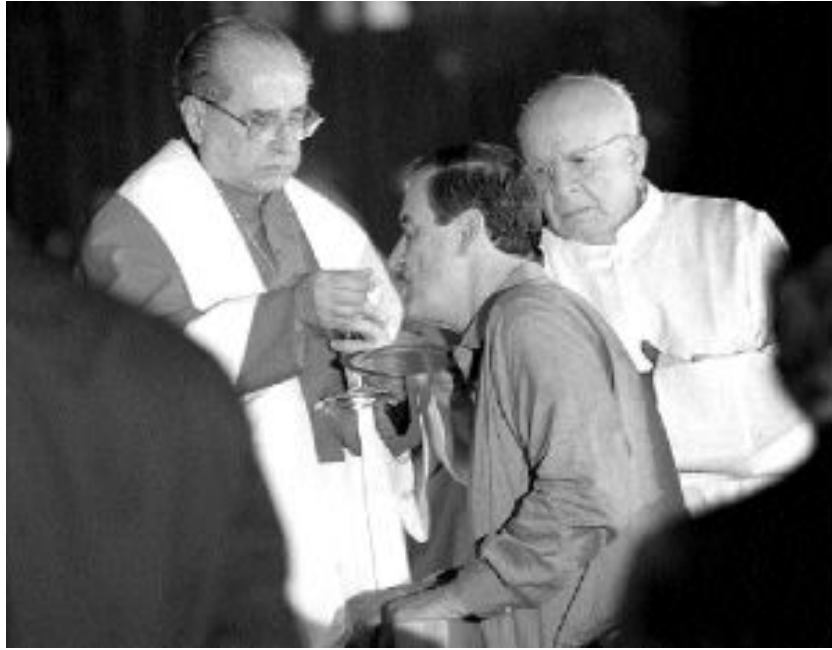


Figure 13: Fox Communion (Jornada, 2000)

During the actual inauguration ceremony, Fox's daughter ran up to him on the podium to present him with a wooden cross.



Figure 14: Fox Crucifix (Político, 2021)

Two years into his presidential mandate, in 2002, Fox welcomed Pope John Paul II on his visit to Mexico. Controversially, he stooped to kiss the papal ring.



Figure 15: Fox / Pope John Paul II (Replicante, 2011)

The gesture was considered by some as a provocation, and by others as an inappropriate act of submission to the Holy See by the head of state of a secular country.

The religious aesthetics of President Fox were certainly visible for all to see - one might even go so far as to say that the president relished these photo opportunities, and to some extent courted controversy, "breaking the unwritten rules about how politicians are 'supposed' to conduct themselves", to use Moffitt's words (Moffitt, 2016b, p.52). The image that Fox sought to project was that of an ordinary, unsophisticated, plain-talking Mexican, and being captured on camera with the iconic signifiers of Mexican Catholicism - the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Pope - helped convey that image.

In addition to his religious aesthetics, Vicente Fox also peppered his discourse with references to religion. At his swearing-in ceremony, for instance, he spoke of a "great crusade for order and respect"²⁹ that would begin that day (Fox, 2000) to rid the country of PRI corruption. Over the course of his presidential mandate, he would frequently end his speeches with the words "God bless you"

²⁹ "Hoy iniciamos una gran cruzada por el Orden y el Respeto."

("Que Dios los bendiga"). These transgressions did not go unnoticed. Barranco, for instance, has criticised Fox for using religious aesthetics in breach of Mexico's secular constitutional principles. He attributes the president's 2002 gesture of submission before the Pope to a desire to overcome plummeting public approval ratings. As it happens, the papal encounter of 2002 turned out to be quite an effective publicity stunt for Fox: an opinion poll conducted a few days later by the large-circulation *Reforma* newspaper indicated that 60% of respondents actually approved of the president kissing the papal ring, and only 23% disapproved. His performative religious fervour seemed to endear him to many Mexicans.



Figure 16: Polling (Reforma, 2002)

In fact, with a few notable exceptions (including Bernardo Barranco and Roberto Blancarte, both staunch defenders of Mexican secularism), the literature shows that Fox's constitutional transgressions were largely shrugged off as normal. He was, after all, a PAN president, a party with strong Catholic roots, and he had never made a secret of his Catholic faith. His political allies

argued that his religious aesthetics were a sign of his authenticity. His Home Secretary, Santiago Creel,³⁰ trivialised Fox's constitutional transgressions by arguing that "the president had used his religious freedom without pretence"³¹ (Creel, 2016). Upon Fox's election, Enrique Krauze praised the breath of fresh air brought to Mexican politics by the president-elect: "Vicente Fox has (...) strength, charisma, a gift for words - not flowery, but direct, plain and effective - the ability to summon the faith, enthusiasm and even the dedication of the masses"³² (Krauze, 2000). None of these attributes were considered perilously populist by the eminent historian, who even recommended that Fox use plebiscites to encourage citizen participation - precisely one of the methods for which AMLO has been charged with populism by his critics.³³

2.3.2 AMLO's Religiosity

Having examined Fox's numerous expressions of religiosity, which were largely considered normal for a PAN president, the next subsection will discuss AMLO's expressions of religiosity, which are generally considered populist in the political-strategic sense: i.e. opportunistic. It is entirely logical for AMLO to come under criticism for his allusions to religion, which are not in the spirit of the Juarista tradition³⁴ to which he repeatedly pledges his allegiance. However, what is less understandable is why AMLO's religious aesthetics are considered more populist than those of his predecessors. The present subsection will put forward my findings and conclusions on this point.

³⁰ PAN Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies during AMLO's mandate (2022-2023).

³¹ "El presidente había uso de su libertad religiosa sin simulaciones."

³² "Vicente Fox tiene (...) fuerza, carisma, don de la palabra - no florida, pero sí directa, llana y eficaz, capacidad de convocar la fe, el entusiasmo y hasta la entrega de las masas".

³³ For the sake of completeness, it is worth noting that Krauze later went on to decry Fox's poor presidential performance, pointing out that his highly effective campaign rhetoric had not translated into the political change that his electorate had been promised. However, like many other Mexican political observers, Krauze charged Fox with inertia, rather than populism, performances of religiosity notwithstanding.

³⁴ Named after President Benito Juárez, the architect of Mexico's liberal reforms (*la Reforma*) which separated matters of church and state.

Many of AMLO's religious manifestations are restricted to his social media communications (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube), as in Figure 17, where he is featured holding hands with his wife Beatriz over a Tzotzil nativity scene in 2022.



Figure 17: Nativity Scene (LatinUS, 2022)

However, some of them are incorporated into his official discourse, as in the case of a video clip he produced in 2020 in which he referenced Pope Francis in support of his own policies: "Pope Francis has said that helping the poor is not communism"³⁵ (Milenio, 2020) The National Electoral Institute (INE) subsequently asked AMLO to remove the video clip, following complaints by opposition parties that it contained a religious element, in breach of the Constitution.

³⁵ "El Papa Francisco ha dicho que ayudar a los pobres no es comunismo." The discourse of both men aligns with the principles of liberation theology (preferential option for the poor).



Figure 18: On Pope Francis (Reforma, 2020)

Barranco and Blancarte have noted AMLO's recurring references to religion with concern, in a country governed by a secular Constitution since 1857:

Andrés Manuel López Obrador has turned religion into a political asset. His continuous incursions into sacred texts place us before a president who at times has become a preacher. Not only because of his biblical invocations, but also because he seems to be responding to a divine call to save the homeland.³⁶ (Barranco and Blancarte, 2019, p.9)

One of AMLO's most vocal critics has been Enrique Krauze, who interviewed him in the run-up to his first presidential election campaign in 2006. In his article, Krauze referred to him as the tropical Messiah - tropical because AMLO hails from the tropical state of Tabasco, and Messiah because of the way people seem to perceive his leadership and the way in which AMLO himself appears to encourage such a perception.

³⁶ "Andrés Manuel López Obrador ha convertido lo religioso en un activo político. Sus continuas incursiones a textos sagrados nos colocan ante un presidente convertido por momentos en predicador. No sólo por las invocaciones bíblicas, sino porque pareciera responder a un llamado divino para salvar la patria."

'Mexico needed a Messiah and López Obrador is here', said a banner in Juárez's hometown. But he was the first to encourage those expectations and to believe that he could fulfil them.³⁷ (Krauze, 2006, p.11)



Figure 19: Tropical Messiah (Letras Libres, 2006)

The messianic image has stuck, to some extent because of AMLO's own discourse and performance, which incorporates both biblical references and religious aesthetics, and to some extent because of the way people have

³⁷ "'México necesitaba un Mesías y ya llegó López Obrador', decía una pancarta en el pueblo natal de Juárez. Pero él ha sido el primero en alentar esas expectativas y en creer que puede cumplirlas."

responded to him. Krauze meant it as a term of derision, and AMLO's critics continue to use it as such. This thesis would prefer to approach the qualifier without value judgment, and to simply explore the manifestations of this supposed messianism, as well as the charismatic bond that arguably exists between AMLO and his followers.

The messianic aspect of AMLO's leadership was noticeable during his 2018 election campaign, where followers would pray for him, light candles for him and build little altars for him in their homes (a typically Mexican form of religious practice - for instance, on the Day of the Dead, Mexican families erect altars with offerings of food and drink for their dearly departed).



Figure 20: Altar (Voz, 2018)

Evangelical ministers - including child ministers - would lay hands on him and pray for him, as seen in Figure 21 (a child minister in Chihuahua prays for AMLO to win the elections):



Figure 21: Child Minister (Etcétera, 2017)

On the day of AMLO's presidential inauguration, Mexican indigenous congregations spiritually cleansed him and handed him a command staff (*bastón de mando*), which symbolises the trust placed by the community in the political and spiritual leadership of the recipient.



Figure 22: *Bastón de Mando* (Otra Opinión, 2024)

Observing the facial expressions and body language of the various celebrants pictured in Figure 22 (cf. also: Figures 63-67), as well as the meditative look

and central position occupied by AMLO in these photographs, it would be difficult not to associate these images with a certain form of messianism.

Since AMLO became president, this form of affective engagement, which I would argue reveals a charismatic bond between AMLO and his followers, may still be seen in his meetings with constituents, both in the countryside - AMLO travels tirelessly to the most remote parts of the country to meet with local communities - and in cities. As seen in Figures 23-25, people (of all ages) want to touch him. The photographs resemble scenes of veneration of a providential figure.



Figure 23: CDMX Constituents (Imer Noticias, 2020)



Figure 24: Querétaro Constituents (Regeneración, 2020)



Figure 25: Jalisco Constituents (Vanguardia, 2018)

As the holder of the country's highest office, AMLO is obliged to tread a fine line between the liberties and constraints of Mexico's Constitution, which on the one hand guarantees his personal freedom of religion, but on the other forbids him from engaging in "public acts of religious expression with political ends, for campaigning or as a means of political propaganda" (article 24). To some extent, AMLO is careful to respect the separation. The journalist Gabriela Vélez describes it as AMLO's "closet religiosity"³⁸ (Vélez, 2023). Indeed, I have yet to find an official image of the president attending mass or a church service. Similarly, the Government's official recordings of his public addresses do not feature any speeches delivered on Christian holidays: Easter, Christmas, or the birthday of Mexico's patron saint, Our Lady of Guadalupe, celebrated on 12 December.

However, by reaching out in public gatherings to what Kristin Norget calls popular Catholicism, "a form of religiosity linked closely to the official church but existing largely outside its sphere of control" (Norget, 1997, p.67), by forging alliances with evangelical churches - AMLO's winning coalition in 2018 included the evangelical Social Encounter Party (PES)³⁹ - and by nurturing an affective

³⁸ "Su religiosidad de closet."

³⁹ The party failed to obtain 3% of the national vote and was dissolved shortly after the elections.

bond with Mexico's indigenous communities who practice their ancestral traditions (*el costumbre*), AMLO is able to indulge his political instinct and signify the spiritual bond that unites him with ordinary people (just as Villa and Zapata had signalled theirs, by fighting under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe).

AMLO began weaving religious references into his discourse and performance more than four decades ago. In other words, his narrative of salvation did not appear out of the blue in 2018, when he campaigned on a message of hope (Morena: The Hope of Mexico). It can be traced back to his earliest political interventions. Below, the section provides a list of some of the salient moments in AMLO's political trajectory that all carry religious overtones.

- The protest march from Tabasco to Mexico City that first brought AMLO to the attention of Mexican public opinion (November 1991 - January 1992) was called the Exodus for Democracy (*Éxodo por la Democracia*). The name is reminiscent of Moses leading the exodus of the Israelites.



Figure 26: Exodus for Democracy (Quadratin, 2018)

- In 2012, in his second presidential campaign, in which he ran against Enrique Peña Nieto, AMLO met privately with the leaders of evangelical churches, who blessed him by laying hands on him and praying for him.



Figure 27: Evangelical Pastors (Siglo, 2012)

- In 2015, on one of his rare trips abroad, AMLO approached Pope Francis in a public gathering in Rome to give him a medallion of Friar Bartolomé de las Casas and a letter in which he told the Pontiff how much he looked forward to his upcoming visit to Mexico. The Pope's spiritual message would keep the flame of hope alive for the people of Mexico, according to AMLO's letter.



Figure 28: Medallion (El País, 2015)

- When AMLO decided to run for president for the third time, he chose to make the announcement on 12 December 2017, the Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. "Third time lucky",⁴⁰ he declared. Few believe that the choice of date was a coincidence.

⁴⁰ "La tercera es la vencida."

← Post



Andrés Manuel ✓
@lopezobrador_



El 12 de diciembre me registraré como precandidato a la Presidencia de la República. La tercera es la vencida.

[Translate post](#)



7:34 PM · Nov 24, 2017

Figure 29: 12 December (Financiero, 2017)

- At a rally in Mexico City, while campaigning for the presidency in 2018, AMLO produced one of the amulets that he carries upon his person at all times, to ward off evil. "Stop, enemy, for the heart of Jesus is with me!",⁴¹ he declaimed. The amulet (one of several produced on different occasions) is a good illustration of his popular religious leanings.

⁴¹ "¡Detente enemigo, el corazón de Jesús está conmigo!"



Figure 30: Amulet (Financiero, 2018)

- In 2018, as a presidential candidate, AMLO expressed his intention to draw up a moral constitution for Mexico. By 2019, this had translated into the distribution of a moral primer (*Cartilla Moral*); in the foreword, AMLO reminded readers that “man shall not live by bread alone” (an extract from a Gospel citation: Matthew 4:4).



Figure 31: *Cartilla Moral* (Forbes, 2019)

- In Figure 32, a picture taken in 2019, AMLO can be seen receiving the blessing of indigenous communities in Guerrero, to protect him against evil and ward off vultures (*zopilotes* - i.e. political opponents who might wish him harm).



Figure 32: Warding off Evil (Diariopresente, 2019)

- The political movement that AMLO now heads is called Morena – officially, an abbreviation of *Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional*, but also a reference to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the dark-skinned Queen of the Americas (*morena* meaning dark-skinned / dark-haired in Spanish).



Figure 33: Virgen Morena (Depor, 2023)

The list goes on. Yet for all his references to spirituality and religious morality, AMLO is also at pains to recall that his revolution is a "revolution of consciousness" (*revolución de las conciencias*) and that it revolves around respect and love for all: believers, non-believers, free thinkers. He appeals to all Mexicans to put their divisions behind them, and to come together and join him in the peaceful transformation of public life in Mexico, after decades, if not centuries, of violence. AMLO summarises his worldview as one of Mexican humanism:

Let no one be alarmed when the word Christianity is mentioned.

Christianity is humanism, all religions have that purpose: humanism, love for one's neighbour. That is social justice. You can call it solidarity, you can call it different things, but it is really about being fraternal with others, about humanism, about not turning one's back on those who suffer.⁴²

(López Obrador, 27.10.2019)

Religious references are a recurring theme in AMLO's political discourse, yet at the same time, he seems open to all denominations and all forms of spiritual belief, as well as humanism. My literature review reveals that AMLO reaches out to all faith communities: Catholic, Protestant and - perhaps most significantly, for reasons that will be explained further on - indigenous congregations who fuse elements of Christian doctrine with pre-Colombian Mesoamerican spiritual practices (*sincretismo*). While AMLO readily admits that he is a believer, he does not tie himself to any specific religion. In fact, he is notoriously cagey about his religious affiliations. In 2018, as a presidential candidate, he described himself as Christian in the broadest sense of the term. That same year, he told a conclave of bishops that he was a Catholic. In June 2020, AMLO described himself as a follower of Jesus Christ. In addition, he

⁴² "Que nadie se alarme cuando se mencione la palabra cristianismo. Cristianismo es humanismo. Todas las religiones tienen ese propósito: el humanismo, el amor al prójimo, esa es la justicia social. A eso se le puede llamar solidaridad, se le puede llamar fraternidad, se le puede llamar de distintas maneras, pero es ser realmente fraterno con los demás, que haya humanismo, que no se le dé la espalda al que sufre."

regularly pays homage to the spiritual values (*valores espirituales*) of Mexico's ancient civilisations.

Based on the above, I would call AMLO's stance on religion ecumenical and his religious aesthetics syncretic, since they incorporate not only different branches of Christianity but also pre-Christian Mesoamerican spiritual practices. Not that this is any more in keeping with the constitutional requirement for him not to use any form of religion for political ends, but it sets him apart from his predecessors. It is AMLO's ecumenicalism / syncretism that arguably hold the key to the perceived populism of his religious manifestations. Presidents Echeverría, López Portillo, Salinas, Zedillo, Fox, Calderón and Peña Nieto limited their religious aesthetics to Roman Catholicism (with one exception: Fox is said to have prayed with evangelical communities on the campaign trail). Constitutionally speaking, all of them transgressed, but AMLO's transgressions are perceived as different and more harshly criticised. To borrow the words of Zúquete, this could be because AMLO's "invocation of the religious is not only a way of distinction *from* but also a transgression *against* the established ways of mainstream political behaviour" (Zúquete, 2017, p.452). The conclusion that I have reached, based on my literature review, is that AMLO's performance of religiosity is considered populist because it represents an act of transgression against the hegemonic religion of Mexico: Roman Catholicism.

Both the political establishment and the Catholic church have done much to keep protestant and evangelical churches on the margins of society. Protestant churches have faced a fair amount of discrimination over the course of their history in Mexico, including severe repression and persecution (Bastian, 1991). However, in twenty-first century Mexico, Protestantism - and in particular: Pentecostalism - has increased its sphere of influence in the country, especially in the states of Chiapas and Tabasco, the South / South-East of Mexico, the poorest and most indigenous parts of the country. These are also communities that practice *sincretismo*. Signalling to these indigenous communities that he stands with them by publicly adopting their spiritual practices is a way for AMLO to construct a collective identity with those who until now have been very much on the margins of society (the "counting of the uncounted", as Rancière might

put it - Rancière, 1999, p.14). Those left behind by neoliberal PRI and PAN governments are now at the heart of the people in AMLO's discursive construction. In other words, through his discourse and his religious aesthetics, AMLO has brought the voice of these subaltern groups into the centre of politics. Applying Laclau's theory, one could argue that through his syncretic religious performance, AMLO has "give[n] voice to the downtrodden and challenge[d] oppressive hegemonic formations" (Dean, 2023, p.6) and that the dislocated establishment has responded by doubting, criticising and belittling AMLO's religiosity - a treatment which they did not inflict on Mexico's openly Catholic presidents.

There are those who would argue that the sole purpose of AMLO's references to religion is to manipulate the masses. Barranco asks, with some concern: "Is AMLO becoming an object of worship for certain sectors, a cult of personality that moves from political to quasi-religious devotion?"⁴³ (Barranco, 2018). There is, however, another possible reading of AMLO's expressions of religiosity. AMLO is a man who for the last forty years has doggedly pursued the same political objectives. His religious references have been just as much of a constant. They may be misplaced, they may come across as old-fashioned, and they may be perceived as moralising, but they are an integral part of his identity, and congruent with his sense of mission, which some biographers have attributed to his mother's words after a near-death drowning accident in his youth: "It was God who saved you because you have a very big mission in life"⁴⁴ (Gil Olmos, 2023, p.24), she is reported to have said.

Based on my literature review, I would argue that AMLO's sense of a mission in life is not necessarily derived from "tactical considerations", "sudden ideas", or "whims" (Weyland, 2017, p.67). It is just as likely to reside in what Father Alejandro Solalinde (cited in Olmos, 2023) has called AMLO's life-long endeavour: to help the poor. According to Solalinde, it is this missionary zeal -

⁴³ "¿AMLO para ciertos sectores se está convirtiendo en objeto de culto? ¿Culto a la personalidad que de lo político pasa a la devoción cuasi religiosa?"

⁴⁴ "Fue Dios quien te sacó porque tienes una misión muy grande en la vida."

or, to use Zúquete's terms, AMLO's missionary politics - that lies at the heart of the faith-based movement that he has succeeded in building up over the decades:

The biblical and Christian references and his charismatic profile as he travelled across the country by land for three decades achieved what no other Mexican politician has achieved: to generate a social movement based on faith. (...) President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has "very important traits of sanctity" because of his work to help "the poor, as Jesus Christ did in his time", according to Father Alejandro Solalinde.⁴⁵ (Olmos, 2023, pp.186-187)

In conclusion, this section has provided some insights into the ways in which modern-day Mexican presidents – and particularly the current incumbent – have incorporated religion into their public persona, even though this is forbidden by the Constitution. As illustrated, AMLO is not the first to have crossed this line: his predecessors also chose to transgress and used religious aesthetics to signal their shared identity with ordinary Mexicans. The difference, in my opinion, is that they flaunted the high (Roman Catholicism), rather than the low (syncretism, Protestantism, evangelicalism) (Ostiguy, 2017).⁴⁶ AMLO's discourse and performance of religion are deemed more populist than those of his predecessors because they represent a transgression against the hegemonic signifiers of Mexican religiosity: Roman Catholicism. The section has also argued that AMLO's performance of religion, which breaks with the dominant tradition of high church Catholicism, has helped him construct a popular identity around the poorest of the poor, which follows a left populist logic of bringing the subaltern into the centre of political discourse.

⁴⁵ "Las referencias bíblicas y cristianas y su perfil carismático al recorrer todo el país por tierra durante tres décadas lograron lo que ningún otro político mexicano: generar un movimiento social basado en la fe. (...) El presidente Andrés Manuel López Obrador tiene 'rasgos muy importantes de santidad', debido a su trabajo para ayudar 'a los pobres, como Jesucristo lo hizo en su época', considera el padre Alejandro Solalinde."

⁴⁶ Ostiguy argues that a high register is "proper", whereas a low register is "warm/direct" (Ostiguy, 2017, p.80).

The final substantive section of this chapter will address a third key factor in the acceptance of missionary politics in modern-day Mexico, namely the prevalence of charismatic leadership in Mexican history.

2.4 Charismatic Leadership in Mexican Politics

At the heart of Zúquete's concept of missionary politics, one finds a charismatic leader. The charismatic leader heads the collective mission of salvation and redemption, to which their followers choose to subscribe "not because of custom or statute, but because they believe in him" (Weber, 1994, p.312). This section outlines two main justifications for analysing charismatic leadership from a Mexican perspective: one is theoretical, in that personalistic leadership is a salient feature of Mexico's structure of governance, and the other is empirical, since the history of Mexico includes some notable examples of charismatic leaders. Relying on the existing literature, the section will address both strands of this argument, before presenting and evaluating the case study of this research, AMLO, and setting out the reasons why the current President of Mexico has been chosen as a contemporary incarnation of charismatic leadership.

2.4.1 Charismatic Leadership in Mexico: Theoretical Arguments

According to the existing academic literature, personalistic leadership has long been an integral feature of Mexican politics. The term "personalistic" is borrowed from the political-strategic school of populism scholarship (Weyland, 2017), but it also overlaps with my own reading of Zúquete's charismatic leader, whose person is central to the pursuit of missionary politics. Although Weyland draws a distinction between ideocratic personalism (doggedly ideological, but not necessarily vote-winning) and pure personalism (the hallmark of opportunistic and unprincipled populism), I would contend that whatever the qualifier, it would be difficult to conceive of charismatic leadership without personalism. It is the central persona of the charismatic leader that drives both

the narrative and the political project forward, for as long as their charisma remains credible in the eyes of the followers.

In the case of Mexico, both personalistic and charismatic leadership have long formed part of the country's political culture. In his writings on the challenges facing nineteenth-century Mexican liberals, Paul Garner (2016) highlights the difficulties they encountered in overturning a political system traditionally premised upon top-down autocratic leadership (*caudillismo*), which left little room for bottom-up republican initiatives:

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a new phase in a series of struggles which had characterised the long and painful process of secular state- and nation-building: the struggle to establish a *modus vivendi* between Mexico's atavistic pre-colonial and colonial preference for hierarchy and authoritarian political structures and the nineteenth-century cult of liberalism and constitutionalism. (Garner, 2016, p.42)

The atavistic preference identified by Garner may be traced back to the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica, whose hierarchical system of government appears to have survived into the present day. According to Ignacio Bernal:

Some forms of [the Mesoamerican] empire endure not only through colonial times, but to the present day. Moctezuma comes to life again in the viceroy, and the presidents of independent Mexico continue to project an image of personal, rather than institutional, caudillos. The government is a person, with all-embracing and almost magical powers.⁴⁷ (Bernal, 1994, p.162)

⁴⁷ "Algunas formas del imperio [mesoamericano] no sólo continúan a través de la Colonia, sino hasta nuestros días. Moctezuma revive en el virrey, y los presidentes del México independiente continúan esa imagen de caudillos personales más que institucionales. El gobierno es una persona, de poderes omnímodos y casi mágicos."

Bernal's remark on the magical powers attributed to the Mexican executive is reminiscent of Zúquete's concept of the re-enchantment of politics which disabused electorates yearn for, according to his analysis (Zúquete, 2017). Armando Bartra would argue that this certainly holds true for Mexico:

We Mexicans (...) have a magical idea of electoral democracy (...) for centuries we expected to get everything from the Virgin of Tepeyac and papá gobierno (daddy government), we still think that changing the president changes Mexico and that with the election of the new tlatoanis (Aztec king), all we have to do is sit back and wait for the new rulers to fulfil their promises. (Bartra, 2015, p.200)

Similarly, using the trope of the Mexican pyramid, Larissa Adler-Lomnitz compares the President of Mexico to an almost god-like figure who decides on the fate of his subordinates during his brief but commanding term of office: "The incumbent president [becomes] the Great Master of the Mexican political pyramid"⁴⁸ (Lomnitz, 2004, p.56). This centralisation of power in the hands of a personalistic leader is arguably facilitated by Mexico's long-established inclination towards political patronage. *Clientelismo* (political patronage) was a hallmark of the PRI era and bolstered the position of the president-in-office, from whom all power descended. However, political patronage was neither invented by the PRI, nor did it vanish with the end of the 71-year institutional revolution and the peaceful government transition from PRI to PAN in 2000. Indeed, according to Raymond Buve, political patronage is almost a given in Mexico: "Systems of political patronage have existed throughout most of Mexican history, linking elites and subordinate groups" (Buve, 1992, p.1). If Buve is correct, then political patronage permeates every level of government, radiating out from the epicentre of power. Applying Lomnitz' analogy of the Mexican political pyramid, therefore, the president's critics have little to gain from giving voice to their dissent, whereas loyal foot soldiers live in hope of

⁴⁸ "El presidente en turno se convertía en el Gran Patrón de la pirámide política mexicana."

being rewarded for their obedience (Lomnitz, 2004). The entire system serves to boost the personal authority of the incumbent.

In a bid to reach the apex of this Mexican political pyramid, charisma can prove to be a great asset for an aspiring political candidate, since the political system is predisposed towards personalism. Highlighting the importance of projecting an aura of charismatic leadership during a winner-takes-it-all electoral campaign such as the Mexican presidential contest, Lomnitz quotes a member of the 1982 campaign team working for Miguel de la Madrid who speaks of the ordinary candidate's transfiguration on the campaign trail: "The election campaign (...) is the process by which a man becomes God"⁴⁹ (Lomnitz, 2004, p.272). This was apparently nothing short of a transfiguration in the case of de la Madrid, whom Krauze describes as a technocrat who "confused prudence with passivity and sometimes with immobility" (Krauze, 1998, p.769). The medium of television - or nowadays: social media platforms - serves to multiply the impact of this charismatic projection: "Especially through television, millions of people received suitable images to present him as the man who decided national destinies"⁵⁰ (Lomnitz, 2004, p.273).

In sum, charismatic leadership is a salient feature of the political culture in Mexico. Mexicans appear to place great faith not only in the state (*papá gobierno*), but also in the person who epitomises the Mexican nation during his term of office (*el Gran Patrón*). This conclusion is endorsed by Roger Bartra, who has argued that in Mexico, "the cult to the charismatic leader is associated with a generalized statolatry" (Bartra, 2013, p.72). Garner (citing Claudio Lomnitz) confirms the strong identification between the president and the nation (or indeed the people, in populist parlance):

⁴⁹ "La campaña electoral (...) es el proceso mediante el cual un hombre se transforma en Dios."

⁵⁰ "Especialmente a través de la televisión, millones de personas recibieron imágenes adecuadas para presentarlo como el hombre que decidía los destinos nacionales."

The president in independent Mexico has always constituted 'the personification of sovereignty' and 'the embodiment of the nation,' and the presidency has always acted as 'a vehicle for imagining sovereignty, building their authority by shaping and embodying these images'. (Garner, 2016, p.48).

It may therefore be argued that the Mexican system of political government, with its long-standing penchant for personalism and strong concentration of power in the hands of the executive, inherently favours charismatic leadership, thereby making it a suitable case study for the purposes of this research. Furthermore, the theoretical assumption above is borne out by empirical observation. Charismatic leaders have made regular appearances in the political history of Mexico, as the next section will illustrate.

2.4.2 Charismatic Leadership in Mexico: Historical Examples

As explained in the introductory chapter, Weber defined charismatic authority as an alternative to traditional or rational-legal authority, using the following terms:

The authority of the exceptional, personal 'gift of grace', or charisma, the entirely personal devotion to, and personal trust in, revelations, heroism, or other qualities of leadership in an individual. This is 'charismatic' rule, as exercised by the prophet or, in the field of politics, by the chosen war-lord or the plebiscitarian ruler, the great demagogue and leader of a political party. (Weber, 1994, 311-312)

Some evident incarnations of Weber's different charismatic archetypes may be found in Mexico's post-colonial history: the prophet Miguel Hidalgo, the war-lord Álvaro Obregón and the demagogue Plutarco Elías Calles are some of the historical figures that immediately spring to mind. Two presidents to whom AMLO regularly refers in his discourse may also be described as charismatic types, owing to their extraordinary leadership qualities: Benito Juárez, who

emerged victorious from every setback he faced (including the Reform War of 1857-1861 and the French intervention of 1861-1867), thereby rendering him heroic in the eyes of many Mexicans, and Francisco I. Madero, who challenged the seemingly unremovable Porfirio Díaz, and who ultimately paid for it with his life, earning him the epithet of the "Apostle of Democracy". While Juárez and Madero may be viewed as significant role models for AMLO, I would contend that the president whom AMLO most resembles is Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). The similarities with Cárdenas are arguably also more evident because he was a modern-day president; technically, AMLO began his political career in the same political party as Cárdenas.⁵¹ Drawing on the academic literature, the following subsection discusses the reasons why Cárdenas may be described as a charismatic leader and how he has influenced AMLO's own style of leadership.

2.4.3 Lázaro Cárdenas: The Sphynx of Jiquilpan

In contrast with many politicians who are labelled charismatic because of their finely honed oratory skills, Cárdenas was reputed to be a man of few words (in this regard, he does not resemble AMLO). One of his nicknames was the Sphynx of Jiquilpan (*la Esfinge de Jiquilpan*), named after his hometown in Michoacán (Basurto, 1969). Yet he proved adept at communicating directly with his constituents, in great part thanks to his congeniality and his listening skills (characteristics that he does share with AMLO). Having risen through the military ranks as a young man, fighting on the side of General Calles in the Mexican Revolution, Cárdenas ran as a candidate for election to the governorship of Michoacán in 1928. He was elected, and quickly became a popular and respected political figure within his constituency. Krauze describes him in the following terms:

⁵¹ NB: The PRI was known at the time as the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) and then as the Party of Mexican Revolution (PRM).

He was a firm and martial reformer like Calles, a convinced idealist like his predecessor in Michoacán [outgoing Michoacán governor] Múgica, a relentless manipulator of the masses - all of it framed within a temperament marked by genuine humanity and communicated almost sweetly. In short, he was the perfect politician. (Krauze, 1998, p.446)

Krauze also emphasises Cárdenas' charisma, in words that correspond to Zúquete's concept of charismatic leadership in missionary politics:

The governor began to fashion a messianic image for himself. (...) His paternal and compassionate presentation of power was in the mold of a benevolent priest, or a missionary father (...) a master of both spiritual salvation and the material well-being of a community. (...) The Tarascan Indians (...) recognized the priest in Cárdenas. (Krauze, 1998, pp.447-448)

Basurto highlights his listening skills, both as governor, and later as president:

He regularly held hours in town plazas, where peasants and workers could sit on park benches and speak with him. Because he always protected and helped Indians, they gave him the nickname 'Tata Lázaro,' or Father Lázaro, in Michoacán. (Basurto, 1999, p.76)

In 1933, Calles named Cárdenas as the next presidential candidate of the PNR (National Revolutionary Party). Cárdenas toured the breadth and length of the country, increasing his support base as he went. Knight has analysed Cárdenas' (not universal, but certainly broad) popularity, attributing much of the allegiance to *clientelismo* - as president, Cárdenas would be in a position to dispense political favours - but part of it also to his charisma:

There was an affective element: the charismatic appeal of the dour, honest, clean-living, frugal, horse-riding, tree-loving, patriotic president;

one who travelled the country incessantly, reaching 'well-nigh inaccessible' places where no president (often no state governor) had previously gone; who hunkered down to talk to peasants in the dusty plazas of remote pueblos. (Knight, 1994, p.80)

Once elected to office, Cárdenas would ensure that his direct and unmediated relationship with the electorate could continue unhindered:

The newly inaugurated President Lázaro Cárdenas (...) installed a direct telegraph line so that the people could send their complaints directly to him. He opened the doors of the National Palace to all the visiting groups of peasants and Indians who wished to see him. (Krauze, 1998, p.457)

The strategy proved effective. In the eyes of his followers, Cárdenas' charisma was sustained by his ability to unite large swathes of the Mexican population behind him. He accomplished this by cumulatively securing the support of different constituencies. First, even though he had been nominated by Calles, he distanced himself from the *Maximato* and eventually sent Calles into exile. He forged his own political vision, one more in keeping with Madero's no re-election reform; unlike Calles, he would not serve as the *éminence grise* of future administrations. The Mexican executive would be reinforced, but the officeholders would change every six years. The days of the *Porfiriato* and *Maximato* were well and truly relegated to history. This ensured the political support of the revolutionaries.

Second, aware of the fractious relations between different groups representing the Mexican working classes - some Marxist, others Trotskyist, others still anarcho-syndicalists, and most of them in open conflict with one another - Cárdenas went to great lengths to incorporate them into an umbrella union, the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). As the architect of this corporatist project, which helped bring about social peace in the decades to come, Cárdenas consolidated his image as the nation's unifier.

Third, he secured a truce with the Catholic Church (cf. subsection 2.3.4). Fourth, he implemented the principles of the Zapatista agrarian revolution by expropriating large landowners and redistributing the land to smallholders with a share in common lands (*ejidatarios*). He also rolled out a package of support measures for rural communities, which included education, electricity, healthcare and food. The formerly dispossessed rural population would repay him with their loyalty. He welcomed Spanish Republican exiles to Mexico, earning the praise of republican left-wing intellectuals both at home and abroad. Finally, he re-nationalised the oil industry in 1938. It was a bold move, in defiance of both British and American interests in a world on the brink of international conflagration, but one for which he was amply rewarded; Mexican Petroleum (PEMEX) would bring the Mexican State tremendous revenues over the decades to come, and Cárdenas would go down in history as the president who had redeemed the Revolution and stood up for Mexican national interests.

All these actions, combined with Cárdenas' deeply-held revolutionary convictions and the Mexican people's perception of him as a president who was close to his constituents, enjoying what Weyland would call a "direct and unmediated" relationship with the nation (Weyland, 2017, p.48), helped to secure his legacy as a charismatic leader. When his mandate ended in 1940, he stepped down from presidential office as promised, giving his successor Manuel Ávila Camacho a free rein to run the country within the pre-established institutional revolutionary framework. As a civil activist, he would continue to campaign for his cause, the defence of the Mexican Revolution:

As Cárdenas's presidency faded into history, his reputation and prestige grew. (...) He became an icon, a kind of moral Jefe Máximo, the only true living Mexican Revolutionary, the moral conscience of the Revolution. (Krauze, 1998, p.480)

True to his principles, Cárdenas never attempted to return to presidential office, but in the eyes of his supporters, his gift of grace and extraordinary moral authority accompanied him until his passing in 1970.

Cárdenas may be seen as an ideal incarnation of Weber's charismatic leader. This is not to say that he was a perfect human being, nor a perfect politician: not all his plans came to fruition, and the corporatist system that he devised in order to secure social peace inadvertently sowed the seeds of the *clientelismo* and corruption that were to dog later PRI administrations. Nevertheless, he had exceptional leadership skills, which he demonstrated by bringing stability to a country that until recently had been in the throes of a protracted civil war. He was celebrated by many Mexicans as a national hero, both for his land re-distribution policy and for his decision to re-nationalise the oil industry. He inspired personal devotion by engaging directly with so many of his compatriots - and specifically, the marginalised. He enjoyed personal trust because his words and his actions were a testament to his political vocation - as Weber would put it, he was perceived as a man who lived for politics, not from politics. His followers attributed charisma to him because they believed in him and identified with him. In AMLO's words:

He was a leader who listened to the people, who lived with the poor and the dispossessed, and who did not allow his office to separate him from ordinary people.⁵² (López Obrador, 2020)

To the Mexican Left, Cárdenas is still remembered as Mexico's best and most respected twentieth-century president. In the eyes of his followers, his charisma - his personal ability to influence and inspire large numbers of people - lives on. Writing in the newspaper *La Jornada*, Martí Batres⁵³ sums it up in the following words:

⁵² "Fue un mandatario que escuchaba a la ciudadanía, que convivía con los humildes y los desposeídos y que no permitió que el cargo lo separara de la gente común."

⁵³ Morena Mayor of Mexico City (2023-2024).

Generation after generation passes on the image of [Cárdenas as] a good president; indeed, of the best president of the twentieth century. And I would say the only post-revolutionary president to be named with respect. In popular parlance it is said that Mexico has only had two good presidents: Benito Juárez in the nineteenth century and Lázaro Cárdenas in the twentieth century.⁵⁴ (Batres, 2005)

Charismatic leadership has shown itself to be a powerful mobilising force in Mexican national politics. Cárdenas is but one example among several twentieth century "prophets", "war-lords" and "demagogues" who succeeded in eliciting "entirely personal devotion" among their followers through their "gift of grace" (Weber, 1994, pp.311-312), thereby changing the course of Mexican history. The reason why Cárdenas represents a particularly relevant example for the purposes of this research is that there are quite a few similarities between the leadership style of Cárdenas and that of the current President of Mexico. Cárdenas and AMLO share what might be called a messianic image: Krauze calls them the missionary general and the Tropical Messiah, respectively (Krauze, 1998; Krauze, 2006). Furthermore, both Cárdenas and AMLO nurture a strong bond with Mexico's indigenous communities: early on in his presidential term, Cárdenas created the Department of Indigenous Affairs and AMLO began his career as Tabasco state delegate at the National Institute of Indigenous Affairs⁵⁵ (INI). Both place much emphasis on the importance of safeguarding the Mexican oil industry: for Cárdenas, it was an act of patriotic defiance against the legacy of the *Porfiriato*, for AMLO, it has been an act of resistance to neoliberalism. Both portray themselves as the champions of the dispossessed, *los de abajo*. Both encourage a direct and unmediated relationship with their constituents: for Cárdenas, it was the telegraph line, for

⁵⁴ "Generación tras generación se transmite la imagen de un buen presidente; más aún: del mejor presidente del siglo XX. Y yo diría del único presidente posrevolucionario que es nombrado con respeto. En el lenguaje popular se dice que México sólo ha tenido dos buenos presidentes: Benito Juárez en el siglo XIX y Lázaro Cárdenas en el siglo XX."

⁵⁵ Instituto Nacional Indigenista.

AMLO, it is social media - the "blessed social networks"⁵⁶ as he calls them). Finally, both cultivate an image of frugality, rejecting the ostentatious trappings of high office: Cárdenas moved his official residence from the opulent Castle of Chapultepec to the more modest Los Pinos, and AMLO went one step further by moving out of Los Pinos and turning the former presidential residence into a cultural centre open to the public.

By demonstrating his inner calling and his dedication to the revolutionary cause through his words and deeds, Cárdenas succeeded in earning the trust and devotion of his followers and establishing his charismatic authority in the eyes of many Mexicans. This research will seek to understand whether the same might also be said of AMLO. As this discussion has shown, AMLO's style of leadership in many ways resembles that of Cárdenas, whom he considers to be a role model and an inspiration for his 4T: "His memory is a beloved and inalienable presence in the nation we are building,"⁵⁷ AMLO writes in *La Jornada* (López Obrador, 2020). In the chapters to follow, this research will look at the ways in which AMLO uses discourse in an attempt to establish his own charismatic authority in the eyes of his followers. In particular, it will address the extent to which AMLO's charismatic leadership corresponds to that of a left populist leader engaging in missionary politics - as suggested (albeit using different terms) by the Mexican sociologist Rafael Arriaga Martínez:

López Obrador's charisma, in the eyes of the electoral masses, does not come from any feat, heroic deed or prodigious achievement, it emanates from goodness, from the promise to save the poor - the nation's substratum - from the wreckage of moral and material degradation.⁵⁸
(Arriaga Martínez, 2020, p.140)

⁵⁶ "Las benditas redes sociales."

⁵⁷ "Su memoria es una presencia entrañable e irrenunciable en la nación que estamos construyendo."

⁵⁸ "El carisma de López Obrador, a los ojos de la masa electoral, no proviene de ninguna proeza, hazaña heroica o logro prodigioso, emana de la bondad, de la promesa de salvar a los pobres – el sustrato de la nación – del naufragio de la degradación moral y material."

2.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to justify the choice of Mexico and the country's current executive leader as an enlightening case study for Zúquete's concept of missionary politics. Three specific concepts were selected from Zúquete's definition - "political religion", "narrative of salvation" and "charismatic leadership" - and all three were found to shed light on the Mexican political context, both past and present. The chapter highlighted some of the reasons why missionary politics might appeal in twenty-first century Mexico. It argued that several of the key ingredients of missionary politics were known to a Mexican electorate and had proven their effectiveness in the past: the successful dissemination of a political religion after the Mexican Revolution, the enduring appeal of religious faith and the proven ability of charismatic leaders such as Lázaro Cárdenas to mobilise large numbers of followers around their revolutionary causes.

The chapter has argued that the narrative around the Mexican Revolution originally served as a form of political religion, symbolising the rebirth of a war-weary nation. However, over time, the narrative lost credibility. This, in turn, sowed the seeds of frustration and discontent that ultimately resulted in a yearning for what Zúquete has called the "reenchantment" of politics (Zúquete, 2017, p.460) and a rekindled desire for salvation and redemption through a new political religion. The chapter has also discussed the baseline religiosity of Mexicans, which makes them amenable to a narrative of salvation embedded in political discourse. The chapter has finally pointed to the recurring presence of charismatic leaders on the Mexican political stage and the very topicality of the subject, with the current President of Mexico, AMLO, described by political analysts as both a left populist and a charismatic leader (cf. *inter alia*: Bolívar Meza, 2014; Krauze, 2006 a; Espinoza Toledo and Navarrete Vela, 2013; Marini, 2019).

Having looked at the past, this thesis will next address the present and will ask whether AMLO's presidential mandate also constitutes an example of

missionary politics in the meaning intended by Zúquete. The writings of some Mexican scholars would certainly point in this direction:

With the ideal of the loving republic and the reign of justice on earth proclaimed at his rallies, Obrador promises to assume the presidency as an apostolate of love and peace, for the happiness and common good of all, for the love of thy neighbour, as Christ taught his disciples.⁵⁹ (Arriaga Martínez, 2020, p.135)

Andrés Manuel López Obrador is a man who believes that he, through religion, can transform the country, pacifying it and rebuilding its social fabric.⁶⁰ (Barranco and Blancarte, 2019, p.2)

There is, in other words, a solid basis for arguing that AMLO represents an exemplary case study of a left populist charismatic leader pursuing a form of missionary politics. Notwithstanding their populist and missionary characteristics, his politics may be contrasted with those of other political leaders in Latin America who have similarly appealed to the religiosity of their electorate (in particular, evangelical congregations), but who have pursued an expressly right-wing agenda while in office: Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Peru's Alberto Fujimori or Guatemala's Jimmy Morales, for instance.⁶¹ There is, in other words, particular merit in addressing the example of AMLO's left-wing missionary politics, which arguably constitute an exception to the rule. What this thesis adds to the existing literature is a detailed and empirical analysis of AMLO's discourse and performance, which breaks new academic ground and contributes to a better understanding of contemporary Mexican politics and missionary politics in twenty-first century left populism.

⁵⁹ "Con el ideal de la república amorosa y el reino de la justicia en la tierra proclamado en sus mítines, Obrador promete asumir la Presidencia como un apostolado de amor y paz, para la felicidad y el bien común de todos, por amor al prójimo, como Cristo lo enseñó a sus discípulos."

⁶⁰ "Andrés Manuel López Obrador es un hombre que cree que él, a través de la religión, puede transformar al país, pacificándolo y reconstruyendo su tejido social."

⁶¹ Looking further North, one could also mention Donald Trump.

Chapter 3

The Moral Community

3.1 Introduction

"The people are wise."⁶²

(López Obrador, 01.07.2021)

The overall purpose of this thesis is to offer an understanding of AMLO's missionary politics and to focus in particular on the role that faith plays in the construction of his charismatic authority within this paradigm. The present chapter will analyse the discursive-performative construction of the moral community with which AMLO identifies most closely. Chapter four will investigate the construction of the collective mission that AMLO invites his moral community to join and chapter five will examine the construction of AMLO's charismatic leadership, to which both the moral community and the collective mission are intricately connected. All three are constructs which require the type of "affective" investment (Laclau, 2006, p.110) that lies at the heart of the populist phenomenon - what Mouffe calls the "passions and affects" that help secure allegiance to radical political projects such as left populism (Mouffe, 2018, p.131). This thesis goes even further, and includes not only passions and affects, but also faith - faith in what Canovan (1999) calls "popular power" and "the promise of salvation through politics":

Democracy is a redemptive vision, kin to the family of modern ideologies that promise salvation through politics. (...) The notion of popular power lies at the heart of the redemptive vision: the people are the only source of legitimate authority, and salvation is promised as and when they take charge of their own lives. (Canovan, 1999, p.10)

⁶² "El pueblo es sabio."

AMLO often repeats that "the Mexican people are an honest people"⁶³ (López Obrador, 21.09.2019), and this thesis would argue that the concept of an honest people cannot be consolidated in the collective imagination without faith in one's fellow human beings, beyond kith and kin. Similarly, without faith in "democracy's inspirational, mobilizing, redemptive side" (Canovan, 1999, p.11), there is little incentive to adhere to AMLO's 4T, which represents an aspiration - however utopian - to achieve "human perfection" by "human effort", to borrow the words of Oakeshott (Oakeshott, 1996, p.23). Finally, and most importantly, this thesis argues that attributing charismatic authority to a political leader necessarily involves an act of faith, particularly against the backdrop of general disillusionment with the political class, as seen in Mexico in recent decades according to Darío Restrepo:

Parties are accused of being corrupt, consumed by struggles between individual interests, and in the hands of elites who are disinclined to discuss their programmatic ideas or the structure of their leadership with their constituencies and voters.⁶⁴ (Restrepo, 2001, p.168)

The central argument of this thesis is that faith is an essential ingredient in the inner workings of charismatic leadership. Without faith in the leader, in their mission and in the collective endeavour, a radical political project such as the 4T would struggle to find popular support. AMLO's quest for root and branch reform – nothing short of a *revolución de las conciencias*, in his own words - requires him to seek unwavering commitment on the part of his followers. To use Peter Thompson's words:

Any movement that seeks social change and improvement is a faith-based one. It has to be, otherwise there would be no reason to hope for something better. (Thompson, 2010)

⁶³ "El pueblo mexicano es un pueblo honesto."

⁶⁴ "Se acusa a los partidos de ser corruptos, estar carcomidos por las pugnas entre intereses individuales y en manos de élites poco inclinadas a discutir sus ideas programáticas y la conformación de las directivas con sus bases y electores."

Understanding the mechanisms that serve to elicit and sustain faith in these constructs therefore seems essential if one is to gain a better understanding of this form of politics. Considering the leader as central to the phenomenon of populism, the thesis analyses the leader's discourse and performance and identifies the elements within these that are conducive to eliciting the faith of the followers. The research also pays close attention to the response of the followers, since it is their reaction that allows the researcher to gauge whether or not a charismatic bond has been formed between the leader and the led. By closely analysing this interaction within the leader-led dyad, the thesis brings a novel contribution to this area of research.

The moral community is discursively constructed by the leader, but the construction must be convincing for the intended audience to adhere to it. Membership of the community is therefore a matter of faith; although the leader will signify who forms part of the moral community by incorporating a number of key identity markers into his discourse (in AMLO's case: honesty, industriousness, wisdom, resilience, as well as age-old cultural and spiritual values), the members of this imagined moral community also need to see themselves reflected in this construct. Ultimately, it is the people who choose whether or not they wish to form part of the leader's construction of a moral community, and they will bring their own contribution to it (cf. chapter seven).

As the present chapter will discuss, AMLO uses both discourse and performance to elicit his audience's faith in the moral community that he wishes to build with them. He appeals to their faith in their fellow human beings, but also to their faith in the spirituality that unites them. Furthermore, he invites them to perceive him as a charismatic leader by appearing as both ordinary and extraordinary before them (one of them, yet at the same time a leader guided by an inner calling). The appeal to the followers' spiritual faith is an element that has arguably been overlooked in some of the existing populism scholarship (much of it focussed on Europe), yet in Mexico, it is a significant factor that helps to explain the phenomenon of charismatic populist leadership.

3.2 The People: An Empty Signifier

The present section will discuss the empty signifier that lies at the heart of much political discourse, namely the people. As Canovan points out, the people are central to most political discourse, whether populist or not: "Populists and politicians alike defer to the people's authority" (Canovan, 2008, p.349). The section will explore the various elements that give meaning to AMLO's conceptualisation of the people and will argue that in the president's discourse, the people are represented as a Mexican moral community.

AMLO's speeches undoubtedly espouse a populist logic: he frequently divides Mexican society into "two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the 'pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite'" (Mudde, 2004, p.543). The Mexican historian Carlos Illades would concur, describing AMLO's rhetorical style as one that relies on "direct and simple language (with a strong moral charge) in which adversaries and allies are clearly identified through binary oppositions"⁶⁵ (Illades, 2016, p.20). For Anna Marta Marini, AMLO's discourse is typical of contemporary left populism, which defends "an imagined people, whose base are 'those at the bottom', i.e. the social classes neglected and disadvantaged by the political measures implemented during previous governments"⁶⁶ (Marini, 2019, p.160).

The dividing line in populist discourse between the people and the elite - or between the moral community and its conspiratorial enemies, to use the lexicon of missionary politics - is an ever-shifting one, since there is no single definition of the people, nor of the antagonistic elite against which it defines itself. The concept of the people, in effect, serves as an empty signifier: "a signifier without

⁶⁵ "Un lenguaje directo y sencillo (con una fuerte carga moral) en el que claramente están identificados adversarios y aliados a través de oposiciones binarias."

⁶⁶ "Un pueblo imaginado, cuya base son 'los de abajo', es decir esas clases sociales desatendidas y desfavorecidas por las medidas políticas actuadas durante los gobiernos anteriores."

a signified" (Laclau, 1994, p.66). The empty signifier is only filled with meaning through the chains of equivalence that form around it in any given discourse at any given time. The next subsection will examine these discursive articulations and illustrate how AMLO at times uses the empty signifier of the people to refer to the whole Mexican nation, and how on other occasions he uses it to appeal specifically to *los de abajo*.

3.2.1 The People: A Synecdochic Concept

"It takes a whole people to bring about transformation."⁶⁷

(López Obrador, 15.03.2020)

All Mexican presidents promise to govern for all the people of Mexico. Election to presidential office implies a non-partisan responsibility towards the entire nation, as AMLO makes clear in the quotation below, taken from a speech he delivered in his home state of Tabasco:

We are fighting to bring about a real change, a transformation, and we are going to achieve it, this transformation has already begun throughout the country, and it is for the benefit of all Mexicans, rich and poor, those who live in the countryside and in the city, of all religions, it is for freethinkers, for all the people.⁶⁸ (López Obrador, 29.02.2020)

However, presidential office in a country such as Mexico, where the president not only holds a ceremonial role as head of state but also directs government policy as head of government, also implies making policy choices. Therefore, in practice, the declared aim of governing for all of the people needs to be reconciled with the incumbent's political programme, which in certain regards

⁶⁷ "Se necesita todo un pueblo para lograr la transformación."

⁶⁸ "Estamos luchando para llevar a cabo un verdadero cambio, una transformación, y que lo vamos a lograr, ya comenzó esta transformación en todo el país, y es en beneficio de todos los mexicanos, de ricos y pobres, de los que viven en el campo y en la ciudad, de todas las religiones, es para librepensadores, para todo el pueblo."

may be more favourable to some societal groups than others. By way of an illustration, during his presidential term, AMLO has rolled out a number of social welfare programmes, some of them universal - available to the people as a nation - but others designed to specifically benefit certain categories of the population - the people in the sense of the most disadvantaged. For instance, in 2020, his Morena government introduced the constitutional principle of a universal pension available to all, as of the age of sixty-eight, whilst at the same time enacting a more favourable provision for Mexico's indigenous communities, who may draw their pension as of the age of sixty-five. In other words, whilst pledging to govern for all of the people of Mexico, in accordance with his constitutional obligations, AMLO also regularly uses his public discourse and his policy initiatives to make clear his particular concern for the poorest members of society, those whom Giovanni Sartori describes as "the masses of the unfortunate; the multitude of the dispossessed"⁶⁹ (Sartori, 2007, cited in Treviño and Bonfiglio, 2018, p.105). In both cases, AMLO will refer to the people (*el pueblo*), but the intended audience will vary from case to case. The meaning of this empty signifier is revealed by carefully examining the discursive elements with which it is associated - what Laclau calls "articulatory practice" (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002b, p.26). The next subsection sets out several instances where AMLO's discursive construction of the people manifestly refers to a moral community, in keeping with Zúquete's definition.

3.2.2 The People as a Moral Community

A recurrent theme in AMLO's narrative is the promise to behave with integrity as Mexico's leader: "I shall not betray the people"⁷⁰ (López Obrador, 04.01.2020) is a constant leitmotiv in his public discourse. Furthermore, when addressing his supporters, AMLO urges them to adopt the same moral rectitude: "If the president is corrupt, everyone else will follow that bad example, but if the president is honest, we all have to behave well"⁷¹ (López Obrador, 29.09.2019).

⁶⁹ "Las masas de los desafortunados; la multitud de los desposeídos."

⁷⁰ "Yo no voy a traicionar al pueblo."

⁷¹ "Si el presidente es corrupto, todos los demás van a seguir ese mal ejemplo, pero si el presidente es honesto, todos tenemos que portarnos bien."

Thus, together, AMLO and his followers come to form a moral community - in the collective imagination, at least. References to such a moral community appear in AMLO's official speeches, his press conferences and his meetings with constituents. They even predate AMLO's term of office as President of Mexico, appearing as an essential feature of his 2018 electoral campaign speeches, in which he invited ordinary Mexicans to join forces with him in ridding the country of high-level corruption. As observed by Marini, as a presidential candidate AMLO placed great emphasis on the "allegedly morally commendable virtues of the Mexican people"⁷² (Marini, 2019, p.165). I have found references to the resilience of the Mexican people in both his opening and closing campaign speeches:

The decline of the country in recent times has been so steep that only the cultural strength of our people can explain such a high level of endurance and resilience.⁷³ (López Obrador, 01.04.2018)

We decided in advance (...) to apply the premise that only the people can save the people and that only the people, united and organised, can save the nation.⁷⁴ (López Obrador, 27.06.2018)

As noted above, AMLO's conception of the Mexican people is twofold: it encompasses all of the people, whilst simultaneously narrowing it down to a particular category of the people: *los de abajo*. Thus, when AMLO pays tribute to the cultural strength of the people in the face of national decline (see above), it is understood that those responsible for the decline are not those who have shown admirable resilience; the former are the corrupt elite, and the latter are the pure people. It is to this people that AMLO refers when he appeals to a moral community, and it is the poorest members of Mexican society who are

⁷² "El líder ha celebrado los presuntos rasgos moralmente apreciables del pueblo mexicano."

⁷³ "Ha sido tan pronunciada la decadencia del país en los últimos tiempos que sólo la fortaleza cultural de nuestro pueblo permite explicar por qué tanto aguante y por qué tanta resistencia."

⁷⁴ "Con anticipación decidimos (...) aplicar las premisas de que sólo el pueblo puede salvar al pueblo y que sólo el pueblo unido y organizado puede salvar a la nación."

articulated with the highest standards of morality in the president's discourse - the poorest members of Mexican society being its indigenous populations (to be discussed in section 3.4).

In AMLO's discourse, there is no doubt that corruption originates in the very upper echelons of society. His discursive construction of the pure people as a community composed of those who have the least in society thus displaces the narrative of his predecessor, Peña Nieto, who claimed that corruption was in fact a "cultural" problem in Mexico, i.e. one that permeated all social strata. Speaking to an audience at the *Fondo de Cultura Económica*⁷⁵ in 2014, Peña Nieto declared: "I do believe that there is a cultural issue, unfortunately, which has led to corruption in all spheres and orders, both private and public"⁷⁶ (Peña Nieto, 2020).

AMLO's rebuttal could not be clearer:

They even said that corruption was part of the culture of the people of Mexico. Not true. In our communities, in our villages, in Mexican families, there is a great reservoir of values: cultural, moral, spiritual. Corruption happens at the top.⁷⁷ (López Obrador, 25.10.2019)

In his discourse, AMLO is at pains to distance himself from his predecessors, who form part of the constitutive outside against which the people are defined in his construction. He views his predecessors as corrupt and contemptuous of the people. He roundly rejects the lavish lifestyle of his immediate predecessor Peña Nieto: his presidential aircraft, his luxurious mansion - the so-called "white house" built for him by one of the corporations to whom Peña Nieto had awarded government contracts - his 8,000-strong presidential guard charged

⁷⁵ Publishing group.

⁷⁶ "Yo sí creo que hay un tema cultural lamentablemente, que ha provocado corrupción en todos los ámbitos y órdenes tanto privado como público."

⁷⁷ "Hasta decían que la corrupción era parte de la cultura del pueblo del México. Falso. En las comunidades, en los pueblos, en las familias de México, hay una gran reserva de valores: culturales, morales, espirituales. La corrupción se da arriba."

with protecting the president and his immediate family, his high salaries - all of which, according to AMLO, contravened the constitutional principle of governing not for one's own benefit, but for the greater good of the people. To express his rejection of what he considered to be an obscene lifestyle, AMLO launched a programme of "republican austerity" (*austeridad republicana*) immediately upon taking office (since transformed into an even stricter policy of "Franciscan" austerity, in reference to the mendicant order of St. Francis of Assisi). Leading by example, he cut his own salary by 50% on the day he took office and disbanded the presidential guard (AMLO has no bodyguards).

AMLO also distances himself from Felipe Calderón (Peña Nieto's predecessor), whom he blames for exposing ordinary people to unprecedented levels of violence by instigating a war on drugs. AMLO has labelled his own security strategy as the exact opposite of warmongering: "hugs not bullets" ("*abrazos, no balazos*").

Some people don't understand this because they think they are going to solve the problem of violence with violence. No, you can't do that, we already know that from when they declared war on drug trafficking with Calderón (...) He turned Mexico into a cemetery, nothing was resolved.⁷⁸ (López Obrador, 16.11.2019)

Finally, AMLO forcefully rejects the discourse of Vicente Fox (Calderon's predecessor), who is known for speaking with contempt of ordinary people who support AMLO and the 4T, calling them "idle minds"⁷⁹ (Fox, 2019). In contrast, AMLO never misses an opportunity to defend the wisdom of his moral community: "I have always said this, and I will say it again: the people are not

⁷⁸ "Esto no lo entienden algunos porque piensan que van a resolver el problema de la violencia con la violencia. No, así no se puede, ya se demostró cuando declararon la guerra al narcotráfico con Calderón. (...) Convirtió a México en un cementerio, no se resolvió nada."

⁷⁹ "Que mentes sin que hacer."

fools, it is those who think that the people are fools who are fools"⁸⁰ (López Obrador, 25.03.2021).

In sum, AMLO's construction of the people as a moral community seeks to displace alternative constructions that depict the Mexican people as foolish, idle and corrupt - constructions rooted in neoliberal philosophy, with its insinuation that the poor are poor because they fail to show entrepreneurial spirit. To quote John Dixon, neoliberal discourse "asserts that the poor can choose not to be poor" (Dixon, 2012, p.1). AMLO's rejection of this neoliberal narrative becomes particularly evident when he speaks of those who form the heart of this moral community, namely Mexico's indigenous peoples (cf. section 3.4).

The next section will discuss the circumstances under which AMLO was able to construct his alternative conception of the people as an honest, hardworking and moral community.

3.3 Dislocation: Mexico's Neoliberal Turn

For AMLO to be able to challenge a previously dominant discourse on the identity of the Mexican people - Marini describes it as his "re-semantisation of the idea of the people"⁸¹ (Marini, 2019, p.158) - there needed to be what Laclau calls a dislocation (cf. section 1.1). By the end of the twentieth century, the PRI was imploding as a hegemonic political force. According to AMLO's narrative, the crisis had already begun with the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), whose neoliberal economics minimised state intervention, with the inevitable corollary of less government support for the most vulnerable strata of society. The crisis deepened with Carlos Salinas (1988-1994), who not only pursued de la Madrid's neoliberal agenda, but also - according to AMLO - de-criminalised corruption: "The Criminal Code was amended so that corruption

⁸⁰ "Siempre digo y repito, el pueblo no es tonto, tonto es el que piensa que el pueblo tonto."

⁸¹ "La resemantización de la idea de pueblo."

would no longer be considered a serious crime"⁸² (López Obrador, 01.03.2020). Salinas signed the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), which undoubtedly boosted Mexican trade, but had little discernible impact on Mexico's indigenous communities, whose social mobility remained notoriously low. The situation went from bad to worse under Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) and his war on drugs, which triggered an escalation in drug-related violent crime and left local communities at the mercy of drug cartels, or a corrupt police force, or venal politicians - or all of the above. The PRI was voted back into office with Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), but his administration proved so corrupt that any remaining hope in the stabilising effect of a party that had ruled the country for seven decades evaporated during his term of office. What Vargas Llosa had called Mexico's *dictadura perfecta* (Vargas Llosa, 1990) was finally being upended. As argued in subsection 2.2.5, it was this dislocation in Mexican politics that triggered the quest for a new political religion and a new "popular subjectivity" (Laclau, 2005a, p.107).

Over three successive presidential ballots (2006, 2012 and 2018), AMLO finetuned his political project for the country, initially called an "Alternative Project for the Nation"⁸³ (López Obrador, 2004), then rebranded as the 4T. At the third attempt, he succeeded in rallying a majority of the population behind his left populist plebiscitarian project for the Mexican nation, where decision-making would rest with the people: "Because the people give and the people take away"⁸⁴ (López Obrador, 24.11.2019). He redefined an empowered people, who would no longer be ignored or exploited by a corrupt political class: "They are no longer imaginary citizens, they no longer allow themselves to be manipulated, they defend their rights to the full"⁸⁵ (López Obrador, 25.03.2021). Through his campaign speeches, his tours around Mexico's forgotten hinterland, his demonstrations and sit-ins, AMLO made clear his rejection of the status quo. Corruption had to be rooted out, at all levels, starting from the very top: "We are going rid the country of corruption from top to bottom, like

⁸² "Se modificó el Código Penal para que la corrupción no fuese delito grave."

⁸³ "Proyecto Alternativo de Nación."

⁸⁴ "Porque el pueblo pone y el pueblo quita."

⁸⁵ "Ya no son ciudadanos imaginarios, ya no se dejan manipular, ya defienden a plenitud sus derechos."

sweeping the stairs"⁸⁶ (López Obrador, 08.02.2020). The honest people would hold the corrupt elite to account, and the country would be transformed through the empowerment of the people.

It is by appealing to a shared morality that AMLO laid the foundations for a discursive redefinition of the Mexican people, a virtuous people who would no longer be at the mercy of a corrupt elite. The hegemonic discourse of the PRI had already been dislocated by the party's own pivot to neoliberalism, which neglected the poorest members of society, the very people whom the "revolution made government" was supposed to defend. AMLO's 4T, with its emphasis on both new beginnings and a revival of what Marini calls "the post-revolutionary nationalist tradition"⁸⁷ (Marini, 2019, p.165), captured the imagination of the "frustrated masses" and triggered a "process of popular identification" and demands for "regime change" (Arditi, 2010, p.489).

Having outlined the nature of the dislocation that paved the way for new hegemonic struggles over the meaning to be attributed to the empty signifier of the people, the next section will examine the particular articulations that AMLO has introduced into this discursive field. In subsection 3.2.2, the chapter set out the elements used by AMLO to construct the people as a moral community; in section 3.4, it will highlight the articulations in AMLO's discourse that place Mexico's indigenous peoples at the heart of his construction of the moral community.

3.4 Indigenous Communities at the Heart of The People

"If we strengthen our cultural, moral and spiritual values, we will create a better society in Mexico, for us and for those who come after us."⁸⁸

⁸⁶ "Vamos a terminar, a acabar, a desterrar la corrupción en el país, de arriba para abajo, como se barren las escaleras."

⁸⁷ "La tradición nacionalista posrevolucionaria."

⁸⁸ "Si fortalecemos nuestros valores culturales, morales, espirituales, se va a tener una sociedad mejor en México, por nosotros y por los que vienen detrás de nosotros."

(López Obrador, 19.10.2019)

This section will highlight the prominence of Mexico's indigenous peoples in the president's political discourse. Indigenous communities occupy a central position in AMLO's overarching narrative about the people of Mexico, whom he has pledged to serve using the same wording as the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) in Chiapas: "*mandar obedeciendo*", i.e. to lead by obeying (García-Bravo and Párra-Vázquez, 2020).

We are complying not only with the law, but with a commitment we have made to lead by obeying, to govern with the people.⁸⁹

(López Obrador, 15.11.2019).

Based on my research, I would argue that when AMLO promises to govern for all Mexicans, but first and foremost the poor (*primero los pobres*), it is primarily the indigenous peoples of Mexico that he has in mind. The reasoning that has led me to this conclusion is set out below.

Following his presidential inauguration on 1 December 2018, AMLO delivered a speech to his followers on Mexico City's central square (Zócalo) in which he spoke of his desire to enhance the "well-being of the soul"⁹⁰ of all Mexicans (López Obrador, 01.12.2018), following decades of "corrosion of civic morality" (Hanrahan, 2019, p.124). The speech (to which this thesis will return in subsection 5.5.1) provides a clear insight into those whom AMLO places centre-stage in his Mexican moral community, namely the poor - a choice consistent with his left populist political orientation.

All Mexicans will be looked after, regardless of belief, class, organisation, gender, party, economic status or cultural background, but the guiding

⁸⁹ "Se está cumpliendo no sólo con lo que establece la ley, sino con un compromiso que tenemos de mandar obedeciendo, gobernar con el pueblo."

⁹⁰ "El bienestar del alma."

principle shall be: for the good of all, first and foremost the poor.⁹¹ (López Obrador, 01.12.2018)

In this speech, AMLO sets out his one hundred pledges to the nation, which deal extensively with the support he will provide to help ordinary Mexicans during his presidential tenure, after decades of neglect by a neoliberal elite. Significantly, his very first pledge is directed at the most vulnerable of all, namely Mexico's indigenous communities:

The very first [pledge] promised 'special attention for the indigenous peoples of Mexico', an idea underlined by the visibility of indigenous elements during the afternoon, including a ritual cleansing of the new president and his spouse. (Hanrahan, 2019, p.124)

This prioritisation reveals the identity of the innermost circle of AMLO's moral community: Mexico's 23.2 million citizens who identify as indigenous according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), representing approximately a fifth of the country's total population (INEGI, 2022). With a human development index that falls far short of the national average according to the United Nations Development Programme, and strikingly low levels of social mobility, Mexico's indigenous communities benefited very little, if at all, from the country's pursuit of neoliberalism under previous government administrations. As Noé Hernández Cortez *et al.* put it: "The State had given up on its popular relationship with the marginalised social strata during the neoliberal period"⁹² (Hernández Cortez *et al.*, 2021, p.49). According to the same authors, one of the main objectives of the 4T is to "re-establish the State's commitment to the national-popular"⁹³ (Hernández Cortez *et al.*, 2021, p.49); this research confirms their analysis. Mexico's indigenous communities feature

⁹¹ "Se atenderá a todos los mexicanos sin importar creencias, clases, organizaciones, sexo, partidos, sectores económicos o culturales, pero se aplicará el principio de que, por el bien de todos, primero los pobres."

⁹² "El Estado había renunciado a su relación popular con los estratos sociales marginados durante el período neoliberal."

⁹³ "Reestablecer el compromiso con lo nacional-popular por parte del Estado."

in many of the president's speeches, whether specifically addressed to these communities or not. They are given pride of place in his official addresses to the nation. In his last major public address of 2022 - a year that the AMLO administration dedicated to Ricardo Flores Magón, a revolutionary pioneer from the Mazatec community of Eloxochitlán - AMLO makes a clear discursive association between the people who support the 4T today and the indigenous political leaders of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who paved the way for reform and revolution:

Ricardo Flores Magón (...) had a phrase that I like very much, I have repeated it over and over again, and I shall keep on repeating it: he said: "Only the people can save the people". And another Oaxacan, the greatest president that Mexico ever had, the best president in history, Benito Juárez, a Zapotec Indian, said: "With the people, everything, without the people, nothing". So, who supports the Fourth Transformation? The people! That is why we will never, ever betray the people.⁹⁴ (López Obrador, 27.11.2022)

It is therefore not just the sheer number of references to indigenous communities in his political discourse that indicate that these are the people with whom AMLO most dearly wishes to build a moral community; it is also the centrality of the indigenous peoples in his overarching narrative that point towards this conclusion.

To demonstrate that his concern for these communities is not just empty rhetoric, AMLO has been quick to adopt several significant initiatives to support indigenous peoples since taking office:

⁹⁴ "Ricardo Flores Magón (...) tenía una frase que me gusta mucho, y la repetí y la repetí y la sigo repitiendo, decía: 'Solo el pueblo puede salvar al pueblo'. Y otro oaxaqueño, el presidente más grande que ya tenido México, el mejor presidente en toda la historia, Benito Juárez, un indígena zapoteco, decía: 'Con el pueblo, todo; sin el pueblo, nada'. Por eso, ¿quién respalda la Cuarta Transformación?: ¡El pueblo! Por eso nunca, jamás vamos a traicionar al pueblo."

- He replaced the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) with a National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI), thereby signalling a symbolic shift from development to full-fledged political participation.

- He promoted members of Mexico's indigenous communities to key positions, something unheard of in the past. By way of example, a Wixárika activist, Claudia Morales Reza, now leads the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (CONAPRED).

- By decree, he changed the name of the 12 October national holiday, formerly known as "Race Day" (*Día de la Raza*) to "Multicultural Nation Day" (*Día de la Nación Pluricultural*).⁹⁵

- In preparations for the bicentenary of Mexico's Independence, AMLO addressed letters to the Vatican and to the Spanish Monarchy, asking them to issue an official apology for the wrongs caused to the indigenous peoples of Mexico by the Spanish Conquest: "The Kingdom of Spain should publicly and officially express its recognition of the grievances caused",⁹⁶ he wrote to King Felipe VI (López Obrador, 01.03.2019).

- The injustice done to the indigenous peoples of Mexico was recalled again in 2021, as Mexico marked the 500th anniversary of the battle of Tenochtitlan and the 200th anniversary of Mexico's Independence, "in order not to forget our past as an invaded and colonised native people and our present as a free and sovereign nation"⁹⁷ (López Obrador, 27.11.2022).

⁹⁵ Adelfo Regino Montes, the Director General of INPI, has described the previous name as offensive to indigenous communities.

⁹⁶ "Que el Reino de España exprese de manera pública y oficial el reconocimiento de los agravios causados."

⁹⁷ "Para no olvidar nuestro pasado de pueblo originario invadido y colonizado y

Giving Mexico's indigenous peoples such prominence shows that they are at the heart of AMLO's discursive construction of the people and at the core of his left populist politics. Meyenberg *et.al*, who conducted a large-scale study into the rhetoric of AMLO's predecessors Fox, Calderón and Peña Nieto, found that their conception of the people was "constructed 'from above'" and did not capture "the ideas, concerns and hopes found in the collective imaginary"⁹⁸ (Meyenberg, 2019, p.216). In contrast, AMLO seems determined to approach the people from grassroots level, rather than from above. Through his extensive travels around Mexico's rural communities - "I am proud to know all the municipalities in Mexico, all of them, the nearly 2,500 municipalities in the country, because we have always worked on the ground"⁹⁹ (López Obrador, 19.12.2023) - just like Lázaro Cárdenas (Tata Lázaro) before him, he has built up a solid knowledge of the practical needs of local communities. Therefore, when he proposes free fertilisers for subsistence farmers (as he does in Atlacomulco, in the case study selected for this chapter - cf. section 3.5), it is because this corresponds to a genuine need that he has made a note of during his peregrinations. While Fox quipped about social mobility in terms that may be read as both classist and sexist - saying, for instance: "75% of households in Mexico have a washing machine - and not a two-legged one, a metal one"¹⁰⁰ (Fox, 2021) - and while Calderón criticised the EZLN for idealising the indigenous customary law (*usos y costumbres*) practiced by autochthonous communities in Chiapas - "not all of which are defensible"¹⁰¹ (Calderón, 2012) - AMLO appears to have nothing but praise for Mexico's indigenous peoples:

In Oaxaca they take care of nature, and they take care of the children,
and they take care of the elderly, and there is no corruption, and

nuestro presente de nación libre y soberana."

⁹⁸ "Lo que observamos es una narrativa construida 'desde arriba' y no como el rescate de las ideas, las preocupaciones y las esperanzas que se encuentran en el imaginario colectivo."

⁹⁹ "Tengo el orgullo de conocer todos los municipios de México, todos, los cerca de dos mil 500 municipios del país porque siempre a ras de tierra hacíamos labor."

¹⁰⁰ "En el 75 por ciento de los hogares de México tienen una lavadora - y no de dos patas o de dos piernas, una lavadora metálica."

¹⁰¹ "No todas defendibles."

everyone participates, and they always look for the wellbeing of the community, collective wellbeing. It is something exceptional, unique, because they have kept their traditions, their customs, their languages, and that is very important.¹⁰² (López Obrador, 27.02.2020)

It is a discourse that idealises Mexico's indigenous communities, and while this may be a subjective appreciation, it is nevertheless helpful in terms of understanding AMLO's construction of the moral community, at the heart of which he places Mexico's *pueblos originarios* (indigenous peoples), from whom he feels his fellow Mexicans have a lot to learn - particularly when it comes to traditional moral values. It also reveals the socially conservative side of a president whose politics are of the Left (one does not preclude the other, and AMLO is no doubt a product of his generation).¹⁰³

The president's particular concern for indigenous communities may be explained by his own professional trajectory. In 1977, still in his early twenties, he became the director of the Coordination Centre for the Indigenous Chontal People in Nacajuca, in his home state of Tabasco, a position he held until 1982. In parallel, he was appointed Tabasco state delegate at the INI, a position he held for five years. By his own admission, these were formative years of his life, and his concern for Mexico's indigenous communities can no doubt be traced back to this period: "Here [in Nacajuca] I learned to work for the humble people, for the poor people in this Chontal region"¹⁰⁴ (López Obrador, 28.02.2020). As a left populist president, it is entirely logical for AMLO to reach out to this particular demographic - the "marginalized Mexico", to use the words of Kathleen Bruhn (Bruhn, 2012, p.90).

¹⁰² "En Oaxaca se cuida la naturaleza y en Oaxaca se cuida a los niños y se cuida a los ancianos, y no hay corrupción y todos participan, y se busca siempre el bienestar de la comunidad, el bienestar colectivo. Es algo excepcional, único, porque han mantenido sus tradiciones, sus costumbres, sus lenguas, eso es muy importante."

¹⁰³ AMLO was born in 1953.

¹⁰⁴ "Aquí aprendí a trabajar para la gente humilde, para la gente pobre en esta región chontal."

Having noted the prominence given to Mexico's indigenous peoples in the president's rhetoric, the next subsection will set out some of the recurring articulations that AMLO creates around Mexico's indigenous communities to construct what he considers to be the essence of his moral community.

3.4.1 AMLO's Dialogues with Indigenous Peoples

"The people of Mexico hunger for thirst and justice."¹⁰⁵

(López Obrador, Tekax, 08.11.2019)

This research has involved keeping a record of all the president's public appearances over the course of his six-year mandate - all of which are recorded and transcribed on the Government's official website, and therefore in the public domain¹⁰⁶ - and compiling data on references to what I consider to be the salient features of his missionary politics: his moral community, his collective mission and his charismatic leadership. For the purposes of this chapter, the analysis will focus on a series of exchanges between AMLO and various indigenous communities around the country, entitled "Dialogues with indigenous peoples" (*Diálogos con pueblos indígenas*). Thirty-four of these encounters were organised between October 2019 and March 2020, before they were interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, in the following locations:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------|
| - Putla Villa de Guerrero | - Nochixtlán |
| - San Juan Bautista Cuicatlán | - Álamos |
| - Guaymas | - Etchojoa |
| - Hermosillo | - Tekax |
| - Felipe Carrillo Puerto | - Temozón |
| - Calakmul | - Mezquital |
| - Mezquitic | - El Nayar |
| - La Yesca | - Puebla |

¹⁰⁵ "El pueblo de México tiene hambre y sed de justicia."

¹⁰⁶ What is not included in the Government's database are the President's communications on social media, which do not form an essential part of this research.

- | | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| - Coatepec | - Chilapa de Álvarez |
| - Tlapa de Comonfort | - San Pablo del Monte |
| - Tenango de Doria | - Pahuatlán |
| - Huayacocotla | - Texcoco |
| - Tierra Blanca | - Amealco de Bonfil |
| - Atlacomulco | - Milpa Alta |
| - Nacajuca | - Centla |
| - Macuspana | - Xochistlahuaca |
| - Marquelia | - Ayutla de los Libres |

These dialogues are suitable exemplars of AMLO's discursive construction of the people as a moral community in situations where he speaks freely and communicates directly with those whom he so ardently seeks to defend. Each of them is different, owing to the traditions of the receiving community, and each gives a different reception to the visiting president: some simply welcome him with a speech (in the language of the community), others present him with a number of gifts or offerings, some organise a musical performance (with dancers dressed in traditional costumes), and approximately half of them perform a ritual cleansing ceremony for the president (with the help of traditional doctors and healers), sometimes followed by a prayer in the native language of the community concerned.

Following the welcome, and a few speeches delivered by the receiving authorities (community leaders, municipal and state governors) and Adelfo Regino Montes (Director General of INPI), AMLO addresses the assembled crowds. Tellingly, *el pueblo* (the people) is the noun most frequently used by the president in these encounters, as shown by the NVivo™ word cloud reproduced in Table 1:¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ NB: the numerical value "1,000" and the verb "we shall" are mentioned more often, but "pueblo" is the most frequently mentioned noun.

**Table 1: Word Cloud**¹⁰⁸

In these exchanges, AMLO articulates *el pueblo* with high moral standards. There can be little doubt that he views morality as the answer to many of Mexico's problems. In 2018, he supported the drafting of a non-binding Moral Constitution for the nation, and in 2019, he promoted Alfonso Reyes' 1952 *Cartilla Moral* in schools - moral guides for a moral community. By tirelessly repeating his government's mission to root out corruption, starting from the very top, AMLO offers the people a narrative of salvation: if morality becomes the norm at the top of the Mexican pyramid, with the president leading by example, corruption will be stamped out and everything that was stolen by a rapacious elite under previous neoliberal administrations will be returned to the people.

It is probably fair to say that the people from whom the most has been stolen over the course of history - whether it is by Spanish colonisers or by Mexican governments - are the indigenous peoples of Mexico. Specifically mentioning the honesty and dignity of these indigenous communities is therefore a way of foregrounding a historical narrative that recalls the unjust treatment that these

¹⁰⁸ Source: NVivo™ / Creator: PGR.

communities suffered at the hands of unscrupulous elites, as well as the resilience that they showed in the face of oppression.

In this regard, it should be noted that since 2020, AMLO has rolled out a series of government plans (known as *planes de justicia*) to offer reparations to indigenous peoples, starting with the Yaqui people, and extending the programme to the Guarijío, Mayo, Mexicanero, O'dam, N'ayeri and Wixárika peoples more recently. These plans provide another illustration of AMLO's bottom-up approach towards the needs of ordinary people (cf. section 3.4) - in this case, Mexico's indigenous communities. The *Plan de Justicia para el Pueblo Yaqui* (which served as a blueprint for subsequent plans) was drawn up on the basis of extensive consultations with the communities concerned (the Yaqui people of Sonora had been the victims of a genocidal war between 1870 and 1908), who clearly stated the compensation they expected to receive from the Mexican government (land, water, education, culture and health services, *inter alia*). The journalist Milton Hernández García ascribes agency to the Yaqui people in these negotiations, describing them as "famous for their indomitable, rebellious and (...) unyielding character"¹⁰⁹ and making the argument that "they would never, ever accept a deal with the government that they did not fully agree with"¹¹⁰ (*La Jornada*, 2021). The *planes de justicia* thus offer more than just a formal apology to these aggrieved populations; they seek to build bridges with the indigenous communities concerned, placing their specific needs at the centre of the relationship.

AMLO's discourse is also designed to connect with indigenous peoples' own self-perception as communities that live by a different moral code to the rest of Mexican society. In Oaxaca, Chiapas and Sonora, for instance, many indigenous communities practice *usos y costumbres*. Community leaders are elected by community assemblies, not according to political affiliation but rather on the basis of services rendered to the community and moral standing. Young people do four- or five-years' voluntary service for their communities when they

¹⁰⁹ "El pueblo yaqui es famoso por su carácter indómito, rebelde y siempre insumiso."

¹¹⁰ "Ellos nunca, jamás aceptarían un convenio con el gobierno en el que no estuvieran plenamente de acuerdo."

come of age. If, according to AMLO's discourse, Mexican politics before the 4T was riddled with corruption, then indigenous *usos y costumbres* communities provided a salutary antidote to this general trend.

Everyone gives service, from the young, they start as *topils*, as policemen, and work their way up to become part of the council of elders, the *tata mandones*. To serve the community is a great source of pride. This authentic democracy in Oaxaca means that there is no corruption.¹¹¹ (López Obrador, Huayacocotla, 05.01.2020)

AMLO is fulsome in his praise of indigenous peoples, and the above citation is but one of many that emphasise their righteousness. In *Populism and Constitutionalism*, Müller observes that "populists put words into the mouth of what is (...) their own creation: the fiction of the homogeneous, always righteous people" (Müller, 2017, p.594). AMLO's discourse does precisely this. In my examination of primary sources, I have not found any negative references to indigenous peoples, only positive ones. Müller is no doubt right to call this a fiction - human nature is flawed, and no individual is always righteous - but in discursive terms, AMLO's constant praise of indigenous peoples serves an important function: it brings indigenous communities into the centre of public discourse, where they are held up as examples to the rest of society, rather than forgotten or ignored as they were under previous administrations. To give just one example, the San Andrés Accords signed by the PRI and the EZLN after the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, designed to improve the lot of indigenous peoples "who had been politically marginalised in the building of the Mexican nation"¹¹² (Sámano *et al.*, 2001, p.106), was never implemented by the PRI. The broken promise was symptomatic of the general lack of real concern

¹¹¹ "Todos dan servicio, desde los jóvenes, empiezan como topiles, como policías, y van ascendiendo hasta llegar a formar parte del consejo de ancianos, los tata mandones. Y eso es un gran orgullo, servir a la comunidad. Bueno, esa democracia auténtica de Oaxaca permite que no haya corrupción."

¹¹² "Los Acuerdos de San Andrés Larraínzar tienen una importancia política e histórica para México, ya que después de quinientos años se realizaría un pacto con los pueblos indígenas que habían estado marginados políticamente en la construcción de la nación mexicana."

for *los de abajo* - those whom Bishop Samuel Ruiz García called "*nuestros hermanos, los más pobres entre los pobres*" ("our brothers, the poor among the poor") (Ruiz García, 2014).

AMLO's discourse is thus designed to right a historical wrong, and the president may even be said to use his discourse to change power dynamics in Mexican society: the moral community of indigenous peoples find themselves at the heart of government policy, and their conspiratorial enemies - the corrupt neoliberal elite - are the ones now relegated to the margins. The discourse that AMLO is seeking to displace is that of neoliberalism. Government policies that did not benefit *los de abajo* are considered immoral, which is why AMLO goes to great lengths to distance himself from Fox, Calderón and Peña Nieto (cf. section 3.3). The political leaders whom the president does hold in high regard belong to a different era: José María Morelos, Benito Juárez, Francisco I. Madero, leaders who delivered what AMLO calls Mexico's three previous transformations: independence (first transformation), reform (second transformation) and revolution (third transformation).¹¹³ He quotes Morelos in many of his *diálogos*:

Do you know what Morelos said? "Let there be courts that protect the weak from the abuses committed by the strong". (...) That is what inspires our movement.¹¹⁴ (López Obrador, Mezquital, 15.11.2019).

Francisco I. Madero also features in many of AMLO's speeches, with analogies drawn between Madero's courageous challenge to Porfirio Díaz and AMLO's own courageous determination to stand up to a corrupt neoliberal elite. In

¹¹³ NB: Dividing Mexico's historic transformation into four chapters forms part of AMLO's idiolect (and has acquired a hegemonic position in contemporary Mexican discourse). It should be noted, however, that not all Mexicans subscribe to this particular vision; Hector Aguilar Camín, for instance, speaks of at least six historic transformations, including colonisation and evangelisation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the Bourbon reforms of the eighteenth century which led to independence in the nineteenth, and the financial crash of the early 1980s. (Aguilar Camín, *Milenio*, 10.09.2018)

¹¹⁴ "¿Saben qué decía Morelos? 'Que haya tribunales que protejan al débil de los abusos que comete el fuerte'. (...) Eso es lo que inspira a nuestro movimiento."

AMLO's discourse, both presidents are portrayed as moral figures, making considerable sacrifices for the good of the people:

When Francisco I. Madero, the "Apostle of Democracy", confronted Porfirio Díaz, he used a biblical phrase, he said: "The people of Mexico hunger and thirst for justice". And so do we. And we are going to quench our people's hunger and thirst for justice, little by little; that is our direction of travel, towards the transformation of our country.¹¹⁵ (López Obrador, Tekax, 08.11.2019)

As for Benito Juárez, a man of humble origins, his influence on AMLO's leadership is unmistakable. For instance, when criticising the high salaries paid to senior civil servants under previous government administrations, AMLO quotes Juárez:

What did President Juárez say? "The civil servant must learn to live in moderation." There can be no rich government with a poor people.¹¹⁶ (López Obrador, Calakmul, 10.11.2019)

AMLO thus draws on the discourse of leading figures from Mexico's past whose political mission was to empower the people - in the meaning of *los de abajo* - and he rejects the discourse of those whom he considers as having deceived the people - again, in the sense of *los de abajo*. There is no ambiguity as to who may be regarded as forming part of the history of the Mexican moral community and who should be excluded from this historical narrative.

¹¹⁵ "Cuando enfrentó Francisco I. Madero, 'Apóstol de la Democracia', a Porfirio Díaz, utilizó una frase bíblica, dijo: 'El pueblo de México tiene hambre y sed de justicia'. Y así estamos. Y vamos a ir saciando el hambre y la sed de justicia de nuestro pueblo, poco a poco, pero vamos hacia allá, hacia la transformación de nuestro país."

¹¹⁶ "¿Qué decía el presidente Juárez? 'El funcionario tiene que aprender a vivir en la justa medianía.' No puede haber gobierno rico con pueblo pobre."

The next section will substantiate the above findings by carefully considering one particular dialogue as a case study, namely AMLO's meeting with indigenous communities in Atlacomulco (State of Mexico) on 8 February 2020.

3.5 Atlacomulco

"The greatest wealth of the people of Mexico, and above all of the indigenous communities, is their honesty."¹¹⁷

(López Obrador, Atlacomulco, 08.02.2020)

AMLO's meeting with indigenous communities in Atlacomulco was chosen as a case study for three main reasons. First, it is a meeting where AMLO's discourse clearly expresses the centrality of indigenous communities in his construction of Mexico's moral community (cf. citation above: their honesty represents the nation's greatest asset), thereby lending support to the argument presented in section 3.4. Second, it is a *diálogo* that involves a particularly elaborate moment of spiritual communion (with offerings, a cleansing ritual and a prayer), thus providing useful data for the chapter to explore the ways in which AMLO draws on spiritual faith to invite his followers to join him in his moral community. Third, owing to the succession of different moments in the Atlacomulco meeting (the spiritual ceremony, the speech, and the slight commotion towards the end of the event), it is a *diálogo* where AMLO appears before his audience as both ordinary (one of the people) and extraordinary (a providential figure who pours oil on troubled waters), in line with the definition of charismatic leadership used by this thesis: the ability to inspire and motivate one's followers through the discursive and performative construction of a public persona that is both ordinary and extraordinary and which is deemed convincing to the followers.

¹¹⁷ "La mayor riqueza del pueblo de México, y sobre todo de las comunidades indígenas, es su honestidad."

AMLO's *Diálogo con Pueblos Indígenas desde Atlacomulco*¹¹⁸ begins with a traditional ceremony organised by Mazahua and Otomí communities to welcome the president, along with the Director General of INPI, Adelfo Regino Montes, and the Governor of the State of Mexico, Alfredo del Mazo. After the ceremony, the guests proceed to the stage, from which speeches are given by Elsa de la Cruz Martínez, a representative of the Mazahua community, Adelfo Regino Montes, Alfredo del Mazo and AMLO himself. The encounter ends with a children's choir singing the Mexican national anthem in Mazahua.¹¹⁹



Figure 34: Mazahua Choir (Sitio, 2022)

The next two subsections analyse the construction of AMLO's ordinary (3.5.1) and extraordinary (3.5.2) persona, as observed during this *diálogo*.

3.5.1 Construction of AMLO's Ordinary Persona

¹¹⁸ Dialogue with Indigenous Peoples from Atlacomulco.

¹¹⁹ Appendix C provides a hyperlink to the video recording of the encounter (for reference). Unless otherwise specified, all quotes below are taken from the official transcription of the event (also referenced in Appendix C).

According to the overall argument presented by this thesis, AMLO's perceived charisma is premised on the one hand on his ability to come across as an ordinary figure: a man of the people who shares many of the characteristics of his audience, who understands their needs and who can be trusted to defend them. The ordinary persona of the leader serves to elicit affect among the followers, who perceive him as one of them. In Atlacomulco, AMLO constructs this persona through a number of discursive and performative elements: he uses humour, he engages with his audience, and he participates in a process of collective identification with the assembled crowd.

An illustration of his use of humour may be seen in his comments regarding the honesty of the Mexican people. If, according to AMLO, indigenous peoples are the most honest of Mexican people, then indigenous women are portrayed as the most virtuous of all. Speaking about the creation of parents' committees to decide on school investments, AMLO gives his listeners the following advice: "The only thing we would recommend is (...) that the treasurer be a woman, because women are more honest than men".¹²⁰ The audience burst out laughing.



Figure 35: Women Treasurers (Canal, 2020)

¹²⁰ "Lo único que estamos recomendando es (...) que el tesorero sea una mujer, porque las mujeres son más honradas que el hombre."

They laugh again when AMLO continues: "And whoever doesn't like it, can go fly in the presidential plane."¹²¹ Humour is thus one of the elements used by AMLO to make himself seem approachable, which enhances his charismatic appeal in the eyes of his followers.

Another element that contributes to this construction of AMLO's ordinary persona is his relaxed manner when speaking to his audience. Unlike many politicians who either do not travel to small rural communities at all, or who come across as aloof or gauche when they meet ordinary people, AMLO can be seen positively enjoying these encounters. There is often a twinkle in his eye, he leans into his audience, and he looks to make eye contact with them, almost constantly.

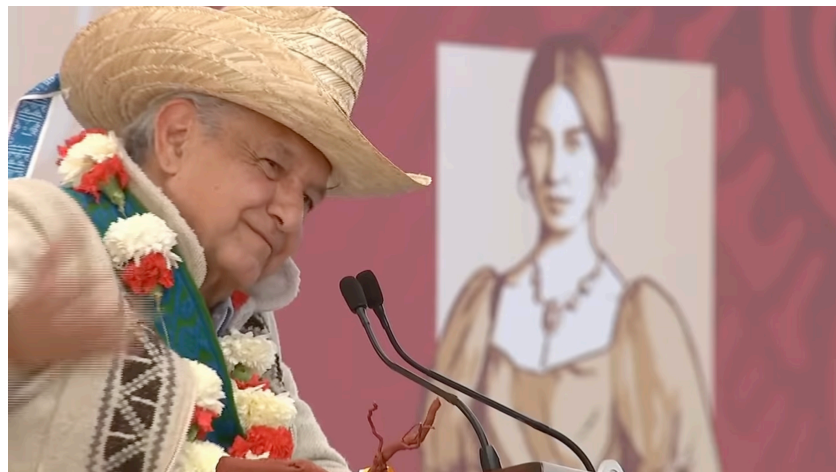


Figure 36: Engaging (Canal, 2020)

The audience respond in a number of different ways. Some listen intently, without giving much away, except their concentration (and possibly their scepticism):

¹²¹ "Y al que no le guste, que se vaya a volar en el avión presidencial." This is a reference to Enrique Peña Nieto's luxury liner, which AMLO began auctioning off as soon as he became president.



Figure 37: Listening (Gobierno, 2020)

Others appear to be enjoying the moment, and especially the president's jokes:





Figure 38: Reacting (Canal, 2020)

Either way, whether it is by listening carefully to what the president has to say, or by expressing their exuberance, there is manifestly a connection between AMLO and large parts of his audience. The bond between AMLO and the people who have come to listen to him is further enhanced by his attire. At the very beginning of the encounter, AMLO agrees to be apparelled in all manner of gifts from the local indigenous communities: garlands, satchels, a cardigan embroidered with the inscription "MAZAHUA BROTHER AMLO"¹²², as well as a *bastón de mando* carved in the shape of a deer (the Mazahua people are known as the deer people - *gente del venado*).



¹²² "AMLO HERMANO MAZAHUA."



Figure 39: Wearing Gifts (Canal, 2020)

AMLO then takes part in a traditional ceremony, saluting the four cardinal points while traditional healers cleanse the air with incense, and officiating members of the community recite incantations. At the end of the ceremony, he hugs the small congregation, and then goes to meet the assembled crowd.



Figure 40: Atlacomulco Celebrants (Canal, 2020)

The performance speaks for itself: it is unmistakably an act of affective identification, and while AMLO's heritage is neither Mazahua nor Otomí, he is embraced by those assembled as one of theirs.

Further evidence of the affective bond between AMLO and his audience may be found in the enthusiasm with which he is greeted when he arrives - partly the effect of his presidential aura (what Weber would call *Amtscharisma*, the charisma attached to the office that he holds), but also an acknowledgment of the fact that the president is taking an interest in this rural congregation, something they are not accustomed to. Elsa de la Cruz Martínez, the representative of the Mazauha people, sums it up when she says: "We have waited so long for a government to look at us."¹²³



Figure 41: Selfies (Sitio, 2020)

¹²³ "Hemos esperado tanto que un gobierno volte a vernos."



Figure 42: Letters (Gobierno, 2020)

As Barranco observes, the affection between AMLO and his followers is instantly recognisable on these occasions: "At the rallies, they want to touch him; if they can't, they touch the objects with which he came into contact"¹²⁴ (Barranco, 2018). These verbal and physical expressions of affect support the second argument presented by this thesis, namely that the followers view the president as a quasi-saintly figure, and that this contributes to the extraordinary side of his perceived charisma in their eyes, which the next subsection will discuss.

3.5.2 Construction of AMLO's Extraordinary Persona

The second argument presented by this thesis is that AMLO's perceived charisma is also premised on his ability to come across as an extraordinary leader, capable of exceptional deeds. In Atlacomulco, he does this in a number of ways: by pledging to return the proceeds of crime to the people, by promising to create incentives for young people to save them from recruitment by organised crime gangs, by appearing before his audience as a figure of peace and reconciliation, and by inspiring the crowd to follow his moral example.

¹²⁴ "En los mítines lo quieren tocar; si no pueden, tocan los objetos con los que tuvo contacto."

To signal that he is on the side of the moral community and not on the side of the corrupt elite, AMLO makes the following promise to his listeners:

I have come here to tell you that everything that we save, everything that we collect, everything that is confiscated from white-collar or ordinary crime will be returned to the people. We have already created the Institute to Return Stolen Goods to the People.¹²⁵

It is a discourse that clearly demarcates the moral community from its conspiratorial enemies, the neoliberal administrations that helped themselves to the nation's riches without a second thought for the plight of ordinary people.

Nothing from the budget went to the people, everything was used to pay very high salaries to senior civil servants, pensions to former presidents, to buy planes and helicopters.¹²⁶

Under his leadership, all of this would change: "*Todo eso ya se acabó*" ("that's all over now").

The conspiratorial enemies of the past had also failed to show any concern for Mexico's youth, making them easy prey for criminal gangs. AMLO pledges to give them grants and offer them apprenticeships and employment opportunities, to deter them from joining criminal gangs.

¹²⁵ "Vengo a decirles que todo lo que ahorremos, todo lo que se recoja, todo lo que se confisque mal habido de la delincuencia de cuello blanco o de la delincuencia común va a regresar el pueblo. Ya se creó el Instituto para Devolverle al Pueblo lo Robado."

¹²⁶ "No se entregaba nada al pueblo del presupuesto, todo era para pagar sueldos elevadísimos a los altos funcionarios públicos, pensiones a los expresidentes, gastar en aviones, en helicópteros."

So that the young person who is not studying and has no job is hired, given work as an apprentice. (...) If they behave well, they can be employed there. (...) Why do we do this? To keep them away from temptation.¹²⁷

To many of his listeners, the word "temptation" will bring to mind the Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation." My analysis of the primary data shows that at both this event and other *Diálogos con Pueblos Indígenas*, AMLO uses both discourse and performance to weave an element of spirituality into these encounters. An illustration of this may be seen in Figure 43, which shows his participation in the spiritual ceremony organised by his hosts.



Figure 43: Spiritual Ceremony (Canal, 2020)

In performative terms, AMLO cuts the figure of a man who comes in peace, a quasi-saintly or priest-like figure who is treated as an object of veneration. His movements are measured, his speech is slow, his manner is relaxed. He often repeats that he will not lie or betray the people; in other words, he invites his audience to acknowledge that he is a man of good moral standing whom they can trust.

¹²⁷ "Para que el joven que no está estudiando y no tiene empleo sea contratado, se le dé trabajo como aprendiz. (...) Si hay un buen comportamiento, ahí los pueden emplear. (...) ¿Con qué propósito hacemos esto? Para alejarlos de las tentaciones."

I come here (...) to tell you that we will not fail you, we will not betray the people. (...) Fourteen months into the presidency, I can now take out my little white handkerchief and say: There is no corruption at the top, official banditry is over.¹²⁸

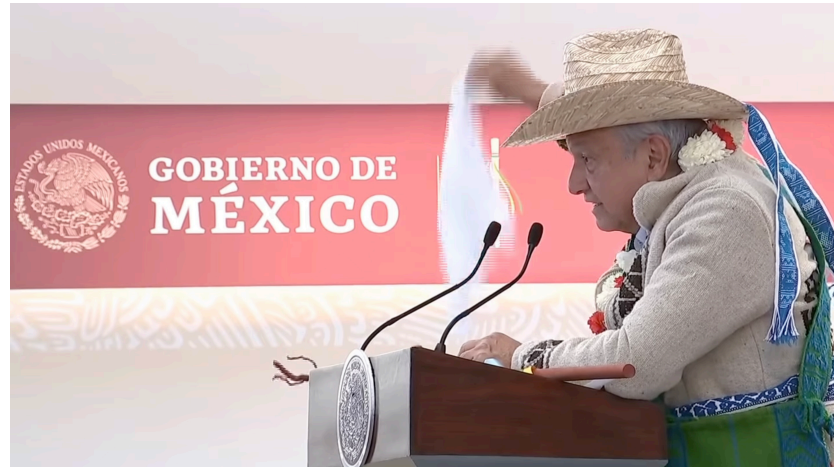


Figure 44: White Handkerchief (Canal, 2020)

Finally, there is a moment during the Atlacomulco encounter that clearly illustrates AMLO's ability to pour oil on troubled waters and encourage his audience to follow his moral example - an indication of his ability to influence and motivate his followers, in accordance with my understanding of charisma. At one point, AMLO praises Governor Alfredo del Mazo for agreeing to implement his health reforms, even though del Mazo represents a rival political party (PRI): "Let's hear it for Alfredo del Mazo"¹²⁹ he says, inviting his audience to applaud. Some do, but one also senses a certain amount of disgruntlement in the audience. A comment from the chat that accompanies the video recording of the event points towards the reason for this commotion: "Del Mazo is the phoniest of the lot, and nobody likes him because he is corrupt and cynical".¹³⁰ AMLO does not ignore the hecklers, but decides to engage with them: "Let's see, do you want controversy? All right then, let's have it. Do you

¹²⁸ "Vengo (...) a decirles que no vamos a fallarles, no vamos a traicionar al pueblo. (...) A 14 meses de estar en la Presidencia ya puedo sacar el pañuelito blanco y decir: Arriba no hay corrupción, se acabó el bandidaje oficial."

¹²⁹ "Un aplauso para Alfredo del Mazo."

¹³⁰ "Lo más falso de ahí es Del Mazo y nadie lo quiere por corrupto y cínico."

want a debate? Well then, let's see: would you say it's better to fight or to work together?"¹³¹



Figure 45: You Choose (Canal, 2020)

It is a rhetorical question, but by inviting his audience to take the decision collectively, AMLO reinforces the idea of a community to which both he and his audience belong. Furthermore, his offer to engage has a calming influence on the audience. Political disagreements, he says, are for political parties competing in election campaigns, but an elected government must govern for all. The people and their leader must now pull together to make a success of the 4T. He goes on to appeal to his listeners' moral compass, gently coaxing them towards cooperation rather than confrontation. Working together is the morally right thing to do, if you share the same noble objective of helping the people. "Hands up those who think we should be united for the benefit of the people?"¹³² he finally asks. A sea of hands goes up in favour of working together in the common interest. The audience's affective identification with their extraordinary leader, who has moral rectitude on his side, has resulted in the symbolic reunification of the moral community.

¹³¹ "A ver, ¿quieren ustedes polémica? Vamos a tenerla. ¿Quieren debate? Bueno, a ver ¿qué es mejor, que nos peleemos o que trabajemos juntos?"

¹³² "Que levanten la mano los que consideren que debemos de estar unidos en beneficio del pueblo."



Figure 46: Vote (Canal, 2020)

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shed light on the discourse used by AMLO to construct the people as a moral community, with Mexico's indigenous peoples at its very centre. It is a discourse intended both for his immediate audience, the indigenous communities with whom he meets on these occasions, but also for his followers on social media and his political peers: it is a way of changing the narrative and showing that a different type of political leadership is possible, one that engages with dispossessed rural communities, one that reconnects with the example set by Lázaro Cárdenas (Tata Lázaro, who also toured the country to sit down with indigenous communities) and one that gives expression to the preferential option for the poor (*primero los pobres*) that lies at the heart of AMLO's concept of Mexican humanism (cf. chapter 5).

The chapter has emphasised the positive construction of the people in AMLO's discourse and has discussed the ways in which this encourages affective identification as well as enthusiasm on the part of his followers. It has furthermore identified elements in AMLO's discourse and performance that contribute to the construction of his charisma: his ability to convincingly convey a persona that is both ordinary and extraordinary in the eyes of his followers.

The positive affective identification between AMLO and his followers identified in this chapter challenges other strands of the academic literature which view populist charismatic leadership as suspect and consider the followers of populist leaders as motivated either by fear - "populism appeals to the most deep-seated instincts in human beings, the tribal spirit, mistrust and fear of the other"¹³³ (Vargas Llosa, 2017, p.17) - or envy - "populism is, in reality, the revenge of the mediocre. (...) Populism appeals to the primal instincts of envy, resentment and division"¹³⁴ (Lacalle, 2017, pp.213-215). By using specific examples, this chapter has shown that alternative interpretations are possible, based on a positive sense of identity and belonging, and the hope that a collective effort will pave the way for a better future. Ultimately, this thesis would argue that it is a question of faith: people choose to adhere to the leader's construction of a moral community if they deem his discourse and performance to be credible, and if they are willing to attribute charismatic authority to his person. Religiosity and the belief in the possibility of redemption and human salvation arguably form part of this phenomenon, as do "feelings of love, brotherhood, idealism, and righteousness" (Zúquete, 2017, p.458) Whilst sceptics will say that AMLO's discourse is deceitful and manipulative, to his followers, AMLO's discourse is infused with a genuine love for his people. Congresswoman and Morena co-founder Martha Ávila Ventura described it to me in the following terms when I met her in Mexico City in 2023: "He speaks to you with truth, with his heart, with love for his people"¹³⁵ (Ávila Ventura, 2023).

The next chapter will examine the collective mission that AMLO invites his moral community to join him in. In *Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach*, Kurt Weyland writes: "Nothing motivates people more than a serious challenge, and the clarion call of a courageous leader to tackle it directly" (Weyland, 2017, p.59). Chapter four will analyse how AMLO broadcasts this clarion call through his daily press conferences, and how he uses discourse and performance to

¹³³ "El populismo apela a los instintos más acendrados en los seres humanos, el espíritu tribal, la desconfianza y el miedo al otro."

¹³⁴ "El populismo es, en realidad, la venganza de los mediocres. (...) El populismo acude a los instintos primarios de la envidia, el rencor y la división."

¹³⁵ "Te habla con la verdad, con el corazón, con el amor a su pueblo."

elicit his audience's faith in his construct of a collective mission designed to incite their "passions and affects" (Mouffe, 2018, p.131).

Chapter 4

The Collective Mission

4.1 Introduction

"When I hand over the presidential sash, I will just say to the four winds:
Mission accomplished!"¹³⁶

(López Obrador, 01.09.2021)

Having addressed, in the previous chapter, the ways in which AMLO discursively constructs his moral community of the people - and in particular, those whom the president's discourse most closely associates with the moral values of righteousness and honesty, Mexico's indigenous peoples - the thesis will turn next to AMLO's construction of the collective mission which all the members of the moral community, president included, are urged to support in order to redeem the nation. This chapter will argue that AMLO's collective mission is embodied by the 4T, a transformative project designed to rescue Mexico from its putative crisis, neoliberalism - or, as AMLO likes to call it, *Neoporfirismo*, i.e. a return of the *Porfiriato* under a neoliberal guise.

The sense of a collective mission is palpable in the Morena government's National Development Plan 2019-2024¹³⁷ (PND), which it published in its first year of office.

We have called this popular and social mandate the Fourth Transformation. (...) It is up to us to build what comes after the failure of neoliberalism. (...) We owe it to the world to design a post-neoliberal proposal and to turn it into a viable model of economic development, political organisation and coexistence between social sectors. We must

¹³⁶ "Cuando esté entregando la banda presidencial solo diré a los cuatro vientos: ¡Misión cumplida!"

¹³⁷ Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2019-2024.

demonstrate (...) that modernity can be forged from below and without leaving anyone behind, and that development does not have to be contrary to social justice.¹³⁸ (PND, 2019, p.11)

The PND makes it clear that the 4T is not just an economic, political and social roadmap for the country; its lofty ambitions also encompass what Zúquete calls the nonmaterial sphere, setting out a path towards the "moral regeneration"¹³⁹ of the nation (PND, 2019, p.16). The PND combines practical targets, such as the sweeping introduction of welfare programmes (*Programas para el Bienestar*) for the poorest members of society, with moral imperatives: the government shall not lie, steal or betray the people (PND, 12.07.2019, p.11).¹⁴⁰ In other words, applying the logic of Zúquete's missionary politics, thanks to the 4T, "the evil present will give way to a redemptive future" (Zúquete, 2017, p.458).

4.2 The 4T: An Empty Signifier

In the president's discourse, the 4T plays the role of what Laclau would call an empty signifier, invested with meaning by an equivalential chain of other signs that form around it. Its meaning is always contingent. AMLO refers to the 4T very frequently. It is central to both his political programme and his public discourse, but he articulates it with a wide range of different objectives, both material - e.g. "a defining trait of the new government under the Fourth Transformation is to deliver [benefit payments] directly [to recipients]"¹⁴¹ (López Obrador, 06.08.2019) - and nonmaterial - e.g. "the Fourth Transformation is an

¹³⁸ "Hemos llamado a este mandato popular y social la Cuarta Transformación. (...) A nosotros nos toca edificar lo que sigue tras la bancarrota neoliberal. (...) Tenemos ante el mundo la responsabilidad de construir una propuesta posneoliberal y de convertirla en un modelo viable de desarrollo económico, ordenamiento político y convivencia entre los sectores sociales. Debemos demostrar (...) que la modernidad puede ser forjada desde abajo y sin excluir a nadie y que el desarrollo no tiene porqué ser contrario a la justicia social."

¹³⁹ "Regeneración moral."

¹⁴⁰ "No mentir, no robar, no traicionar."

¹⁴¹ "Una característica del nuevo gobierno de la Cuarta Transformación es entregar todo de manera directa."

awakening of consciousness"¹⁴² (López Obrador, 06.03.2019). One could therefore argue that the 4T means different things to different people. However, while the 4T may be deemed a rather protean concept, its primary objective is the fight against corruption. Indeed, when asked to describe the essence of his political programme in a nutshell, the president himself uses a phrase taken from his 2018 electoral campaign, the wording of which is reproduced below, with an accompanying photograph of how he performs the phrase:

I used to say during the campaign: Do you want me to tell you what the plan is, and to tell you in the time it takes me to stand on one leg, even though I don't speak fast? And I used to position myself like this: 'To put an end to corruption, that's the plan'.¹⁴³ (López Obrador, 23.02.2023)



Figure 47: The Plan (Canal, 2023)

¹⁴² "La Cuarta Transformación es un despertar de las conciencias."

¹⁴³ "Decía yo en campaña: ¿Quieren que les diga cuál es el plan y que se los diga en lo que tardo parado en un solo pie, aun cuando no hablo recorrido? Y me ponía yo así: 'Acabar con la corrupción, ese es el plan'."

AMLO never ceases to repeat that Mexico's main problem under previous governments was corruption, and that ridding Mexico of corruption is the main objective of his mission. To carry out this mission, he needs the unequivocal support of his moral community, who must remain vigilant towards conspiratorial enemies. AMLO uses a variety of means to communicate this message: his meetings with constituents (cf. chapter three), his official public addresses (cf. chapter five) and his daily press conferences (the subject of this chapter). In section 4.5, the chapter will use the example of a specific morning press conference (*Mañanera*) to discuss how AMLO discursively constructs his collective mission on these occasions, and how he uses both discourse and performance to elicit faith in the 4T within a broader moral community that extends beyond the core described in chapter three (Mexico's indigenous peoples) to include a more heterogeneous urban population.

By way of providing context, sections 4.3 and 4.4 will first address AMLO's relationship with the Mexican media and the significance of his *Mañaneras* within Mexico's media landscape.

4.3 AMLO and the Mexican Media

The president's *Mañaneras* - his direct channel of communication with the Mexican people - need to be understood against the backdrop of Mexico's media landscape. Media ownership concentration in Mexico is reportedly among the highest in the world (Huerta-Wong *et al.*, 2015, p.674) and AMLO's relationship with the traditional media - legacy broadcasters and broadsheets - has long-since been fraught. As the journalist Carlos Monsivaís put it in 1978, "the mass media act to close ranks around a single ideological route"¹⁴⁴ (Monsivaís, cited in Trejo Delarbre, 2023, p.40) and alternative routes "did not always find a voice in the media environment"¹⁴⁵ (Trejo Delarbre, 2023, p.40).

¹⁴⁴ "Los medios masivos actúan provocando el cierre de filas en torno a una sola ruta ideológica."

¹⁴⁵ "No siempre encontraban voz en el entorno mediático."

One of those alternative voices was that of the opposition politician AMLO. AMLO's fraught relationship with the press is thus partly attributable to the long periods of his political career during which he battled with the ideological conformism of the mainstream media (Mexico's most influential newspapers, radio stations and television channels) which were favoured by those in power. The media expert Mireya Márquez Ramírez notes: "Historically, regulation (or the lack of it) was always favourable to the biggest enterprises and to the regime's allies" (Márquez Ramírez *et al.*, 2023). The combative young AMLO did not qualify as an ally of the regime.

Relations have not improved much since. Although he is no longer an opposition politician, the relationship between AMLO and the media continues to be marked by tensions, in what Márquez Ramírez describes as an "increasingly divided, politically polarized society and an environment plagued with politically motivated misinformation" (Márquez Ramírez *et al.*, 2023). One possible cause might be AMLO's cuts to the government's communications budget. Whereas AMLO's predecessor Peña Nieto "spent roughly 38bn pesos in governmental advertisement for newspapers alone", AMLO has "cut 50% off in the budget allocated for advertisements in the media" (Márquez Ramírez *et al.*, 2023) as part of his austerity programme - spending cuts which, one suspects, do little to endear him to the owners of Mexico's traditional mass media, as AMLO himself wryly observes:

They don't get advertising revenue like they used to. So they are very upset about that, but we have to carry on with the transformation.¹⁴⁶
(López Obrador, 03.01.2022)

The journalist Federico Arreola, a keen observer of AMLO's political trajectory, confirms Márquez Ramírez' impression, noting a negative change of tone in media reporting since the beginning of this presidential mandate:

¹⁴⁶ "Ya no reciben dinero de publicidad, como recibían antes. Entonces, eso los tiene muy molestos, pero tenemos que llevar a cabo la transformación."

Most media and journalists (or commentators) were absolutely friendly with EPN [Enrique Peña Nieto] and now they are remarkably critical of López Obrador.¹⁴⁷ (Arreola, 2019)

AMLO does not hold back in publicly accusing the media of conservative bias:

There is a lot of misinformation because conservatism is determined and desperate to attack us, the majority of the media, in chorus against what we are carrying out, which is a transformation of the country with the support of millions of Mexicans.¹⁴⁸ (López Obrador, 01.03.2022)

He holds the mass media partly responsible for his election defeats in 2006 and 2012. In 2006, he criticised the PAN's use of public broadcasting channels to conduct a smear campaign (*guerra sucia*) against him and bolster the chances of their own candidate, Felipe Calderón:

I remember the campaign saying that I was a danger to Mexico, it was all over the media, all of it, and our messages were cut, and suddenly our messages stopped appearing altogether at the height of the smear campaign.¹⁴⁹ (López Obrador, 29.11.2022)

In 2012, AMLO queried the double-digit polling advantage consistently attributed by the influential *Milenio* newspaper to his rival candidate Peña Nieto. Peña Nieto ultimately won the presidential elections, but by a relatively small

¹⁴⁷ "La mayoría de medios y periodistas (o comentócratas) fueron absolutamente amables con EPN y son ahora notablemente críticos de López Obrador."

¹⁴⁸ "Hay mucha desinformación porque el conservadurismo está empeñado y desesperado en atacarnos, la mayoría de los medios de información, en coro en contra de lo que estamos llevando a cabo, que es una transformación del país con el apoyo de millones de mexicanos."

¹⁴⁹ "Recuerdo que estaba la campaña de que yo era un peligro para México a todo lo que daba en todos los medios, todos, y teníamos nosotros nuestros mensajes limitados, y de repente dejan de aparecer nuestros mensajes en momento de más intensidad de la guerra sucia."

margin of 6.6%, and Ciro Gómez Leyva, the editorial director of *Milenio*, was forced to apologise.

Since that period, Mexico has experienced a surge in the number of independent digital media platforms and AMLO relies upon these "blessed social networks"¹⁵⁰ (López Obrador, 13.09.2021) to circumvent more traditional media outlets. Whilst independent digital media platforms are no guarantee for the "responsible exercise of watchdog journalism" or "non-partisan" reporting (Marqu  z Ram  rez *et al.*, 2023), they have nevertheless proven instrumental in broadening and democratising the Mexican media landscape and fostering citizen engagement in politics. As Trejo Delarbre points out, "there is no public conversation, nowadays, outside of digital spaces"¹⁵¹ (Trejo Delarbre, 2023, p.46). Nonetheless, AMLO still needs to have a working relationship with the traditional media, whose influence may have waned but continues to be substantial among a "social elite composed of politicians, public servants, investors, scholars, students, and so forth" (M  rquez Ram  rez *et al.*, 2023), and it is in this area that one most often notices friction.

By way of an example: during his presidential term, AMLO has frequently exercised his constitutional right of reply (*derecho de r  plica*) to what he considers to be misinformation or disinformation in the press, calling out specific journalists and newspapers and challenging their publications. In June 2021, he even introduced a new slot in his Wednesday *Ma  aneras*, entitled "Who's who in this week's lies", led by the government's Director of Networks Ana Elizabeth Garc  a Vilchis.

¹⁵⁰ "Las benditas redes sociales."

¹⁵¹ "No hay conversaci  n p  blica, hoy en d  a, al margen de los espacios digitales."



Figure 48: Who's Who (Sol, 2021)

AMLO hails this type of communication as the end of censorship. His argument is that under the 4T, both the press and the government fully exercise their freedom of expression:

If they didn't come out and attack us with these reports, we wouldn't be talking about this situation here and many people, many, many millions, would be left with the idea that journalism is like this castle of purity.¹⁵² (López Obrador, 15.03.2022)

The journalists concerned, however, consider this to be a dangerous and unacceptable attack on their person in a country described as "the most lethal country for journalism on the continent"¹⁵³ by the press organisation Article 19 (Articulo19, 2023). Writing in 2018 - i.e. before AMLO's term of office - Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez already observed that "journalists in Mexico are targets of online harassment by those who disagree with their message or who target them personally for hate speech" and that they also "face risk from criminal elements and 'dark networks' of politicians and police in league with criminals"

¹⁵² "Si no salieran a atacarnos con esos reportajes, pues no estaríamos hablando aquí de esta situación y mucha gente, muchísima, millones, se quedarían con la idea de que el periodismo es como el castillo de la pureza"

¹⁵³ "El país más letal para ejercer el periodismo en el continente."

(Hughes *et al.* 2018, p.541). Regrettably, the verbal and physical violence have continued under the present administration, and whilst AMLO is quick to point out that the violence does not originate from his government - "we did not order anyone to be taken out, not anyone"¹⁵⁴ (López Obrador, 16.02.2022) - many journalists object that they would fear less for their own safety if the president could refrain from verbally attacking them in his morning press conferences. At one *Mañanera* where this subject came up, and AMLO once again pointed out that the phenomenon predated his term of office, a somewhat disheartened journalists asked: "Wouldn't it be a good idea to call for peace, President?"¹⁵⁵ (*Mañanera*, 16.02.2022). Suffice it to say that the *Mañaneras* can be rather tense encounters.

John Uhr has argued that "audiences differ in what they are prepared to consent to, believe in, accept as credible or trustworthy" (Uhr, 2014, p.255). Journalists are probably to be placed at the more sceptical end of the audience spectrum, disinclined to believe anything at face value, and mistrustful towards a supposedly charismatic political leader. It is precisely because of the degree of scepticism that prevails in press conferences that they need to be included in this research, which seeks to gain an overall understanding of AMLO's charisma, in both supportive and hostile environments. Furthermore, AMLO's *Mañaneras* are interesting to observe from a contemporary Latin American left populist perspective, in that they share certain similarities with the innovative communication strategies deployed by some of the leaders of the *Marea Rosa* (Pink Tide), including Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Ecuador's Rafael Correa.

Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa developed weekly television programs where they informed citizens about their governmental projects and policies, set the news agenda for the week, and simultaneously entertained the public by singing and mocking their political enemies. (de la Torre, 2017, p.206)

¹⁵⁴ "Nosotros no mandamos a aniquilar a nadie, a nadie."

¹⁵⁵ "¿Y no se necesita llamar a la paz, presidente?"

As this chapter will illustrate, AMLO uses similar performative techniques in an attempt to foster an affinity with his audience in the Palacio Nacional (National Palace) from which he gives his *Mañaneras*, as well as audiences watching from afar, through live television broadcasts or on social media. His aim is to use this daily platform to convince his listeners of the virtues of his collective mission, the 4T. Whilst not all audiences are receptive to this appeal - for instance, some of the journalists in the room remain unconvinced by the president's Panglossian narrative on the 4T, according to which all is for the best in the best of worlds - my research shows that AMLO does not let this deter him; he will still attempt to foster an affective bond with those parts of the audience who might be receptive to his charismatic appeal - for instance, journalists who are sympathetic to the 4T cause, or online followers who tune into the broadcasts and who consider themselves to be members of the president's moral community (*el pueblo*). The latter may be said to have faith in the president, whereas the former do not (or, at the very least, they harbour reservations). AMLO's charismatic appeal is more likely to resonate with the believers than with the sceptics. The *Mañaneras* thus represent a somewhat complex environment in which to explore charismatic populist leadership - but all the more interesting for it, since the element of faith is discernible from time to time, but not a given in this heterogeneous audience (visible/invisible, urban/rural).

4.4 AMLO's *Mañaneras*

This section will analyse the format (4.4.1) and setting (4.4.2) of the president's *Mañaneras*, as well as the viewing public, i.e. the journalists who attend the press conferences (4.4.3) and the audiences who follow them from afar (4.4.4). The section will show how the staging of the *Mañaneras* contributes to the projection of AMLO's persona as someone who is both extraordinary - i.e. a commanding presence - and ordinary - i.e. someone who is approachable and down-to-earth.

4.4.1 Format of the *Mañaneras*

The dynamics of the *Mañaneras* are rather different to AMLO's meetings with local communities, which provided the primary data in chapter three. For one thing, the president does not set the agenda at the *Mañaneras*; the journalists initiate the debate by asking questions, and he replies. The format allows for a certain degree of spontaneity. Journalists entitled to ask questions are drawn by lot half an hour before the start of the morning press conference; if selected, they take their seats in the first three rows of the auditorium, and the president invites them to take the floor, one after the other (Lineamientos, 2024). Owing to the length of the president's answers, there is generally not enough time to hear all the questions, so it is a random selection.

Furthermore, in contrast to his encounters with local communities, at the *Mañaneras* AMLO is not meeting with followers hoping to catch a glimpse of their leader, but rather with the assembled press corps who attend these assignments as part of their professional duties. Admittedly, at an individual level, the lines may be somewhat blurred between a journalist's professional duty to follow the president for journalistic reasons and their personal desire to follow him for reasons of affect - i.e. a perception of AMLO as an extraordinary leader. Arreola argues that some of those who attend the *Mañaneras* are *paleros* (yes-men) rather than professional journalists, eager to ask the president questions that will portray him in a favourable light: "Because they don't know the profession of journalism, they ask questions in a way that really suits López Obrador"¹⁵⁶ (Arreola, 2022). It is therefore worth noting that while most questions put during the *Mañaneras* are probing and investigative, there can be exceptions. The *Mañaneras* make no distinction between the political leanings of those who attend, or the editorial desks they represent. This sets them apart from meetings with local communities (addressed in chapter three) and mass rallies (to be analysed in chapter five), which tend to be attended predominantly by AMLO supporters.

¹⁵⁶ "Como no conocen el oficio periodístico preguntan de una manera que le viene muy bien a López Obrador."

In terms of their format, the *Mañaneras* may be understood as "political performances" that break down the so-called "fourth wall" of theatre to "foster proximity with one's audience" (Aiolfi, 2022a, p.10). This sense of proximity is enhanced by the negligible physical distance between AMLO and his public, the absence - as always - of bodyguards, and the fact that the president is constantly available to the press; with the exception of three Covid episodes, the media have been offered the opportunity to question him every single weekday since he took office. AMLO could therefore be said to be at the service of the assembled media - yet he is also, unmistakably, the protagonist in this piece of political performance. All eyes are on him, all cameras are trained on his movements and facial expressions, all microphones record his every utterance, which provide the backbone for the journalists' daily news reports. The configuration of the *Mañanera* is thus designed to showcase the president as the main protagonist of the event. Sometimes, AMLO is accompanied on stage by his ministers or invited experts, in which case the format is designed to showcase the unity of his government - although the focus is still primarily on the president, as suggested by Figure 49.



Figure 49: Protagonist (Sitio, 2023)

4.4.2 Setting of the *Mañaneras*

The *Mañaneras* may furthermore be understood as a setting that is used to frame AMLO's "leadership 'acts'" (Gaffney, 2013, p.396) before a Mexican public. This subsection provides a description of the materials and techniques deployed during the *Mañaneras* to showcase the president's performance and to help him communicate his extraordinary status to the nation, as a modern-day *tlatoani* (the náhuatl term for ruler - he who speaks and he who commands).

The venue chosen for the president's morning press conferences is the Palacio Nacional, built on the historic site of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin's palace at the heart of Mexico City. Seen through the lens of AMLO's 4T narrative, it is worth noting that all four of Mexico's historic transformations are symbolically associated with this vast edifice:

- The bell rung by Miguel Hidalgo in 1810 (Campana de Dolores) hangs over its main entrance (Independence);
- Benito Juárez suffered a heart attack and died here in 1872 (Reform);
- Francisco I. Madero was executed within the walls of the Palace in 1913 (Revolution);
- López Obrador made it his official residence in 2019; he governs from its offices and uses it for his daily *Mañaneras* (4T).

The Palacio Nacional is steeped in Mexican history. In its current incarnation, it has been the seat of both executive, legislative and judicial power since Mexico's Independence. The *art déco* Treasury Hall that hosts the *Mañaneras* is vast and imposing, offering journalists a slice of history rather than a purpose-built functional press centre.

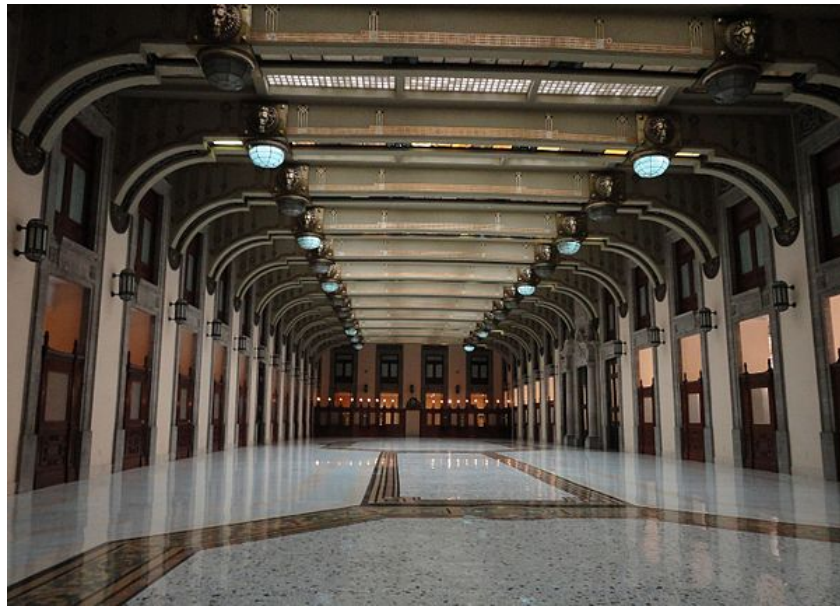


Figure 50: Treasury Hall (Vallejo, 2011)

The choice of venue for the *Mañaneras* is thus not anodyne: it symbolises the locus of Mexican government power down the centuries, all the way back to the days of Aztec rule. The overwhelming majority of morning press conferences are held in this rather grand setting. However, when the president tours the country, to inspect a flagship project or to meet with state-level elected representatives, his press conferences are organised in spacious, but less imposing locations: government buildings, purpose-built halls, or even marquees, assembled especially for the occasion.

The configuration is invariably the same: the president and his entourage face the journalists, and the journalists sit in rows facing the stage. The accredited media representatives arrive and take their seats, falling silent when the president walks onto the stage and opens the press conference, often with a jovial word of encouragement: "Come on, let's go!" (*¡Ánimo!*). AMLO is sometimes accompanied by his ministers or invited experts, who present reports and answer questions that fall within their portfolios, but on other occasions, AMLO is the only one to face the press. The government spokesperson, Jesús Ramírez Cuevas, and a technical support team are always to hand off stage, but only provide additional information to the president when asked to do so. Occasionally, AMLO will issue instructions during the

Mañanera to his team, to follow up specific questions asked by the journalists, particularly if he does not have an immediate answer, or if the matter is urgent or controversial.

In terms of the technical apparatus used during the *Mañaneras* to help the president communicate, one finds the basic equipment one would expect: microphones (fixed ones for the president, roving ones for journalists and presenters), loudspeakers dotted around the hall, cameras - a TV camera mounted on a dolly in front of the stage, another one suspended from a boom arm at the back of the hall, professional cameras on tripods positioned next to the front row of journalists, handheld cameras carried by accredited photographers, as well as smart devices brought by some of the digital journalists, which they use from their seats - and spotlights. The original *art déco* ceiling and wall lights provide soft lighting, but they are insufficient for visual broadcasting purposes, hence the need for spotlights, all directed towards the dais. In addition, there is a projection screen positioned on the left side of the stage. It is used to display a screensaver featuring the government logo, or to show support material for the president or other speakers where required - video clips, photographs, newspaper articles, maps, etc. The projected material is managed by the technical support team referred to above: they sit at their computers, to the left of the hall (between the podium and the journalists), and call up material as and when requested. In sum, one could say that the technical means deployed during the *Mañaneras* are adequate, but not extravagant. While the press conferences may be considered a performance, the technical set-up is not intended to dazzle the audience; it remains a rather sober affair, technically speaking.

The same could be said for the props used by the president on these occasions, which are pared down to a minimum. AMLO stands on a stage, which is only slightly raised; visually, this minimises the height gap between the speaker and his audience. He uses a lectern and speaks into a microphone (a fixed one when standing behind his lectern, or a roving one when walking around the stage). Functionally speaking, that is all. It is quite an austere set-up. The president does not use any stationery to jot down questions, he does

not have any water to hand, and he does not sit down; any chairs on the stage are provided for his ministers or invited guests. While the media remain seated, AMLO stands for the duration of the press conference; this allows him to project the image of a strong and resilient leader, despite his advancing years. It is also worth noting the presence of a few additional props on stage that serve no practical purpose, but do fulfil a symbolic role: the Mexican coat of arms at the front of the president's lectern, the Mexican flag that hangs on a pole behind him (to the right of the president), and the large screen that serves as a backdrop to the stage, featuring a stylised representation of the Mexican Eagle and the historical figures whom the Government honours each year (cf. Figure 51).



Figure 51: Historical Figures (composite, 2019-2024)

This small handful of props - lectern, flag, coat of arms and government logo - are used at all AMLO's press conferences, whether it is in the grand hall of the Palacio Nacional or in an improvised marquee on tour. Symbolically, they reinforce AMLO's extraordinary status: the verbal exchanges between AMLO

and the press corps may be rather informal in tone, but he is still the President of the United Mexican States - he who speaks, and he who commands. The timing of the *Mañaneras*, which invariably start at 7 am, after a meeting of the president's national security committee, but before AMLO sits down for breakfast, conveys the image of a president who is working hard for his country. The instructions he occasionally gives to his ministers or his communications team live on air serve to confirm both his authority and his efficiency: he is a leader who either gets things done or instructs others to do so on his behalf. In terms of the dress code, AMLO wears a suit and tie when speaking from the Palacio Nacional. However, when the *Mañaneras* are organised outside Mexico City, the president often wears a traditional Mexican shirt (*guayabera*). It is one of the small distinguishing features between Mexico City and rest-of-Mexico press conferences, which follow the same pattern otherwise. The journalists, whether in Mexico City or elsewhere, do not adhere to any particular dress code: some are smartly dressed, but most attend in casual attire.

4.4.3 Journalists at the *Mañaneras*

The attendees at the *Mañaneras* include reporters from the printed and digital press, multimedia platforms, radio and television broadcasting, as well as social media. Admission is free to all accredited media representatives, from both national and international news outlets. These range from the smallest community radio stations and digital news outlets with a circulation or rating figure of 1,000, authorised to attend once or twice a month, to the largest national newspapers and media platforms, with circulation or audience ratings upward of 1.5 million, authorised to attend daily. The *Mañaneras* are also broadcast live by both public and private television channels and online social media platforms.

While AMLO's weekend tours around the country (*giras*), such as the ones analysed in chapter three, are designed to bring the president physically closer to his constituents, albeit in small clusters, the *Mañaneras* are designed to bring the president closer to all of his constituents, albeit virtually. Sceptics would

argue that the president uses the *Mañaneras* to represent government "as a televised show" (de la Torre, 2017, pp.205-206). Supporters would counter that the *Mañaneras* allow the president to broadcast his message directly to the nation, without media spin; as the presidency spokesperson points out, "if you don't say something, other people will fill the space" (Ramírez Cuevas, 04.01.2021). Be that as it may, it is worth remembering that there are two intended audiences for every *Mañanera*: the media assembled in the auditorium, who report on the president's discourse, and before whom AMLO may therefore wish to "make a good speech and win allegiance to the 'self' of the speaker" (Gaffney, 2014, p.391) - or, at the very least, ensure neutral, rather than negative, media coverage - and the president's followers around the country, who may be tuning in remotely, either live or on replay, and whose support AMLO wishes to enlist and retain. Indeed, as de la Torre observes, "TV and radio shows allow for the creation of support networks"¹⁵⁷ (de la Torre, 2013, p.31). The next subsection will discuss the wider audience of the president's *Mañaneras*.

4.4.4 The Wider Audience

In terms of the viewing public, the *Mañaneras* constitute a formidable - and direct - channel of communication between the president and his followers. According to a report published by *Aristegui Noticias*, its viewing figures are high:

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's morning press conferences have accumulated 235 million views on his YouTube channel, while the official channels of the Mexican government, Cepropie and Canal Catorce have a combined total of 50 million views.¹⁵⁸ (Barragán, 2021)

¹⁵⁷ "El show televisivo y radial permite crear redes de apoyo."

¹⁵⁸ "Las conferencias de prensa matutinas acumulan 235 millones de vistas en el canal de YouTube del presidente Andrés Manuel López Obrador, mientras que los canales oficiales del Gobierno de México, de Cepropie y Canal Catorce suman en conjunto 50 millones de visualizaciones."

To which one may add more than a million accompanying social media comments: "In total, the broadcasts feature 1,015,000 million comments, of which 886,000 are on López Obrador's personal account"¹⁵⁹ (Barragán, 2021).

The *Mañaneras* certainly have their detractors - Roger Bartra would like to see them abolished altogether:

As for what the president should do, he should start by not threatening the mass media and, in my view, cancel the morning conferences, which are a real disgrace, a ridiculous and pitiful spectacle, unworthy of a political culture such as Mexico's, which has moved towards democracy.¹⁶⁰ (Bartra, 2019)

Santiago Creel has already pledged to abolish the *Mañaneras* if he is elected president. However, notwithstanding its critics, most Mexicans seem to approve of the daily news conference format. This may be because it contrasts with the relative dearth of public communication exercises under previous administrations. Mexican presidents did not give any press interviews at all until the 1970s; the decade thereafter, they issued one statement a year to the press, in the presence of two handpicked journalists who were not allowed to ask the president any unscripted questions. Salinas was the first president to answer a few questions as he toured the country, and his successors (Zedillo, Fox, Calderón and Peña Nieto) followed suit - but as Alberto Nájjar points out, "under no circumstances were press conferences organised, and there were very few awkward questions"¹⁶¹ (Nájjar, 2019). Writing for *The New York Times*, Jorge Ramos confirms the contrast between AMLO and previous administrations: "His

¹⁵⁹ "Todas las transmisiones tienen un millón 15 mil comentarios, de los cuales 886 mil están en la cuenta personal de López Obrador."

¹⁶⁰ "En cuanto a lo que debería hacer el presidente, debería empezar por no amenazar a los medios masivos de difusión y, desde mi punto de vista, cancelar las conferencias mañaneras que son una verdadera vergüenza, un espectáculo ridículo y lastimoso, que no es digno de una cultura política como la mexicana que ha transitado hacia la democracia."

¹⁶¹ "En ningún caso se organizaron conferencias de prensa, y muy pocas veces hubo preguntas incómodas."

words are reproduced much more than those of other presidents. (...) AMLO (...) has given much more access to the press"¹⁶² (Ramos, 2021).

In reference to Samuel Kernell's work on presidential communication (Kernell, 1997), Mexican media specialist Ramón Morales Izaguirre points out that traditionally, Mexican presidents have used the "Roosevelt" method of communication - "on demand, on specific occasions" - and that "AMLO is the first president in Mexico's history to use the Kennedy system", communicating "daily, mostly to journalists" (Morales Izaguirre, 2022). According to Morales Izaguirre, this has allowed him "to control the agenda and maintain his popularity" (Morales Izaguirre, 2022) - an argument seemingly borne out by AMLO's consistently high approval ratings (cf. Figure 52), which suggest that he has been able to weather every political storm (Covid 19 pandemic, feminicides, etc.) by presenting his own narrative on the topic immediately and broadcasting it to the entire nation.

EVALUACIÓN DE GOBIERNO

Aprobación

En general, ¿usted aprueba o desaprueba el trabajo que está haciendo Andrés Manuel López Obrador como Presidente de México?
[% promedio trimestral 2019 a 2022 y % mensual a partir de 2023]

— Aprueba — Desaprueba

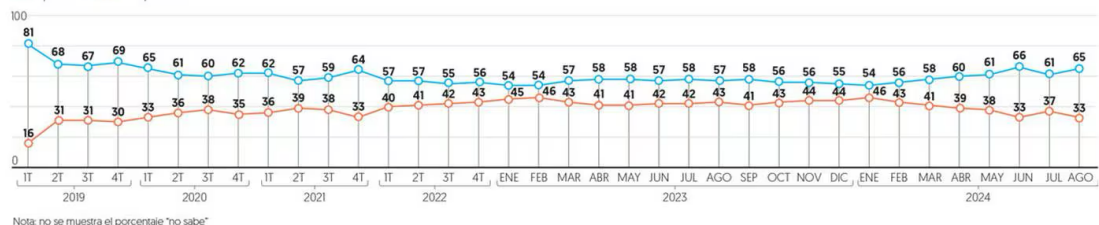


Figure 52: Approval Ratings (Financiero, 2024)

In April 2023, *Forbes México* noted the continued popularity of the *Mañaneras*:

When asked the question 'Are you in favour or against President López Obrador's morning press conferences?', 68% of respondents said they

¹⁶² "Sus palabras se reproducen mucho más que los de otros presidentes. (...) AMLO (...) ha dado mucho más acceso a la prensa."

were in favour and 32% said they were against.¹⁶³ (Forbes México, 2023)

Amongst those who reported watching the *Mañaneras*, either frequently or occasionally, the majority described the press conferences as informative:

On whether they consider that the morning conferences propagate lies or help people to be more informed about the country, 65% said that they help people to be more informed and 35% responded that they propagate lies.¹⁶⁴ (Forbes México, 2023)

The *Mañaneras* may therefore be considered an effective channel of communication for the presidential source, through which AMLO is able to discursively construct his collective mission, on a daily basis, and before a wide audience.

In conclusion, this section has argued that the staging of AMLO's morning press conferences is designed to fulfil two functions. On the one hand, the setting provides the technical support required for the president's performance before the assembled media and the broader viewing public, a performance in which the collective mission of the 4T features prominently. On the other, the staging of the *Mañaneras* is also designed to present AMLO as a *ciudadano presidente* - approachable, yet unquestionably the man who has the final say.

4.5 Case Study: Press Conference of 23 February 2023

¹⁶³ "Al ser cuestionados con la pregunta '¿Usted está a favor o en contra de las conferencias de prensa mañaneras del presidente López Obrador?', 68% de los consultados dijo que está a favor y 32%, en contra."

¹⁶⁴ "Sobre si consideran que las conferencias mañaneras distribuyen mentiras o ayudan a que la gente esté más informada sobre el país, 65% dijo que éstas ayudan a que la gente esté más informada y 35% respondió que en ellas se distribuyen mentiras."

I was given the opportunity to attend the president's *Mañanera* during a field trip to Mexico in 2023. Having observed the exchange between the president and the press first hand, I have chosen this particular press conference (23 February 2023) as my principal case study for the present chapter. It was an ordinary press conference, with no major breaking news or overly heated exchanges - and for that very reason, it may be considered a representative example of the type of communication that the president routinely engages in during his *Mañaneras*. Much of the rhetoric used on this day is replicated in other press conferences. For instance: on 23 February 2023, AMLO talks at length about the 4T, and the database I have compiled as part of my research shows that the Fourth Transformation ("*cuarta transformación*") has been mentioned explicitly at 473 morning press conferences. On this occasion as on many others, AMLO reiterates several of the moral leitmotifs of the 4T:

- "love thy neighbour" ("*amor al prójimo*") (quoted in 150 *Mañaneras*);
- "first and foremost the poor" ("*primero los pobres*") (quoted in 141 *Mañaneras*);
- "revolution of consciousness" ("*revolución de las conciencias*") (quoted in 133 *Mañaneras*).¹⁶⁵

The recurrent use of these phrases in the *Mañaneras* shows a certain consistency over time, and the press conference of 23 February 2023 thus forms part of a discursive chain that links the very first press conference given by the president on 4 December 2018 to the last one he will hold on 30 September 2024, all of them designed to inform the people of Mexico about AMLO's collective mission, the 4T.

¹⁶⁵ All figures given at the time of thesis submission.

The *Mañanera* has helped build an idea of the country, of the problems, and of the origin of the problems we are experiencing (...) The fact that it is done publicly, that elements are provided, that a vision is shared, that the context of the news is given - as the President says, there is always a context to the news - strengthens the citizens' views on key issues and on public life.¹⁶⁶ (Ramírez Cuevas, 2023)

This section will analyse both the "wordcraft" (scripts) and "stagecraft" (actions) (Uhr, 2014, p.253) used by the president during his press conference of 23 February 2023 and flag up the performative and discursive elements that help construct AMLO's narrative of the 4T as a collective mission. It will also illustrate how AMLO uses unscripted discourse and spontaneous performance to elicit faith in his collective mission, even in front of a somewhat incredulous audience.

The discursive and performative analysis will be structured as follows: subsection 4.5.1 will address AMLO's construction of the past as a putative crisis that renders the collective mission necessary; subsection 4.5.2 will analyse AMLO's construction of the future as a redemptive horizon to be achieved through the collective mission; subsection 4.5.3 will discuss his portrayal of the moral community's conspiratorial enemies, who constitute an ever-present threat to the collective mission; subsection 4.5.4 will address the means by which AMLO seeks to form an affective bond with his audience, and how the latter respond; finally, subsection 4.5.5 will provide an illustration of a charismatic bond formed during the *Mañanera* that I attended.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ "La Mañanera ha ayudado a construir una idea del país, de los problemas, y del origen de los problemas que estamos viviendo. (...) El hecho de que se haga públicamente, de que se aporten elementos, de que se dé una visión, de que se dé el contexto de las noticias - como dice el Presidente, toda noticia tiene un contexto - fortalece la visión de los ciudadanos sobre los temas torales y sobre la vida pública."

¹⁶⁷ Appendix D provides a hyperlink to the video recording of the *Mañanera* (for reference). Unless otherwise specified, all quotes below are taken from the official transcription of the press conference (also referenced in Appendix D).

4.5.1 The Past: Putative Crisis

According to Joseph S. Nye, "an inspirational leader has to communicate effectively", using "oratory" and / or "non-verbal signals" (Nye, 2008, p.72) to create meaning in such a way that it is understandable to their audience. One such technique, according to Uhr, involves using "crisis rhetoric" to craft "public understanding of the hard choices of crisis management made by responsible leaders" (Uhr, 2014, p.260). In his discourse, AMLO portrays himself as a responsible leader having to make hard choices to overcome a systemic crisis created by his predecessors. Responsible leadership is also one of the strands in his rhetoric on Mexico's past; it forms part of a narrative that places the moral community and its virtuous leaders on the right side of history. As this subsection will illustrate, AMLO's construction of the past is mostly negative - hence, the sense of crisis - but he does find inspiration in the bravery of ordinary people and a handful of historical leaders who championed the popular cause, examples which he draws upon to inspire faith in his own morally righteous collective mission for the twenty-first century, the 4T. The subsection will start with an exploration of these positive references before turning to the more negative ones and explaining why this particular construction of the past resonates with his audience and helps AMLO establish his trustworthiness in their eyes.

In his *Mañanera* of 23 February 2023, AMLO performs what sociologists call a "frame alignment" between the achievements of the Mexican moral community of the past and today's 4T generation, "linking present behaviors to past events by citing historical examples", thereby "rendering events or occurrences meaningful" in an overall "schemata of interpretation" (Shamir *et al*, 1993, p.585) that connects the Mexican people's heroic past to its glorious future under the 4T. For instance, answering a question about obstructions to the construction of one of the government's flagship projects, the Trans-Isthmic Corridor, AMLO gradually steers the conversation away from the present - arguing that any current hold-ups are the result of decades of neoliberal neglect - "the southeast didn't matter to them, they couldn't even be bothered to rob

it"¹⁶⁸ - and towards one of his favourite subjects, Mexico's pre-Hispanic civilisations, which he praises for their grandeur: "the great Maya nation", the "mother culture" of the Olmecs, the "archaeological wealth" of southern Mexico, "which you don't find anywhere else in the world".¹⁶⁹ It is to these ancient cultures that today's generations owe their resilience, if one follows AMLO's narrative.

Fortunately, we Mexicans have a great reserve of cultural, moral and spiritual values, because of our cultures, that come from ancient times and have deep roots.¹⁷⁰

This fount of moral values puts the Mexican people in a league of their own, according to the president. It is what gave them the strength to oust a neoliberal government seemingly intent on handing over the country's natural resources to foreign investors.

Why do I say that the people of Mexico are in a different league? Because they let [the neoliberal governments] continue, on and on, and then, just as they were about to destroy the country, the people said: "stop". It's like thieves who enter a bank, they are looting the vaults, hurriedly putting the money in a bag or a sack, and then the alarm goes off and they run out and leave everything behind. That's how it was, the alarm went off.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ "El sureste no les importaba, ni siquiera para robar."

¹⁶⁹ "La gran nación Maya"; "florecieron culturas como la olmeca, la cultura madre"; "lo que no hay en otras partes del mundo: la riqueza arqueológica."

¹⁷⁰ "Los Mexicanos, afortunadamente (...) tenemos una gran reserva de valores, culturales, morales, espirituales, por nuestras culturas que vienen de tiempos remotos y son profundas sus raíces."

¹⁷¹ "¿Por qué digo que el pueblo de México es mucha pieza? Porque los dejó, los dejó, los dejó, y ya cuando estaban a punto de acabar con el país, dijo el pueblo: 'basta'. Es como los ladrones que entran a un banco y están saqueando las bóvedas, metiendo el dinero apurados en un costal o un saco, entonces suena la alarma y salen corriendo y van dejando tirado todo. Así fue, sonó la alarma."

AMLO praises not only the fortitude of the Mexican people, but also the heroic efforts of political leaders who have stood by the people over the course of history. He cites President Benito Juárez as an inspiration for his own government's determination to complete the collective mission, with the support of the people.

With patience, with the support of the people, as Juárez said: "With the people, everything; without the people, nothing", we were able to advance and we are advancing. So, yes, we are going to finish.¹⁷²

23 February happens to mark the anniversary of the 1913 *Decena Trágica* which led to the assassination of President Francisco I. Madero and his Vice-President José María Pino Suárez; a commemorative act was held immediately after the press conference in the Palacio Nacional. On this occasion, as on many others, AMLO refers to Madero as the Apostle of Democracy.

A good man, that's why he is known as the Apostle of Democracy, good, good, good, who was ahead of his time, who wanted Mexico to have a true democracy, who wanted freedoms to be respected.¹⁷³

He aligns Madero's political achievements with what he hopes will be the legacy of the 4T.

Imagine dismantling the *Porfirista* regime that had lasted thirty-four years. Yes, that's why we have to be patient, because *Neoporfirismo*

¹⁷² "Con paciencia, con el apoyo del pueblo, como decía Juárez: 'Con el pueblo, todo; sin el pueblo nada', pudimos avanzar y estamos avanzando. Entonces, sí vamos a acabar."

¹⁷³ "Un hombre bueno, por eso se le conoce como el Apóstol de la Democracia, bueno, bueno, bueno, que se adelantó a sus tiempos, quería que en México hubiese una auténtica democracia, que se respetaran las libertades."

lasted thirty-six years, from 1983 to 2018, and it had deep roots. As I always say: Don Porfirio left, but Doña Porfiria stayed behind.¹⁷⁴

By aligning the moral community of the past with that of the present and by alluding to the success of previous historical transformations which form part of his audience's cultural identity, AMLO signals to his listeners that a morally just cause - a collective mission - can triumph, even in the face of adversity, and that with the support of today's moral community and the vision of a determined and morally righteous leader, the collective mission of the 4T will succeed, too. The frame alignment between past achievements and contemporary efforts thus serves to encourage faith in the collective mission that is the 4T.

AMLO's choice of historical references is judicious, because they are instantly recognisable to a Mexican audience and shore up the president's credibility as someone who knows their history; all the journalists in the room will have studied Mesoamerican civilisations, Independence, Reform and Revolution and integrated them into their self-perception as Mexicans. By drawing on these references, AMLO not only reinforces "a sense of identity with the collectivity", but also kindles "a sense of efficacy resulting from membership in the collectivity" (Shamir, 1993, p.585).

That said, much of AMLO's construction of the past in this *Mañanera* (as in others) focuses on irresponsible - indeed: criminal - leadership, which is the very reason why the country finds itself in crisis and why the 4T is so necessary. It is in this strand of his construction of the past that crisis rhetoric comes into play. Mexico's problems, according to the president, are rooted in an enduring tradition of conservatism and the elite's disregard for the people: "There is a long-standing tradition of conservative thinking in Mexico; there has always been conservatism."¹⁷⁵ Under the *Porfiriato* and *Neoporfirismo*, democracy and

¹⁷⁴ "Imagínense desmontar el régimen porfirista que había durado 34 años. Si, por eso tenemos que tener paciencia, porque el neoporfirismo duró 36 años, desde 1983 hasta el 2018, y caló profundo. (...) Siempre repito que se fue don Porfirio, pero se quedó doña Porfiria."

¹⁷⁵ "Hay una tradición de pensamiento conservador en México, que viene de lejos,

the separation of powers were entirely fictional. No-one contradicted the president.

In the past (...) the Constitution was respected in form, but breached in substance, from the time of Porfirio Díaz until the last *sexenio* [six-year presidential term]. There were (...) three powers, but in reality, the supreme power was the Executive, it was the president, the other two powers were just adjuncts to the Executive.¹⁷⁶

According to AMLO's construction of the past, the rule of law (*estado de derecho*) was non-existent under *Neoporfirismo*, supplanted instead by a rogue state (*estado de chueco*) or a state of bribery (*estado de cohecho*). Even with the end of the PRI's one-party domination in 2000, nothing changed.

What there was was a lot of pretence; imagine the great pretence of the 2000 elections: the PRI loses, the PAN comes in, and so many people thought that things were going to change. Well, it was *gatopardismo* [cosmetic change], which is when things appear to change, but actually stay the same.¹⁷⁷

At the heart of it all lay government-sponsored corruption and theft: "The budget was only enough to maintain a gilded elite of bureaucrats at the service of the looters."¹⁷⁸ AMLO is particularly damning of his immediate predecessors in office, who - according to him - made any number of wrong-headed decisions

siempre ha existido el conservadurismo."

¹⁷⁶ "Antes (...) se respetaba la Constitución en la forma, pero se violaba en el fondo, desde la época de Porfirio Díaz hasta el sexenio pasado. Había (...) tres poderes, pero en realidad el poder de los poderes era el Ejecutivo, era el presidente, los otros dos poderes eran apéndices del Ejecutivo."

¹⁷⁷ "Lo que había era mucha simulación, imagínense la gran simulación que significó la elección del 2000: pierde el PRI, entra el PAN, y cuántos pensando de que iban a cambiar las cosas. Pues fue gatopardismo, eso que consiste en que las cosas en apariencia cambian para seguir igual"

¹⁷⁸ "No alcanzaba el presupuesto más que para mantener una élite dorada de burócratas al servicio de los saqueadores."

while in office. If they made any correct ones, these are absent from his discourse, which is significant in itself: what is said is just as important as "what is not said" and "what is said through gesture and body language" (Uhr, 2014, p.254). In this *Mañanera*, AMLO does not say anything remotely positive about Fox, Calderón or Peña Nieto. Fox is condemned for mismanaging the oil sector, initiating a 15-year decline in oil production. More importantly, he is criticised for not delivering the democratic change he had promised after seventy-one years of PRI rule: "They were duped by Fox, who told them there was going to be a change, and it was just more of the same."¹⁷⁹ Calderón comes in for the most severe criticism. This particular *Mañanera* took place a day after Calderón's security chief Genaro García Luna, the enforcer of the former president's war on drugs, was convicted by a Brooklyn District Court of drug trafficking and corruption involving the Sinaloa cartel. Calderón was therefore bound to be on the media agenda on 23 February 2023. Calderón is lambasted not only for his appointment and retainment of García Luna, but also:

- for electoral fraud in 2006: "Felipe Calderón stole the presidency";¹⁸⁰
- for obstructing an inquiry into a fire that killed 49 children in a nursery co-owned by a family member of his wife in Sonora in 2009: "We are talking about the loss of children's lives, boys and girls, a most appalling incident";¹⁸¹
- for his war on drugs and the collateral damage caused by his use of force, which AMLO compares to President Díaz Ordaz's repression of student protests during the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre. He quotes Calderón: "'I ordered that all the might of the state be used, and I would do it again', a bit like Díaz Ordaz: 'I assume all the responsibilities';"¹⁸²

¹⁷⁹ "Fox los engañó, que les dijo que iba a haber un cambio y que fue más de lo mismo."

¹⁸⁰ "Felipe Calderón se robó la Presidencia."

¹⁸¹ "Estamos hablando de la pérdida de vidas de niñas, de niños, un asunto lamentable completamente."

¹⁸² "Calderón (...): 'Ordené que se usara toda la fuerza del Estado y lo volvería a hacer', al estilo Díaz Ordaz', 'yo soy responsable'."

- for his connivance with US agencies who treated Mexico as their backyard during his presidency: "They came and went, doing whatever they wanted in our country, violating Mexico's sovereignty. Why doesn't he explain all that?".¹⁸³

There can be little doubt that AMLO's discursive construction of the past is centred primarily around the putative crisis of neoliberalism, a crisis that many Mexicans will recognise as not merely putative but something that they experienced first-hand. As de la Torre (2017) explains, a discourse that rails against neoliberalism is likely to find broad acceptance within Latin American societies. De la Torre identifies three endogenous factors that have contributed to Latin America's turn towards radical populism in the twenty-first century:

The first was a crisis of political representation. Traditional political parties and the institutional framework of democracy were in crisis. (...) The second (...) was widespread popular resistance to neoliberalism. (...) A third cause was that citizens perceived that politicians and neoliberal elites had surrendered national sovereignty to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the US government. (de la Torre, 2017, pp.200-201)

By emphasising the dire situation that the country found itself in prior to his mandate, AMLO also expresses his empathy with those whom neoliberalism left behind. Drawing on social psychology, and applying it to her area of specialism (the charismatic leadership of Hugo Chávez), Caitlin Andrews-Lee makes an interesting observation in this regard:

The theory of "proxy control" developed in social psychology suggests that people who have experienced these feelings [of exclusion, deprivation and hopelessness] are likely to seek out a charismatic "saviour" to recognise their suffering, take control of their seemingly

¹⁸³ "Entraban y salían, hacían lo que querían en el país, violando la soberanía de México. ¿Por qué no explica todo eso?"

unmanageable situation, and combat the "evil" forces blamed for their problems. (Andrews-Lee, 2019, p.301)

AMLO's crisis rhetoric and dramatic depiction of the corrupt state that he inherited from the PRI and the PAN (collectively known in Morena circles as the PRIAN) is an effective way of signalling to his audience the need for what Gaffney calls "providential leadership" (Gaffney, 2013, p.397) to save the nation.

Furthermore, by securing such a strong media presence - thanks to the *Mañaneras* and the *giras*, AMLO is in the public eye practically every day of the year - AMLO is able to continuously broadcast what Andrews-Lee would call "'contentious performances' in which he inexhaustibly repeats the central components of his transformative mission" which "followers come to internalise as part of their daily lives" (Andrews-Lee, 2019, p.301).¹⁸⁴ This familiarity makes the followers "perceive the leader as more authentic, and [they] therefore feel closer to him" (Andrews-Lee, 2019, p.301). Although the journalists who attend the president's morning press conferences are not necessarily followers - in the sense of admirers - of AMLO, they nevertheless recognise the "themes of heroism, villainy, and salvation" (Andrews-Lee, 2019, p.301) upon which his 4T narrative is based. Since many of them attend the *Mañaneras* very assiduously, one cannot rule out a certain acceptance of AMLO's narrative as the new dominant discourse of Mexican politics. In addition, one should not forget that the *Mañaneras* are not just directed at the assembled press corps in the Palacio Nacional; the journalists are intermediaries who convey the president's messages to the world at large - either verbatim, or by incorporating them into their own editorial analysis. The crisis rhetoric used by the president is therefore also intended for a much larger audience, including his supporters, and by depicting the past as a struggle between good and evil in a way that is recognisable to his followers, AMLO strengthens the "personalistic attachments"

¹⁸⁴ Andrews-Lee refers to Hugo Chávez, but her observations may be applied *mutatis mutandis* to AMLO.

(Andrews-Lee, 2019, p.317) between his support base and himself, and reinforces his charisma in their eyes.

Recognition of historically marginalised citizens (...) and a compelling symbolic narrative of redemption that incorporates familiar cultural themes solidify personalistic bonds and lead citizens to perceive the founder as intensely charismatic. (Andrews-Lee, 2019, p.317)

Incidentally, if one casts a sideways glance at the commentary in the online chat displayed next to the recording of the *Mañanera*, one finds a considerable amount of evidence to support this personalistic attachment between AMLO and his followers - specifically those who choose to tune into the daily broadcasts at 7 am¹⁸⁵ (cf. subsection 4.4.4). As seen in Figure 53, these followers repeat their president's formulations and pledge their unequivocal commitment to the cause.

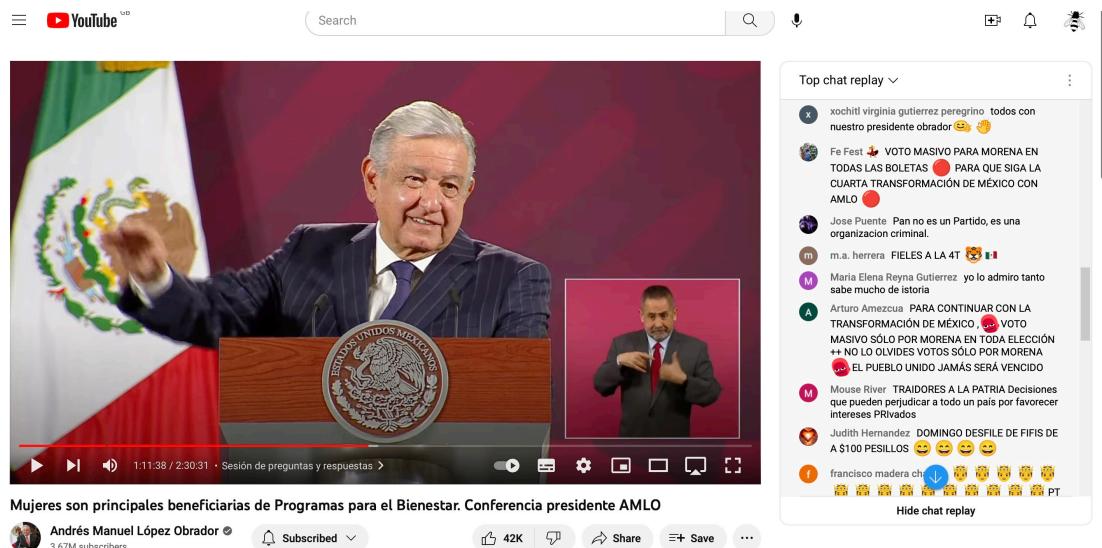


Figure 53: Online Chat (Canal, 2023)

The *Mañanera* of 23 February 2023 provides a clear illustration of the way in which AMLO articulates Mexico's putative crisis with the irresponsible

¹⁸⁵ The chat feed is live, so the commentaries found in it (even in replay mode) are from the live broadcast of the *Mañanera*.

leadership of its neoliberal governments, in particular that of Calderón. The picture he paints of the past is grim: a country ravaged by corruption, theft, deceit and violence, and with a seemingly endless succession of self-serving elites at the helm. His crisis rhetoric prepares the ground psychologically for a collective mission of salvation. In its next subsection, the chapter will discuss the ways in which AMLO discursively constructs his vision of the future under the collective mission of the 4T, and how he seeks to elicit his audience's faith in the project.

4.5.2 The Future: Redemption

As the previous subsection argued, the crisis rhetoric employed by AMLO in depicting the past, and in particular Mexico's recent neoliberal past, resonates with an audience who can identify with the problems that he enumerates - corruption, fraud, deceit - and who are therefore likely to view him as a trustworthy political leader who is not afraid to speak the truth. Citing Kirk Hawkins, de la Torre observes:

A Manichaeian discourse denouncing elite conspiracies and celebrating the eventual triumph of the popular will speaks to a real underlying problem of democratic failure in which the vast majority of citizens are poorly served by a dysfunctional or even predatory state. (Hawkins, 2010, p.149, cited in de la Torre, 2017, p.208)

AMLO's crisis rhetoric also serves to emphasise the urgency of taking action, if one is to emerge from this deep-rooted crisis. However, denouncing elite conspiracies is not sufficient in itself; to be considered an extraordinary leader, AMLO needs to present an alternative political project that is both transformative and meaningful to his followers, a project that they can believe in. This subsection will argue that to elicit this faith, AMLO discursively constructs the collective mission of the 4T as a visionary project designed to bring both material and nonmaterial benefits to the Mexican people.

In their writings on the motivational effects of charismatic leadership, Shamir *et al.* argue that "being hopeful in the sense of having faith in a better future is an intrinsically satisfying condition" (Shamir *et al.*, 1993, p.580) and that the leader's ability to inspire confidence in a better future is what makes them charismatic in the eyes of their followers. It is an observation that sits well with both Weber's description of the charismatic leader to whom the led submit "not because of custom or statute, but because they believe in him" (Weber, 1994, p.312) and with John Gaffney's theory on "envisioning" (Gaffney, 2013). According to Gaffney, it is the act of "envisioning" that lends leaders "exceptional status" in the eyes of their followers: "The audience, paradoxically, feels an affinity with the speaker because he or she can 'see' something that they cannot see" (Gaffney, 2013, p.395). Gaffney's theory may usefully be applied to the case study of the present thesis. Indeed, at regular intervals of his *Mañanera*, the president envisions the future. His vision connects the past to the present and future and "explains the role and the meaning of the community in history" (Zúquete, 2017, p.459). As outlined in the previous subsection, AMLO's construction of the past emphasises the struggle for morally just popular causes, in defiance of immoral elite interests. As de la Torre would put it, AMLO exalts the "common people as the embodiment of true and uncorrupted national traditions and values against foreign-oriented elites" (de la Torre, 2017, p.209). AMLO projects these elements onto his vision of the future, giving his followers "a sense of continuity" (Shamir *et al.*, 1993, p.586) that lends credibility to his proposed undertaking. The underlying message could be summarised as follows: with the determined will of the moral community, victories of the past can be replicated in the future.

In his discourse on the merits of the 4T, AMLO speaks of both material and moral benefits to be gained from this transformation. The moral benefits are arguably the more relevant to a thesis that addresses the role of faith in charismatic leadership; with no immediate quantifiable rewards, the narrative around these moral outcomes is essentially an invitation addressed to followers to take a Kierkegaardian leap of faith and sign up to the project, despite the absence of any certainty as to the outcome. The moral benefits of the 4T are

ethereal and distal. However, even when AMLO lists the purported material benefits of the 4T, he articulates them with moral objectives to make them more meaningful to his listeners. In other words, the material objectives of the 4T are not just tangible goals, they also serve a higher purpose, according to AMLO's construction. AMLO's overall envisioning of the future under the 4T should consequently be read as the discursive construction of a mission that is primarily moral in nature. The subsection will first turn its attention to AMLO's references to the material - but at the same time moral - objectives of the 4T, before addressing its purely moral ambitions.

A large part of the *Mañanera* on 23 February 2023 is devoted to the government's flagship projects, including Mexico City's second airport, the Felipe Ángeles International Airport (AIFA), the Dos Bocas oil refinery, the Tren Maya railway line that connects the southern states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Yucatán and Quintana Roo, and the Trans-Isthmic Corridor built to facilitate freight traffic between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. The journalists ask about delays to these projects and their overall financial viability. The president's replies are consistently reassuring: "Yes, we are making progress and we will be able to finish"; "Yes, we will finish it all".¹⁸⁶ His comments on these projects start as a response to a journalist's question, but sometimes turn into a digression that incorporates other projects which the journalist has not necessarily inquired about. The intention is to make sure that the public is kept informed of the progress being made on all these flagship projects: "It is very important that all this be known".¹⁸⁷

There are arguably several reasons why the president is so keen to provide his own perspective on these projects. For one thing, the projects are not uncontroversial. Critics argue that they are costly, harm biodiversity and run counter to contemporary environmental concerns; fossil fuels bring revenue, but they also destroy the planet. Yet the president defends them staunchly and takes great pride in reporting on their state of advancement. A second reason has to

¹⁸⁶ "Sí, vamos avanzando y vamos a poder terminar."; "Sí, vamos a terminar todo."

¹⁸⁷ "Todo eso es muy importante que se conozca."

do with economics. Financial markets were apprehensive when AMLO was voted into office, fearing that a leftist administration could not be trusted with the economy. On this point, AMLO appears to have proven the financial markets wrong; at the time of writing, the Mexican peso is strong, foreign direct investment is booming, and public debt has not increased on his watch: "Look how far the budget can stretch when there is no corruption"¹⁸⁸ he proudly announces at the *Mañanera*. A third reason has to do with AMLO's overall vision of Mexico's past, present and future, as discussed above. In AMLO's overarching narrative, the 4T follows on from Mexico's three previous transformations - Independence, Reform and Revolution - which all sought to rid the country of foreign influence, both political, military and economical. The first generation of post-revolutionary governments focussed much of their attention on bolstering the national economy through a policy of import substitution industrialisation, giving rise to a Mexican "economic miracle" (Knight, 2010, p.231). Cárdenas nationalised the oil industry in 1938, bringing the country great amounts of revenue. In AMLO's narrative, these achievements were subsequently undermined by the neoliberal (*neoporfirista*) administrations that governed the country from 1983 to 2018, who gradually relinquished the country's economic sovereignty through concessions and licences granted to foreign corporations. The president's discourse on major infrastructure and energy investments thus serves not only to showcase Mexico's strong economy, but also to offer an overall narrative around the collective mission of the 4T that reconnects the present with a pre-neoliberal past. According to AMLO, after a 36-year disastrous hiatus, Mexico is finally returning to the path of national sovereignty, and ordinary Mexicans should take great pride in this. As Andrews-Lee would put it, it is a "symbolic narrative [that] solidifies the leader's role as the ultimate saviour" (Andrews-Lee, 2019, p.302) - or, in specifically Mexican terms, as a modern-day *tlatoani*.

In his discourse on the government's welfare policies, the president forges a link between the immediate and tangible goals of these policies and their more general moral objective, namely to help *los de abajo*. For instance, with its 2,750 branches, the Welfare Bank (*Banco del Bienestar*) is not just a major

¹⁸⁸ "Fíjense cómo alcanza el presupuesto cuando no hay corrupción."

logistical accomplishment, it is also designed to help Mexico's poorest rural communities, thereby fulfilling a moral purpose: "We are talking about branches in the mountains, in the most remote places".¹⁸⁹ Similarly, the government's *Programas para el Bienestar* are presented as both morally just and economically feasible, thanks to the government's overall mission of eradicating corruption.

You have no idea (...) how important it is not to allow corruption, because it is not only a moral issue, it is also a lot of money that is freed up for the development of the country.¹⁹⁰

One of the 4T's objectives is to create employment opportunities in Mexico, especially in its poorest regions, so that no-one is forced to emigrate out of economic necessity - again, a combination of material and moral objectives. In the *Mañanera*, AMLO reiterates this commitment to the Southern and South-Eastern states of Mexico, an area that he claims was neglected by neoliberal governments.

Where are we allocating more resources? To Guerrero, to Oaxaca, to Chiapas, I can prove it to you with the Welfare Programmes; because they are the poorest, they are the ones in greatest need, and we are putting into practice the principle of: for the good of all, first and foremost the poor.¹⁹¹

"First and foremost the poor" (*primero los pobres*) has been AMLO's constant leitmotiv since his time as Mayor of Mexico City. Those who have followed his

¹⁸⁹ "Estamos hablando de sucursales en la sierra, en los lugares más apartados."

¹⁹⁰ "No saben (...) la importancia que tiene el no permitir la corrupción, porque no es un asunto nada más de índole moral, sino es muchísimo el dinero que se libera para el desarrollo del país."

¹⁹¹ "¿Dónde estamos destinando más recursos? A Guerrero, a Oaxaca, a Chiapas, se los puedo probar con los Programas de Bienestar, porque son los más pobres, son los más necesitados, y estamos llevando a la práctica que, por el bien de todos, primero los pobres."

political trajectory, including the journalists attending the *Mañanera*, will be aware of this. AMLO's steadfast attachment to the same principles lends credibility to the collective mission of the 4T; its policies are not the result of an opportunistic president's "sudden ideas" or "whims" (Weyland, 2017, p.61), but rather, they form part of a vision that AMLO has been nurturing since he first became politically engaged.

The findings above lend support to one of the arguments advanced by this chapter, namely that whilst AMLO's construction of the future under the 4T incorporates a number of material pledges, the articulations that he uses in his discourse alert his listeners to the fact that these material benefits form part of a broader moral mission, too. Appeals to such high-minded aspirations resonate with AMLO's followers at a "deeper, emotional level" (Naidoo, 2008, p.292) than the promise of pure material rewards. The "realm of the nonmaterial" helps to cement the followers' "attachment to the leader and to the mission" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.264) - an aspect which scholars of the political-strategic approach to populism tend to overlook.

Political scientists are enthralled by a rationalistic paradigm and often dominated by cost-benefit analyses that underplay the role of beliefs, emotions, and nonmaterial forces, such as symbolism, in human affairs. (Zúquete, 2013a, p.263)

Having addressed some of the material objectives embedded in AMLO's wider discourse on the moral purpose of the 4T, this subsection will focus next on AMLO's more direct references to the nonmaterial aspirations of the 4T. These examples will be used to lend further weight to the overall argument of this chapter, namely that AMLO's collective mission is primarily a moral proposition, which appeals to the faith of his followers, rather than just their expectations of material rewards.

Contrasting the thirty-six years of *Neoporfirismo* with his own six-year term, AMLO resorts to a binary good-versus-evil imagery that allows him to detach his

politics from the "normal" and hold out instead "the promise of the extraordinary" (Zúquete, 2017, p.452). The extraordinary is reflected in a whole series of nonmaterial values that form an integral part of the collective mission of the 4T, according to the president's rhetoric.

"Corruption is not allowed under this government and there is no impunity."¹⁹²

"May public life in our country be cleansed."¹⁹³

"It is important to promote the revolution of consciousness."¹⁹⁴

"We are uprooting the regime of corruption, injustice and privilege."¹⁹⁵

AMLO invests particular hope in the young generations, who hold the key to the future of the 4T.

Young people (...) already have a different mindset (...) because they have a fresh perspective; it's like (...) a blank notebook, and this is where a lot of progress can be made, so that they learn to think more humanely, more fraternally, not selfishly, not in classist or racist way; so that they don't hate; (...) so that they don't worship money.¹⁹⁶

With a wry smile, he shares his gratitude with the audience for the changes already brought about by this *revolución de las conciencias*. Were it not for this

¹⁹² "No se permite en este gobierno la corrupción y no hay impunidad."

¹⁹³ "Que se vaya purificando la vida pública en nuestro país."

¹⁹⁴ "Por eso es importante impulsar la revolución de las conciencias."

¹⁹⁵ "Estamos (...) arrancando de raíz el régimen de corrupción, de injusticias, de privilegios."

¹⁹⁶ "Los jóvenes (...) sí, ya están pensando de otra manera (...) porque tienen una mente más fresca, es como (...) un cuaderno en blanco, donde se puede avanzar mucho para que tengan un pensamiento más humano, más fraterno, no egoísta, no clasista, no racista, que no odien; (...) que no conviertan al dinero en su dios."

change in mindsets, he would not be standing here today: "Mexico has made a lot of progress."¹⁹⁷



Figure 54: Progress (Canal, 2023)

Expressing his own unshakeable faith in just causes, AMLO invites his audience to follow suit, and never to lose heart.

Freedom is not something you beg for, it is something you have to win, and we have been fighting for many years. Don't lose momentum. "Fight, fight, fight, never stop fighting for a workers', peasants' and people's government." Fighting from the opposition is hard work, it is a permanent struggle for ideals, for principles. And yet there is nothing more beautiful than fighting for ideals and principles, for just causes. So come on, let's go!¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ "Se ha avanzado muchísimo en México."

¹⁹⁸ "La libertad no se implora, se conquista, nosotros luchamos durante muchos años. Y que no se cansen. 'Lucha, lucha, lucha, no dejes de luchar por un gobierno obrero, campesino y popular'. Porque también la lucha en oposición exige de muchas fatigas, es estar permanentemente luchando por los ideales, por los principios. Eso sí, no hay cosa más bella que luchar por ideales y principios, por causas justas. Entonces ¡ánimo!"

In this example, AMLO clearly uses affect to communicate with his audience: he smiles, he recites a little ditty from his youth ("*lucha, lucha, lucha*"), he opens up to his audience by sharing both his weariness and his enthusiasm, and he sends them a little message of encouragement ("*¡ánimo!*"). The interaction - and in particular, the way in which AMLO uses both discourse and performance in an attempt to draw his audience closer - evokes "a speaker-audience relationship of proximity, empathy and sharing" (Gaffney, 2013, p.394). As Gaffney would point out, the sense of intimacy is necessarily constructed: "the speaker is real, as is the audience, but the performance involves imagined and constructed notions of these real people" (Gaffney, 2013, p.393). Yet, even as a construct, it provides an insight into how the leader is perceived as being both like his listeners - the audience can identify with his emotions - and not like them: no-one else in the room offers a vision that could potentially re-enchant a desolate political landscape, which is what AMLO's collective mission of the 4T proposes to do.

The third subsection of this chapter analyses AMLO's discursive construction of the conspiratorial enemies of the 4T - and of the moral community - identifying the rhetoric used by the president to alert his followers to the constant danger they pose to the success of the collective mission.

4.5.3 The Conspiratorial Enemies: An Ever-Present Threat

Section 4.5.1 already addressed the conspiratorial enemies of the past, i.e. the forces of reaction and conservatism who tried, but ultimately failed, to derail Mexico's three previous historic transformations: Independence, Reform and Revolution. Section 4.5.3 will therefore turn its attention to the conspiratorial enemies of today, which, according to the president's discourse, include politicians, the media, state institutions and civil society organisations. They form part of what AMLO calls a conservative bloc and are the reason why the 4T requires the unwavering support of the moral community.

I have always maintained that the strength of the conservative bloc should not be underestimated. (...) They are financed by the oligarchy, they have a lot of money, they are sometimes even financed by foreign governments, they have most of the media on their side, they also have the support of organic intellectuals.¹⁹⁹

The objective of the conservative bloc is to destabilise the supporters of the 4T, ordinary people for whom they have no real concern: "They want to confuse and manipulate people".²⁰⁰ AMLO depicts these conspiratorial enemies as hypocrites who lie to the people and who hold their elected leader (AMLO) in contempt, mocking him for his provincial ways - precisely the traits that make his supporters perceive him as one of their own.

They can see that Fox deceived them, that he told them there was going to be change, and then it was just more of the same. They can see - they know - that Felipe Calderón stole the presidency, and that his Secretary of Public Security [Genaro García Luna] was involved with criminal organisations, and they don't care. As far as they're concerned, it is AMLO who is doing things wrong: authoritarian, populist, doesn't speak English, parochial. That's just how it is, and that's how it always will be.²⁰¹

The largest contingent of these conspiratorial enemies is represented by the political class (the PRIAN). On this occasion, AMLO singles out four high-profile

¹⁹⁹ "Siempre he sostenido que no hay que menospreciar la fuerza del bloque conservador. (...) Ellos están financiados por la oligarquía, tienen mucho dinero, cuentan a veces hasta con financiamiento de gobiernos extranjeros, tienen de su lado a la mayoría de los medios de información, cuentan también con el apoyo de los intelectuales orgánicos."

²⁰⁰ "Quieren confundir y manipular a la gente."

²⁰¹ "Pueden estar viendo que Fox los engañó, que les dijo que iba a haber un cambio y que fue más de lo mismo. Pueden estar viendo, constatando, sabiendo de que Felipe Calderón se robó la Presidencia o esto de que su secretario de Seguridad Pública estaba involucrado con las organizaciones criminales y a ellos no les importa. O sea, para ellos el que está haciendo mal las cosas es AMLO, autoritario, populista, que no habla en inglés, pueblerino, entonces así es y así será."

PAN politicians (former Presidents Calderón and Fox, Ricardo Anaya, who ran against AMLO in 2018, and Marko Cortés, the current leader of the PAN) and four senior PRI politicians (José Antonio Meade, who ran against AMLO in 2018, Alejandro Moreno, the current president of the PRI, Miguel Angel Osorio Chong, formerly Peña Nieto's Home Secretary, and Claudia Ruiz Massieu, Peña Nieto's Foreign Secretary and niece of former President Salinas). The political class, however, are not alone in conspiring against the 4T: the media, too, form part of the conspiratorial enemies - particularly those news corporations that, according to AMLO, are waging a campaign to discredit both the collective mission of the 4T and its leader. On this occasion, it is *Proceso* and *Reforma* that are explicitly mentioned by the president. AMLO also singles out a number of high-profile journalists, such as Enrique Krauze (editor of *Letras Libres*), Héctor Aguilar Camín (director of *Nexos*) and Carlos Loret de Mola (founder of *LatinUS*), whom AMLO places firmly on the side of the conspiratorial enemies of the 4T. He describes them as organic intellectuals whose prestige allows them to legitimise the worldview of the privileged classes and disseminate a negative view of the 4T, both at home and abroad.

Anyone from abroad can come and look at the media, look at the newspapers or talk to intellectuals, ask Krauze for an opinion, ask Aguilar Camín for an opinion, or talk to the most famous journalists, the foreign correspondents, and the conclusion they will reach is that we are making a hash of it.²⁰²

AMLO furthermore refers to a number of public figures expected to attend a march organised in defence of the INE (National Electoral Institute) the next weekend. According to the president, these personalities will not be taking to the streets to defend the INE, but rather to show their solidarity with the corrupt elite that used to run the country, and to undermine the 4T. He mentions José

²⁰² "Puede venir cualquier persona de otro país y ve los medios de información, revisa los periódicos o habla con los intelectuales, le pide opinión a Krauze, le pide opinión a Aguilar Camín, o habla con los periodistas más afamados, los corresponsales extranjeros, y entonces tienen esa opinión, ¿no?, de que estamos haciendo las cosas mal."

Woldenberg, the first president of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE),²⁰³

Claudio X. González, the founder of Mexicans against Corruption and Impunity (MCCI) and José Ramón Cossío Díaz, a former member of the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN), whom he describes as "a corrupt conservative, a hypocrite, as are most of them".²⁰⁴

AMLO also alludes to feminist and environmentalist civil society organisations as potential opponents of the 4T. Feminist grievances are subsumed into a general disinformation campaign against his government, manipulated by the conservative bloc, according to AMLO. Asked by a journalist whether the government's megaprojects aren't actually funnelling money away from social programmes designed to support women, the president replies:

That is not true, it is part of the same campaign of disinformation and slander. This year - and this has never happened before in history - 600 billion pesos are being allocated to welfare programmes for twenty-five million households, and most of that goes to women.²⁰⁵

Environmentalists are labelled pseudo-environmentalists; they protest against 4T projects, but they were nowhere to be seen when previous corrupt administrations gave licences to criminal organisations to plunder Mexico's natural resources: "There was not a single environmentalist, not a single injunction, not a single protest at the time".²⁰⁶ Together with the political class, certain elements of the media and the aforementioned state institutions, civil society organisations thus form part of a chain of equivalence that gives

²⁰³ In 2014, the IFE was replaced by the INE.

²⁰⁴ "Corruptazo conservador, hipócrita, como son la mayoría de ellos."

²⁰⁵ "No es cierto eso, es parte de la misma campaña de desinformación y de calumnias. (...) Este año, como nunca en la historia, se están destinando 600 mil millones de pesos a programas de bienestar para 25 millones de hogares y la mayoría de eso va a mujeres."

²⁰⁶ "No hubo en ese tiempo ni un solo ambientalista, ni un solo amparo, ni una sola protesta."

meaning to the signifier of conspiratorial enemies of the 4T. In the president's own words, "it is a mixture of economic, corrupt and conservative interests."²⁰⁷

By drawing on the content of the *Mañanera* of 23 February 2023, this subsection has analysed the ways in which AMLO discursively constructs the conspiratorial enemies of his collective mission, showing how a chain of equivalence - involving representatives of the political class, parts of the media, civil society organisations and public institutions - is formed around this signifier to give it meaning. In the president's discourse, all these elements are articulated with a conservative bloc that opposes Mexico's historical transformation under his leadership. AMLO urges his followers to remain vigilant at all times. Should the moral community let down its guard, the conspiratorial enemies would return with a vengeance and undo all the achievements of the collective mission.

They must not be allowed to return to their old ways, because then they would end it all, because they are very ambitious and very corrupt, and they do not care about the people, they have no love for the people.²⁰⁸

It is worth pointing out that in AMLO's conception, all Mexicans are welcome to join the moral community and support the collective mission - even the conservative opposition, if they so wish: "All Mexicans, even the opponents from the conservative bloc, have behaved very well. (...) We have carried out this transformation without violence"²⁰⁹ he declares during the *Mañanera*. However, he also advises his followers not to despair if they find that some of their compatriots have decided never to join the collective mission: "Do not get angry or waste a lot of time trying to convince people who (...) have already

²⁰⁷ "Es una mezcla entre intereses económicos, corruptos y conservadores."

²⁰⁸ "Que (...) no regresen por sus fueros, porque entonces sí acabarían con todo, porque son muy ambiciosos y muy corruptos, y no les importa el pueblo, no le tienen amor al pueblo."

²⁰⁹ "Todos los mexicanos, hasta los opositores del bloque conservador, se han portado muy bien. (...) Hemos llevado a cabo esta transformación sin violencia."

decided not to change."²¹⁰ The 4T will succeed, as long as its supporters stand firm. Finally, with a glint in his eye, AMLO tells his audience not to worry about the antagonism that has risen to the surface since the 4T began; a lively debate is the sign of a healthy democracy.

We can't complain, we live in interesting times - I would even say: stellar times - in the history of our country. This didn't happen before, everything was very flat, nothing ever moved.²¹¹



Figure 55: Interesting Times (Canal, 2023)

Having discussed AMLO's constructions of the past, the future and the conspiratorial enemies of the 4T, the next subsection will address the discursive

²¹⁰ "No enojarse ni perder mucho tiempo en querer convencer a gente que (...) ya ha decidido no cambiar."

²¹¹ "Estamos viviendo, no nos podemos quejar, tiempos interesantes, yo diría momentos estelares en la historia de nuestro país. Esto no pasaba antes, era muy plano todo, no se movía nada."

and performative elements used by the president as he attempts to form a charismatic bond with his audience, and thereby win them over to his collective mission, the 4T.

4.5.4 Affective Identification Between the Leader and the Led

Gaffney has argued that "the charismatic concept has to be entered into by all concerned, and imagined in some way" (Gaffney, 2013, p.393). He follows this up with a question: "For this, the leader has to *do* something. But what?" (Gaffney, 2013, p.393). Having observed the president's discourse and performance first hand on this occasion, I would argue that AMLO invites his audience to bestow charisma on him by presenting himself as both ordinary (one of us) and extraordinary (the only contemporary Mexican politician to have a vision capable of redeeming the country from its putative crisis). This combination in AMLO's projected persona, of being both "'like us' and yet different" (Gaffney, 2013, p.395), is essential to understanding his charismatic appeal in the eyes of his followers. The extraordinary side of the equation has already been explored, *inter alia*, in section 4.4 - the staging of the *Mañaneras* as a constant reminder of the president's exceptional status - and subsection 4.5.2 - AMLO's envisioning of the future, which reinforces his status as an extraordinary leader. Subsection 4.5.4 will therefore focus on the ordinary side of AMLO's projected persona, analysing the ways in which the president uses discourse and performance in an attempt to foster an affinity with his audience, and to persuade them that his political mission, the 4T, is also their collective mission.

One way for the president to signal to some of the journalists present that they form part of the same moral community as him is to use what Gaffney calls a "choreographed dance of pronouns" (Gaffney, 2013, p.395). Gaffney argues that although the exchange between the speaker and their audience is not an equal one, the speaker can nevertheless promote a sense of affinity through their performance and through a judicious use of pronouns.

Pronouns are fundamental to the speaker–audience relationship because they define it. They allow for intimacy between the speaker and the audience (often in a dynamically choreographed way) through the structured interplay of I, you, and we (and they). (Gaffney, 2013, p.395)

AMLO generally uses the informal *tú*, rather than the formal *usted*, when addressing the journalists in the room:

- "*Te manden a tí*" ("They send you");
- "*¿Por qué hay el problema que tú mencionas?*" ("Why is there this problem that you mention?");
- "*Mañana tú quedas*" ("Tomorrow it will be your turn").

This immediately promotes a sense of intimacy. In fact, AMLO draws an antagonistic "internal frontier" (Laclau, 2005b, p.77) between the owners of media outlets on the one hand, and the journalists attending the *Mañaneras* on the other. The media owners (like the other conspiratorial enemies) are necessarily absent from the room and excluded from this intimacy: "You, the media workers, are one thing, and media entrepreneurs or media owners, or the interests of media owners, are another."²¹² The journalists who attend the *Mañanera* are therefore not automatically included in AMLO's construction of the media as conspiratorial enemies of the 4T. Whether or not these journalists form part of a moral community that embraces the 4T's *revolución de las conciencias* is another matter, but the value of their labour is acknowledged by the president: it is, after all, thanks to these journalists that his narrative reaches the broadest possible audience.

²¹² "Una cosa son ustedes, los trabajadores de los medios, y otra cosa son los empresarios de los medios o los dueños de los medios, o los intereses de los dueños de los medios de información." NB: Mexicans use the plural "ustedes" for the second person plural, both formally and informally.

In addition, notwithstanding the central position that he occupies in the *Mañanera* - he is often the only man on stage and the journalists' eyes are all trained on him - there are moments during the press conference where AMLO turns the conversation around to his audience, asking for their input, which some of them readily give. Even if it is a piece of theatrical performance, it is a way of signifying that AMLO and his audience are on an equal footing, engaging in a conversation as peers. The exchange below provides an illustration of how the president and some of the journalists attending the *Mañanera* construct a narrative together around the conspiratorial enemies of the 4T. AMLO begins by referring to the hypocrisy of previous governments who promised reform but delivered no change, before turning to the march to be held that weekend, convened by the very same conservative bloc. He starts listing the attendees, and then asks the audience to fill in the gaps.

President: On Sunday, they will be there, holding hands, with Fox and... What's the name of the PRI guy?

Journalist(s): Alejandro Moreno.

President: Alejandro Moreno, [Miguel Ángel Ossorio] Chong.

Journalist(s): Claudia Ruiz Massieu.

President: Claudia Ruiz Massieu, [José] Woldenberg, [Héctor] Aguilar Camín, [Enrique] Krauze, Marko Cortés, [Carlos] Loret de Mola, etc, etc, all holding hands. "*Agárrense de las manos*" [President sings]²¹³

The excerpt shows that the journalists - or at least, some of the journalists - are keen to engage in this conversation with the president. In the exchange, each side imagines and constructs the other: AMLO as a leader seeking the support

²¹³ PRESIDENTE: "El domingo ahí están agarrados de la mano Fox con... ¿Cómo se llama el del PRI?" INTERVENCIÓN: "Alejandro Moreno." PRESIDENTE: "Alejandro Moreno, Chong." INTERVENCIÓN: "Claudia Ruiz Massieu." PRESIDENTE: "Claudia Ruiz Massieu, Woldenberg, Aguilar Camín, Krauze, Marko Cortés, Loret de Mola, etcétera, etcétera, ahí todos agarraditos de la mano. 'Agárrense de las manos'."

of his followers, the journalists as followers keen to help their leader. To paraphrase Gaffney:²¹⁴

Few of us know [the President] beyond his rhetorical and mediated persona. We 'imagine' the real person. The opposite is also true: he or she invents us, the audience, even though each of us is real. (Gaffney, 2013, p.391)

The president asks for the audience's help, and they come to his assistance. They call out the names of political leaders, intellectuals and institutional representatives who are likely to attend the opposition march, and AMLO incorporates the names into his discourse, sharing a knowing smile with his audience. The exchange ends with AMLO humming a line from a popular song, "*Agárrense de las Manos*", originally the 1985 hit of Venezuelan singer José Luis Rodríguez, popularised with a younger Mexican audience in 2021 when Rodríguez performed it in a duet with a Mexican star of Latin music, Carlos Rivera. In accordance with Ostiguy's theory, which states that politicians who appeal to the "high" tend to be "well-mannered" in their public appearances, whereas those who appeal to the "low" engage in more "colourful" performances (Ostiguy, 2017, p.78), AMLO's spontaneous foray into the musical genre allows him to "flaunt the low" (Ostiguy, 2017) and burnish his popular credentials.²¹⁵

On the low, people frequently use a language that includes slang or folksy expressions and metaphors, are more demonstrative in their bodily or facial expressions as well as in their demeanour, and display more raw, culturally popular tastes. (Ostiguy, 2017, p.78)

On this occasion, as on many others, AMLO flaunts the low by using popular expressions and joshing with his audience. The performance makes him appear

²¹⁴ Gaffney's analysis refers to Barack Obama but could equally be applied to AMLO.

²¹⁵ AMLO regularly includes popular music videos in his *Mañaneras*.

closer to his audience (i.e. one of us) and encourages the type of identification that can serve as a basis for the attribution of charisma, as argued by this thesis.

This is not to say that the sense of affinity that AMLO seeks to promote is necessarily reciprocated by his audience. Most of the time, the reporters sit in silence, recording or taking notes. As for those who ask questions, their exchanges with the president tend to be neutral in tone. For example, the journalist from *El Sol de México* asks questions about elections to replace Lorenzo Córdova (the outgoing president of the INE), and about delays to some of the Government's flagship projects (AIFA, Trans-Isthmic Corridor). If anything, his questions mark a distance rather than a proximity between himself and the president. As an opponent of the president's proposed reform of the INE, Córdova is a well-known thorn in AMLO's side, and the AIFA and Trans-Isthmic Corridor are emblematic 4T projects on which the president will brook no dissent. Notwithstanding, the exchange between interviewer and interviewee remains courteous and professional. The president replies matter-of-factly to all the questions, and the journalist files copies in which he faithfully reproduces the president's answers. The exchange, and the subsequent reporting, are devoid of any affective markers.

The journalist representing *Proceso* has a slightly tetchier exchange with the president (the interaction points towards the limitations of AMLO's charismatic appeal in the eyes of some of the journalists in the room). At one stage, each side attempts to interrupt the other. The journalist has a question on defence procurement contracts, to which the president replies by referring back to previous *Proceso* reports on the same topic, which he considers to have been factually inaccurate: "What *Proceso* should have done is apologise,"²¹⁶ rather than commissioning this journalist to raise the subject once more in the *Mañana*, thereby compounding their error. Yet in her reporting after the event, the journalist remains neutral, simply conveying the president's answers to her questions. That same morning, the journalist also uploads a video clip on

²¹⁶ "Proceso lo que debió hacer era disculparse."

Proceso's social media channel in which she lists the main topics addressed during the *Mañanera*, repeating the formulations used by the president, with no particular editorial comment.

These examples are worth noting for three reasons. First, they suggest that the *Mañaneras* are held so frequently that there is little time to prepare an editorial analysis in response to the president's statements - at least, not for immediate publication. Consequently, even though it is technically the journalists who initiate each exchange, it is still the president who determines the content of what is reported in the daily press. Second, these examples challenge the assumption that journalists are by default ill-disposed towards the president. Of all the media sources that I was able to consult (*El Sol de México*, *Proceso*, *SDP Noticias*, *El Universal*, *Milenio* and *La Jornada*), none reported on the *Mañanera* with any particular hostility. There were nuances - the right-leaning *Milenio* referred to the Mexican Central Bank's reservations about AIFA, whereas the left-leaning *La Jornada* featured an opinion piece by Pedro Miguel in which the journalist explored the links between Genaro García Luna and Calderón's "narco-government" (*narcogobierno*) - but all of them conveyed the president's answers during the *Mañanera* without distortion. The tension between AMLO and the media therefore appears to reside at a different level: not necessarily between the president and the journalists who habitually report from the *Mañaneras*, but rather between the president and some of the owners and chief editors of Mexico's main media corporations. Third, these examples suggest that much of the media reporting on the *Mañaneras* is neutral in tone, and that even if some of the exchanges become somewhat animated, the relationship between the president and the journalists who attend the morning press conferences remains professional and cordial.

As this subsection has shown, AMLO's judicious use of pronouns, his attempts to engage the journalists in conversation, and his flaunting of the low elicit a certain level of response, even if the enthusiasm remains relatively muted on the journalists' side (AMLO's discourse and performance arguably elicit a greater level of enthusiasm within the online community - cf. Figure 53). Nonetheless, the *Mañanera* of 23 February 2023 did feature one instance of

what I would call a charismatic bond between the president and one of the journalists present. The next and final subsection will analyse this fleeting moment in careful detail.

4.5.5 A Charismatic Moment

Halfway through the *Mañanera*, a young digital media journalist from *BCS Noticias* inquires about an end-of-year press photograph from 2022 which he never received from the president's communications team. He asks whether the photograph could be forwarded to him. AMLO spontaneously invites him up onto the stage, to make up for this oversight.

President: You weren't there?

Journalist: No, we didn't receive the photograph. If you could share it with us...

President: Let's take it now, come up here, come on.

Journalist: It's just so that you can send it to us. Thank you, President, thank you very much. I wasn't expecting that. Thank you, President.²¹⁷

The journalist's delight is plain to see in Figure 56:

²¹⁷ PRESIDENTE: "¿Tú no estuviste?" INTERLOCUTOR: "No, no tuvimos fotografía. Si nos comparte..." PRESIDENTE: "Ahorita, tómatela, vente, vente acá, ven." INTERLOCUTOR: "Para que nos la pasen. Gracias, presidente, muchas gracias. No lo esperaba. Bueno, gracias, presidente."





Figure 56: Charismatic Moment (Canal, 2023)

Based on my direct observation of the exchange, I would begin by remarking that the young journalist looks very pleased to have been invited to join the president (an extraordinary leader) on stage, and that AMLO looks relaxed and in good spirits. The warmth of the exchange is noted by *SDP Noticias*: "AMLO fulfils reporter's dream; takes photo with him in the middle of conference"²¹⁸ (Ek, 2023). It was the briefest of encounters, but in that moment, I perceived a charismatic bond between AMLO and the reporter. My impression was confirmed by the journalist's own *Twitter* feed, after the event: "This was the best day since the conferences of our president @lopezobrador started, I'm still excited and very happy. My president of Mexico has such humility"²¹⁹ (@JulioOmarGS, 2023). The young man clearly feels an affective bond with the president, evidenced by his expressions of happiness in the moment, and by

²¹⁸ "AMLO le cumple su sueño a reportero; se toma una foto con él en plena conferencia."

²¹⁹ "Este fue el mejor día desde que iniciaron las conferencias de nuestro presidente @lopezobrador_ aún sigo emocionado y muy feliz. Que humildad tiene mi presidente de México."

his choice of words on his *Twitter* feed, in which he describes his surprise at being invited onto the podium and how emotional the moment felt for him: "What a lovely surprise I got"; "I've been on the other side for so long, and today it was my turn to be close, and it was captured on camera"²²⁰ (@JulioOmarGS, 2023). The young man clearly feels honoured to have had his twenty-five seconds of fame; when an AMLO supporter tweets the familiar hashtag *#EsUnHonorEstarConObrador* ("it is an honour to be with Obrador") on his *Twitter* page, he replies: *"Es un honor cubrir la fuente presidencial"* ("it is an honour to report from the presidential source") (@JulioOmarGS, 2023).

This fleeting moment may be characterised as an illustration of a charismatic bond between the president and the journalist for two reasons. First, because of the body language and facial expressions of the parties involved, i.e. their physical manifestations of affect. Second, because of the words used by the journalist to describe the president, whom he perceives as being like any other ordinary Mexican - "humble" ("*humilde*") - and yet at the same time extraordinary - "the best, without a doubt" ("*el mejor no hay duda alguna*") (@JulioOmarGS, 2023). This corresponds to my own definition of charismatic leadership in left populism (to recall: the ability to inspire and motivate one's followers through the discursive and performative construction of a public persona that is both ordinary and extraordinary and which is deemed convincing to the followers). Like many of those to whom I spoke in Mexico, the journalist portrays AMLO as a "president of the people, for the people" ("*un presidente del pueblo y para el pueblo*") (@JulioOmarGS, 2023). The formulation encapsulates part of the charismatic phenomenon in what Rosendo Bolívar Meza calls "*lopezobradorismo*": "a social movement built from below" that lends AMLO "great strength among broad layers of the citizenry on the left of the political spectrum"²²¹ (Bolívar Meza, 2014, p.81). Being "of the people" makes AMLO appear trustworthy in the eyes of ordinary Mexicans; he understands them and can relate to them. Being "for the people" lends him the

²²⁰ "Vaya bonita sorpresa que me llevé"; "Tanto tiempo de estar del otro lado y hoy me tocó cerca y con foto".

²²¹ "Un movimiento social construido desde abajo, haciendo de López Obrador un líder social y político con gran fuerza entre amplias capas de la ciudadanía situada a la izquierda del espectro político."

exceptional aura of someone who uses his political office not for personal gain, but for the greater good - in this case, attending first and foremost to the needs of *los de abajo*. As Weber would put it, AMLO is perceived by his followers as someone who lives for and not from politics. The young journalist's words confirm this perception - "I confirm: [he is] a humanist and a humble man"²²² (@JulioOmarGS, 2023). On the strength of this perception, the journalist is prepared to express his faith in AMLO's collective mission, the 4T: "Mexico is undergoing a transformation"²²³ (@JulioOmarGS, 2023) he writes on his *Twitter* account.

4.6 Conclusion

By carefully analysing both the wordcraft and stagecraft used by AMLO at his *Mañanera* of 23 February 2023, a representative example of his weekday early morning press conferences, this chapter has shown how the president seeks to inspire faith in his collective mission, the 4T:

- He uses a form of crisis rhetoric when speaking of the past, in a manner that is recognisable and plausible to his audience; this helps him establish his credibility as someone who is knowledgeable about the trajectory of Mexican political history.
- His narrative connects the past to the present and the future, offering his listeners a sense of historical continuity, both in terms of their own identity as Mexicans, and in terms of the sequence of Mexico's historical transformations, of which the 4T is a logical consequence.
- His rhetoric on the tangible benefits brought by the 4T is based on both factual data - progress accomplished so far - and on a pledge to deliver - a timeline

²²² "Confirmo: humanista y humilde."

²²³ "México se está transformando."

and budgetary commitments for projects yet to be completed. In addition, these tangible benefits are given meaning through their incorporation into higher-order moral objectives.

- AMLO's rhetoric depicts a vision of a better future for ordinary Mexicans, to be achieved through the eradication of corruption, which lies at the core of the 4T collective mission. Holding out the promise of a better future serves as an inspiration to his followers to join the president on his mission.

- Drawing on both past and present examples, he warns his audience of the perils of underestimating the forces of conservatism, who would prefer to maintain their privileges under a *status quo*, perpetuating a system based on corruption and injustice. His warnings are designed to strengthen the resolve of his followers to support the collective mission of the 4T.

- He expresses his belief in the success of the collective mission and his confidence in ordinary Mexicans' ability to transform the country, thanks to a *revolución de las conciencias*. His trust in the wisdom and determination of the people enhances the self-esteem of his followers.

- In performative terms, AMLO uses affect and humour in an attempt to form a bond with his audience, be it the journalists in the Palacio Nacional who are receptive to this invitation, or fellow Mexicans who follow the *Mañaneras* via the media. He occasionally flaunts the low in order to signal to his audience that he is an ordinary Mexican, just like them (not a member of the elite). This helps strengthen the affective bond between him and those members of the audience who find this construction credible, and who therefore consider him as one of them and trustworthy. Establishing his own trustworthiness is a way of motivating his followers to rally behind the collective mission of the moral community, the 4T. In his discourse, AMLO explains how he is pursuing this transformative mission, but he also makes clear that the collective mission cannot be completed without the support of the moral community.

- Finally, he recalls his own long-standing commitment to just causes, including the fight against corruption and the struggle for greater social justice. His years of dedication to the same causes, which included long spells in opposition, finally culminated in his election to Mexico's highest political office, a trajectory that testifies to his extraordinary leadership skills. This, in turn, lends credence to the collective mission of the 4T, which helped him secure his ultimate victory.

Zúquete has argued that faith in the collective mission is bolstered by faith in the charismatic leader:

The leader's incarnation of the spirit and substance of the mission boosts the trustworthiness from, and within, the community: followers are more likely to (...) trust that the leader, who *knows* what is best for the community, would *never* do anything to harm the community. (Zúquete, 2017, p.457)

The next chapter of this thesis will examine the discursive and performative construction of the linchpin of the entire structure of missionary politics: the charismatic leader, who is perceived by his followers as embodying both the general will of the moral community and the essence of the collective mission.

Chapter 5

The Charismatic Leader

5.1 Introduction

Chapters three and four examined President López Obrador's discursive construction of the moral community and the collective mission, two essential concepts in Pedro Zúquete's definition of missionary politics. In this chapter, I address the concept that Zúquete positions at the centre of missionary politics, namely charismatic leadership.

As seen in section 1.3, populism scholars do not necessarily agree on the centrality or politically transformative nature of charismatic leaders in populism. Ideational scholars argue that populist movements can emerge even in the absence of a clear leadership figure, and political-strategic scholars question whether charismatic populist leaders have any sincerely held ideological convictions at all (or whether they are just opportunists). This thesis follows the socio-cultural approach to populism, which emphasises the importance of discourse and collective identity formation in the populist phenomenon. Within this school, Moffitt has argued that "the leader is the figure that performs and renders-present 'the people' within populism" (Moffitt, 2016b, p.52). Similarly, Arditì has stated that "without a leader there can be no 'people' and therefore no politics either" (Arditì, 2010, p.490). The leader is central to the political logic of populism. If populist leaders are attentive to the needs of their followers, and if they act as a conduit for the incorporation of the followers' demands into the political agenda, their charisma becomes an asset for the advancement of popular causes. The socio-cultural school allows for an open exploration of the dynamics of charismatic leadership. While some charismatic populist leaders may show authoritarian tendencies - Mouffe claims that this is the case for right-wing populists: "in the case of right-wing populism, it's a very authoritarian relation, where everything comes from the top" (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016, p.109) - others may serve as the empty signifier of which Laclau speaks, around

which disparate unmet popular demands coalesce to form an equivalential chain, with the leader eventually transforming these demands into concrete actions. This is possible within left-wing populism, according to Mouffe: "It's perfectly possible to establish a different type of relationship, less vertical, between the leader and the different groups that constitute the movement" (Errejón and Mouffe, 2016, p.109). Either way, the leader - and the leader's discourse - are central to the socio-cultural approach to populism.

As for Zúquete's concept of missionary politics, it unequivocally attributes importance to the charismatic leader: "Missionary politics is a political religion that has *at its center* a charismatic leadership" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.263 - emphasis my own). One of Zúquete's case studies in this area is the former President of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez (Zúquete, 2008). Citing Loris Zanatta's writings on the resonance in Latin America of a "holistic imaginary (...) deeply rooted in the spiritual and normative structures of colonial Christianity"²²⁴ (Zanatta, 2008, pp.40-41), Zúquete argues that this social imaginary goes some way towards explaining the sacralisation of Chávez by his followers as a "savior-like" figure, "driven by a sense of mission to save the community" (Zúquete, 2017, p.456). Indeed, some of Chávez' supporters saw him as "the 'second Bolívar' for whom Venezuela [had] waited so long" (Zúquete, 2008, p.91). Zúquete considers Chávez's charismatic leadership and affective bond with his supporters as the driving force behind the political events that unfolded in Venezuela at the turn of the millennium.

Chávez has been the subject of much academic interest in Latin American populism scholarship (cf. *inter alia* Hawkins, 2009; Moffitt, 2016; Errejón and Mouffe, 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018), and his persona therefore serves as an interesting reference point for this thesis, which explores the phenomenon of charismatic leadership. Several populism scholars have argued that the charismatic figure of Hugo Chávez was essential to the breakthrough of Venezuela's "Socialism of the Twenty-First Century" (*Socialismo del siglo XXI*)

²²⁴ "[Un] imaginario holístico, cuyas raíces residen en el fondo de las estructuras mentales y normativas de la cristiandad colonial."

and to its continued currency even today for those who identify as *Chavistas* (Chávez supporters). "I am a *Chavista* because I believe in Chávez", as one interviewee told the researcher Caitlin Andrews-Lee three years after Chávez' death (Andrews-Lee, 2019, p.315). Carmen Arteaga Mora argues that the appeal of the Bolivarian dream rested heavily on "a charismatic leadership, as Hugo Chávez' undoubtedly was"²²⁵ (Mora, 2019, p.215). Lucia Michelutti believes that it was Chávez' ability to withstand "personal abuse, exposure, embarrassment, and risk of failure" (Michelutti, 2017, p.245) that helped him secure charismatic authority in the eyes of his followers, even posthumously. Similarly, Andrews-Lee notes that "perceptions of Chávez's charisma were uniquely high throughout his tenure" (Andrews-Lee, 2019, p.310), despite some of his policy failures. Weyland observes that "many people's hopes in Chávez were derived from faith in his charisma, not from a careful assessment of his likely performance, based on his track record" (Weyland, 2003, p.843).

The charismatic authority of Chávez and AMLO are not entirely comparable. From a Weberian perspective, Commander-in-Chief Chávez may be said to resemble the archetype of the awe-inspiring war-lord, whereas AMLO cuts a more messianic figure (Krauze, 2006), thereby bringing him closer to Weber's archetype of the charismatic prophet whose revelations persuade the followers to submit to him "because they believe in him" (Weber, 1994, p.312). Nor are Chávez and AMLO necessarily perceived in the same way by their followers. Writing of the cult to Chávez, Luis Alonso Hernández quotes the prayer (*Oración al Comandante Chávez*) recited by some of his followers after his death, which commends the soul of "the son of the Bolivarian people" ("*el hijo del pueblo de Bolívar*") to the Lord (Hernández, 2018, p.117). In contrast, the Morena MP Erika del Castillo bids an emotional farewell to AMLO as he approaches the last days of his presidency, affectionately calling him (as do many Mexicans) "*abuelito*" ("grandfather") (*El Financiero*, 2024). A grandfather figure, as opposed to a son figure - but both the subject of familial affection on the part of their followers.²²⁶

²²⁵ "Un liderazgo carismático, como lo fue, sin duda, [el de] Hugo Chávez."

²²⁶ It is also worth noting Natalia Milanés's description of one of Latin America's other legendary charismatic left populist leaders, Juan Perón, as a "*descamisado*" ("shirtless

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, this thesis attaches great importance to the collective identity formation rendered possible by populist discourse. Expressions of affect - be it by the leader or by the led - form part of the construction of this collective identity. Moffitt has argued that "the leader is the central figure of affective focus from populist followers" (Moffitt, 2016b, p.52); conversely, as this chapter will illustrate, the leader directs his affect towards the followers, who embody the president's moral community. The present chapter will explore the importance of affect in the attribution of charisma to AMLO on formal occasions attended by large crowds of his supporters (specifically: his government anniversary speeches). It will do this by unpacking the staging used on these occasions (section 5.3), AMLO's discourse (section 5.4) and performance (section 5.5), as well as the crowds' responses to his wordcraft and stagecraft, identifying their expressions of affect and the ways in which they signal their attribution of charismatic authority to the leader.²²⁷

5.2 The President's Formal Addresses

Responding to the overarching research question of the thesis, the present chapter will shed light on the discursive-performative elements in AMLO's public addresses that are conducive to eliciting and sustaining his supporters' perception of him as a charismatic leader. As in previous chapters, the analysis will draw on AMLO's public appearances over the course of his presidency. In chapter three, the thesis examined AMLO's meetings with Mexico's indigenous communities; in chapter four, it focussed on AMLO's *Mañaneras*. The government's official recordings and transcriptions of AMLO's speeches, which provide the database of primary sources for this thesis, feature a third category of public appearances by the president, namely his official speeches. In order to

one") exhibiting "unmistakable signs of virility" - i.e. a third type of masculinity and object of familial affection, that of the husband / lover (Milanesio, 2014, p.91).

²²⁷ The approach is comparable to the one adopted by Zúquete (2008) in his analysis of Chávez' missionary politics, which was similarly grounded in an "extensive analysis of the oral and symbolic discourse" (Zúquete, 2008, p.92) of the Venezuelan President.

provide as complete an overview as possible of AMLO's public discourse and performance, the present chapter will use the latter as its primary data.

AMLO's official speeches include his annual first quarterly reports, delivered towards the beginning of April, his election victory anniversary speeches, delivered on 1 July, his state of the nation addresses, delivered on 1 September, and his government anniversary speeches, delivered on 1 December (with one exception, which will be analysed in detail in chapter six). Unlike the other three calendar events, the 1 December government anniversary speeches have, as a rule, been delivered to large-scale gatherings on Mexico City's Zócalo.²²⁸ Given that this research is designed to explore the charismatic bond between AMLO and his followers, it is these government anniversary speeches that appear best suited to a close examination of the interaction between the charismatic leader and large numbers of his supporters.²²⁹

The sociologist Martin Spencer once defined charisma as "an affectual relationship between the leader and his followers; the one pole of this affect is awe, the other is enthusiasm" (Spencer, 1973, p.351). Although the article was written some time ago, the concept of inspiring awe (which may be translated into more contemporary language as commanding respect) and enthusiasm can still be operationalised in a present-day analysis of the interaction between charismatic political leaders and their followers. Indeed, as sections 5.3 and 5.4 will illustrate, on the one hand, large-scale performances are largely choreographed and designed to convey "mastery" (Spencer, 1973, p.347); the leader is presented as being in control, and conveys what Spencer calls a

²²⁸ With two exceptions: in 2020, pandemic-related public health measures prevented large gatherings and the address was therefore televised from the inner courtyard of the Palacio Nacional; and in 2023, the President addressed the nation from one of his flagship projects, the Felipe Carrillo Puerto international airport in Tulum, which he inaugurated on 1 December 2023.

²²⁹ Appendix E provides a hyperlink to the video recordings and transcripts of these government anniversary speeches (for reference). Unless otherwise specified, all quotes below are taken from the official transcription of these events (with an indication of the year immediately after the quote, for ease of reference).

"satisfying order" (Spencer, 1973, p.347) to their followers, which in turn inspires their respect (or awe, to use Spencer's terminology) and their perception of the leader as extraordinary. At the same time, the charismatic leader also fulfils what Spencer calls a "representative" function (Spencer, 1973, p.354) on these occasions: they represent the people, engaging in a process of affective identification through both discourse and performance in a way that kindles the enthusiasm of the crowd and encourages their perception of the leader as ordinary (i.e. as one of them). Performance and discourse may both, in different ways, serve to inspire awe and enthusiasm. As Uhr has argued, political leaders use a combination of stagecraft and wordcraft to put together a "persuasive performance" before their audiences (Uhr, 2014, p.253). The next two sections will address each in turn.

5.3 Staging the President's Anniversary Speeches

Unlike the president's public appearances examined in chapters three and four, which rely on a certain degree of improvisation - particularly the *Mañaneras*, which are entirely unscripted as far as the president is concerned - the president's solemn addresses are carefully prepared in advance. They are both scripted and staged. As Moffitt observes:

Although the limelight is shone on the unique and remarkable leader as a way of creating the most affective (and effective) bonds between leaders and 'the people', populist leaders' performances are often actually the result of careful planning, staging and scripting reliant on a team of professionals and an array of media resources: presenting oneself as ordinary and extraordinary does not occur in a vacuum. (Moffitt, 2016b, p.69)

There is, in other words, a script to be followed on these occasions, from which the president may occasionally depart - although this happens relatively

infrequently in AMLO's case. Moffitt explains why these events require careful planning, for the purposes of optimal communication:

First, there must be an audience to watch or hear your performance.
 Second, that audience needs to understand the performance, and
 choose to accept the claim: it must scan as both legible and convincing.
 (Moffitt, 2016a, p.105)

Therefore, while AMLO may be considered a natural communicator - a skill he has honed over the course of his long political career, much of it spent in opposition and on the campaign trail, exchanging with constituents up and down the country - official anniversaries, national holidays and historical commemorations are standout events in Mexico's political calendar, attracting not only large crowds but also guaranteed press coverage, which is arguably why not much is left to chance on these occasions. The president is supported by a communications team, headed by the government spokesperson Jesús Ramírez Cuevas, and AMLO's speeches on these occasions are carefully prepared in advance. Putting the president's performance together for these formal events requires a certain number of decisions to be made regarding, amongst other things, stage-setting, visual and non-visual props, guest lists, and choreography. The next four subsections address these elements in turn, identifying the ways in which they contribute to the construction of AMLO's charismatic leadership.

5.3.1 Setting the Stage

Except for 2020 (Covid-19 pandemic) and 2023 (inauguration of the Felipe Carrillo Puerto airport in Tulum), the setting of AMLO's government anniversary speeches has invariably been Mexico City's Zócalo, with an estimated capacity of 200,000 people. The Zócalo is the largest square in the Spanish-speaking world. It was the centre of political and religious power in Tenochtitlan and the capital of the Mexicas. It houses the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City, the

National Palace - seat of the country's federal executive power, from which AMLO governs today - as well as the Old Town Hall and the Government Building of Mexico City, AMLO's former headquarters as mayor of Mexico City (2000-2005). The Zócalo is without a doubt a setting steeped in history and national symbolism.

By choosing this venue for his government anniversary speeches, AMLO conveys a number of important messages before he even opens his microphone. It is a public square, and the people are welcome to come and see their president, who is one of them. It is a historically significant venue, linking Mexico's past to its present and future. From Tenochtitlan to modern-day Mexico City (CDMX), the Zócalo has always hosted the seat of Mexican power, and the sovereign Mexican people have their rightful place within it. Through its impressive architecture and sheer size, the Zócalo symbolises Mexico's splendour as a nation - "Mexico's cultural grandeur"²³⁰ to which the president so often refers. Finally, as the largest public square in the country, the Zócalo serves as a litmus test for the president's popularity and his ability to attract the masses - a test that he appears to pass every time, judging by Figure 57.²³¹



²³⁰ "La grandeza cultural de México."

²³¹ AMLO's predecessors in office did not use the Zócalo for anniversary speeches. The Zócalo has traditionally been a site of celebration or protest. For instance, Mexicans marching for the INE (National Electoral Institute) gathered here in February 2023 - estimated attendance: 90,000 (El Financiero, 2023). The highest numbers ever reached have been by AMLO: Silent March of 24 April 2005 (cf. section 6.4), estimated turnout: 1.2 million (Proceso, 2005).



Figure 57: Zócalo 2018/2019/2021/2022 (composite)

As for the stage itself, whenever AMLO delivers his government speech from the Zócalo, the stage is a large black tribune, positioned either against the

Metropolitan Cathedral (2018, 2019, 2022) or the National Palace (2021). The addresses usually start in the afternoon, and some have finished at dusk, providing what one might call an awe-inspiring backdrop to the event, with the stage patriotically lit up in the red, white and green colours of the Mexican flag.



Figure 58: Dusk (Canal, 2021)

The tribune itself, however, is sparsely decorated. Arguably, this is a non-verbal way of communicating what AMLO calls his government's policy of *austeridad republicana*. Whereas AMLO's predecessor in office Peña Nieto was known for his lavish lifestyle, AMLO seeks to distance himself from this type of profligacy in every conceivable way. As Alejandro Monsiváis points out, AMLO is "willing to eradicate everything that represents a legacy of previous administrations, especially that of Peña Nieto"²³² (Monsiváis Carrillo, 2021, p.76). Austerity is a recurring theme in AMLO's discourse, but it is also communicated through his public appearances, such as the ones he makes on 1 December: the stage is rudimentary, and the decor is minimalist.



Figure 59: *Austeridad Republicana* (Canal, 2019)

In other words, the stage that is set for AMLO's government anniversary speeches is designed to inspire both awe - through the location, timing and sheer size of the event - and enthusiasm, in that ordinary Mexicans are able to come quite close to a president who in many respects appears on stage as one of them, without much pomp and circumstance. This helps foster an affective bond between the two.

²³² "Dispuesto a erradicar de tajo todo lo que represente una herencia de las administraciones anteriores, en especial de la de Peña Nieto."

That said, the staging also makes use of a certain number of props which serve a symbolic and ritualistic purpose and remind the audience of AMLO's extraordinary status, as the next subsection will discuss.

5.3.2 Visual and Non-Visual Props

Geert Banck has described public political performances as "rituals staged by politicians" (Banck, 1998, p.26). AMLO's government anniversary speeches confirm the ritualistic element to which Banck refers. According to my observations, there is often a sense of *déjà vu* on these occasions. As section 5.4 will illustrate, there are certain discursive articulations that are almost invariably repeated at these events. In addition, AMLO - or perhaps more accurately: his communications team - make recurrent use of a few props that promote brand recognition and accentuate the ritualistic side of these anniversaries. These props feature almost without fail at every formal address by the president. In Laclauian terms, they are thus strongly articulated with the signifier of the charismatic leader. Some of the props serve to recall the extraordinary status of the man on stage: the President of Mexico. These include the Mexican flag, always positioned to the right of the president, and the lectern, adorned with Mexico's coat of arms.



Figure 60: Presidential Signifiers (Canal, 2019)

AMLO's extraordinary status is furthermore signalled through what one might call intangible ritualistic elements, such as the regular public address announcements, alerting the audience to his imminent arrival / formal address / departure from the stage: "Ladies and Gentlemen: The Constitutional President of the United Mexican States!"²³³ Other intangible ritualistic elements include the characteristic "¡Viva México!" ("Long live Mexico!") with which AMLO ends all his speeches - to which the crowds respond with a resounding "¡Viva!" - and the Mexican national anthem, played at the end of each official event after AMLO has concluded his speech.

Other props are deployed as a reminder of the nation's collective mission under AMLO, the 4T. A huge banner is suspended behind the stage, featuring the following graphics: Mexico's coat of arms, which depicts the founding myth of México-Tenochtitlan; the institutional logo of the Morena government, featuring the leaders of Mexico's three previous transformations (Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos (Independence), Benito Juárez (Reform), Francisco I. Madero (Revolution), as well as Lázaro Cárdenas); the date, place and current year of 4T government; and finally, the year and the historical personality or event to which it is dedicated (cf. Figure 51). All these features may be seen in Figure 61, depicting the 2020 government anniversary - which was broadcast from the National Palace owing to lockdown measures - and the 2021 edition, by way of a comparison. Even though 2020 was a rather sombre affair, with no real opportunities for the leader to forge an affective bond with the led owing to social distancing measures, the 4T signifiers were still prominently on display, thereby ensuring the continuity of collective mission signifiers even through the pandemic.

²³³ "Damas y Caballeros: ¡El Presidente Constitucional de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos!"



Figure 61: 4T Signifiers (Canal, 2020/2021)

Repetition, reinforcement of key messages (including non-verbal ones) and a certain degree of predictability in the rituals observed during these anniversary events serve to convey AMLO's strong leadership and extraordinary status, as well as the stability of his transformative 4T government.

5.3.3 Guest Lists

Another aspect that enhances the performative construction of AMLO as an extraordinary leader on these occasions is the coterie that surrounds him on stage. Roger Eatwell defines the leader's coterie as "a hard core of supporters"

who hold that "the leader [is] driven by a special mission and/or that the leader [is] invested by unique powers" (Eatwell, 2006, p.153). The coterie contributes to the perception of the leader's charisma by acting as cheerleaders, so to speak. Disregarding AMLO's family members, who primarily have a personal rather than political relationship with him,²³⁴ one could divide AMLO's coterie into two categories: his long-term political allies, which include the guests of honour invited to attend the 2019 and 2021 events (José Mújica, former President of Uruguay, and Dilma Rousseff, former President of Brazil - both members of Latin America's *Marea Rosa*), and his current Morena associates, which include both politicians and staff. With the exception of government spokesperson Jesús Ramírez Cuevas, who appears on stage with AMLO in 2022, I have not identified any other government staff members on these anniversaries; the staff assist off stage, but do not take up position on stage. Morena cabinet ministers, governors and senators, however, do share a stage with AMLO in 2021, 2022 and 2023 (albeit in different configurations).²³⁵ In 2021, it is cabinet ministers who appear on the Zócalo stage with the president:

Table 2: 2021 Coterie²³⁶

Claudia Sheinbaum (Mayor of CDMX), Adán Augusto (Home Affairs), General Luis Cresencio Sandoval (Defense), Admiral José Rafael Ojeda (Navy), Tatiana Clouthier (Economics), Rogelio Ramirez de la O (Treasury), Marcelo Ebrard (Foreign Affairs), Delfina Gomez (Education), Rosa Icela Rodríguez (Security), Jorge Arganis Díaz-Leal (Communications), Javier May Rodríguez (Welfare), Alejandra Frausto Guerrero (Culture), Víctor Villalobos (Agriculture), María Luisa Albores González (Environment), Rocío Nahle (Energy), Roberto Salcedo Aquino (Civil Service), Luisa María Alcalde Luján (Labour), Miguel Torruco Marqués (Tourism), María Estela Ríos González (legal adviser).

In 2022, it is Morena state governors:

²³⁴ The only family member who shares a stage with AMLO is his wife, Dr. Beatriz Gutiérrez Müller.

²³⁵ In 2018, the stage was reserved for indigenous congregations. In 2019, only Beatriz Müller shared the stage with AMLO. In 2020, AMLO appeared alone on stage, owing to social distancing measures.

²³⁶ Creator: PGR.

Table 3: 2022 Coterie²³⁷

Marina del Pilar Ávila Olmeda (Baja California), Víctor Manuel Castro Cosío (Baja California Sur), Layda Sansores (Campeche), Indira Vizcaino Silva (Colima), Evelyn Salgado Pineda (Guerrero), Julio Menchaca Salazar (Hidalgo), Alfredo Ramirez Bedolla (Michoacán), Miguel Ángel Navarro Quintero (Nayarit), Mara Lezama Espinosa (Quintana Roo), Rubén Rocha Moya (Sinaloa), Francisco Alfonso Durazo Montañón (Sonora), Américo Villareal Anaya (Tamaulipas), Lorena Cuéllar Cisneros (Tlaxcala). Plus: Delfina Gómez, senator for the State of Mexico.

In 2023, it is a mixture of cabinet ministers, governors, business entrepreneurs and army personnel (the 2023 anniversary coincided with the inauguration of the Felipe Carrillo Puerto international airport, built by army engineers):

Table 4: 2023 Coterie²³⁸

General Luis Cresencio Sandoval (Defense); Mara Lezama Espinosa (Governor Quintana Roo); Admiral José Rafael Ojeda (Navy); Layda Sansores San Román (Governor Campeche); Rutilio Cruz Escandón Cadenas (Governor Chiapas); Carlos Manuel Merino Campos (Governor Tabasco); Salomón Jara Cruz (Governor Oaxaca); Cuitláhuac García Jiménez (Governor Veracruz); Sergio Salomón Céspedes Peregrina (Governor Puebla); Alicia Barcéna Ibarra (Foreign Affairs); Rosa Icela Rodríguez (Security); Ariadna Montiel Reyes (Welfare); María Luisa Albores González (Environment); Raquel Buenrostro Sánchez (Economics); Jorge Nuño Lara (Communications); Miguel Torruco Marquez (Tourism); Román Meyer Falcón (Agricultural Development); Manuel Bartlett Díaz (Director of public energy company CFE); Maricarmen Hernández Solís (Municipal President of Felipe Carrillo Puerto). Plus: army personnel and civil aviation engineers.

Three observations may be made with regard to this changing cast in the president's coterie. One is the fact that the line-ups come close to striking a gender balance: a total of twenty-four women and twenty-eight men in the coterie of 2021, 2022 and 2023. The reason why this is noteworthy is because AMLO is often regarded as someone who struggles to engage with feminism. Mexican feminists have repeatedly expressed their disappointment in - as well as anger with - AMLO, from whom they had expected a more progressive gender agenda (Beer, 2021, p.9). Issues such as sexual and reproductive health and rights or gender-based violence appear to be somewhat of a blind

²³⁷ Creator: PGR.

²³⁸ Creator: PGR.

spot for this socially conservative president. Yet at the same time, AMLO has done more than any of his predecessors to promote women in politics, appointing seventeen women to his cabinet, as opposed to Vicente Fox's four, Felipe Calderón's seven and Enrique Peña Nieto's five. Using the public stage to highlight this point is, in all likelihood, a conscious choice.

In AMLO's mind, the 4T is undoubtedly feminist:

The Fourth Transformation is already feminist (...) Women are leading the whole process of transformation in our country.²³⁹ (López Obrador, 08.03.2023)

It is conceivably a form of feminism, but it owes more to first-wave feminism - which sought political and legal gender equality and greater inclusion of women at decision-making level - than to current fourth-wave feminism, which focuses on sexual and reproductive health and rights, gender-based violence, femicide and everyday misogyny, both online and offline (Crozier-De Rosa, 2024), topics that AMLO does not prioritise, much to the anger of contemporary Mexican feminists. Admittedly, as Caroline Beer notes, "demands to reduce gender-based violence are problematic for AMLO because they are not easy to meet" (Beer, 2021, p.13). It is easier for AMLO to make symbolic gestures, such as introducing a "feminist foreign policy"²⁴⁰ (Beer, 2021, p.12), or appointing women to top government jobs, measures that produce immediate results. To his followers, AMLO's active and visible inclusion of women in Mexico's process of transformation may be sufficient to lend credibility to his projection of progressive and extraordinary leadership. To sceptics, however, it does not compensate for his apparent lack of commitment to defending women's right to decide over their own bodies. He may therefore appear charismatic - "truthful and trustworthy" (Wood, 2013, p.668) - to some, but not to others.

²³⁹ "Ya la Cuarta Transformación es feminista. (...) Las mujeres [están] en la conducción de todo el proceso de transformación de nuestro país."

²⁴⁰ "Política exterior feminista."

Second, it is worth noting that very few members of the coterie have been invited to share the stage with AMLO more than once.

Table 5: Returning guests²⁴¹

General Sandoval (Defense Secretary), Admiral Ojeda (Navy), Delfina Gómez (first as Education Secretary, then as Senator for the State of Mexico), Layda Sansores (Governor of Campeche), Mara Lezama (Governor of Quintana Roo), Rosa Icela Rodríguez (Minister for Security and Citizen Protection), María Luisa Albores (Environment Secretary), Miguel Torruco (Minister for Tourism).

The select few include two military government appointees, General Sandoval and Admiral Ojeda. The special privilege extended to Sandoval and Ojeda may be a matter of protocol, but their prominence on stage may also be read as a reflection of the increasing role played by the Army and Navy in the day-to-day running of the country under AMLO's administration. The military have been tasked with the construction of major public infrastructure projects, customs operations, and the National Guard (*Guardia Nacional*), originally placed under civilian command, which now operates under the aegis of the Ministry of Defence. These developments have caused some disquiet among those who fear a form of military mission creep in Mexico, citing the history of other Latin American countries as a cautionary tale.

In this discussion, which is very much alive in both journalistic and academic circles, it is worth recalling two points. First, the fact that post-revolutionary Mexican presidents have consistently sought to keep the army on side. AMLO is therefore no exception to that rule. In the post-revolutionary collective consciousness, the army is fêted as the driving force of the Mexican Revolution; the first generation of post-revolutionary presidents were in fact all army officers. "Sailors and soldiers are the people in uniform"²⁴² (López Obrador, 01.07.2019), as AMLO likes to say. Second, in contrast with other Latin American countries, the Mexican army has consistently provided support to Mexico's civilian governments, even when these have been of a leftist hue.

²⁴¹ Creator: PGR.

²⁴² "El marino y el soldado es pueblo uniformado."

There is little evidence to suggest that Mexico might suddenly be facing the prospect of a military coup. Nonetheless, the concerns raised by AMLO's increasing reliance on the armed forces, which runs counter to his overarching discourse of "*abrazos, no balazos*" ("hugs, not bullets") should be noted. These are concerns voiced not only by political commentators or opposition politicians, but also by some of Mexico's indigenous communities who have historically suffered great brutality at the hands of the military - the 1997 Acteal massacre of a Tzotzil congregation at prayer is but one example - or indeed the survivors of the brutal student repressions of 1968 and 1971, known as the Tlatelolco and Halconazo massacres, respectively. The high profile given to military commanders on these government anniversary occasions may therefore inspire awe and respect amongst some, bolstering AMLO's perceived charismatic authority, but it may also generate a sense of unease among others, detracting from AMLO's potential charismatic aura (which is always in the eye of the beholder).

Third, and following on from the previous point, it should be noted that General Sandoval and Admiral Ojeda are seated very close to the president and his spouse on these formal occasions. Sandoval is seated to the right of the president in 2023, and second to the right in 2021, with only AMLO's long-term political friend (and fellow Tabascan) Adán Augusto between them. Ojeda is seated to the left of Beatriz Müller in both 2021 and 2023. These arrangements matter, as Banck points out.

Standing next to the leader has strong symbolic significance; it carries the message of proximity to the leader (and thus of derived power and influence for the actor involved) to rival politicians and to the public at large. (Banck, 1998, p.28)

Sandoval and Ojeda do not have political rivals, as such - both made their careers in the armed forces - but their physical proximity to the president on these occasions still has strong symbolic significance - for them, and more significantly, for AMLO. It projects an air of political strength combined with

military might, conducive to eliciting the awe that Spencer writes of.

Notwithstanding AMLO's projection of a messianic image (Krauze, 2006), it also brings to mind the Weberian archetype of the charismatic "war-lord" (Weber, 1994, p.312). Indeed, one should not forget that as President, AMLO is also the Supreme Commander of Mexico's Armed Forces. Such signifiers matter, and as seen above, they may enhance AMLO's charismatic authority, just as they may detract from it, depending on the viewer's confidence and trust in the leader.

Having examined the significance of the president's coterie, and the ways in which the coterie contributes to the construction of AMLO's extraordinary leadership, the next subsection will turn its attention to the choreography of AMLO's movements on these formal occasions.

5.3.4 Choreography

A close observation of the way in which AMLO uses the stage that he is given to address the multitudes on these anniversaries shows that the choreography is practically identical every year. The president always walks onto the stage holding hands with his wife, both smiling and waving to the assembled crowd as they cross the breadth of the platform. The public address system then asks for the attention of the assembled crowd, to hear the president's address. AMLO walks up to the lectern. He then stays behind the lectern for the duration of his address. In other words, he is not the type of politician who reads from a teleprompter; he reads from his notes, and sticks to his script in a steady tone, except for the occasional ad-libbing. Nor does he stride up and down the stage, gesturing dramatically or exuding "high energy" (Conger, 2012, p.381) as some charismatic leaders would, particularly in front of such a large audience. There is in fact little artifice or theatricality to his performance; it is mostly a straightforward reading exercise.

When describing extraordinary populist leaders, Moffitt speaks of a "particular aura":

A particular aura is granted to those leaders who can perform successfully for "the people" by combining strong leadership with interesting, "accessible" and entertaining personas. (Moffitt, 2016, pp.56-57)

As seen in the preceding sections, AMLO's strong leadership is communicated through stage-setting and ritual, as well as through the loyal and enthusiastic support of the president's coterie. AMLO is also accessible, in that he makes himself available to a large number of followers on these occasions (his large public rallies are known informally as AMLOFESTs),²⁴³ something that his predecessors rarely did, except when on the campaign trail. The fact that he dresses and speaks as a man of the people also enhances this ordinariness and accessibility. However, his actual performance on the dais falls somewhat short of being entertaining. His slightly stiff body language on stage contrasts with his relaxed demeanour when walking amongst the crowds off stage. AMLO is clearly a politician who thrives not on pomp and circumstance, but rather on human contact and spontaneity (a point to be developed further in section 5.5). It is in situations of proximity - generally, off stage - that one catches a glimpse of the charismatic bond between AMLO and his followers. The bond is harder to discern when AMLO stands alone behind the presidential lectern, delivering a pre-written speech. The choreography of AMLO's movements therefore has a limited charismatic effect. It triggers expressions of affect from members of the audience when he arrives on stage and when he leaves, particularly if he seizes these opportunities to walk past the crowds, who clamour for the attention of their extraordinary leader. In contrast, the fact that AMLO remains immobile during the delivery of his invariably rather lengthy addresses hampers his ability to forge an affective bond with his audience. It does happen from time to time, but it tends to be when AMLO decides to momentarily depart from his script - lifting his gaze from the piece of paper in front of him and looking straight at his audience to share a moment of complicity. The straightforward stationary

²⁴³ AMLO celebrations.

reading exercise, however, provides few opportunities to forge a charismatic bond with his listeners.

5.4 Discourse

The previous section discussed the stagecraft involved in the attempt to forge a charismatic bond between AMLO and his followers at the mass gatherings organised to celebrate Morena's government anniversaries. The present section will discuss some of the elements in AMLO's discourse that also serve to bolster his charismatic leadership in the eyes of his followers. As this thesis has argued in previous chapters, the discursive construction of AMLO's charisma is based primarily on AMLO's ability to credibly portray himself as both ordinary - one of us, and therefore trustworthy - and extraordinary: a leader who stands by his word and who is capable of delivering transformative change for his people. Subsections 5.4.1 and 5.4.2 will examine these two strands in turn, both of which are required for the discursive construction of a charismatic leader. Following on from this, subsection 5.4.3 will analyse AMLO's narrative on Mexico's transition from the dark days of neoliberalism to the bright future promised by the 4T, unpacking the discursive construction that articulates AMLO's political leadership with his redemptive mission for the people of Mexico. Finally, subsection 5.4.4 will highlight the continuity, as well as some of the variations, in AMLO's government anniversary speeches, discussing the ways in which continuity and repetition are used to carve out a hegemonic position for AMLO's discourse in Mexico's political landscape, and exploring the reasons why there are occasional variations in this discourse over time.

5.4.1 Discursive Construction of AMLO's Ordinary Persona

For a charismatic bond to be forged, the leader and the led need to identify with one another. This collective affective identification establishes the basis for the leader's trustworthiness: the leader is perceived as being one of us, someone who understands us and will always have our back. As Zúquete puts it:

"Followers (...) *trust* that the leader, who *knows* what is best for the community, would *never* do anything to harm the community" (Zúquete, 2017, p.457). In his government anniversary speeches, AMLO repeatedly underscores the fact that he is a man of the people who knows and understands his fellow Mexicans and who speaks their language, rather than the technocratic jargon that other politicians might use. In his discourse, AMLO recalls his humble background as someone who was not born into the country's financial or political elite: "We will never forget where we came from"²⁴⁴ (2018). He often repeats that he will always be there for his fellow Mexicans: "There will be no divorce between power and the people, I will never lose communication with you, the people"²⁴⁵ (2018).

To cement his trustworthiness, AMLO reminds his audience that he has adopted, and will continue to adopt, a number of measures to democratise his presidential office, stripping it of luxuries which he considers to be obscene for an administration that governs in a spirit of *austeridad republicana*. Los Pinos, formerly the official residence of Mexico's presidents, was opened to the public as soon as AMLO took office. In 2018, he promised to scrap "protocol and ceremonial expenses dedicated to the President"²⁴⁶ (2018). He put the presidential aircraft up for sale - a sale that took five years to complete and became somewhat of an in-joke between the president and his supporters (cf. subsection 5.4.4.2). Another recurrent theme in AMLO's discourse is the removal of presidential immunity: "The president's immunity from prosecution has been removed so that he can be tried for any crime like any other Mexican"²⁴⁷ (2020). Ex-presidents (himself included) will no longer be entitled to a special pension. The aim of all these measures, to which the president regularly refers, is to cut down government expenditure and to redirect the savings made to the Morena government's welfare programmes - taking from

²⁴⁴ "Nunca se olvidará de dónde venimos."

²⁴⁵ "No habrá divorcio entre el poder y el pueblo, nunca perderé la comunicación con ustedes, con la gente."

²⁴⁶ "Se eliminarán (...) cualquier gasto de protocolo y ceremonial dedicado al Presidente."

²⁴⁷ "Se eliminó el fuero al presidente para que pueda ser juzgado por cualquier delito como cualquier otro mexicano."

the rich to give to the poor, in accordance with AMLO's motto: "*por el bien de todos, primero los pobres*" ("for the good of all, first and foremost the poor").

Another way of building an affective bond with his supporters is by sharing little in-jokes with them. Even though the government anniversary speeches are scripted, AMLO occasionally departs from his manuscript to introduce a note of humour or to elicit a response from his listeners. For example, reading through his one hundred pledges to the people of Mexico on 1 December 2018, AMLO pauses for a moment, a quarter of the way through: "I am reading 100 points. I'm already on twenty-seven..."²⁴⁸ (2018). He smiles at his audience, acknowledging their patience - his speeches are rarely under an hour long on these occasions - and begs their indulgence. Similarly, in 2023, he apologises for the length of his address: "I'm already taking too long, aren't I? But I also have to thank..."²⁴⁹ (2023). By joking about the characteristically slow pace of his delivery, AMLO shows his self-deprecating side; it is another way of affectively drawing his audience closer to him. In 2022, he jokes about the price to be paid for cutting media subsidies, so-called *chayotes* - bribes that politicians pay journalists in exchange for favourable press coverage: "We have saved 42 billion pesos - so it's actually not a bad deal, putting up with the questioning, the insults, even the slander"²⁵⁰ (2022). The crowds react with laughter and strong applause, cheering and chanting "*¡No estás sólo!*" ("You are not alone!").

²⁴⁸ "Estoy leyendo 100 puntos. Ya voy en el 27..."

²⁴⁹ "Ya me estoy tardando mucho ¿no? Pero es que tengo que agradecer también a..."

²⁵⁰ "Se han ahorrado 42 mil millones de pesos. Por eso, no es mal negocio aguantar los cuestionamientos, los insultos - hasta la calumnia."



Figure 62: Worth It (Canal, 2022)

Humour is sometimes mixed with colloquial language in these off-script outbursts: "They said that if it rained hard above, it would drip down below, as if wealth were permeable or contagious. To hell with their lies!"²⁵¹ (2021). By making his audience laugh and by signalling that he knows that the people are no fools, AMLO strengthens the affective bond with his audience, and confirms whose side he is on in the antagonistic opposition between the people and the elite. The crowd respond enthusiastically, chanting: "*¡Presidente! ¡Presidente!*". Even in 2020, addressing a very small audience inside the Palacio Nacional, AMLO attempts a note of humour, assuring his listeners that no matter what his critics might say, 71% of Mexicans still want his government to continue in office; "*porque yo tengo otro dato*" ("because I have other data"), he adds. The phrase "*yo tengo otros datos*" is one that AMLO regularly uses to question data presented by journalists at his *Mañaneras*. AMLO's critics use it to mock his alternative version of reality - in 2022, they even created a hashtag to mark AMLO's state of the nation address, calling it the "*#DíaNacionalDeLosOtrosDatos*" ("*#NationalDayOfOtherData*") - whereas his sympathisers use it to raise awareness about media spin (presumably, the

²⁵¹ "Decían que si llovía fuerte arriba, goteaba abajo, como si la riqueza fuera permeable o contagiosa. ¡Que se vayan al carajo con ese cuento!"

president's original intention). Either way, AMLO's turn of phrase has become part of the national conversation.

Another way for AMLO to indicate that he is one of the people is by consistently using the first-person plural ("we"), as conjugated in the following examples (all taken from his 2021 address):

- "*Hemos resistido a las adversidades y seguimos avanzando*" ("We have resisted adversity and we continue to move forward");

- "*Salimos adelante por la fortaleza cultural de nuestro pueblo*" ("We are moving forward because of the cultural strength of our people");

- "*En estos tres años hemos demostrado que somos una gran nación libre y soberana*" ("In these three years, we have demonstrated that we are a great, free and sovereign nation").

Occasionally, AMLO uses the first person singular ("I"), but more often than not, he attributes his achievements to the joint effort of his moral community, thereby emphasising a collective identity: "I repeat: this has been the work of all of us, of a 'we' that is represented here today by you: free and responsible women and men, the main protagonists of the Fourth Transformation of Mexico"²⁵² (2021). To bring home the sense of complete unison between the leader and the led, AMLO occasionally departs from his script to call out to his followers and elicit their response:

- "I am sure you will never abandon me."²⁵³ (Response: ¡¡no!!) (2018);

²⁵² "Eso ha sido una obra, repito, de todas y de todos, de un 'nosotros' que hoy está aquí representado por ustedes: mujeres y hombres libres y conscientes, protagonistas principales de la Cuarta Transformación de México."

²⁵³ "Estoy seguro que no me van a dejar solo."

- "Is it important to fight corruption, yes or no?"²⁵⁴ (Response: ¡¡sí!!) (2021);
- "Who supports the Fourth Transformation?"²⁵⁵ (Response: "¡¡*El pueblo!!*")²⁵⁶ (2022).

The questions call for emotive responses, and the followers are more than happy to oblige. It is an expression of the affective bond between the leader and the led, and of the followers' trust in the wisdom of their leader. As the Mexican author and journalist Jorge Zepeda Patterson points out, in his discourse AMLO consistently positions himself on the side of the people, expressing his empathy with the most marginalised members of Mexican society: "I speak from your suffering, your dissatisfaction, your discontent with those who have brought you to this position"²⁵⁷ (*El Financiero Bloomberg*, 2022). It is a discourse that strengthens the affective bond between the leader and the led and constructs them as forming one entity. To signal his trustworthiness as one of the people, AMLO also emphasises his personal commitment to the cause - not only now that he is president, but also in the four decades that preceded his election to the country's highest office, much of it spent in opposition, and with many obstacles along the way: systemic electoral fraud, as well as the attempt to impeach him in 2004 to stop him from running for the presidency in 2006, which "made López Obrador into a kind of martyr" (Gugelberger, 2005, p.109). He recalls it in his 2020 anniversary speech: "Many years of struggle, crisscrossing the national territory at ground level, (...) making a note of the feelings of ordinary people in all the towns and regions of this country"²⁵⁸ (2020). Furthermore, AMLO is keen to stress that nothing has changed since he became president and that he is still very much committed to the people: "As president, I have visited every state in the country, some four times, others as many as twenty-six times"²⁵⁹ (2020). Nor have his political

²⁵⁴ "¿Es importante combatir la corrupción, sí o no?"

²⁵⁵ "¿Quién respalda la Cuarta Transformación?"

²⁵⁶ "The people!!"

²⁵⁷ "Hablo a partir de tu sufrimiento, de tu inconformidad, de tu malestar con aquellos que te han traído a esta posición."

²⁵⁸ "Muchos años de brega, recorriendo a ras de tierra el territorio nacional (...) recogiendo los sentimientos de la gente en todos los pueblos y regiones del país."

²⁵⁹ "He visitado como presidente todos los estados del país; unos, cuatro veces y

views changed over the years: "As I have argued for years, corruption must be fought not only for moral reasons but also because of the vast amount of resources that are recovered [and used] for the development and welfare of the people"²⁶⁰ (2021). His discourse serves to remind his audience that his dedication has been absolute and unfaltering. In his 2023 address, he speaks with pride of his contribution to the foundations of Mexico's 4T, made possible thanks to the help of millions of fellow Mexicans: "My term is coming to an end and I am about to retire. (...) I have already made my contribution, with the help of millions of men and women; we started this process of transformation"²⁶¹ (2023).

The millions of Mexicans of whom AMLO speaks are, according to his discourse, the real rulers of Mexico. The president and his government are but servants of the people.

The people must hold on to the reins of power; if a ruler is not up to the task and does not lead by obeying the people: recall their mandate and get rid of them.²⁶² (2021)

The presidential recall (*revocación de mandato*) is a theme that runs through all of AMLO's government anniversary speeches until the actual referendum, held on 10 April 2022. The referendum symbolically conveys two messages to his followers; first, that AMLO can be trusted as a true democrat, willing to relinquish power if the people so decide - "this is democracy: government by the people, for the people and with the people"²⁶³ (2021) - and second, that even

otros, hasta en 26 ocasiones."

²⁶⁰ "Como he sostenido por años, la corrupción no solo se debe combatir por razones morales sino también por la gran cantidad de recursos que se recuperan para el desarrollo y el bienestar del pueblo."

²⁶¹ "Yo ya termino mi ciclo y me voy a jubilar, me retiro por completo; ya ayudé con muchos más millones de hombres y mujeres que iniciamos este proceso de transformación."

²⁶² "El pueblo tiene que mantener todo el poder en sus manos; si un gobernante no está a la altura de las circunstancias y no manda obedeciendo al pueblo: Revocación del Mandato y para afuera."

²⁶³ "Esa es la democracia: gobierno del pueblo, para el pueblo y con el pueblo."

though his critics portray him as just another Calles (who refused to relinquish power and governed from behind the scenes during the *Maximato*), AMLO has no intention of clinging on to office. In fact, as he approaches the end of his term, he emphatically rejects what he calls "*el necesariato*", the misguided belief that one is indispensable: "One should not aspire to be constantly needed, to believe that one is indispensable, to cast oneself as a supreme leader, tyrant, strongman, despot"²⁶⁴ (2023). The persona he constructs through this discourse is that of a man who is, always has been, and always will be one of the people. Once his presidential mission is accomplished, he looks forward to returning to the ranks of ordinary Mexicans. Indeed, happiness - according to AMLO's discourse - is not derived from power or money, but from a clear conscience:

I am convinced that we should not be too attached to power or money, because that is not happiness at all; happiness is to be at peace with ourselves, at peace with our conscience and at peace with our neighbour.²⁶⁵ (2023)

By underlining his detachment from materialism and his attachment to "nonmaterial values" (Zúquete, 2017, p.458), AMLO constructs the persona of a humble and trustworthy individual. This construction is reinforced by his repeated references to the sovereign people whom he serves, as exemplified in these two quotes: "I am only a leader; the people are the great lord, the master, the sovereign, the ruler, the one who truly rules and transforms"²⁶⁶ (2019) and "the people give and the people take away, the people are sovereign"²⁶⁷ (2018). What is more, AMLO is profoundly grateful for the privilege of serving the people and for the people's unwavering support for the collective mission, the

²⁶⁴ "No se debe aspirar al necesariato, a creernos indispensables, a apostar a ser jefes máximos, caudillos, hombres fuertes, caciques."

²⁶⁵ "Tengo la convicción que no hay que tenerle mucho apego ni al poder ni al dinero, porque eso no es del todo la felicidad, la felicidad es estar bien con uno mismo, estar bien con nuestra consciencia y estar bien con el prójimo."

²⁶⁶ "Yo solo soy un dirigente; el pueblo es el gran señor, el amo, el soberano, el gobernante, el que verdaderamente manda y transforma."

²⁶⁷ "El pueblo pone y el pueblo quita, el pueblo es soberano."

4T: "Thank you, people of Mexico. Thank you from the bottom of my heart"²⁶⁸ (2021).

At times, AMLO's gratitude to the people is expressed through deep humility. The message conveyed to his followers is that he is nothing without the people.

Do not abandon me, because without you, I am nothing, or next to nothing; without you, the conservatives would easily defeat me. I ask for your support, and I reiterate my commitment not to fail you; I would rather die than betray you.²⁶⁹ (2018)

I owe all that I am to the people, so I will continue to listen and serve them, and I will never, ever betray the people.²⁷⁰ (2019)

In his 2018 speech, AMLO even dissolves his own identity into that of the people: "I no longer belong to me, I belong to you, I belong to the people of Mexico"²⁷¹ (2018). It is a particularly striking example of AMLO's use of discourse to express his complete oneness with the people. His followers applaud him enthusiastically, acknowledging the affective bond.

5.4.2 Discursive Construction of AMLO's Extraordinary Persona

Section 5.4.1 addressed the ordinary side of AMLO's discursively constructed persona - the side that triggers enthusiasm amongst his followers who consider him to be one of them. Section 5.4.2 will address the extraordinary side of AMLO's discursively constructed persona - the side that inspires awe amongst

²⁶⁸ "Gracias, pueblo de México. Gracias de todo corazón."

²⁶⁹ "No me dejen solo porque sin ustedes no valgo nada o casi nada; sin ustedes, los conservadores me avasallarían fácilmente. Yo les pido apoyo, porque reitero el compromiso de no fallarles; primero muerto que traicionarles."

²⁷⁰ "Al pueblo le debo todo lo que soy, por eso lo seguiré escuchando y sirviendo, y nunca jamás lo traicionaré."

²⁷¹ "Yo ya no me pertenezco, yo soy de ustedes, soy del pueblo de Mexico."

his supporters, who are encouraged to perceive him as a leader capable of transformative change for the greater good of the people. Notwithstanding all the humility expressed towards the real rulers of Mexico (i.e. the sovereign Mexican people), AMLO does occasionally like to remind his audience that although he is just like them and understands them better than most, he is also the President of the United Mexican States, a position that gives him great power. In these instances, departing from the usual pattern of his rhetoric, he uses the first-person singular, as in the example below:

On 9 November I chaired the [UN Security] Council and proposed the implementation of a global welfare and fraternity plan to help 750 million of the world's poor. (...) I am sure it will be approved.²⁷² (2021)

He is, metaphorically, the *tlatoani* at the top of the Mexican pyramid of power, and from this position he can achieve extraordinary things, proving himself as truthful - he promises "not to lie, not to steal, not to betray"²⁷³ (2020) - and trustworthy - he assures his listeners that he "has not let them down" and "will not let them down"²⁷⁴ (2020). He states that he is driven by a spirit of peace and reconciliation.

What I most wish for, with all my heart is that (...) we may live in a better society: freer, fairer, more prosperous, more democratic, more peaceful and more fraternal.²⁷⁵ (2019)

The values that AMLO consistently refers to in his discourse, on these government anniversaries but also more broadly, and to which his audience tends to react with enthusiasm, are moral in nature. They are, in Zúquete's

²⁷² "El 9 de noviembre pasado presidí ese Consejo [de Seguridad de la UNO] y propuse la aplicación de un plan mundial de bienestar y fraternidad para ayudar a 750 millones de pobres del mundo. (...) Estoy seguro de que será aprobada."

²⁷³ "No mentir, no robar, no traicionar."

²⁷⁴ "No les he fallado y no les fallaré."

²⁷⁵ "Lo que más deseo con toda mi alma es que (...) vivamos en una sociedad mejor: más libre, justa, próspera, democrática, pacífica y fraterna."

terms, "nonmaterial values", to be found "at the core of the charismatic bond", transforming "the community of followers into a moral community, united by feelings of love, brotherhood, idealism, and righteousness" (Zúquete, 2017, p.458). AMLO's overarching narrative is that the collective mission will succeed precisely thanks to these nonmaterial values - in this, he has every faith, as he reiterates time and again:

We are confident that we will bring peace to Mexico with the support of the people (...) and, above all, with actions guided by the principle that peace is the fruit of justice.²⁷⁶ (2019)

The change we are making is there for all to see.²⁷⁷ (2019)

According to AMLO, the morality of the pure people will prevail over the immorality of the corrupt elite. He quotes Benito Juárez to reinforce his message: "The triumph of the forces of reaction is morally impossible"²⁷⁸ (2019). AMLO's confidence in the collective mission is designed to inspire the confidence of his followers, too - and as Thomas Cronin argues, "inspiring others with a sense of optimism and purpose" (Cronin, 2008, p.465) is an important part of charismatic leadership: "People want their would-be political leaders to have an inner self-confidence, a strength of conviction and a compelling authenticity" (Cronin, 2008, p.465).

AMLO also uses his discourse to construct the figure of an extraordinary leader by referring to his great achievements - past, present and future. Many are described as being the result of a valiant effort made by the people: "We have forged ahead thanks to the cultural strength of our people, which has always saved us in the face of calamities"²⁷⁹ (2021). Some are attributed to an

²⁷⁶ "Estamos seguros de que vamos a serenar a México con el apoyo del pueblo (...) y, sobre todo, con acciones guiadas por el principio de que la paz es fruto de la justicia."

²⁷⁷ "El cambio que estamos realizando está a la vista."

²⁷⁸ "El triunfo de la reacción es moralmente imposible."

²⁷⁹ "Salimos adelante por la fortaleza cultural de nuestro pueblo, que siempre nos ha salvado ante calamidades."

undefined "*nosotros*" ("we") - although, as section 5.4.1 illustrated, AMLO and the people tend to blend into one in this "*nosotros*": "We successfully confronted the stubborn attitude of the corrupt conservatives"²⁸⁰ (2019); "I can argue, factually and truthfully, that we have made progress in our goal of transforming Mexico"²⁸¹ (2020). Others are attributable to AMLO's administration, i.e. the collective effort of his Morena government: "Instead of sitting on our hands, we decided to confront both the health crisis and the economic crisis"²⁸² (2020). Finally, many of these fundamental changes can be ascribed to the virtuous example set by the president himself. These examples are instantly recognisable through the incorporation of some of AMLO's best-known leitmotifs (emphasised in bold in the citations below):

*No habrá **amiguismo, nepotismo e influyentismo**.* (2018)

("There will be no cronyism, nepotism or influence peddling.")

*Estamos limpiando al gobierno de arriba para abajo, **como se limpian las escaleras**.* (2019)

("We are cleaning the government from top to bottom, like you would clean the stairs.")

*De inmediato comenzamos a (...) poner en práctica una política de **austeridad republicana**.* (2020);

("We immediately set about (...) implementing a policy of republican austerity.")

*Se gobierna también con **autoridad moral**.* (2020);

("We also govern with moral authority.")

²⁸⁰ "Enfrentamos con éxito la actitud obstinada de los conservadores corruptos."

²⁸¹ "Puedo sostener con hechos y en honor a la verdad que hemos avanzado en nuestro objetivo de transformar a México."

²⁸² "En vez de quedarnos con los brazos cruzados, decidimos enfrentar, tanto la crisis sanitaria como la económica."

*No dejamos de trabajar para consumir la **Cuarta Transformación de la vida pública de México**. (2020)*

("We have not stopped working towards the Fourth Transformation of public life in Mexico.")

*Estamos demostrando que es viable: sí, funciona el **humanismo mexicano**. (2023).*

("We are demonstrating that it is viable: yes, Mexican humanism works.")

Throughout his discourse, AMLO articulates concepts such as morality, government austerity, transformation, humanism, fight against corruption and impunity with his own political mandate. These articulations help reinforce the extraordinary side of his leadership, in that his moral policy initiatives break with the material tradition of neoliberalism. AMLO is the leader who "takes the responsibility for announcing a break in the established normative order and declaring this break to be morally legitimate" (Parsons,²⁸³ quoted in Pappas, 2016, p.379). Extraordinariness is also conveyed through the radical changes that he has introduced since taking office, or intends to complete before the end of his presidential term, such as the creation of the Institute to Return Stolen Goods to the People (INDEP), which funds social welfare programmes from the proceeds of corruption or embezzlement, the establishment of some 2,750 branches of the *Banco del Bienestar*, designed to cut out commissions and *moches* (bribes) in Mexico's social benefits payment system, the doubling of the minimum wage during his six-year presidential term, and the introduction of a universal pension.

These four examples serve both a material purpose (the disbursement of money) and a higher-order moral one: a helping hand for *los de abajo*. There

²⁸³ Parsons' comment refers to charismatic leadership generally, not to AMLO.

are others, which serve a purely material function: one thinks, in particular, of AMLO's flagship construction projects, such as the Tren Maya, the Dos Bocas oil refinery, or the two new airports (Felipe Ángeles and Felipe Carrillo Puerto) that he has built during his term of office, which are presented as extraordinary feats. By way of an example, the Tren Maya is hailed as "the largest and most important construction project in the world today"²⁸⁴ (2023).

Both his nonmaterial and material achievements may be considered extraordinary, according to the president's narrative. However, the one that appears to mean the most to him is a nonmaterial one: the *revolución de las conciencias* brought about by the 4T.

The most important thing is that we have already laid the foundations for the transformation of the country, all of us, together. In three years, people's mindsets have changed as never before, which is the most important thing of all: the revolution of consciousness, the change of mentality; that is as close as you will get to what is essential, to what is most important, and it is as close as you will get to what is irreversible. They can turn back the material, but they will not be able to change the consciousness of the people of Mexico.²⁸⁵ (2021)

Bell has argued that "political leadership depends on the ability to persuade" (Bell, 2014, p.93). I would add that charismatic leadership depends on the ability to inspire faith. An appeal to a *revolución de las conciencias* is a vague and distal goal, and it requires an act of faith on the part of the followers. Yet this is what AMLO expects of his supporters. It reveals his desire to be an extraordinary leader in the Weberian sense: expecting his followers to submit to

²⁸⁴ "El Tren Maya, el proyecto constructivo más grande e importante en la actualidad en todo el mundo."

²⁸⁵ "Lo más importante es que ya sentamos las bases para la transformación del país, entre todos. En tres años ha cambiado como nunca la mentalidad del pueblo, que eso es lo más importante de todo: la revolución de las conciencias, el cambio de mentalidad, eso es lo más cercano a lo esencial, a lo mero principal y eso es lo más cercano a lo irreversible. Pueden darle marcha atrás a lo material, pero no van a poder cambiar la conciencia que ha tomado el pueblo de México."

him, "not because of custom or statute, but because they believe in him" (Weber, 1994, p.312). An audacious gamble, but one which his followers seem prepared to respond to, judging by the enthusiasm and awe he elicits from his supporters (cf. chapter six).

5.4.3 From Crisis to Redemption

In addition, as noted in previous chapters, one of the ways in which AMLO attempts to form a charismatic bond with his followers is by promoting a sense of shared identity, shared history and shared destiny. He connects the heroic past of the Mexican people to their glorious future, via the courage and determination of present generations: "By relating [their] vision to significant historical events and projecting it into the future, charismatic leaders provide for followers a sense of continuity" (Shamir, 1973, p.586). This subsection will illustrate how AMLO's government anniversary speeches articulate Mexico's past, present and future with three distinct concepts: crisis (the past), pride (the present) and hope (the future). It will discuss how these constructs serve to strengthen the charismatic bond between the leader and the led and enhance the perceived charismatic authority of the president.

5.4.3.1 The Past: The Crisis of Neoliberalism

"Despite the errors, the chaos and the seriousness of the problem we inherited, (...) we have been making progress to achieve peace."²⁸⁶
(2019)

As discussed in chapter three, AMLO has what one might call a reverential attitude towards Mexico's indigenous peoples, whom he celebrates at every opportunity, in line with his pledge of 2018: "Our original cultures will be

²⁸⁶ "A pesar de los vicios, el caos y la gravedad del problema que heredamos (...) hemos ido avanzando para conseguir la paz."

celebrated"²⁸⁷ (2018). The same cannot be said of his sentiments towards Mexico's recent governments, the "thirty-six years of neoliberal politics"²⁸⁸ (2023) that began with Miguel de la Madrid (1982) and ended with Enrique Peña Nieto (2018), which AMLO qualifies as an unmitigated disaster. Not only were the proponents of neoliberalism untrustworthy, with their "feigned laughter, gelled hairstyle and fake image"²⁸⁹ (2021), they also led the country's economy to the brink of collapse. Their legacy, in AMLO's words, was "a health system in tatters, corroded by corruption"²⁹⁰ (2019), "a neoliberal energy policy that (...) sought to ruin the national electricity industry"²⁹¹ (2021), "enormous debt"²⁹² (2019) and "a strategy of indebting the people in order to rescue those at the top"²⁹³ (2019).

Furthermore, according to AMLO's narrative, these neoliberal governments, whom he also describes as the "former authoritarian regime"²⁹⁴ (2018), were not just corrupt, but also violent.

It should not be forgotten that (...) Felipe Calderón, in an attempt to legitimise himself after his electoral fraud, ordered (...) the participation of the Armed Forces in what he called the "war on drugs" (...) with executions, massacres and extermination.²⁹⁵ (2019)

AMLO uses a form of "crisis rhetoric" (Uhr, 2014, p.260) to portray his predecessors in office as irresponsible, and himself as responsible.

²⁸⁷ "Se exaltarán nuestras culturas originarias."

²⁸⁸ "36 años de política neoliberal."

²⁸⁹ "La risa fingida, el peinado engominado y la falsedad en la imagen."

²⁹⁰ "Un sistema de salud en ruinas minado por la corrupción."

²⁹¹ "La política energética neoliberal que (...) buscaba arruinar a la industria eléctrica nacional."

²⁹² "La enorme deuda que heredamos."

²⁹³ "La estrategia de endeudar al pueblo para rescatar a los de arriba."

²⁹⁴ "Antiguo régimen autoritario."

²⁹⁵ "No debe olvidarse que (...) Felipe Calderón, para tratar de legitimarse luego del fraude electoral, ordenó (...) la participación de las Fuerzas Armadas en lo que denominó 'Guerra contra el narcotráfico' (...) con ajusticiamientos, masacres o exterminio."

Never again will [the armed forces] be used to commit excesses, or to carry out illegal and inhumane orders.²⁹⁶ (2019)

In our government, there are no officials like García Luna.²⁹⁷ (2022)

Our government (...) does not make any deals with any organised crime groups.²⁹⁸ (2022)

This crisis rhetoric is used by AMLO to distance himself from previous governments and to form a bond with those who had lost trust in Mexico's politics as usual by 2018. It is a discourse that some find congruent, others not. AMLO's detractors decry his symbolic break with the past as a sham, pointing out that he actually began his political career in the hegemonic PRI, and arguing that although he left the party in 1988, his leadership style still bears the hallmarks of the old authoritarian PRI. "Andrés Manuel is trying to establish an authoritarianism similar to that of the old PRI, where he was politically trained"²⁹⁹ (Ruiz-Healy, 2024). His supporters, however, are more likely to describe AMLO as someone who was always on the left fringes of the PRI, who joined the Democratic Current (*Corriente Democrática*) to follow Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (son of Lázaro Cárdenas) in defiance of an increasingly neoliberal PRI leadership, and who frequently disagreed with the party hierarchy - so much so, that he ultimately chose to pursue a political career outside (and to the left of) the PRI. By the time he became president, AMLO had spent thirty years in opposition. Nevertheless, in order to dispel any lingering doubts in the minds of the electorate, AMLO puts as much metaphorical clear blue water as possible between himself and the neoliberal administrations of the latter-day

²⁹⁶ "Nunca más se (...) utilizará [a la Fuerzas Armadas] para cometer excesos y ejecutar órdenes ilegales e inhumanas."

²⁹⁷ "En nuestro gobierno no hay funcionarios como García Luna."

²⁹⁸ "En nuestro gobierno no (...) se hace ningún acuerdo con ningún grupo de la delincuencia organizada."

²⁹⁹ "Andrés Manuel pretende instaurar un autoritarismo similar al del viejo PRI, en donde se formó políticamente."

PRI. The image that he seeks to project is that of an extraordinary leader who succeeded in defeating a party that was created to institutionalise the Revolution but ended up institutionalising government corruption. In the words of Massimo Modonesi: "The president-elect (...) pulverised the old, powerful PRI"³⁰⁰ (Modonesi, 2018, p.6) - a description that speaks to AMLO's perception as a transformative leader, capable of extraordinary achievements.

5.4.3.2 The Present: Pride in the Moral Community

"It is a source of pride that (...) we have not stopped working to bring about the Fourth Transformation of public life in Mexico."³⁰¹ (2020)

According to AMLO's discourse, under the 4T, Mexico has turned the page on its gruesome past: "This nightmare is coming to an end"³⁰² (2021). If the past was characterised by crisis, the present and future will be peaceful: "We will bring Mexico back to peace with the support of the people"³⁰³ (2019). This transformation will owe much to the exemplary leadership of the president, but also to the collective effort of the moral community, of which both the leader and the led form part. In his government anniversary speeches, AMLO expresses the pride that he feels when he reflects on the achievements of the people:

- A people who have fought for sovereignty: "Mexico, our great country, is a free and sovereign nation, respectable and respected by the rest of the world."³⁰⁴ (2020)

³⁰⁰ "El presidente electo (...) pulverizó al viejo y poderoso PRI."

³⁰¹ "Es un timbre de orgullo el que (...) no dejamos de trabajar para consumir la Cuarta Transformación de la vida pública de México."

³⁰² "Se está terminando esa pesadilla."

³⁰³ "Vamos a serenar a México con el apoyo del pueblo."

³⁰⁴ "México, nuestro gran país, es una nación libre y soberana, respetada y respetable para el resto del mundo."

- A people committed to peace and justice: "We are fighting for peace, and we are progressing towards a just, egalitarian, free, democratic, sovereign and fraternal republic."³⁰⁵ (2020);

- An enlightened people: "They used to try and fool us with the sophism that if it rained hard upstairs, it would trickle downstairs, as if wealth were contagious or permeable; now, we no longer believe that fairy tale."³⁰⁶ (2023)

It is a discourse designed to enhance the followers' self-esteem, which in turn encourages their affective commitment to the collective mission, to an imagined propitious future, and to their charismatic leader. They all have a stake in the 4T. AMLO not only expresses his pride in his followers' achievements so far; he also appeals to them to continue on this trajectory, and to remember the legacy that they will leave for future generations: "Let us all continue to promote what is good, to exalt our homeland and to make history"³⁰⁷ (2020). Most importantly, he expresses his confidence that together, the supporters of the 4T can effect genuine change:

Above all, let us act with optimism and joy, because we are immensely fortunate to live in interesting times; we are facing a stellar moment in history, because together we are beginning to build the justice and happiness that our people deserve, and a new life for our great nation.³⁰⁸ (2023)

³⁰⁵ "Se lucha por la paz y nos encaminamos a vivir en una República justa, igualitaria, libre, democrática, soberana y fraterna."

³⁰⁶ "Antes nos engañaban con el sofisma de que si llovía fuerte arriba, goteaba abajo, como si la riqueza fuese contagiosa o permeable; ahora ya no nos creemos ese cuento."

³⁰⁷ "Sigamos todos promoviendo el bien, enalteciendo a nuestra patria y haciendo historia."

³⁰⁸ "Por encima de todo, actuemos con optimismo y alegría, porque tenemos la dicha enorme de vivir tiempos interesantes; estamos ante un momento estelar de la historia porque entre todos empezamos a construir la justicia y la felicidad que nuestro pueblo se merece y una nueva vida a nuestra gran nación."

Emphasising the magnitude of the undertaking is a way of communicating the need for absolute commitment, on the part of both the leader and the led, for the collective mission to succeed.

5.4.3.3 Hope in the Future

"Keeping hope alive for the future."³⁰⁹ (2021)

As for the future, AMLO's narrative describes it as idyllic, provided the 4T is allowed to continue. This very much depends on the people to whom he addresses his government anniversary speeches. In his appeals, AMLO uses some of his well-known leitmotifs (highlighted in bold in the citations below):

*Promoveremos el bienestar material y el **bienestar del alma**.* (2018)

("We will promote material well-being and the well-being of the soul.")

*Se logrará el **renacimiento** de México.* (2018)

("Mexico's will experience a renaissance.")

*Hagamos realidad y gloria el **humanismo mexicano**.* (2022)

("Let us make Mexican humanism a glorious reality.")

These are words designed to inspire hope and enthusiasm amongst his listeners, and to encourage them in their affective identification with an extraordinary leader who can redeem them from the crisis of the past and lead them towards future salvation - provided the people adhere to the collective mission. By portraying the people as the architect of their own destiny, AMLO

³⁰⁹ "Mantener viva la esperanza en el porvenir."

bolsters the resolve of his moral community and strengthens the transgressive dynamic of the populist moment. To quote Laclau:

The emergence of the 'people' as a historical actor is (...) always transgressive vis-à-vis the situation preceding it. This transgression is the emergence of a new order. (Laclau, 2005b, p.228)

This is precisely what the 4T is designed to achieve: a rupture with politics as usual. The table included at the end of this subsection provides a succinct overview of some of the turns of phrase used by AMLO in these government anniversary speeches to contrast the putative crisis of the past with the “political journey of redemption” (Panizza, cited in Zúquete, 2017, p.452) offered by the 4T. As Mark Roelofs argues:³¹⁰

By his words (...) the President (...) must tell the nation its story in believable terms (...); above all, he must personally show the people a way forward, he must enunciate in broad terms the choices they must make for their future, and lead them positively in the making of these choices." (Roelofs, 1992, p.16)

AMLO's appeal to the people is an appeal to faith and commitment: "Let us have faith in the people and let us continue to make history"³¹¹ (2021). If the sovereign people so decide, the nation will be saved.

Table 6: Past and present³¹²

PAST	PRESENT
Neoliberalism or <i>Neoporfirismo</i> (2021)	Mexican humanism (2023)

³¹⁰ Roelofs' analysis concerned US presidential rhetoric, but is equally applicable to AMLO.

³¹¹ "Tengamos fe en el pueblo y sigamos haciendo historia."

³¹² Creator: PGR.

Cronyism, nepotism and influence-peddling (2018)	No more cronyism, no more nepotism, no more influence-peddling (2023)
Neoliberal corruption (2020)	Corruption is not tolerated, and impunity is not allowed (2020)
It is a disgrace that our indigenous peoples have been living for centuries under oppression and racism (2018)	Discrimination, racism and classism are now repudiated (2021)
Felipe Calderón tried to legitimise himself after his electoral fraud (2019)	The federal government will not institute electoral fraud (2020)
1,750 civilians injured and detained, and 2,459 dead in 2011 and 2012, in the midst of the war on drugs (2020)	We have not (...) declared war on anyone; only on corruption and impunity (2019)
The government sought to solve insecurity and criminal violence through military and police force actions (2019)	That is what we have been doing, because peace and tranquillity are the fruits of justice (2023)
Rescuing those at the top (2020)	The economy will be revived from below (2018)
Funds that were handled in a discretionary and dishonest way that benefited the minority (2021)	The government no longer represents a minority, but all Mexicans, of all classes, cultures and beliefs (2020)
The practice of the so-called <i>moches</i> (2022)	The shameful practice of <i>moches</i> will end (2018)
The money they used to steal (2020)	We created the Institute to Return Stolen Goods to the People (2021)

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ANTES	AHORA
"El neoliberalismo o neoporfirismo"	"El humanismo mexicano"

"Amiguismo, nepotismo e influyentismo"	"Ya no hay amiguismo, ya no hay nepotismo, ya no hay influyentismo"
"La corrupción neoliberal"	"No se tolera la corrupción ni se permite la impunidad"
"Es una ignominia que nuestros pueblos originarios vivan desde hace siglos bajo la opresión y el racismo"	"Se repudia la discriminación, el racismo y el clasismo"
"Felipe Calderón, para tratar de legitimarse luego del fraude electoral..."	"No se organizan fraudes electorales desde el poder federal"
"En 2011 y 2012, en plena guerra contra el narcotráfico (...) hubo 1,750 civiles heridos y detenidos, y 2,459 fallecidos"	"No hemos (...) declarado la guerra a nadie; solo a la corrupción y a la impunidad"
"Los gobernantes pretendieron resolver la inseguridad y la violencia delictiva mediante acciones de fuerza militar y policial"	"Eso es lo que venimos haciendo, la paz y la tranquilidad son frutos de la justicia"
"Rescatar a los de arriba"	"Se reactivará la economía desde abajo"
"Fondos que se manejaban de manera discrecional, deshonesto y en beneficio de minorías"	"El gobierno ya no representa a una minoría sino a todos los mexicanos"
"La práctica de los llamados moches"	"Se acabará la vergonzosa práctica de los llamados moches"
"El dinero que antes se robaban"	"Se creó el Instituto para Devolver al Pueblo lo Robado"

5.4.4 Continuity and Variation

The final part of this subsection will highlight some of the recurring themes in AMLO's government anniversary speeches (5.4.4.1), as well as some of the variations over time (5.4.4.2). While much of the content is repeated over the years, with updates on facts and figures where appropriate, there are certain themes that feature more prominently at the beginning of AMLO's term of office, some that make an appearance towards the end, and some that are not mentioned at all, even though one would expect them to be.

5.4.4.1 Recurring Themes

Within AMLO's recurring themes, one finds references to both the material and the nonmaterial realms. In accordance with Zúquete's reading, the material realm covers issues such as "economic security" or "crime and order" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.264), whereas the nonmaterial realm encompasses more intangible values, such as "positive identity" or "culturally specific grand narratives" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.264).

An example of a reference to the "economic security" facet of the material realm (Zúquete, 2013a, p.264) would be the minimum wage, which has doubled over the course of AMLO's mandate - a fact that bears repeating, according to the president.

The minimum wage increased by sixteen per cent, which had not happened in thirty-six years of neoliberalism.³¹⁴ (2019)

The minimum wage has increased by thirty per cent.³¹⁵ (2020)

³¹⁴ "El salario mínimo aumentó en 16 por ciento, como no había ocurrido en 36 años de neoliberalismo."

³¹⁵ "Ha aumentado el salario mínimo en 30 por ciento."

During our term in office, the minimum wage has increased by sixty-five per cent in real terms.³¹⁶ (2021)

The commitment I made in my campaign to double the minimum wage nationwide is being honoured.³¹⁷ (2023)

Another example would be the *Banco del Bienestar*. The roll-out of this vast project is clearly a source of great pride to the president, hence the frequent references.

We will set up a Welfare Bank.³¹⁸ (2018)

The Federal Government has set up the Welfare Bank.³¹⁹ (2019)

The Welfare Bank continues to expand.³²⁰ (2021)

According to AMLO's discourse, the funding of these measures has been possible thanks to three factors: the 4T fight against government corruption, a reduction in government spending - *austeridad republicana* - and the remittances sent by Mexicans working abroad, "our living heroes"³²¹ (2019). It is worth noting in this regard that AMLO attributes past emigration to necessity - young Mexicans used to have limited options: emigration, working in the informal economy, or joining a gang - whereas today's emigration is presented as a choice; thanks to the government's "Young People Building the Future"

³¹⁶ "Durante nuestra gestión, el incremento al salario mínimo ha sido del 65 por ciento en términos reales."

³¹⁷ "Se cumple el compromiso que hice en campaña de aumentar el salario mínimo al doble a nivel nacional."

³¹⁸ "Se creará el Banco del Bienestar."

³¹⁹ "El gobierno federal ha creado el Banco del Bienestar."

³²⁰ "Sigue en expansión el Banco del Bienestar."

³²¹ "Nuestros héroes vivientes, los migrantes mexicanos."

programme (*Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro*) and a broad range of study grants that provide incentives for home-grown talent, young people no longer have to emigrate in search of better prospects, according to AMLO's discourse.

Reflecting the "crime and order" facet of the material realm (Zúquete, 2013a, p.264), AMLO consistently mentions the Ayotzinapa case in his government anniversary speeches. The case concerns the forced disappearance of forty-three students from a rural teacher training college in Iguala (State of Guerrero) in 2014. Resolving the case was one of AMLO's most symbolic pledges in 2018: "There will be a thorough investigation into the disappearance of the young people from Ayotzinapa"³²² (2018). According to Olivia Mozdierz, Ayotzinapa represents a "political and moral test" for the president, where "nothing less than his political legacy and the future direction of Mexican civil society is at stake" (Mozdierz, 2022). Keeping the nation informed on the progress of the investigation is therefore something that his audience expects.

We will not rest until we know the whereabouts of the young people from Ayotzinapa.³²³ (2019)

We are working on uncovering the truth about the disappearance of the young people from Ayotzinapa.³²⁴ (2020)

We will continue with the investigation until we know the truth about the young people who disappeared from the Ayotzinapa teacher training college.³²⁵ (2021)

³²² "Se investigará a fondo la desaparición de los jóvenes de Ayotzinapa."

³²³ "No descansaremos hasta saber el paradero de los jóvenes de Ayotzinapa."

³²⁴ "Conocer la verdad acerca de la desaparición de los jóvenes de Ayotzinapa, en eso estamos."

³²⁵ "Vamos a continuar con la investigación hasta saber la verdad de los jóvenes desaparecidos de la normal de Ayotzinapa."

The law applies equally to everyone. (...) Proof of this is the progress in the investigation and punishment of those involved and accomplices in the disappearance of the young people from the Ayotzinapa teacher training college. We made a commitment to shed light on these events and we are going to honour that commitment.³²⁶ (2022)

Whilst the theme runs through the whole mandate, there is a subtle change in the terms used. Whereas in 2018 and 2019, the tone is one of firm determination - "there will be a thorough investigation into"; "we will not rest until..." - by 2020 and 2021, the certainty about resolving the case is not quite as emphatic: "we are working on uncovering..."; "we will continue with the investigation". However, by 2022, AMLO expresses confidence again: "We made a commitment to shed light on these events and we are going to honour that commitment". This variation reflects the ups and downs of the investigation itself, which continues to this day. Over a hundred presumed perpetrators (criminal gang members, army officers, police officials, politicians, and even the former attorney general, Jesús Murillo Karam) have been arrested and charged, but the whereabouts of forty of the missing students is still unknown.³²⁷

Some of the recurring themes in AMLO's 1 December speeches refer to achievements that are both material and nonmaterial in nature. The fight against poverty - *primero los pobres* - is a material objective, but also a higher-order moral imperative. Upon his election, AMLO had promised to govern for all Mexicans, but he had also made clear that his priority would be the country's poor: "*Por el bien de todos, primero los pobres*". By investing in the *Programas para el Bienestar*, doubling the minimum wage, introducing a universal old-age pension, cutting out intermediaries in the disbursement of social welfare benefits, and slashing government expenditure, the Morena government has helped improve the lot of Mexico's poorest citizens. According to the World Bank, approximately nine million Mexicans were lifted out of poverty between

³²⁶ "La ley se aplica por parejo. (...) Una prueba de ello es el avance en la investigación y el castigo a los involucrados y cómplices en la desaparición de los jóvenes de la Normal de Ayotzinapa. Hicimos el compromiso de esclarecer estos hechos y lo vamos a cumplir."

³²⁷ At the time of writing.

2018 and 2023 (Gobierno de México, 2023), and the gap between high-income and low-income households has been reduced by six percentage points (INEGI, 2023). AMLO does not mention these figures in his government anniversary speeches, but he cites poverty reduction as his greatest accomplishment in an interview with *Canal Red* (a small Spanish media outfit run by the former leader of Podemos, Pablo Iglesias) given in the final year of his mandate.

At the end [of the programme], the interviewer asked him which achievement of these five and a half years was the one that he was most proud of. "Reducing poverty", he replied.³²⁸ (Zerega, 2024)

It was a sentiment that he had already shared in a *Mañanera* the day after the official data was released.

This is something that they will not be able to take away from us, the joy that comes from knowing that there are fewer poor people in the country. It is something that fills me with pride."³²⁹ (López Obrador, 11.08.2023)

Another recurring hybrid (material and nonmaterial) theme is the empty signifier of the 4T, which is used to refer to anything from direct benefits payments (a material objective) to a *revolución de las conciencias* (a nonmaterial objective). The same holds true for the one hundred pledges made by AMLO on the day of his presidential inauguration; many of these pledges are material (e.g. student grants), but some are nonmaterial (opening the doors of Los Pinos to the public, for instance). In his anniversary speeches, AMLO likes to perform a countdown of the one hundred pledges; by 2019, he claimed to have met eighty-nine of the one hundred pledges, and by 2020 it was ninety-seven. The countdown from one hundred appears to stop in 2020, but in 2022, AMLO lists 110 government

³²⁸ "Al finalizar, la conductora [Inna Afinogenova] le pregunto cuál era el logro de estos cinco años y medio que más orgulloso le pone. 'El haber reducido la pobreza', ha respondido."

³²⁹ "Esto no nos lo van a poder quitar, esta alegría que nos produce el que haya menos pobres en el país. Eso sí me llena de orgullo."

achievements instead - possibly a way of telling his supporters that the original target has not only been met, but exceeded, thanks to the active participation of the people.

I shall list 110 actions and achievements of this government, which is all of us. Everything that has been done has been done starting from below, with the people."³³⁰ (2022)

Finally, in addition to the material and hybrid objectives and achievements repeatedly mentioned by AMLO on these anniversary occasions, there are also a great number of recurring nonmaterial themes in these addresses. Many refer to the "positive identity" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.264) of the nation - "Mexico, our great country"³³¹ (2020) - at the centre of which stand the people of Mexico. Every year, AMLO addresses those assembled as his friends ("*amigos y amigas*") and he never fails to quote Juárez, who - like AMLO - also put the people first: "everything with the people, nothing without the people" ("*con el pueblo todo, sin el pueblo nada*") is a Juárez citation that he uses every year.³³² It is a way of recalling "culturally specific grand narratives" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.264). The president himself is but a servant of the people; every year, AMLO reminds his audience that it is the people who put him where he is, and that the people may remove him from office if he were to fall from their grace (cf. *revocación de mandato*). The shared identity of the moral community to which both the president and his listeners belong is reinforced by these frequent references.

The positive identity of the moral community he is addressing is also reinforced through articulations with lofty principles. For instance, having declared in his first speech of 2018 that on his watch "there will be no cronyism, nepotism or

³³⁰ "Enumeraré 110 acciones y logros de este gobierno, que somos todos. Todo lo realizado se ha hecho desde abajo y con la gente."

³³¹ "México, nuestro gran país."

³³² With the exception of 2023, which took place before a more restricted audience at the AIFCP.

influence-peddling"³³³ (2018), by 2023 he calls it mission accomplished: "There is no more cronyism, no more nepotism, no more influence-peddling"³³⁴ (2023). No evidence is proffered to substantiate this claim, but the consistency of the message is significant in itself: the collective mission must be seen to be working for the leader to retain his charismatic authority. Justice must not only be done, but must also be seen to be done.

AMLO also states that unlike his predecessors, he will defend human rights - "the State is no longer the main culprit when it comes to human rights violations"³³⁵ (2019) - and to support his claim, he is prepared to face the scrutiny of international observers: "International bodies have been allowed in to monitor human rights compliance in our country"³³⁶ (2021). The agreement to be monitored by international human rights bodies is significant in that it signals government transparency in this sensitive area, historically characterised by a culture of opacity. The pivotal change in approach is acknowledged by Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2022) in a report that unquestionably finds fault with Mexico's human rights record, but nevertheless acknowledges the fact that for the first time, the country is open to inspection.

In November [2021], the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances visited Mexico - its first visit to any country. The committee first requested permission to visit Mexico in 2013 but was denied access by the previous government. In August 2020, the López Obrador government recognized the committee's jurisdiction to consider cases from Mexico.

(HRW, 2022)

Similarly, in December 2023, the Ayotzinapa Truth and Justice Commission announced the full disclosure of the Ayotzinapa archives to the families of the

³³³ "No habrá amiguismo, nepotismo e influyentismo."

³³⁴ "Ya no hay amiguismo, ya no hay nepotismo, ya no hay influyentismo."

³³⁵ "El Estado ya no es el principal violador de los derechos humanos."

³³⁶ "Se permitió la entrada a organismos internacionales para vigilar el cumplimiento de los derechos humanos en nuestro país."

missing students (Comisión Ayotzinapa, 2024). The announcement of such measures is designed to comfort the followers' perception of AMLO as an extraordinary leader who has nothing to hide when it comes to human rights in general, and in the Ayotzinapa case in particular. Nonmaterial values such as transparency and accountability are thus invoked to enhance the perception of AMLO as an extraordinary leader.

A final observation on the nonmaterial constants in AMLO's government anniversary speeches: The president has a certain number of stock phrases which he repeats almost every year in his anniversary speeches. What is noteworthy is that these sayings are reminiscent of Scripture. Some examples are provided in the table 6:

Table 7: Quasi-biblical references³³⁷

FIGURE OF SPEECH	REFERENCE IN SRIPTURE
<i>"Por el bien de todos, primero los pobres"</i> ("For the good of all, first and foremost the poor.")	<i>"Bienaventurados los humildes, pues ellos herederán la tierra."</i> ("Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.") (Matthew 5:5)
<i>"La paz es fruto de la justicia."</i> ("Peace is the fruit of justice.")	<i>"Y el efecto de la justicia será paz."</i> ("The fruit of that righteousness will be peace.") (Isaiah 32:17)
<i>"El pueblo pone, y el pueblo quita."</i> ("The people give, and the people take away.")	<i>"El Señor dio, y el Señor quitó."</i> ("The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.") (Job 1:21)

³³⁷ Creator: PGR.

The first phrase is borrowed from a former governor of Tabasco, Enrique González Pedrero, who formed part of AMLO's 2006 campaign team. The origin of the other two is unknown; they may well be AMLO's own turns of phrase. Whether or not they form part of his own idiolect, the recurrent use of these phrases, both in AMLO's government anniversary speeches and in his public discourse in general, is arguably no coincidence. Most Mexicans (an estimated 90%) practice a Christian faith (INEGI, 2023) and are consequently familiar with Scripture. It is therefore more than likely that they will recognise AMLO's references and will interpret them as an additional indication of a shared identity between their leader and themselves. Furthermore, by referring (directly or indirectly) to Scripture, AMLO embeds his discourse in the language of Christianity, which a number of Mexicans will find spiritually comforting.

5.4.4.2 Variations

Having outlined some of the recurring themes in AMLO's government anniversary speeches, the subsection will conclude with some observations regarding his occasional deviations from the usual pattern. One obvious example is AMLO's departures from script, i.e. his ad-libbing. Even though anniversary speeches are tightly scripted, AMLO does occasionally depart from his manuscript, to emphasise a particular point or to interact with his audience, hoping for their response (which they generally give him). The ad-libbing will include little in-jokes, which help strengthen the affective bond between the president and his followers. The in-joke on the sale of Peña Nieto's luxury liner is one example. In 2018, AMLO suddenly calls out: "Going, going..."³³⁸ and the crowd joyfully respond: "the presidential plane!"³³⁹, filling in the gap in AMLO's oft-repeated campaign slogan about selling Peña Nieto's aeroplane. The joke comes back in 2019: "And whoever doesn't like it, can go and take a flight on the presidential plane!"³⁴⁰ (2019). The crowd respond with laughter, just as they do with AMLO's other favourite catchphrases. Compared to the rather sober

³³⁸ "Se va, se va..."

³³⁹ "¡El avión presidencial!".

³⁴⁰ "Y al el que no le guste ¡que se vaya a volar en el avión presidencial!"

delivery of the official speeches, which are full of facts and figures, these brief moments of levity provide a form of release for the audience, who seem happy to have a little fun with the president.

Another improvisation from the president's side are his invitations to applaud specific categories of the population: Mexican emigrants, teachers, mothers, young people... The crowd are always happy to oblige, just as they stand ready to respond to his exclamations and rhetorical questions.

"Me esperan ¿verdad?" ("You will wait for me, right?") (Response: *"¡Sí!"*) (2018)

"El pueblo es mucha pieza" ("The people are in a league of their own"). (Response: *"¡Viva el pueblo!"* ("Long live the people!")) (2019)

These may not be very lengthy exchanges, but they punctuate the president's address and remind everyone present - as well as those watching - of the bond between the leader and the led. The crowd applaud the heroes of the people and boo the enemies of the people, as defined by AMLO: for instance, the living heroes that are the hard-working Mexican migrants, who send back remittances, as opposed to the false prophets of neoliberalism, who promised trickle-down economics but only filled their own pockets. Comparing the video footage to the published text of the formal speeches, none of these references seem to feature in AMLO's scripts; he draws on them spontaneously to define the antagonistic line between the pure people and the corrupt elite. This confirms Moffitt's theory on the role of the charismatic leader as the "key articulator of populist discourse" (Moffitt, 2016, p.53), the leader who adds an element of affect to the interaction, which the followers seize upon to respond to their leader, expressing either approval or disapproval.

As for the scripted part of AMLO's speeches, it is interesting to note that some topics are conspicuous by their absence, despite their relevance to

contemporary Mexican politics. For instance, on the subject of women's rights, AMLO is proud to recall his support for women in politics - "50% of the cabinet is made up of women"³⁴¹ (2020) - but he makes no mention of Mexico's endemic problem with feminicides, even though women's rights organisations have unequivocally brought this matter to his attention, repeatedly. Similarly, AMLO pledges his commitment to environmental protection - "we will not [allow] (...) any activity that damages health, destroys territory or affects the environment"³⁴² (2021) - but he fails to make the connection between the government's investment in fossil fuel projects and the damage these may cause to the planet. He repeatedly mentions Calderón's ill-advised war on drugs and the death toll that followed in its wake but does not utter the word *narcotráfico* (drug trafficking) when speaking of his own term of office, even though the problem of drug-related violence continues to plague the country. He simply points out that his government will have no truck with it: "In my government, authority is not associated with crime"³⁴³ (2020). These rhetorical choices - what to foreground, and what to omit - are indicative of the type of framing involved in AMLO's official speeches, which (understandably) highlight his government's achievements, rather than its failings.

Finally, it may be observed that some concepts feature quite prominently at the beginning of AMLO's mandate, but no longer appear in later speeches, whereas some are only introduced towards the end of his presidential term. For instance, AMLO's proposal to convene a citizen's congress to draft a new moral constitution for the country is only mentioned in 2018, and his *Cartilla Moral* is not alluded to after 2019. The fact that he tasked the National Fellowship of Evangelical Christian Churches (CONFRATERNICE) with its distribution had raised alarm bells amongst defenders of Mexico's post-revolutionary secular tradition, and little was heard of the campaign subsequently. Similarly, AMLO's pledge to promote the "*bienestar del alma*" ("wellbeing of the soul") of his fellow Mexicans only features in his first two speeches (2018 and 2019). The phasing out of these concepts coincides with the emergence of the alternative notion of

³⁴¹ "El gabinete está integrado, en un 50 por ciento, por mujeres."

³⁴² "No se [permitirá] (...) cualquier actividad que dañe la salud, destruya el territorio o afecte el medio ambiente."

³⁴³ "En mi gobierno, la autoridad no se asocia con la delincuencia."

humanism, which becomes "*humanismo mexicano*" as of 2022. Having faced a fair amount of criticism for his incursions into the spiritual realm, which blurred the lines of separation between church and state established by Mexico's 1917 Constitution, AMLO arguably chose to incorporate the concept of humanism into his vision for Mexico because it was less likely to be challenged. As it happens, his concept of humanism encompasses Christianity (cf. section 2.3), albeit subtly.

A final example of a discursive shift over time concerns AMLO's stated mission to transform the country. Whereas his speeches of 2019, 2020 and 2021 systematically highlight the "change" ("*cambio*") at work in the 4T, his last speech of 2023 subtly shifts its emphasis towards "continuity with change" ("*continuidad con cambio*") - a reference to the end of AMLO's six-year-term in 2024 and to his desire for the 4T to continue, albeit under a new leadership. Judging by the election results of 2 June 2024, the intended meaning was fully understood by his supporters: the Morena candidate and longtime AMLO ally Claudia Sheinbaum obtained an even higher score than her predecessor: 35 million votes for Sheinbaum in 2024, compared to 30 million for AMLO in 2018. In a press conference shortly thereafter, AMLO jokes: "Yes, she swept me aside" ("*si, me cepilló a mí*") (López Obrador, 06.06.2024). It was just as he had intended.

5.5 Performance: The Imagined Communion

Having analysed the staging and discursive elements in AMLO's official addresses and the ways in which these serve to enhance his perception as a charismatic leader - both ordinary and extraordinary - the next section will turn to the performative contribution made by the president and by those who come to watch him, since ultimately, it is the interaction between the leader and the led in the moment itself that determines whether or not the leader is perceived as commanding charismatic authority. Close attention needs to be paid to both sides of this dyadic interaction. AMLO's discourse and performance are key to constructing his charismatic persona, but all his efforts would amount to naught

if his audience found his performance neither "legible" nor "convincing" (Moffitt, 2016, p.105).

In *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism* (2007), Arditi argues that populist representation involves a process of imaginary identification: "the presumption of enjoying a direct relation with the people and the imaginary identification of the latter with the leader" (Arditi, 2007, p.68). In the same vein, Pappas emphasises the significance of large-scale events as opportunities to foster an "unmediated relationship" (Weyland, 2017, p.59) between charismatic leaders and their followers.

The most classical manifestation of such [an unmediated and direct] relationship is in mass political rallies, for which charismatic leaders have a strong penchant both for the collective mobilization and the social effervescence they tend to generate. (Pappas, 2016, p.380)

The collective mobilisation of which Pappas speaks does not occur in a vacuum, and nor can social effervescence be conjured up out of nothing. The mobilisation is prepared, through the *mise-en-scène* put together by AMLO's team (cf. section 5.3), but also through announcements made by the president himself at his *Mañaneras*, in which he informs viewers of the details of his next public appearances, or through posts on social media networks shared by AMLO's supporters. As for the social effervescence at the event itself, it is generated through the performative and discursive interaction between the leader and the led - some of it rehearsed, some of it spontaneous. The next two subsections explore the interaction between AMLO and his followers at the mass gatherings which form the subject matter of this chapter, which I would describe as a form of communion between the leader and the led. The first subsection will explore elements in the president's own performance which constitute an invitation to his supporters to enter into a communion with him, and the subsection thereafter will examine the supporters' response to this invitation, how they indicate their willingness to engage in communion with their president, and how they sometimes even initiate the interaction.

5.5.1 The Symbolic Call to Communion

The public event organised on Mexico City's Zócalo on 1 December 2018, immediately after the president's swearing into office at the Mexican Congress, provides a clear illustration of the communion that AMLO and his followers engage in on these occasions. It will be used as a case study for this subsection.³⁴⁴

Leaving the Palacio Nacional, AMLO crosses the Zócalo to reach the stage where the event is being organised, and members of the public who line his route clamour for his attention, which he willingly gives to them. Welcoming the newly elected president onto the stage temporarily assembled in front of Mexico City's Metropolitan Cathedral stands a large gathering of indigenous congregations, representing Mexico's sixty-eight Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Peoples led by their priests and priestesses, doctors and traditional healers (*curanderos*). The mood is unmistakeably spiritual. AMLO gazes solemnly into the distance and remains entirely silent throughout a 25-minute spiritual ceremony, during which he submits himself to a cleansing ritual, a consecration and a ceremonial laying of flowers to Tonantzin ("our revered mother" in Nahuatl, the language of the Mexicas). Historians believe that Tonantzin was integrated into Catholic religious worship as the Virgin of Guadalupe (Bernardino, 1990), and some argue that in *sincretismo*, Tonantzin has become "Tonantzin-Guadalupe" (Harrington, 1988, p.48). This appears to be borne out by the fact that in the ceremony, a Mexica priestess (María de Lourdes Jiménez) addresses a prayer to the Virgin of Guadalupe, asking her to protect AMLO like a son:

³⁴⁴ Appendix F provides a hyperlink to the video recording of the event (for reference). Unless otherwise specified, all quotes in subsection 5.5.1 are taken from the official transcription of the speech (also referenced in Appendix F).

Virgin of Guadalupe, mother of Mexico and of all Mexicans, we ask that like a mother you take care of your son; take care of him, free him from all evil, from all the bad energies that want to intercede in his path so that he can break away and walk freely.³⁴⁵



Figure 63: Guadalupe / Tonantzin (Sitio, 2018)

Later on in the ceremony, an Otomí doctor kneels down before the president to offer him a cross. The doctor addresses a few words to AMLO in his native language (hñähñu). The man is visibly moved and begins to cry. After a few seconds, AMLO decides to kneel down to the man. He smiles at him reassuringly, receives the cross held up by the doctor, stands up again and helps the celebrant to his feet.

³⁴⁵ "Virgen de Guadalupe, madre de México y de los mexicanos, pedimos que como una madre cuides a tu hijo; lo cuides, lo libres de todo lo malo, de todas las malas energías que se le quieran interceder en el camino para que él pueda romper y caminar libremente."



Figure 64: Kneeling Down (NMás, 2018)

The ceremony continues, but this brief moment perfectly encapsulates the charismatic bond forged between the celebrant and the president in that instant. The former looks awe-struck, and the latter performs an unprecedented gesture: no Mexican president in living memory had ever knelt down before Mexico's indigenous peoples in such a public display. AMLO's performative action is a way of communicating his humility: he may be the most powerful man in the land now, but he is still the equal of all his fellow Mexicans. His act of communion with Mexico's indigenous peoples on this day may be interpreted as an act of reparation for the centuries of "oppression and racism" (López Obrador, 01.12.2018) they have suffered at the hands of their rulers. It is a believable performance of charismatic leadership on the part of the president - the leader signalling that he is both extraordinary and ordinary - and the bestowing of charisma by the beholder is just as credible: the follower acknowledges his perception of the leader as both ordinary and extraordinary, looks straight at him and then averts his gaze, addresses him as both "our

brother" and our "great master" (Regeneración, 2018). The facial expressions of those assembled on stage also communicate a sense of awe in witnessing this moment.



Figure 65: Awe-Inspiring (Regeneración, 2018)

During the same ceremony, AMLO receives a *bastón de mando* (command staff) from Carmen Santiago Alonso and Santiago Ortela Sarmiento, representing the congregation of Ayutla de los Libres. The *bastón de mando* features the carved head of Quetzalcóatl / Kukulcán, the plumed serpent of Aztec and Maya mythology, a signifier of indigenous resistance to Hispano-Catholicism. The *bastón de mando* is a symbolic representation of both worldly and spiritual power, with which the indigenous peoples of Mexico entrust AMLO on this day. In the words of the celebrant:

Remember: the indigenous peoples and the Afro-Mexican people give you our trust and our commitment. (...) May it serve you to lead by obeying the people.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁶ "Recuerda: los pueblos indígenas y el pueblo afromexicano le entregan nuestra confianza y nuestro compromiso. (...) Qué sirva para usted mandar obedeciendo al



Figure 66: Receiving the Bastón (Observador, 2018)

AMLO is then asked to stand at the centre of a prayer during which the entire congregation, including the large crowd gathered on the Zócalo, pivots to address the cardinal points of pre-Hispanic Mexican cosmovision and to draw energy from these sources.



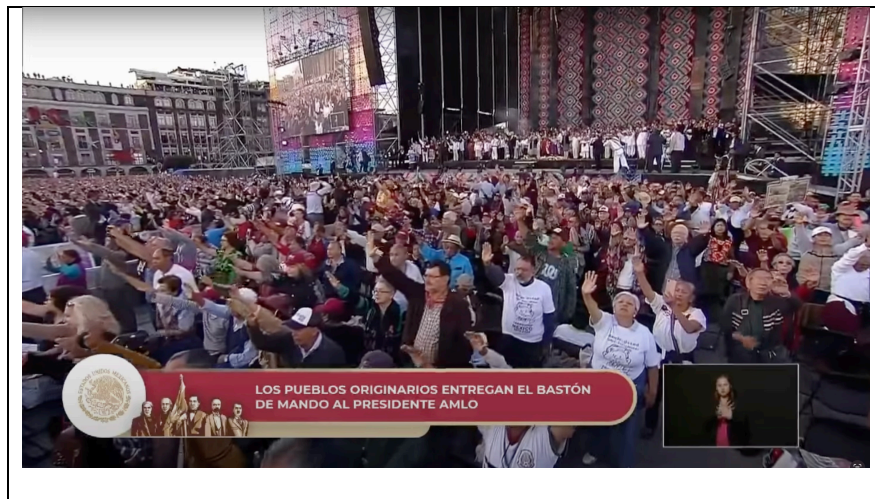


Figure 67: Communion (Canal, 2018)

In sum, the ceremony performed on 1 December 2018 bears all the hallmarks of a call to communion. It features the rituals, prayers, litanies, offerings and expressions of brotherly and sisterly love that one would expect at a religious service. Communion is not expressed through the Christian doctrine of transubstantiation, but it is embodied through a spiritual union between AMLO and his followers - 150,000 people in prayer, moving as one. As Zúquete explains, it is through this type of ritualisation that the "moral community is experienced; it helps to foster a sense of collectivity as a chosen people and plays a crucial role in legitimizing its soteriological dimensions" (Zúquete, 2017, p.458).

Subsequent government anniversary events organised on the Zócalo have followed a strictly secular template and the strong spiritual component witnessed in 2018 does not feature in later 1 December iterations.

Notwithstanding, a communion between AMLO and his followers is still visible in 2019 and 2022, not in the form of a spiritual union, but in embodied practice. It is noticeable, above all, in what Banck calls the "*corpo a corpo*": "Nothing is more important than a *corpo a corpo*, a body-to-body meeting, with its patting, kissing, embracing, these bodily codified symbols of the true politician" (Banck, 1998, p.39). Indeed, it is in moments of proximity with his supporters that one senses a charismatic bond between AMLO and his followers. It is AMLO who initiates this process of "imaginary identification" (Arditi, 2007, p.68) by approaching the crowd and by physically reaching out to his supporters:

shaking their hands, hugging them, kissing them, autographing their books, posing for their selfies. It is done with what appears to be genuine warmth; AMLO smiles, and his body language is relaxed. The followers embrace him.



Figure 68: Shaking Hands (Canal, 2019)

It is highly unlikely that AMLO knows any of these followers, but in a process of "imaginary identification", he performs "a direct relation with the people" (Arditi, 2007, p.68). It contributes to what Zúquete would call the "art of leadership", so essential in the "generation of charisma" (Zúquete, 2011b, p.304).

Having explored some of the ways in which AMLO may be said to symbolically call his followers to communion - by appearing before them on these anniversaries and by seeking to engage with them in a union that is both embodied and spiritual - the next subsection will discuss the ways in which his followers heed this call, and in some cases even initiate the process.

5.5.2 Answering the Call

As Shirin Rai observes: "The relationship between the audience and the performer is a dialectical one: it is the interaction between the two that gives

performance its affect." (Rai, 2015, p.1182) The performance referred to in Rai's writings is a political one, and one of the questions she addresses is how the audience "receive, decode and respond to political performance" (Rai, 2015, p.1188). This subsection will set out some of the ways in which the audience - in this case: AMLO's followers - respond to his call to communion.

The first and most obvious point is that they turn up. In great numbers. Some commentators have argued that this is because they are bussed in ("*acarreados*") by the organisers. Whilst it is probably fair to say that supporters from distant states have collective transport organised for them - one should not forget that travel costs are a factor for supporters coming from remote communities - the followers themselves would vehemently deny that they are paid to be there (cf. chapter six). The followers heed AMLO's call because they want to be there to show their support. The contempt shown towards them by AMLO critics, who pejoratively label them as "*acarreados*" and "*chairos*" - "a derogatory term used in Mexican politics to refer to a leftist or a person who idolises a populist leader"³⁴⁷ (Santillana Rivera, 2024) - only serves to strengthen their resolve. It is in fact an indication of AMLO's charismatic authority that followers believe "in the necessity and propriety of 'standing up and being counted'" (Shamir, 1993, p.582), notwithstanding the constant criticism levelled by the opposition at both AMLO and at the pro-AMLO movement (*obradorismo*).

Once they have arrived on the Zócalo, and as soon as the president's arrival is announced on the public address system, the followers call out to him. Those closest to the railings reach out their hands to try to touch him, shake hands with him - even give him a kiss on the cheek or a hug, if they manage to stop him in his tracks for long enough. In 2019, a child manages to slip through the railings and runs up to AMLO for a hug.

³⁴⁷ "La palabra 'chairo' es un término utilizado en la política mexicana de uso despectivo para referirse a una persona de izquierda o que idolatra a algún líder populista."



Figure 69: Child (Vanguardia, 2019)

The communion between the leader and the led on the Zócalo, before AMLO walks onto the tribune, is a moment of slightly chaotic euphoria. Many of the supporters are equipped with mobile phones and ask AMLO for a selfie. Others ask for autographs. Others still hand over little presents, or letters addressed to the president - a long-standing custom in Mexico, where many believe that only the highest authority can intervene to resolve their problems.



Figure 70: Autographs (Canal, 2019)

These corporeal expressions of affect are responses to AMLO's invitation - his call to communion. The president reaches out to the crowds, and the followers respond. The same phenomenon may be observed in the discursive interaction between AMLO and his supporters during his formal address (cf. subsection 5.4.4.2). However, the followers do not just respond to their leader; they also initiate an interaction with their president, co-writing the script of this collective performance. One way for them to engage in communion is to chant certain slogans which they know the president will recognise. The chants are rehearsed, in that they have been performed on previous occasions - for instance, on AMLO's campaign trail - but their expression is spontaneous, ebbing and flowing through the course of the afternoon, with an ever-changing chorus, some chants initiated by Morena members, others by the trade unions, others by the general public of supporters. Table 8 lists the chants identified in the recordings of these annual events:

Table 8: Chants³⁴⁸

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
¡No estás solo!	You are not alone!
¡Presidente! ¡Presidente!	President!
¡Obrador! ¡Obrador!	Obrador!
¡Es un honor estar con Obrador!	It's an honour to be with Obrador!
¡Es un honor marchar con Obrador!	It's an honour to march with Obrador!
¡SNTE, presente, apoya al Presidente!	SNTE is present and supports the President! ³⁴⁹
¡Honesto, valiente, así es mi Presidente!	Honest, courageous, that's my President!
¡Señor Presidente, aquí está su gente!	Mr. President, your people are here!
¡AMLO! ¡AMLO!	AMLO!
¡Vamos!	Come on!
¡Sí se pudo!	Yes, we did!

³⁴⁸ Creator: PGR.

³⁴⁹ SNTE: National Union of Education Workers.

These slogans express the followers' faith in the charismatic leader (e.g. "*honesto, valiente, así es mi Presidente*"), in the collective mission (e.g. "*sí, se pudo*") and in the moral community (e.g. "*Señor Presidente, aquí está su gente*") - very much in line with the salient elements of Zúquete's concept of missionary politics discussed throughout this thesis.

Another way for the followers to engage in a communion with the leader is to display home-made placards. Like the chanting, the placards are used to express the followers' faith in their leader and to voice their enthusiasm for his leadership. Table 9 lists some of the placards displayed at AMLO's government anniversary speeches.

Table 9: Placards³⁵⁰

ORIGINAL	ENGLISH TRANSLATION
<i>Dios salve al Peje</i>	God save the Peje ³⁵¹
<i>No estás solo</i>	You are not alone
AMLO ❤️	❤️ AMLO
<i>Te amamos AMLO</i>	We love you, AMLO
<i>The 4T no se toca</i>	Hands off the 4T
<i>AMLO por siempre</i>	AMLO for ever
<i>México te AML</i> ❤️	Mexico ❤️ you AMLO

Many others feature drawings of AMLO, including the characteristic AMLITO (little AMLO) - a caricature of the president, affectionately displayed by his supporters.

³⁵⁰ Creator: PGR.

³⁵¹ Peje is AMLO's nickname, after "pejelagarto", a species of fish native to Tabasco.



Figure 71: AMLITO (Político, 2023)

AMLITO was created by the cartoonist José Hernández in 2006, when AMLO first ran for the presidency - AMLITO's slogan was "*Sonríe, vamos a ganar*" ("Smile, we are going to win") - and although AMLO did not win the 2006 elections, the cartoon figure, with its buck teeth and quiff, went on to become a huge success and has been a fixture at *obradorismo* events ever since.



Figure 72: AMLITO Marching (Reuters, 2022)

Like the chants, the placards, too, are expressions of the followers' affect: they communicate admiration for and trust in the president, thereby echoing Spencer's definition of the "affectual relationship between the leader and his followers", with its two poles of "awe" and "enthusiasm" (Spencer, 1973, p.351).

In sum, the followers not only respond to AMLO's call to communion, they also invite AMLO to join them in communion, using various performative means to express their perception of him as both "truthful and trustworthy" (Wood, 2015, p.668), and signalling to him that he is worthy of their unwavering support.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the staging, discursive and performative elements that help AMLO construct a public persona that is both ordinary and extraordinary at mass rallies attended by his supporters. It has also discussed the followers' responses to these elements and shown the ways in which AMLO's supporters give expression to their faith in the leader.

The chapter has shown that the *mise-en-scène* of these formal events is primarily designed to convey AMLO's extraordinary status as a modern-day *tlatoani* (he who speaks and he who commands). Judicious use is made of both rituals and symbols to recall the elevated status of the man addressing the multitude. The presence on stage of an enthusiastic coterie further reinforces the narrative of these events, according to which "the leader [is] driven by a special mission and/or (...) [is] invested by unique powers" (Eatwell, 2006, p.153), a narrative reflected in the "foreground scripts" (Aiolfi, 2022b, p.81) of these formal events, during which AMLO reiterates the achievements of the nation's collective mission, the 4T. Under his leadership, and with the resolute support of the moral community, the 4T is allowing Mexico to emerge from the crisis of neoliberalism and proceed on its path towards redemption and salvation.

This portrayal of AMLO as an extraordinary leader is counterbalanced by a number of elements in his performance and discourse that recall AMLO's ordinary status as one of the people. AMLO is seen at his most comfortable when he is in the midst of his fellow Mexicans (rather than when he is stood alone behind his lectern, reading out his script); both the president and the supporters reach out to each other as he walks to and from the podium, revealing their affection through their facial expressions and body language. In his 2018 address to the nation (the case study selected for closer scrutiny in this chapter), AMLO communes with representatives of Mexico's sixty-eight Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Peoples, thereby signalling his spiritual union with those who for centuries lived "under the yoke of poverty and marginalisation" (López Obrador, 2018). By kneeling down before them, he signals his humility. In his discourse, AMLO frequently recalls that he owes everything to the people of Mexico who put their trust in him and in his collective mission, the 4T. He also repeats that his destiny is in the hands of the Mexican people, who are the real sovereign; he is but an emanation of the people, entrusted by them to lead the moral community towards a future in which Mexican humanism will prevail. The followers gathered on the Zócalo applaud his discourse and call out their support for their leader. As this thesis has consistently argued, it is AMLO's credible portrayal of both facets - his navigation between the extraordinary and

ordinary sides of his public persona - that holds the key to his charismatic appeal in the eyes of his followers.

Chapter five has analysed a series of formal addresses by the president and has discussed the various aspects that contribute to the construction of his perceived charismatic leadership qualities, highlighting a certain degree of continuity over the course of his six-year presidential mandate. The next chapter will adopt a slightly different approach, by conducting an in-depth exploration into one particular government anniversary event which, I would argue, crystallises the various points developed in the preceding chapters of this thesis and therefore serves as a cogent illustration of the arguments developed so far in this research. The event in question is AMLO's celebration to mark the fourth anniversary of the 4T,³⁵² held in Mexico City on 27 November 2022.

³⁵² "Celebración por 4 Años de Transformación."

Chapter 6

Hands Off the 4T

6.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses one specific government anniversary event organised by the president on 27 November 2022.³⁵³ I selected this particular occasion for close scrutiny because it neatly encompasses the three salient concepts around which this research is structured. Indeed, on this day, AMLO (the charismatic leader) convened a people's march through the centre of Mexico City by persuading his followers (the moral community) to come to the defence of the 4T (the collective mission). By carefully analysing the events as they unfolded (the multitudinous march, followed by the president's speech from the Zócalo), the chapter will address what lies at the heart of the thesis as a whole, namely the role of faith in the construction of AMLO's charismatic leadership.

The salient discursive aspects of AMLO's speech on 27 November 2022 have already been broadly covered in section 5.4, which illustrated the ways in which AMLO's discourse serves to construct both an ordinary and an extraordinary persona before his audience. The present chapter therefore proposes to primarily address the performative aspects of the event, which lasted seven and a half hours in total. It will unpack AMLO's performance against the backdrop of his political trajectory, highlighting the different strands of the performance that contribute to his perceived charisma in the eyes of his followers.

The chapter will be structured around four cross-cutting themes that I have identified:³⁵⁴ centrality, authenticity, perseverance and bravery - it being

³⁵³ Appendix G provides a hyperlink to the video recording of the event and the transcript of the president's address (for reference). Unless otherwise indicated, all AMLO quotes in this chapter are transcribed from this event.

³⁵⁴ The analysis is based on press articles, video recordings and social media posts.

understood that it is through their combination that these different elements help construct AMLO's overall charismatic authority.

6.2 Centrality

One of the reasons for selecting this particular government anniversary speech for close analysis is the fact that it took place under rather special circumstances. A fortnight earlier, on 13 November 2022, tens of thousands - if not hundreds of thousands³⁵⁵ - of demonstrators had taken to the streets of Mexico to protest against a planned reform of the National Electoral Institute (INE). The demonstrators viewed the reform as an attack on an important state institution by a president who would rather dispense with institutional mechanisms and govern by direct decree - the archetypical personalistic populist leader of whom Weyland speaks (Weyland, 2017). AMLO, on the other hand, considered the reform of the INE to be an essential part of his government austerity programme, in that it would save the taxpayer some 24 billion pesos, he claimed. The fact that AMLO also has history with the INE³⁵⁶ is probably not irrelevant to the sequence of events. Many Mexicans will remember his exclamation from the 2006 presidential elections, which AMLO claimed had been marred by electoral fraud: "To hell with your institutions!"³⁵⁷ (López Obrador. 06.09.2006). In other words, the INE is a longstanding bone of contention between AMLO and his political adversaries, and by extension, between AMLO supporters (known as AMLOvers) and AMLO critics (whom one could arguably call AMLOothers, by analogy).

The traditional government anniversary speech, which should have been held on Thursday 1 December 2022 (a weekday) was brought forward to Sunday 27 November 2022. One assumes that this break with tradition (all other Morena

³⁵⁵ Organisers (from the political opposition) claimed an attendance of 640,000. CDMX (Morena) authorities spoke of 60,000.

³⁵⁶ The INE and its predecessors, the CFE (Federal Electoral Commission) and IFE (Federal Electoral Institute).

³⁵⁷ "¡Al diablo con sus instituciones!"

government anniversary speeches have been held on 1 December) was introduced to maximise attendance. According to AMLO, this was not his decision, but that of the people: "People want us to march on the 27th, on a Sunday (...) because (...) Thursday is a working day: 'We want to go in large numbers'"³⁵⁸ (López Obrador, 16.11.2022).³⁵⁹ The turnout was certainly impressive: 1.2 million marched with AMLO, according to the municipal authorities, a number not disputed by the press.



³⁵⁸ "La gente quiere que marchemos el 27, un domingo (...) porque (...) el jueves es día laboral: 'Queremos ir muchos'."

³⁵⁹ Marches in Mexico are often organised on Sundays, if they are not linked to a specific calendar date.



Figure 73: Front Pages (tar.mx, 2022)

AMLO invited the people to march with him from the Angel of Independence to the Zócalo of Mexico City - setting off at 9 am and arriving at 3 pm.





Figure 74: Ángel / Zócalo (Canal, 2022)

It is a route that he had taken before, for instance at the closing event of his 2012 presidential election campaign, which he ran as a PRD candidate.



Figure 75: 2012 Campaign (Sitio, 2012)

The symbolism of this invitation to march together - once more, and possibly for the last time - down the Paseo de la Reforma³⁶⁰ will not have been lost on AMLO's followers. AMLO's call to communion (cf. subsection 5.5.1) was heeded

³⁶⁰ Promenade of the Reform, a large avenue that connects the Palacio Nacional to Chapultepec Castle.

by his supporters. They too had been galvanised by the counterdemonstration that had taken place just a fortnight earlier and were keen to express their solidarity with their leader, who they felt was under attack, yet again. In fact, one of the chants heard most often during the event is "You are not alone!".³⁶¹ In terms of rallying the faithful, AMLO's leadership was thus central to the event. The followers joined the march because they had been invited to do so by their leader and because they knew that he would be there in person. AMLO created the "emotional connection" (Alexander, 2004, p.547) that brought them together as the people on this specific day.

AMLO was also central to the event in terms of his embodied presence: he chose to walk the route surrounded by his supporters, as shown in Figure 76.



Figure 76: Central Figure (SDPNoticias, 2022)

At times, the video footage of the march resembles a scene from a storm, with AMLO standing almost still in the middle of a sea of followers, who push and shove to come closer to him.

³⁶¹ "¡No estás sólo!"



Figure 77: Rock in a Storm (Canal, 2022)

Writing for the left-wing *La Jornada*, Arturo Cano describes AMLO's supporters as eminently comfortable in these situations:

A week earlier, the opposition had launched a challenge from the streets. As was to be expected, *obradorismo* responded, in a terrain where it moves like a fish in water.³⁶² (Cano, 2022)

In addition, AMLO may be described as central to the specifically populist mobilisation of 27 November 2022, for it is he who separates Mexican society into "two homogeneous and antagonistic groups" (Mudde, 2004, p.543): the pure people, articulated on this occasion with those who support his reform of the INE, and the corrupt elite, articulated here with the critics of this reform. In AMLO's discourse, the former represent the future: "It (...) made me very happy to see (...) that most of those who participated in the march are young people. This represents a generational change."³⁶³ The latter are referred to as the right-wingers of past political regimes: "The most famous ultra-right-wing figures in the world held their summit here, in Mexico City, just a few days ago, without

³⁶² "Una semana atrás, la oposición lanzó el reto de la calle. El obradorismo respondió, como era de esperarse, en un terreno en el que se mueve como pez en el agua."

³⁶³ "Me (...) hizo muy feliz (..) que la mayoría de los que participaron en la marcha son jóvenes. Hay relevo generacional."

any hindrance."³⁶⁴ It is a way of communicating that the opposition are not censored - unlike their own attempts to exclude AMLO from political debate by waiving his immunity in 2006 (*desafuero*) - but also, that the opposition should be relegated to history, because they are no longer relevant to the Mexico being built under the 4T.

AMLO convenes the march by persuading his followers to rally around his collective mission, the 4T. As Santiago Delgado Fernández points out, one of the skills required for strong leadership is to clearly state the objectives that the followers should be pursuing: "It is up to leaders to point out to their followers the big issues and the goals to be achieved"³⁶⁵ (Fernández, 2004, p.17). In his discourse, AMLO challenges the opposition's stated objective on 13 November - namely to defend the INE as a bulwark against "inherently unsteady, fickle and unpredictable" populist government, to use Weyland's words (2017, p.54) - arguing instead that the march on 13 November was just another example of a corrupt elite defending its privileges.³⁶⁶ AMLO offers an alternative and more popular objective for the people to defend, namely social justice, because "progress without justice is tantamount to backsliding"³⁶⁷ in the president's words.

The constitution of this "internal frontier" (Laclau, 2005b, p.77) is appropriated and then replicated by his followers in a performance of allegiance to the leader. Just as the opposition had brandished placards saying "hands off the INE" on 13 November, *obradorismo* took to the streets on 27 November to say "hands of the 4T".

³⁶⁴ "Aquí, en la Ciudad de México, hace unos días, sin ningún obstáculo, hicieron su cumbre los más famosos personajes de la ultra derecha en el mundo."

³⁶⁵ "Les corresponde a los líderes señalar a sus seguidores cuáles son los grandes temas y los objetivos a conseguir."

³⁶⁶ Lorenzo Córdova, the president of the INE who led the demonstration, earns twice as much as AMLO.

³⁶⁷ "Sostenemos que el progreso sin justicia es retroceso."



Figure 78: Hands Off (composite)

In terms of follower engagement, the march could be described as the main event of the day. There was some audience engagement during AMLO's anniversary speech later in the day, but nothing comparable to the scenes observed during the march. The *Reforma* headline of the following day sums it up rather accurately: "Many march, few listen."³⁶⁸

³⁶⁸ "Muchos marchan; pocos lo escuchan."



Figure 79: Few Listen (tar.mx, 2022)

Reforma's reporting draws attention to the fact that the Zócalo was not as packed as usual when the president finally gave his speech. By so doing, it diverts the reader's attention away from the record high numbers who attended the march - numbers which the newspaper does not dispute. It is an editorial choice made by a right-leaning newspaper. Most media outlets do not mention the discrepancy in numbers (cf. front pages reproduced in Figure 73), and some even offer an explanation: commenting in the independent news programme *Mirada Crítica*, Héctor Javier Sánchez argues that many supporters probably felt weary after the nearly six-hour long walk and therefore chose not to stay another hour or two on the Zócalo, preferring to watch a broadcast of the

speech instead: "After all, they already knew what was coming next"³⁶⁹ (Rompeviento TV, 2022). In other words, the supporters' main contribution had been their embodied participation in the event, coming out in support of their leader in an "expression of a collective identity" (Shamir, 1993, p.582), and this was arguably "more meaningful" (Shamir, 1993, p.582) to them than a speech on the Morena government's 100 pledges and 110 achievements, which they were already quite familiar with.

The front page of *Reforma* also features a photograph of "coaches, minibuses, government cars"³⁷⁰ parked along the city's major arteries, to suggest that the attendees of the march were *acarreados*.



Figure 80: Acarreo (tar.mx, 2022)

Again, offering a counter-narrative, Álvaro Delgado Gómez writes in *La Educación*: "Acarreado? No one has wings to fly to these mobilisations."³⁷¹ (Delgado Gómez, 2022)

³⁶⁹ "Pues ya saben lo que viene."

³⁷⁰ "Camiones, micros, autos de gobierno."

³⁷¹ "¿Acarreado? Nadie tiene alas para llegar volando a las movilizaciones."

The followers' embodied participation in the event did not just take the form of marching alongside their leader. They also used the opportunity to subvert some of the stereotypes applied to them collectively by AMLOthers, who describe them as *acarreados* who only show up for their "*frutsi*" and their "*torta*", a piece of fruit and a sandwich distributed to them by the organisers. A tweet posted by Vicente Fox on 28 November neatly encapsulates this type of discourse. It reads: "Could it be any sadder: you hiding behind the *acarreados*, the bribed and clueless people who come for their sandwich without even knowing what is going on??"

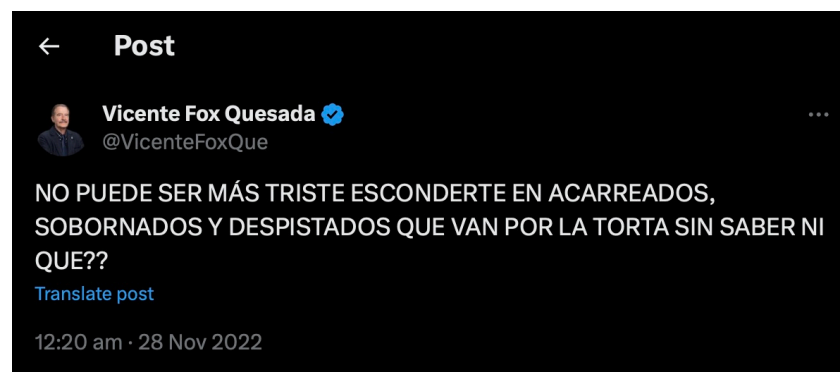


Figure 81: Clueless (X, 2022)

Upping the elitist ante, there are even those who call AMLO supporters "*Indios patas rajadas*"³⁷² (uncouth "Indians"). The 13 November protestor featured in the video behind AMLO (cf. Figure 82) applies the pejorative concept to the president himself, adding the qualifier "*naco*" (an "Indian" from Veracruz).³⁷³

³⁷² Literally, "Indians with cracked feet", originating from the fact that Mexico's indigenous peoples did not traditionally have footwear.

³⁷³ AMLO's grandparents were farmers from Veracruz.



Figure 82: Uncouth from Veracruz (Notiguía, 2022)

In contrast, on 27 November, supporters from Tlamanca express their solidarity with the "Indian from Macuspana" (AMLO's birthplace).



Figure 83: Macuspana Brother (Radio Turquesa, 2022)

The press reports published after the march show a great number of AMLO supporters who took this opportunity to appropriate these racist and elitist insults and turn them against their detractors. The photographs reproduced in Figure 84, featuring home-made placards seen on the anniversary march,

illustrate the followers' humorous subversion of a discourse that was intended to belittle them.







Figure 84: Reclaiming the Narrative (composite)

The placards read (loosely translated), from top to bottom:

- 1) I am *acarreado* by my conviction, and the joy of having the best president, AMLO. Long live the 4T.
- 2) I didn't come for my sandwich, I came just because I felt like it.
- 3) I am *acarreada* by my political memory. I ❤️ U AMLO .
- 4) *Acarreadas* by our hearts.
- 5) I am a *pata rajada* Indian... but I have clean and strong feet when it comes to marching for democracy and in support of the 4T.

6) Long live Chiapas, long live AMLO. We are *patas rajadas* Indians from Chiapas. Proud to be indigenous and Mexican. We stand with AMLO.

7) I am *acarreado* by my conscience and because I want change in Mexico.

The underlying message from the followers to the detractors is that these *chairs* did not show up for a free sandwich or some merchandise; they came out of conviction and love for their president. It is AMLO who is at the centre of their concerns and their affect - and if it were up to them, he would stay in office for ever - cf. placard featured in Figure 85, which reads: "AMLO, many of us would be delighted to see your dictatorship continue forever". The placard may be read on the one hand as a reference to Vargas Llosa's description of Mexico as a *dictadura perfecta* under the PRI, and on the other as a nod to the oft-repeated claim by the opposition that despite all his assurances, AMLO will never actually relinquish power, governing from behind the scenes like Calles. The supporter holding up the placard clearly thinks this would not be such a bad thing.



Figure 85: Forever (Canal, 2022)

Finally, AMLO is also central to the political significance of the event. Four years into his mandate at this point, and with two years remaining, speculation is starting to grow about his succession. The three Morena presidential hopefuls

(*corcholatas*)³⁷⁴ Adán Augusto, Claudia Sheinbaum and Marcelo Ebrard, arrive early, keen to welcome their leader at the Ángel de la Independencia and eager to show their unity, political rivalry notwithstanding.



Figure 86: Corcholatas (Financiero, 2022)

Similarly, the Morena state governors who attend the event at the Zócalo demonstrate their affection for AMLO by lining up to take selfies with the president - as discussed in section 5.3.3, physical proximity to the leader has "strong symbolic significance" (Banck, 1998, p.28) for the coterie.

³⁷⁴ Literally: "bottle tops". *Corcholata* is AMLO's twist on the *destape* (removing the lid / uncorking) of the PRI era, when the outgoing President would reveal his chosen successor. In contrast, Mexico's preferred *corcholata* will be chosen by the people, according to AMLO: "Yo soy el destapador y mi *corcholata* favorita será la del pueblo" ("I am the bottle opener, and my favourite *corcholata* will be the one chosen by the people") (AMLO, 12.07.2021)



Figure 87: Governors (Canal, 2022)

AMLO is indisputably the central figure in all these constellations. His supporters - be they ordinary members of the public or political allies - coalesce around him, performatively expressing their enthusiasm and awe for their leader. Through their expressions of affection - hugs and selfies - and approval - applause and cheers - they are seen as attributing to AMLO what Weber would call "charismatic authority": their "personal devotion" and "personal confidence" in the qualities of an extraordinary leader (Weber, 1994, pp.311-312).



Figure 88: Selfies (Milenio, 2022)

6.3 Authenticity

Aside from his centrality to the event, AMLO also constructs a charismatic persona by coming across as authentic before his supporters, who perceive him as being without artifice. The acceptance of authenticity primarily depends on the audience in question - authenticity, like charisma, is very much in the eye of the beholder, and while AMLO supporters may perceive him as genuine and unaffected, his detractors will perceive him as calculating and fake.³⁷⁵

For the leader to be perceived as charismatic (both extraordinary and ordinary), the audience needs to be receptive to the performance of authenticity. Much also hinges on the performer's ability to persuade their audience to suspend disbelief and to accept the "illusion of authenticity" (Bleiker, 2018, pp.12-14) acted out before them. As Alexander has argued, "the attribution of authenticity (...) depends on an actor's ability to sew the disparate elements of performance back into a seamless and convincing whole" (Alexander, 2004, p.548). While politicians may not be professional actors, they are nevertheless required to perform before their audiences and are likely to gain greater acceptance if they manage to convincingly communicate authenticity. It is a challenging exercise, not just for AMLO, but for any politician: "Because acting is associated with deceit and falsehood, social performers have the delicate task of maintaining the illusion that there is no distinction between their social role and a hypothetical 'true self'" (Aiolfi, 2022b, p.76). The present section identifies a number of performative elements used by AMLO to construct his "hypothetical 'true self'" (Aiolfi, 2022b, p.76) before his followers, and thereby lend credence to his claim to be a genuine man of the people.

One factor that may be highlighted is the way in which AMLO dresses for the event. As mentioned in chapter four, AMLO invariably wears a suit and tie for his public appearances in Mexico City (his morning press conferences and his

³⁷⁵ Similarly, those loyal to the President will refer to this march as the march of the people - *#LaMarchaDelPueblo* - whereas those of a more cynical disposition will call it a march of the people bussed in especially for the occasion - *#LaMarchaDelAcarreo*.

formal addresses). The suits may not be haute couture - and he has, on occasion, been mocked for turning up at official ceremonies in scuffed shoes and crumpled jackets (cf. Figure 89) - but they are formal suits, nevertheless.



Figure 89: Scuffed Shoes (Reporte Indigo, 2019)

AMLO's sartorial choices give rise to a social media debate between detractors and supporters, the former deploring the president's unkempt appearance (in marked contrast to his predecessor Peña Nieto, who was extremely image-conscious), and the latter using it as evidence of AMLO's authenticity as a man of the people. In this particular social media post from 2019, the AMLO critic writes: "It is a pity that such a person should represent the President of the nation." Hundreds of supporters immediately reply in the thread, along the following lines: "Those feet have walked across Mexico, they are dusty because they have walked the streets and rural roads that no smug politician ever wanted to set foot on"; "His shoes may be dirty, but his conscience, righteousness and, above all, his honour are spotlessly clean"³⁷⁶ (*The Mexico*

³⁷⁶ "Esos pies han recorrido México, están polvorosos porque han caminado sobre las calles y caminos rurales que ningún político petulante ha querido pisar"; "#tendrá los zapatos sucios, pero su conciencia, rectitud y, sobre todo, su honor, están impecablemente limpios."

News, 2019). On 27 November 2022, AMLO goes one step further: he leaves the Palacio Nacional without a tie and removes his jacket once temperatures start to climb, appearing in a plain white shirt, in which he also gives his address some six hours later.

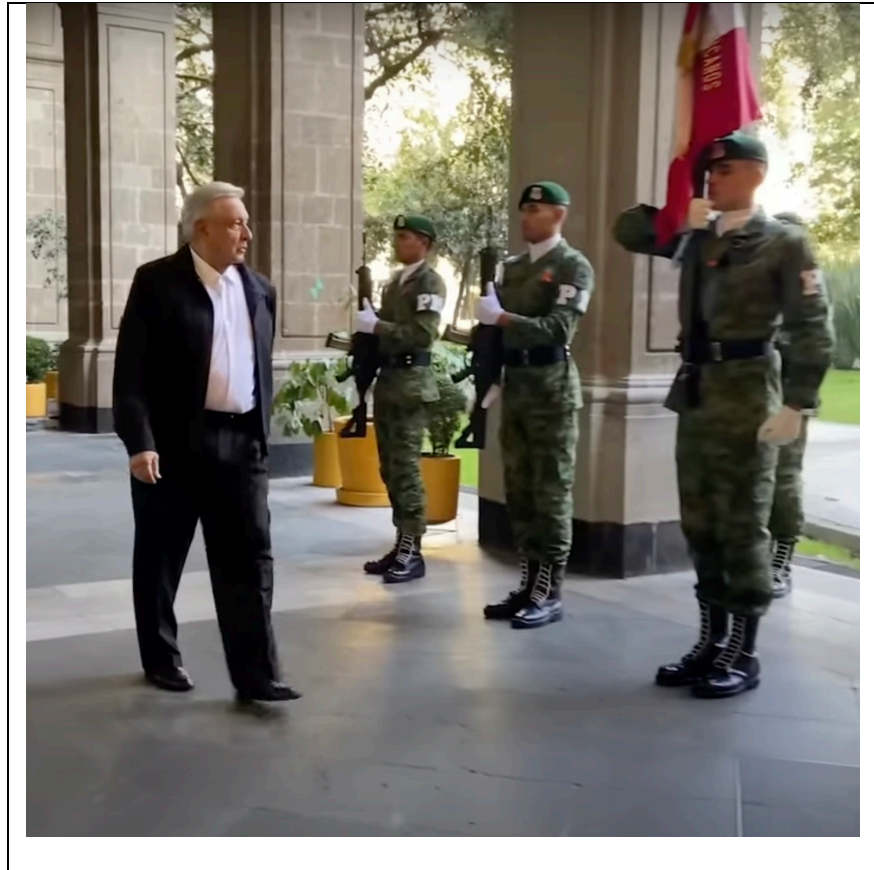






Figure 90: White Shirt (Canal, 2022)

AMLO marches alongside the people in shirtsleeves, thereby blending in with the rest of the crowd, who are also dressed informally in t-shirts and shirts. AMLO's simple attire conveys a sense of informality. His sartorial choice on this occasion is coherent with his claim to be a man of the people and supports the corollary to that claim: the ability to speak for the people. Furthermore, he chooses to stay in this informal attire for his anniversary speech, thereby maintaining and extending his nexus with the people, with whom he has just marched through the streets of Mexico City. His choice of attire for the day signals humility and approachability. Subconsciously, it will also remind many Mexicans of the days before his presidency, when AMLO would regularly march with the people in defence of a popular cause (cf. section 6.4).

This sense of authenticity is reinforced by the president's body language, which is relaxed as he marches amidst his supporters. His clothes are comfortable, and his physical movements are natural; despite the constant pushing and the shoving, he shows no signs of irritability. His facial expressions alternate

between the serious and the joyful. He seems happy to waive at the people around him, and to shake the hands of those who come within touching distance - AMLO does not have bodyguards, but he does appear to have a team, composed mostly of women, who do their best to help the president advance without being crushed by the throng.



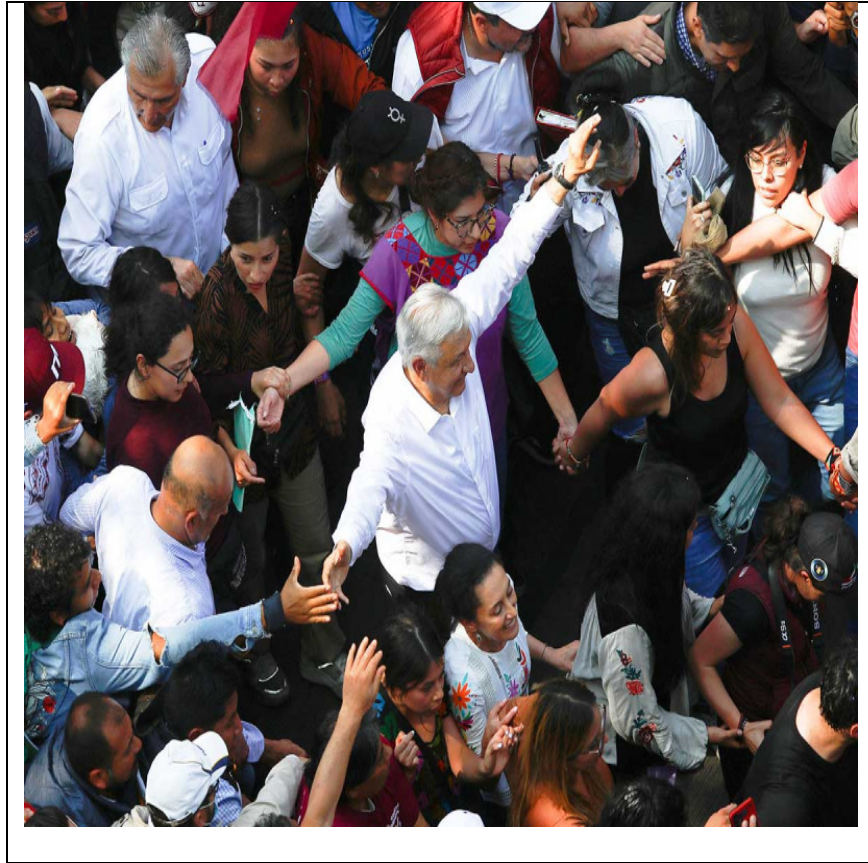


Figure 91: Reaching Out (composite)

One can see that the nearly six-hour long march is tiring - 27 November happened to be quite a warm winter's day, with temperatures around 24° Celsius - and from time to time, AMLO reaches for his handkerchief to wipe the sweat off his brow. However, he never stumbles or falls, unlike some members of the public, who have to be attended to by the emergency services.



Figure 92: Fatigue (NMás, 2022)

Mindful of the physical toll that the long march might be taking on the 69-year-old president, after about four hours, his security team send in the president's car - a compact family car, a signifier of his government's policy of *austeridad republicana* - to offer him a lift for the remainder of the journey. AMLO waves it away, and continues on foot, with the crowds jostling around him for another two hours.



Figure 93: Jetta (Canal, 2022)

AMLO's body language and facial expressions communicate a range of emotional and physical states as the march progresses: contentment, happiness, concentration, determination and stamina. At no point does he look as though he would rather be elsewhere. In the midst of the people is where AMLO feels most at home. Conversely, it is in these moments of proximity that his followers seem to be the most enthused.

Appearing on stage later that day, AMLO is seen in combative mode, seemingly energised by his six-hour march, and seeking more eye contact than usual with

his audience. Compared to some of his previous anniversary speeches, in which his delivery of pre-prepared scripts could be described as somewhat stilted - barring the occasional foray into off-script territory - this time, AMLO speaks more emphatically and makes more use of his kinetic energy, extending his hand, pointing, or leaning forward for emphasis. He exudes assuredness, which lends authenticity to his performance (Rai, 2015, p.1185). He appears more animated than usual, particularly towards the end of his speech, when speaking about the spirit of his mission, for which he has chosen a name, which he proudly reveals to his supporters: "How should one define, in theoretical terms, the model of government that we are applying? My proposal would be to call it Mexican humanism."³⁷⁷ The new signifier is noted in the press.

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Marcha y 'bautiza' AMLO su modelo

DISTINTIVO. Propone llamarle 'humanismo mexicano' como sello de la 4T

A cuatro años de asumir el cargo de presidente, ayer Andrés Manuel López Obrador le puso nombre a su modelo, y a la Cuarta Transformación ahora la definió como "humanismo mexicano".

Tras casi cinco horas de marchar del Ángel al Zócalo, llegó entero, subió al pódium y durante hora y media dio un discurso.

Explicó que este nuevo concepto deriva de la frase "toda humano me esquivo", del dramaturgo romano Publio Terencio.

En el camino lo mismo se oían críticas de acorreo, pero también aplausos y gritos de simpatizantes y de sus "vorcholas" presidenciales. Pidió "sigamos haciendo historia" y se aconsejaron de "reelección, reelección", AMLO dijo "yo, no reelección, somos moderados, salta el efectivo no reelección".

Se dijo feliz de la participación, luego de que esta marcha se hiciera en respuesta a la del 13 de noviembre a favor del D.E.

— Diana Benítez / PÁGS. 46 Y 47

AFAVOR ✓

"Fue una marcha histórica (...). Saldo blanco. No se rompió ni un vidrio. (Marcharon) cerca de 1.2 millones"

CLAUDIA SHEINBAUM
Jefa del Gobierno de la CDMX

4 AÑOS DE TRANSFORMACIÓN 2018-2022

LOS INCONDICIONALES. Cinco horas de marcha, más hora y media de discurso.

ENCONTRA ✗

"La verdadera razón de la marcha (...) es ocultar que México tiene hoy 4 millones de nuevos pobres..."

MARKO CORTÉS
Líder del PAN (en comunicación)

ECONOMÍA. EN NIVELES PREPANDEMIA

Aunque la economía perdió dinamismo en el tercer trimestre, al responder un aumento del 0.3 por ciento, ya alcanzó niveles prepandemia, por la recuperación del comercio y la manufactura. Según INEGI, el PIB aumentó 0.3 por ciento respecto al cuarto trimestre del 2019. — C. Dávila / PÁG. 4

PIDE CEEESP CAUTELA

PESEA QUE HAY CIFRAS DE MEJORA, SE DEBE A UNA BAJA CONTRACCIÓN ANUAL. PÁG. 7

La Silla Roja

¿QUÉ PASA EN MÉXICO ESTÁ EN UN PROCESO DE MILITARISMO. PÁG. 82

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Figure 94: "AMLO 'christens' his model" (tar.mx, 2022)

³⁷⁷ "¿Cómo definir, en el terreno teórico, el modelo de gobierno que estamos aplicando? Mi propuesta sería llamarle humanismo mexicano."

Although the speech is performed with more affect than usual, it is during the march itself that AMLO's body language appears at its most comfortable, and it is in close proximity to the people that the performative construction of his ordinary persona seems the most persuasive - and thus, closest to authenticity. Moreover, it is when he finds himself in the multitude that AMLO's representative claim on behalf of the people appears the most convincing. This can be seen from his interactions with those around him. The people he claims to represent are the people gathered for the occasion. They embrace his representative claim, just as they - quite literally - embrace their extraordinary leader, attributing to him their "personal devotion" and "personal confidence" in Weberian terms (Weber, 1994, pp.311-312).



Figure 95: *Abrazos* (El País, 2022)

6.4 Perseverance

The third aspect that this section will address is that of perseverance. It is a characteristic trait of AMLO's - an obstinacy that he even jokes about himself: "*Me canso ganso*"³⁷⁸ - loosely translated as "I'm darned if I'll give up" - was one of his 2018 campaign slogans, and while some might find AMLO's stubbornness less than endearing, his supporters like to repeat the phrase and display it on their placards and t-shirts as a sign of their affection for him.



Figure 96: *Me Canso Ganso* (NMás, 2022)

Over more than four decades, AMLO has painstakingly constructed an identity as a campaigner for social justice who never gives up. Popular marches are very much part of that construction. They are what first brought AMLO to national attention, beyond the boundaries of his home state of Tabasco. In 1988, AMLO supported the presidential bid of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of Lázaro Cárdenas. It was the first time that the official PRI candidate - in this instance, Carlos Salinas - had been challenged by a serious contender from the Left. As the ballots were being counted during the night of 6-7 July 1988, with

³⁷⁸ The phrase was popularised by the comedian Germán Valdez (Tin Tan) in the 1947 film "*El Niño Perdido*".

Cárdenas in the lead, the tabulation system suddenly broke down ("*la caída del sistema*"), and by the time the system was re-established, Salinas had overtaken Cárdenas in the official count. Understandably, Cárdenas and his team protested at what they, and many Mexicans, considered to be a breakdown of the system in a much broader sense.



Figure 97: Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (Apiperiódico, 2017)

In 1988, the focus was very much on Cárdenas, but three years later, AMLO made a name for himself by organising an *éxodo por la democracia* (Exodus for Democracy), walking with supporters from Villahermosa to Mexico City, a total distance of 759 km; the group arrived some forty-eight days later in the capital city. The protest march was convened to draw attention to electoral fraud in the state of Tabasco, where AMLO had unsuccessfully run for the position of state governor.



Figure 98: First Exodus (Universal, 2022)

Shortly thereafter, in 1994, AMLO organised a second *éxodo por la democracia*. The subject of the protest was not only electoral fraud but also unlawful campaign spending on the part of his PRI rival, Roberto Madrazo. It was AMLO's second unsuccessful attempt to run for state governor in Tabasco.



Figure 99: Second Exodus (Excelsior, 2023)

During the same period (1994-1996), AMLO organised a number of oil well blockades to protest against the privatisation of PEMEX. Figure 100 shows him

with an injury he sustained in the process: "They cracked my head open with a club"³⁷⁹ (López Obrador, 2017, p.18).



³⁷⁹ "Me abrieron la cabeza con un macanazo."



Figure 100: Pemex (Apiperiódico, 2017)

To this very day, AMLO's defence of Mexico's oil industry remains undiminished, even though it runs counter to the current global trend away from fossil fuels. There are several explanations for this. For one thing, his father, Andrés López Ramón, worked for the oil industry (López Obrador, 2017, p.5). Second, oil has historically been a source of great revenue for the Mexican economy, and one of AMLO's life-long campaigns has been to take back control of a natural resource that he argues was stolen from the nation and sold to foreign investors and private capital under the *Porfiriato* and *Neoporfiriato*. His discourse is reminiscent of that of the first generation of Mexican revolutionary leaders.

Both the Revolution and the Querétaro constituent congress perceived the grave dangers to national sovereignty of foreign subsidiaries and their inter-monopoly struggles, as was evident between the British and Americans in the country.³⁸⁰ (Labastida, 1990, p.142)

More significantly, AMLO mirrors the stance adopted by one of his greatest political inspirations, President Lázaro Cárdenas, who finally - after a series of grave violations of workers' rights by foreign investors - re-nationalised the oil industry in 1938, thereby earning a place in the hearts of millions of Mexicans. Cárdenas, too, had organised a "march for progress" (*Marcha del Progreso*) in 1935, and AMLO's initiatives were no doubt inspired by the example that he set.



Figure 101: March for Progress (El País, 2022)

Replicating the images of 1935-1938, which are ingrained in the national consciousness, AMLO's demonstrations in the 1990s struck a chord with the electorate and helped him establish an "emotional connection" (Alexander,

³⁸⁰ "Tanto la Revolución cuanto el constituyente de Querétaro percibieron los graves peligros para la soberanía nacional de las subsidiarias del exterior y sus luchas intermonopólicas, como fue patente entre ingleses y estadounidenses en el país."

2004) with ordinary Mexicans. Indeed, as Cynthia Emrich *et al.* explain in an analysis of image-based vs. concept-based rhetoric:³⁸¹

Followers may hear and comprehend a leader's message, but if that message does not resonate at some deeper, emotional level, then followers will be less willing to act on it. Thus (...) the image-based rhetorician is better poised to meet this challenge [of delivering a message that appeals to followers' emotions] than is the concept-based rhetorician because imagery and emotion are closely intertwined. (Emrich *et al.*, 2001, p.532)

Towards the end of the 1990s, AMLO organised protests against the bailout of Mexico's Savings Protection Banking Fund (Fobaproa), a contingency fund considered too big to fail. The bailout operation converted private debt into public debt, at huge cost to ordinary Mexicans.



Figure 102: Fobaproa (Universal, 2022)

The largest popular marches and assemblies occurred around 2005-2006. AMLO was mayor of Mexico City by this point and had decided to run for the

³⁸¹ Emrich *et al.* analyse US presidential discourse, but their theory may be transposed to a Mexican context.

presidency of the country. However, in 2004, he was impeached in connection with an expropriation case that had begun before his term as mayor; the *desafuero* was considered by AMLO's supporters as a rather unsubtle tactic to prevent him from running for presidential office. Large-scale rallies were held in support of AMLO, with a "march for legality and democracy" in 2004 ("*marcha por la legalidad y la democracia*") and a "silent march" ("*marcha del silencio*") in 2005.



Figure 103: March for Legality (Publimetro, 2022)



Figure 104: Silent March (Aristegui Noticias, 2022)

The silent march was the largest one ever seen in the country, with an estimated participation of 1,200,000 people. Allegations of foul play to prevent AMLO from running for president as a PRD candidate had gained momentum in the popular imagination. This was hardly surprising, given the decades of electoral fraud perpetrated by the PRI, but it was nevertheless disappointing for many ordinary citizens who had hoped things would be different under a PAN administration after the country's democratic transition of 2000. Mexican intellectuals, including the author and journalist Elena Poniatowska, called out what they saw as a pre-electoral *coup d'état* (Poniatowska, 2006). Members of Fox's government resigned in protest. The public pressure became so intense that three days after the march, President Fox appeared on national television, declaring that his government would not stand in the way of any candidate running for federal election. The attorney general resigned, and AMLO's path to the country's highest office was cleared.

However, AMLO lost the elections. In an uncanny repetition of the contested elections of 1988, the official count began by giving López Obrador a slight advantage (2.59%) over his PAN rival, Felipe Calderón. Minutes later, there was a general blackout ("*apagón general*") on the LCD screens displaying the results of the count. The count resumed a few minutes later, but AMLO had lost his head start. The final result, declared the following day, attributed 35.91% to Calderón and 35.29% to AMLO (a margin of 0.62%). AMLO cried fraud and demanded a re-count, "*voto por voto, casilla por casilla*" ("vote by vote, ballot box by ballot box"). Having accompanied him on his tortuous journey so far, his supporters came out once again in solidarity with their leader. Gabriela Vélez recalls:

When he lost the presidential election again in 2006 by half a percentage point, according to official figures, those of us who already supported him did so with even more fervour.³⁸² (Vélez, 2023)



Figure 105: Demanding a Recount (Nación321, 2018)

The protests continued for a considerable time and included a sit-in on the Paseo de la Reforma, the same avenue as the one used for the march on 27 November 2022. AMLO convened his supporters to a peaceful protest.

I propose that we stay here, in permanent assembly (...) that we remain here, day and night, until the votes are counted and we have an elected president, in compliance with the minimum standards of legality that we Mexicans deserve.³⁸³ (López Obrador, 30.07.2021)

AMLO declared himself the legitimate President of Mexico, donned a presidential sash and appointed a cabinet-in-waiting (six women, six men).

³⁸² "Cuando en 2006 perdió nuevamente las elecciones presidenciales por medio punto porcentual, según datos oficiales, quienes ya lo apoyábamos lo hicimos con más fervor."

³⁸³ "Les propongo que nos quedemos aquí, en asamblea permanente (...) que permanezcamos aquí, día y noche, hasta que se cuenten los votos y tengamos un presidente electo con la legalidad mínima que nos merecemos los mexicanos."



Figure 106: Legitimate President (Heraldo, 2018)

It was all to no avail, and eventually, the peaceful protest was disbanded - but the seed of his Movement of National Regeneration (Morena) had been planted, his inner circle constituted, and his figure as a martyr of an undemocratic and corrupt regime firmly established in the minds of his supporters. His perseverance would lead him to the Palacio Nacional twelve years later.

In the intervening period, AMLO continued marching: against Peña Nieto's energy reforms in 2013 and against his education reforms in 2016.



Figure 107: Energy Reform (Universal, 2022)



Figure 108: Education Reform (Publimetro, 2022)

These marches were not attended by the same numbers as the huge demonstrations organised in conjunction with his impeachment and subsequent electoral loss (2005/2006), but they allowed AMLO to regularly flex his marching muscles and retain the attention of his supporters. In fact, on 27 November 2022, when a journalist asks why the president had taken to the streets once more, AMLO gleefully responds: "So as not to lose the habit!" ("*Para no perder la costumbre!*").



Figure 109: Habit (Sin Embargo, 2022)

Popular marches form part of AMLO's habitus (the "unconscious embodied habits and skills that result from one's cultural capital" - Aiolfi, 2022b, p.86).

Marching is second nature to AMLO and he is clearly quite comfortable in these situations where he finds himself surrounded by his supporters, in scenes not dissimilar to religious pilgrimages, in which the collective journey matters just as much as the (allegorical) destination.³⁸⁴ The author José Gil Olmos makes an interesting observation in this regard, arguing that the reason why AMLO has developed such empathy with the people is because those in power kept him at arm's length for such a long time; AMLO had no choice but to immerse himself in the people.

Paradoxically, what was initially and throughout his career a drawback - not having access to the media, especially television - paid off in the end, because in every community, village, town, city and square he spoke and listened directly to the people. This generated an empathy for him like no other politician in modern Mexican history.³⁸⁵ (Gil Olmos, 2023, p.67)

Through perseverance, AMLO's charismatic appeal just kept growing in the eyes of his supporters, who recognised in him someone like them - not a member of the privileged elite, but an ordinary man of the people - but also someone who possessed extraordinary leadership qualities, which he promised to deploy in a way that would benefit all of the people, in particular *los de abajo*.

6.5 Bravery

Lastly, to anyone who follows Mexican politics, what is quite extraordinary about the march organised in conjunction with the 2022 government anniversary is

³⁸⁴ AMLO's followers seem just as happy to join him "by literally following in his footsteps" as Fidel Castro's supporters did in Cuba, where they would follow their leader on mountain ascents that "functioned much like classic rites of Catholic pilgrimage" (Guerra, 2009, p.81).

³⁸⁵ "Paradójicamente, lo que en un principio y a lo largo de todo su andar fue un inconveniente - no tener acceso a los medios de comunicación, sobre todo a la televisión - al final le redituó, porque en cada comunidad, pueblo, ciudad y plaza habló y escuchó directamente a la gente. Eso le generó una empatía como a ningún otro político en la historia moderna de México."

the fact that for five and a half hours, AMLO marches with his supporters, without any bodyguards or special protection (AMLO disbanded the presidential guard when he took office).



Figure 110: Multitude (Lista, 2022)

This is quite remarkable, bearing in mind Mexico's general levels of violence and history of magnicides. Looking back only as far as the Mexican Revolution, it is worth remembering that the first president of the post-Porfirian era, Francisco I. Madero, was assassinated in a military coup in 1913, during the *Decena Trágica*. Venustiano Carranza, the architect of the 1917 Mexican Constitution, was assassinated in 1920, having fled to Veracruz to set up an alternative government to the one supported by some of his political rivals, including Álvaro Obregón. Obregón was elected president in 1928, only to be assassinated by an ardent Roman Catholic the very same year, during the Cristero War. Emiliano Zapata, the "Caudillo of the South" (*Caudillo del Sur*), in dispute with Carranza, had been ambushed and killed by Carrancista forces in Morelos in 1919, and Francisco (Pancho) Villa, the "Centaur of the North" (*Centauro del Norte*), had been assassinated while driving his car in Chihuahua in 1923. Although not proven, Villa's assassination is said to have been ordered by his political enemies, including Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles. To paraphrase Jacques Mallet du Pan: The Mexican Revolution really did devour its children.

With the stability of the Lázaro Cárdenas administration (1934-1940), the violent internecine post-revolutionary conflicts abated, but Mexico remains a dangerous country for politicians. Political violence continues - the salient difference being that in the twenty-first century, the violence is primarily connected to organised crime, which has infiltrated politics at practically every level. This is perhaps best illustrated by the Ayotzinapa tragedy, which Alejandro Encinas, head of the Commission for Truth and Access to Justice in the Ayotzinapa case (CoVAJ), has described as a "state crime"³⁸⁶ (Encinas, 2022). According to the non-governmental organisation Data Cívica, between 2018 and August 2024, there were 2,089 attacks, threats, assassinations and assassination attempts against political and government actors and political institutions in Mexico (Data Cívica, 2024). In the introduction to their most recently published data, they write: "In Mexico, electoral violence has become a tool of organised crime to influence public life in states and municipalities"³⁸⁷ (Data Cívica, 2024). While most victims are municipal employees and party militants, the casualties invariably include political officeholders and political candidates.

Watching the footage of AMLO engulfed by the crowd on 27 November 2022, one is reminded of the tragic fate of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the 1994 PRI presidential candidate who also immersed himself in the crowd on the campaign trail, but who did not survive the experience. In those days (the days of the *dictadura perfecta*), the chosen candidate of the outgoing president (in this case: Carlos Salinas) was practically guaranteed to become the next incumbent. Elections were generally rigged, and the PRI candidate always won - hence, seventy-one years of PRI rule. Colosio was young, popular, and of the Left. He seemed to want genuine change for the country, rather than a continuation of politics as usual. The 1988 elections had made it clear that the system was broken, and in 1989, for the first time since the 1930s, the PRI lost a state governorship to the PAN (in Baja California). Furthermore, the entry into force of NAFTA on 1 January 1994 had triggered the Zapatista EZLN uprising in

³⁸⁶ "Se trató de un crimen de Estado."

³⁸⁷ "En México, la violencia electoral se ha convertido en una herramienta del crimen organizado para influenciar la vida pública de estados y municipios."

Chiapas, with indigenous communities defying a central government that had consistently ignored their demands and their warnings about the negative impact of globalisation on their livelihoods. The country was in turmoil. Out of conviction, and possibly out of youthful idealism, Colosio called for genuine democratic change, including free and fair elections. At times, his discourse seemed to defy the neoliberal line taken by the party hierarchy - as seen here, in his address to mark the sixty-fifth anniversary of the PRI, delivered at the Monument to the Revolution (Mexico City) on 6 March 1994.

I see a Mexico of indigenous communities that can no longer wait for the demands of justice, dignity and progress. (...) I see a Mexico that hungers and thirsts for justice.³⁸⁸ (*Excelsior*, 2024)



Figure 111: Colosio (*Excelsior*, 2024)

This thinly veiled criticism riled the upper echelons of the PRI, including the president, who had hand-picked him as his successor. Whilst popular with the electorate, Colosio began to lose the support of his party hierarchy. His fellow contender, Manuel Camacho, refused to endorse his nomination. Barely a fortnight later, on 23 March 1994, Colosio travelled to Tijuana to rally support for

³⁸⁸ "Yo veo un México de comunidades indígenas, que no pueden esperar más a las exigencias de justicia, de dignidad y de progreso. (...) Yo veo un México con hambre y sed de justicia."

his candidacy in a working-class district called Lomas Taurinas. In his speech, he reiterated his call for free and fair elections, to great applause from the crowd: "We are not afraid of political competition. What we reject is political incompetence"³⁸⁹ (*Expediente Noticias*, 2012). After his speech, he descended from the makeshift podium and began walking through the crowd towards his campaign van. With hindsight, the organisation of the event looked chaotic and ill-prepared. Colosio could hardly move for the crowds - like AMLO, he was a popular figure, so there was a lot of jostling around him.



Figure 112: Lomas Taurinas (Sol, 2022)

Although accompanied by a few security guards, at one fateful point someone approached Colosio out of nowhere and shot him in the head at close range (with a second gunshot to the stomach). Colosio collapsed to the ground. His security guards struggled to evacuate him, owing to the poor organisation of the event and the general panic. Colosio was pronounced dead at Tijuana hospital, less than two hours later.

³⁸⁹ "Nosotros no le tememos a la competencia política. Lo que sí rechazamos es la incompetencia política."



Figure 113: *Magnicidio* (Imagen, 2022)

The circumstances under which this assassination (*magnicidio*) occurred were not dissimilar to the ones prevailing on AMLO's march of 27 November 2022: the slight air of chaos, the jostling, the absence of any proper security precautions. AMLO emerged completely unscathed from the long march, but tragedy could have struck at any point. The footage shows constant commotion around the president, and some members of the public watching the procession from balconies; they could just as easily have been snipers.



Figure 114: *Watching* (NMás, 2022)

The fact that there is aerial footage of the march indicates that the event was being observed from the skies, by helicopters or drones. However, this in itself could not have prevented an attack such as the one that Colosio fell victim to in

1994. Whatever else one might think of the president, it shows a certain amount of courage on AMLO's part. He chose to immerse himself in the crowds when there was no obligation for him to do so. By so doing, he performed an act that symbolically contributed to his charismatic authority, in Weberian terms:

There is the authority of the extraordinary and personal gift of grace (charisma), the absolutely personal devotion and personal confidence in revelation, *heroism*, or other qualities of individual leadership. (Weber, 1994, pp.311-312 - emphasis my own)

The concept of heroism is probably viewed with greater scepticism today than it would have been in Weber's times, but in more contemporary language one could certainly speak of AMLO's bravery for the risk he takes on 27 November 2022. It contributes to his overall performative construction of a courageous man. Throughout his political career, he has never hesitated in challenging the authorities when he considered them (rightly or wrongly) to be responsible of electoral fraud; he stood firm during the whole *desafuero* episode, stoically resisting every attempt to tarnish his political reputation; he has been known to march for weeks on end to defend what he considers to be a just cause. All these acts of bravery, large or small, contribute to the construction of his extraordinary persona. This should not be read as meaning that AMLO is always courageous; for instance, it is worth noting that on 27 November 2022, he does not stop to acknowledge the protestors at the *Glorieta de las Mujeres que Luchan*³⁹⁰ who raise awareness about violence against women, nor does he speak to the families of the disappeared stood by the *Glorieta de las y los Desaparecidos*.³⁹¹

³⁹⁰ Roundabout of the Women who Fight.

³⁹¹ Roundabout of the Disappeared.



Figure 115: *Desaparecidas* (NMás, 2022)

Admittedly, it would have been difficult for the president to stop at any point of the route: he was surrounded by the multitude and - one might argue - carried along by it. The supporters did not stop at these monuments either, much to the disappointment of the victims: "It shows an indifferent government; but the real problem is that neither the government, nor those marching turn around to look at us"³⁹² (*Expansión Política*, 2022). However, this reluctance to engage in any meaningful way with the dark underbelly of Mexican society - and in particular, with the scourge of gender-based violence - may be illustrative of AMLO's less courageous side, just as it may point towards his inability (or unwillingness) to tackle issues that do not sit easily with the social conservatism that informs his construction of the moral community (cf. section 3.4), which praises women for being honest and hard-working, but fails to take into account their more contemporary concerns, such as the right to decide over their own bodies or to live a life free of sexual violence.

³⁹² "Muestra un gobierno indiferente, pero lo grave es que no solo él, los que aquí vienen marchando tampoco voltean a vernos."



Figure 116: Femicide (SDPNoticias, 2024)³⁹³

AMLO's exhortations to behave with propriety - "think of your dear mothers"³⁹⁴ - and to lead by moral example have proven ineffectual when it comes to feminicides or narco-violence. Nonetheless, because the overall balance between bravery and weakness seems to be tipped towards the former in AMLO's performance - at least as far as his followers can gauge - he is forgiven for his occasional wavering. As Rudolf Metz and Bendegúz Plesz explain in their analysis of charisma attribution in populism:³⁹⁵

Followers of leaders who are seen as charismatic are more likely to forgive them for their failures. Emotional bonds can resolve the cognitive contradiction between the politician's charismatic appeal and the outcomes of their actions. (Metz and Plesz, 2023, p.9)

As a consequence of the affective bond forged between AMLO and his followers, the president's supporters seem willing to make allowances for their

³⁹³ Diana Laura Valdez Plasencia's placard reads: "Tired of having to let people know I've arrived alive." She disappeared and was found dead in Jalisco in January 2024.

³⁹⁴ "Piensen en sus mamacitas."

³⁹⁵ Metz and Plesz analyse this from a Hungarian perspective, but their theory may be applied to a Mexican context.

leader's shortcomings, such as the lack of progress in the fight against feminicides and continuing high levels of drug-related violence. They are more likely to attribute these failings to external circumstances, rather than personal failure on the part of their leader (psychologists call this the attribution of an external locus of control).

This section will conclude with one final observation: AMLO's decision to dive into the multitude on 27 November 2022 may be interpreted as a manifestation of his faith in the people. It is in keeping with his oft-repeated claim that the people are his guardian angel: "I've always had a guardian angel; it's called the people"³⁹⁶ (AMLO, 01.12.2019). What is more, the examples cited in this chapter indicate that AMLO's faith in the people is reciprocated by his followers, who see in him "someone who is inwardly 'called' to the task of leading men" (Weber, 1994, pp.312), and whose call they are prepared to heed, any time. Although he may not be able to resolve all their problems overnight - AMLO himself would argue that some of them are a complicated legacy from the past, and consequently require a sustained collective effort of dedication and perseverance - his followers still believe that his intentions are good, and that (in the words of Zúquete) he "would *never* do anything to harm the community" (Zúquete, 2017, p.457). In many ways, 27 November 2022 could be interpreted as a declaration of love by AMLO's followers towards their leader, and by AMLO for the people who have supported him and defended him over so many years, remaining steadfast and true. It was, in all probability, AMLO's last big popular march, and he seized the moment to thank the people. In a video clip produced by AMLO's team after the event, entitled "*¡Gracias!*" ("Thank you!"), the protagonists are in fact the people; the camera only zooms in on AMLO at the very end. The clip has no soundtrack, making the viewer focus solely on the movements and facial expression of the people as they celebrate their *#MarchaDelPueblo*. It may be viewed as AMLO's own tribute to the people on this important day.³⁹⁷

³⁹⁶ "Siempre he tenido un ángel de la guarda que se llama pueblo."

³⁹⁷ Appendix H provides a link to the video clip, for reference.



Figure 117: ¡Gracias! (Canal, 2024)

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that AMLO's centrality to the collective mission, the discursive and performative construction of his authenticity as a member of the moral community, together with the articulations that he forges between his own public persona and the virtues of perseverance and bravery which mark him out as an extraordinary leader, collectively contribute to the perception of him as a leader who is "truthful and trustworthy" (Wood, 2015, p.668), and to whom supporters will remain loyal, even in the face of adversity (cf. section 6.2). It is especially in moments such as these, when the supporters feel that the moral community and/or its leader are under attack (exemplified here by the opposition demonstration that had taken place a fortnight earlier) that they respond with visible attributions of charisma and appear to take both pride and pleasure in doing so. Their belief in the leader and their desire to demonstrate this faith appear to be strengthened in moments of crisis. Indeed, as Nicholas Wolterstorff would argue, "the person of firm faith, though sometimes assailed by doubt, will be very reluctant to abandon his beliefs and will persevere in them" (Wolterstorff, cited in Wood, 2015, p.668).

Both spiritual faith and secular faith - according to which "man is redeemable in history" (Oakeshott, 1996, p.23) - lie at the heart of AMLO's charismatic leadership in the eyes of his followers. AMLO's followers do not expect perfection, but they do want to see "an inner self-confidence, a strength of conviction and a compelling authenticity" (Cronin, 2008, p.465). As chapter seven will explore, they yearn for a leader who understands them (someone ordinary), who stands by their word (who is truthful), who acts in the collective interest rather than their own (who is trustworthy) and who has a vision for the future that inspires them (someone extraordinary).

Over time, using the discursive and performative means discussed in this and previous chapters, AMLO has succeeded in constructing precisely this persona: a political leader who is both "ordinary" and "extraordinary" (Moffitt, 2016, p.69), both "truthful" and "trustworthy" (Wood, 2015, p.668), who lives "for" and not "from" politics (Weber, 1994, p.318). Most importantly, the persona that he has constructed is credible in the eyes of his followers. AMLO has been in the public eye for nearly five decades, and the people have had plenty of time to gauge his truthfulness and trustworthiness.³⁹⁸ Not everyone is convinced; over the course of my research, I have met both AMLOvers and AMLOothers. Two Mexican interlocutors I spoke to during my investigation illustrate these contrasting perceptions perfectly: Whereas one argued that under AMLO, "ordinary people are happy"³⁹⁹ (Luna, 2023) because they have real opportunities to work and study in Mexico (which were denied them in the past), the other expressed their disappointment: "On paper, the 4T project looks great. However, I have come to realise that his discourse does not correspond to reality"⁴⁰⁰ (Garza Garza, 2023).

It brings one back to the question of *fiducia* (personal trust). As Zepeda Patterson observes, those who recognise AMLO's construction of the people

³⁹⁸ AMLO first engaged in politics in 1976, supporting the poet Carlos Pellicer in his (successful) bid to become Senator of Tabasco. His presidential term will end in 2024.

³⁹⁹ "La gente del pueblo está feliz."

⁴⁰⁰ "Sobre el papel, el proyecto 4T es padre. Pero me dí cuenta de que su discurso no era real."

(the downtrodden, the forgotten, the marginalised, the poor - in sum: *los de abajo*) may well find AMLO's narrative convincing, because it speaks to their lived experience.

Mexico being such an unequal country, those who are at the bottom of the pyramid, that is to say, the majorities - these majorities understand, yes, this man is trying to achieve something, through concrete actions.⁴⁰¹
(*El Financiero Bloomberg*, 2022)

Those who have experienced first-hand the material benefits and opportunities brought by AMLO's 4T, or those who may not be direct beneficiaries but who agree that this is the morally right thing to do, or those who feel included in AMLO's construct of a moral community and who refuse to put up with the corruption and impunity of the political class any longer, are categories of the population who have good reason to believe AMLO's discourse. In their eyes, AMLO is perceived as a charismatic leader, offering "a promise of emancipation after a journey of sacrifice" (Panizza, 2005, p.23).

The government anniversary of 2022 was chosen as a case study for this chapter because it epitomised AMLO's charismatic leadership, for all the reasons cited above (it showcased the moral community, the collective mission and the charismatic leader). For just one day, AMLO was physically reunited with the people, marching in their midst, before arriving at the Zócalo - the seat of Mexican secular and spiritual authority - stepping up to the podium and delivering a speech in which he not only outlined the achievements of the 4T (as per tradition), but also declared his love for the people of Mexico. His speech began with one of his favourite José Martí quotes: "*Amor con amor se paga*" ("love is repaid with love"). Before concluding, he returned to the importance of love in politics: "The most important thing is to have love for the people, a deep love for the people; nothing can be achieved without love for the

⁴⁰¹ "Al ser México un país tan desigual, los que están abajo, es una pirámide muy muy amplia, es decir, son las mayorías - estas mayorías entienden, sí, este señor lo está intentando, a través de hechos concretos."

people."⁴⁰² Love was clearly a central feature of the event, and it was, by all accounts, mutual.



Figure 118: Expressions of Love (Jornada, 2022)

The next chapter will turn its full attention to the people at the heart of AMLO's discourse and will discuss the trust and confidence that the president's discourse inspires amongst his followers. It will also consider the role that "faith, courage, sacrifice and hope" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.264) play in the affective bond that connects the followers to their leader.

⁴⁰² "Lo principal es tenerle amor al pueblo, querer al pueblo, profundo amor al pueblo, nada se logra sin amor al pueblo."

Chapter 7

The Followers

7.1 Introduction

The present thesis addresses charisma as a relational phenomenon. In order to gain a better understanding of the inner workings of charismatic populist leadership, the preceding chapters have carefully analysed AMLO's discourse and performance in different settings, unpacking the ways in which these are used to elicit "awe" and "enthusiasm" (Spencer, 1973, p.347) amongst his followers, and the manner in which the latter have responded to this invitation (the decision whether or not to attribute charismatic authority ultimately rests with them). This chapter will provide additional insights into the phenomenon of charismatic populist leadership by using a different set of primary data as its point of departure, namely the followers' own discourse regarding the president. Focussing specifically on the discourse of the followers, the chapter will explore the question of faith in the attribution of charisma. It will highlight the discursive elements that point towards the supporters' confidence in the leader's ability not only to provide for them in material terms, but also to deliver on their "transcendent hopes for a more fulfilling existence" (Zúquete, 2017, p.461).

The chapter will be structured around an anonymous survey I conducted among AMLO supporters, designed to help me explore the reasons why AMLOvers choose to support their president and to correlate the results of this investigation with the overall findings of the thesis. The chapter will begin with an explanation of the survey design and the analytic process followed in order to give meaning to the data collected (section 7.1). It will then set out the codes and categories used to classify the data obtained from respondents (section 7.2), before discussing the themes that emerged from this analytic process (section 7.3), engaging inductively with the material and extracting from it a number of salient themes, which are subsequently used to discuss the research

questions addressed by this thesis. The chapter will end with some concluding remarks (section 7.4), before moving on to the overall conclusions of the thesis.

In terms of analysing the followers' attribution of charisma to the leader, the research has so far relied on the recordings and transcriptions of AMLO's public appearances before small, medium-sized and large-scale gatherings (all of which are in the public domain). I was also fortunate enough to travel to Mexico three times during my research (in February 2023, May 2024 and September 2024, respectively). This provided me with opportunities to meet both supporters and critics of the president and it gave me some valuable insights into the perception that Mexican citizens have of their president. Furthermore, thanks to my network of academic and professional contacts in Mexico, I was able to conduct an anonymous online survey with AMLO supporters in the final year of my research, providing me with some valuable and original input for my thesis. The present chapter discusses the findings of this exercise, which largely corroborate the conclusions reached in previous chapters.

7.2 Survey Design

The survey was conducted using the JiscTM online survey tool, available to all postgraduate researchers at the University of Leeds. Once the survey question had been formulated (the survey contained just one question), the proposal to conduct an anonymous online survey was sent to the University of Leeds' research ethics board for approval. Approval was granted on 1 December 2023,⁴⁰³ and the survey was launched the same day. The survey remained open until 31 December 2023. The objective of the exercise was to elicit spontaneous responses from AMLO's supporters, who were asked to name their main reasons for supporting the president, in their own words.

⁴⁰³ The ethics board decision may be found in Appendix I.

To ensure complete anonymity and confidentiality, I asked my academic and professional contacts in Mexico to disseminate the survey for me. All replies were submitted anonymously through Jisc™. The survey was accompanied by an explanatory note explaining the University's privacy policy and consent procedure. The respondents were asked to answer the survey online, using a URL link or a QR code (both generated by Jisc™). I received fifty-four replies in total. The respondents had complete freedom in the drafting of their responses: some replies consisted of just a few words, the majority were formulated as full sentences, and some were lengthier contributions (short paragraphs).

The survey format contained three pages: the first one briefly explained the nature of the research and the purpose of the survey; the second one contained the single survey question, as well as a field into which respondents could type their replies; the third page thanked the respondents for their time. The table below reproduces the exact wording used.

Table 10: Survey questions⁴⁰⁴

SPANISH (ORIGINAL)	ENGLISH (TRANSLATION)
<p>PÁGINA 1</p> <p><i>Soy investigadora en la Universidad de Leeds (Inglaterra).</i></p> <p><i>Mi investigación se centra en la relación entre el Presidente López Obrador y sus seguidores.</i></p> <p><i>Para avanzar en mi investigación, le agradecería que respondiera a una breve pregunta, escribiendo su respuesta en una casilla de texto libre.</i></p> <p><i>Sólo le llevará un minuto.</i></p> <p><i>La encuesta es totalmente anónima. Por favor, no revele ninguna información que pueda identificarle (por razones de confidencialidad, tendría que hacer caso omiso de su respuesta).</i></p> <p><i>Si le parece bien continuar, haga clic en "siguiente".</i></p>	<p>PAGE 1</p> <p>I am a researcher at the University of Leeds (England).</p> <p>My research focuses on the relationship between President López Obrador and his supporters.</p> <p>To further my research, I would be grateful if you could answer a short question.</p> <p>I will be asking you to reply to just one question, and to type your reply into a free-text box. It will only take a minute.</p> <p>The survey is completely anonymous. Please do not disclose any information that might identify you (for reasons of confidentiality, I would have to disregard your response).</p> <p>If you are happy to continue, please click on "next".</p>
<p>PÁGINA 2</p> <p><i>¿Cuál es su razón principal para apoyar a Andrés Manuel López Obrador?</i></p>	<p>PAGE 2</p> <p>What is your main reason for supporting Andrés Manuel López Obrador?</p>
<p>PÁGINA 3</p> <p><i>¡Muchas gracias por su colaboración!</i></p>	<p>PAGE 3</p> <p>Thank you very much for your cooperation.</p>

In accordance with the University of Leeds' ethics approval procedure, it was agreed that the raw data (i.e. the verbatim replies to the questionnaire) would be deleted six months after the closure of the online survey, on 30 June 2024, in order to guarantee complete anonymity for the respondents and to safeguard the confidentiality of their replies. I therefore proceeded with the analysis of the

⁴⁰⁴ Creator: PGR.

raw data between January and June 2024, after which the raw data was deleted.

I followed Lester *et al.*'s recommendations (cf. section 1.8) to conduct my thematic analysis (Lester *et al.*, 2020, pp.98-102). The process entailed collating and transcribing the raw data, coding it, creating categories that mapped the relationships between the different codes, and finally devising themes that allowed me to produce "broad descriptive statements" that reflected my "overall understanding of the data" emerging from the survey (Lester *et al.*, 2020, p.98). The methodology recommended by Lester *et al.* was helpful in unpacking, organising, analysing and re-assembling data sets with a view to addressing the questions raised by this thesis. To complete the different coding steps, I used NVivo™, a qualitative data analysis computer software package available to all postgraduate researchers at the University of Leeds. The coding process was conducted in four stages:

- 1) identifying top-level codes to organise the bulk of the data set;
- 2) creating granular codes to finesse the original data distribution;
- 3) aggregating analytically linked granular codes in categories;
- 4) identifying overarching themes emerging from these categories.

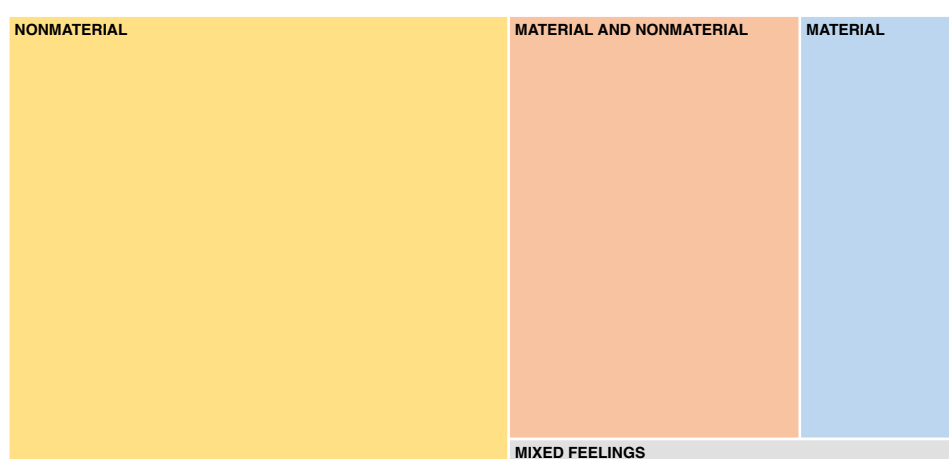
7.3 Codes and Categories

Having familiarised myself with the respondents' replies, I initially created two top-level codes to organise the bulk of the data emerging from the survey: "material" and "nonmaterial" motivations for supporting AMLO. Not only did this distinction arise quite naturally from the nature of the replies - the respondents cited both material and nonmaterial reasons for supporting AMLO - it also corresponded to Zúquete's analysis of the "articulation of populist appeals", which according to him includes both "material" demands and "non-material" expectations on the part of "populist constituencies" (Zúquete, 2017, p.461). Material demands include tangible material gains, such as jobs or an improved financial situation, whereas nonmaterial motivations revolve around what

Zúquete calls "transcendent hopes for a more fulfilling existence" (Zúquete, 2017, p.461) - in other words, motivations not connected to tangible material gains. However, as I began the process of allocating the respondents' replies to these two top-level codes, I noticed an overlap, in that some responses could be categorised as hybrid motivations, both material and nonmaterial in nature. For instance, the fight against corruption, a frequently recurring theme, could be said to bring material gains to the country, through the recuperation of lost revenue, but it could equally be considered a moral imperative, as in the biblical commandment: "thou shalt not steal". I therefore created a third top-level code, "material and nonmaterial", to account for these hybrid motivations. Finally, I found that two responses could not be assigned to any of these three top-level codes; although the respondents concerned cited both material and nonmaterial factors, they also appeared to question their original motivations for supporting the president (in that these aspirations had not been fulfilled, in their view). A fourth top-level code was thus created for "mixed feelings".

Table 11 indicates the relative weight of responses attributed to each of these four top-level codes (using NVivo™).

Table 11: Top-Level Codes⁴⁰⁵



⁴⁰⁵ Source: NVivo™ / Creator: PGR.

Having broadly divided the data into four top-level codes, I proceeded to finesse the analysis by creating additional, more granular codes.

Data originally allocated to "nonmaterial" motivations could be further subdivided into more precise reasons for supporting the president (key words in bold):

- his **personal qualities**;
- his **left politics**;
- his **vision**;
- his **credibility**;
- his embodiment of political **change**.

The "material" top-level code was broken down into the following more precise reasons (key words in bold):

- AMLO's **reforms**;
- his restructuring of the **economy**;
- **jobs** created during his presidency;
- AMLO's **welfare** programmes;
- his **flagship projects**.

The hybrid "material and nonmaterial" top-level code was subdivided into five individual codes (key words in bold):

- AMLO's **social justice** agenda (redistributing wealth, but also placing *los de abajo* at the heart of his policies);

- his fight against **corruption** (as an immoral act, but also as a means of redistributing resources from the corrupt elite to the moral community);
- his **principles** (which included moral precepts, but also legal standards, such as the principle of constitutionality);
- his defence of **Mexico** (its cultural values, but also its strategic assets);
- his **communication** (AMLO's general rhetorical skills, but also his assiduous use of communication platforms to publicise the material achievements of the 4T).

Finally, the "mixed feelings" top-level code was divided into two more specific codes (key words in bold):

- **pessimism** (disenchantment because of unfulfilled promises);
- **optimism** (remaining positive, despite slow progress of reforms).

All in all, I created seventeen additional codes. Table 12 provides an overview of the number of references made to each top-level code and each granular code within it (calculated using NVivo™).

Table 12: References to top-level and granular codes⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁶ Source: NVivo™ / Creator: PGR.

Codes

Name	References
MATERIAL	10
Economy	2
Flagship projects	2
Jobs	1
Reforms	4
Welfare	1
MATERIAL & NONMATERIAL	22
Communication	2
Corruption	5
Mexico	5
Principles	1
Social justice	9
MIXED FEELINGS	2
Optimism	1
Pessimism	1
NONMATERIAL	35
Change	7
Credibility	2
Left politics	5
Personal qualities	16
Vision	5

Jun 29, 2024

1

Once I had ascertained that these granular codes encompassed all the data before me, following Lester *et al.*'s methodology, I began aggregating the codes into categories, based on their articulations. The categories are emphasised in bold font:

- "Social justice" was aggregated with "left politics", because the demand for social justice is a traditional left-wing objective. Together, they reflect AMLO's desire to build a more fair and equal society.

Category: **Equality**.

- "Jobs" and "welfare" were aggregated with "economy", because AMLO's job creation schemes, his welfare programmes and his restructuring of the economy all form part of his efforts to reshape the Mexican economy in a way that will lift the most dispossessed out of poverty. Category: **Social mobility**.

- "Flagship projects" were aggregated with "Mexico", because the former are designed to enhance the international standing of the latter. Category: **Patriotism**.

- "Principles" were aggregated with "personal qualities", because AMLO's positions of principle form part of his personal qualities. Category: **Conduct**.

- "Optimism" and "pessimism" were aggregated with "credibility", because the respondents' replies provided an indication of the extent to which they trusted the president. Category: **Trust**.

- "Communication" was aggregated with "vision", because AMLO's daily communication exercises serve to remind the people of his vision for Mexico. Category: **Leadership**.

- "Reforms" and "corruption" were aggregated with "change", because AMLO's policy reforms and his fight against corruption are a tangible expression of the transformative agenda he is pursuing for Mexico. Category: **Transformation**.

Table 13 shows the re-grouping of codes into categories (listed in the top row).

Table 13: Categories⁴⁰⁷

EQUALITY	SOCIAL MOBILITY	PATRIOTISM	CONDUCT	TRUST	LEADERSHIP	TRANSFORMATION
	Welfare Economy Jobs	Flagship projects				Reforms
Left politics			Personal qualities	Credibility	Vision	Change
Social justice		Mexico	Principles		Communication	Corruption
				Optimism Pessimism		

In the final step of the process, in accordance with Lester *et al.*'s methodology, I considered the similarities and differences between the categories. I regrouped categories that I considered to be conceptually linked and assigned them to themes. The next subsection sets out the three overarching themes that emerged from this inductive engagement with the material and discusses the ways in which the respondents' replies, contained in each of these themes, both confirmed and complemented the findings reached in previous chapters.

7.4 Themes

Having entertained a number of possible themes emerging from the seven categories and seventeen codes set out in section 7.3, I finally selected what I considered to be the most suitable thematic approach to interpret the material before me, connecting all the data emerging from the survey to the three

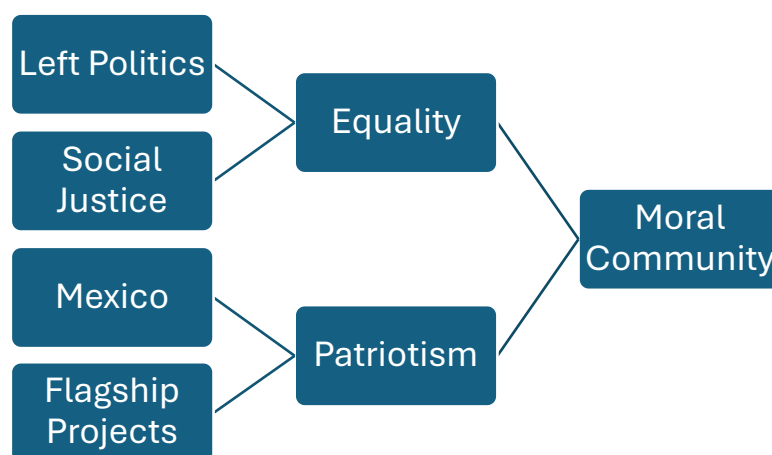
⁴⁰⁷ Creator: PGR. NB: The granular codes are colour-coded according to the top-level codes discussed above (material, nonmaterial, hybrid and mixed).

themes of the overarching conceptual framework of the thesis: the moral community, the collective mission and the charismatic leader. Indeed, after careful consideration of all the responses, I found that each reply could find its natural place within this tripartite structure. In the case of complex replies, some could be subdivided, with different motivations cited by the same respondent attributed to different themes. This approach had the advantage of providing a logical sequence to my analysis of the survey findings, with a clear presentation of the followers' own perception of the salient features of AMLO's missionary politics, as discussed in chapters three, four and five.

The three themes will be developed in subsections 7.4.1-7.4.3. Please note that for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality, only key words or short extracts from the replies given by the respondents are reproduced in the body of this thesis. The purpose of this chapter is to provide aggregate anonymised data to help address the salient points made by the research.

7.4.1 Respondents' Comments on the Moral Community

Table 14: Allocation of replies to the moral community⁴⁰⁸



⁴⁰⁸ Creator: PGR.

The first overarching theme that emerged from my engagement with the survey data reflected the respondents' associations with what this thesis has called the moral community. The theme encompasses the perceived characteristics attributed to this discursively constructed community, of which both the people and the president form part: their aspiration to be a nation of equals (category: equality), made possible by a concerted effort to leave no-one behind (codes: left politics / social justice), and their sense of national pride (category: patriotism), enhanced by the president's exaltation of all things Mexican and his determination to complete a number of iconic infrastructure projects during his mandate (codes: Mexico / flagship projects).

Within the set of responses attributed to this theme, one finds numerous references to the significance of left politics in Mexico. The thesis engages with left populism as a "principled commitment to a politics of the people" (Olson, 2017, p.663), and in chapter one, I flag AMLO's left politics as a salient feature of his identification with the people. The respondents' replies brought home how important left politics was for AMLO's followers, in terms of their loyalty to the leader. The thesis has shown that the followers' allegiance to AMLO owes much to his personal charisma, but the survey results indicate that the supporters' allegiance is also rooted in the history of the Mexican Left and the ways in which AMLO embodies this history. My understanding of AMLO's charisma was thus broadened by the survey findings: it is partly a matter of personal charisma - constructed, as I have argued, from the simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary persona that he projects through his discourse and performance - but it arguably also owes something to what Weber would call *Amtscharisma*, i.e. the charisma attached to the office-holder (Heurtin, 2019, p.11). The mere fact of being the leader of Mexico's largest left-wing party⁴⁰⁹ and of having represented the left wing of the Mexican political spectrum for nearly fifty years inspires enthusiasm among many on the Mexican Left, and the fact that he has made it to the top of the Mexican political pyramid commands their respect. Therefore, in addition to his personal charismatic leadership, discussed

⁴⁰⁹ Morena won 191 seats in Congress and 55 seats in the Senate in 2018. The PT, Mexico's other left-wing party, won 61 and 6 seats, respectively. The left-of-centre PRD won 21 and 8, respectively and the centre-left MC won 27 and 7 seats, respectively.

throughout this thesis, AMLO may also be said to enjoy *Amtscharisma* by virtue of the position that he holds in the Mexican political landscape and the political current that he represents.

Two respondents referred specifically to AMLO's left politics as their main reason for supporting him, describing him as "of the Left" and citing his "left-wing agenda".⁴¹⁰ Five referred to his primary concern for the poor, using a variety of broadly synonymous concepts: "*los más necesitados*" ("those in greatest need"), "*la clase popular*" ("the working class"), "*la gente pobre*" ("the poor"), "*la gente de menos recursos*" ("those of lesser means"), and "*los que nunca han sido tomados en cuenta*" ("those who have never been taken into account"). Three cited social justice, a traditional left-wing demand, as their main motivation for supporting a president who wanted to create "a more just and democratic Mexico", who had shown "his solidarity and empathy with the low income classes who constitute the majority of the population" and who had made clear "his principle that education and health are not privileges, but rights to which the people are entitled".⁴¹¹ One mentioned his "humanism,"⁴¹² which in AMLO's lexicon represents politics "for the good of others and especially the poor,"⁴¹³ according to Adriana Sandoval Hernández *et al.* (Hernández *et al.*, 2023, p.3). Humanism thus reconnects with the idea of equality and social justice mentioned above.

All these motivations are rooted in AMLO's left-wing politics and in the adherence of the respondents to this form of politics, described by Kevin Olson as "a society of the people in the purest sense, freed from distinctions of class, property, or privilege" (Olson, 2017, p.661). AMLO's left-wing politics, including his welfare programmes, which are designed to achieve a fairer distribution of national wealth and greater social justice, are mentioned in eleven of the fifty-four replies to the survey. The sample of fifty-four respondents may not be

⁴¹⁰ "Es de izquierda"; "Su proyecto de izquierda".

⁴¹¹ "Quiere crear un México mucho más justo y democrático"; "Su solidaridad y empatía con (...) la mayoría"; "Su principio de que educación y la salud no son privilegios, sino derechos del pueblo".

⁴¹² "Es un político humanista".

⁴¹³ "En bien de los demás y en especial de los pobres".

considered representative, but it nevertheless provides an insight into the reasons why some Mexicans support this particular president.

It is an interesting finding because some AMLO critics, both on the right and on the left, have argued that his politics are not really of the Left. The political scientist Ramón Centeno claims that when AMLO left the PRI, he "did not actually move to the left, but the country moved to the right"⁴¹⁴ (Centeno, 2021, p.173). For some on the Left, AMLO's administration has betrayed the principles of the Left by awarding lucrative government contracts to multi-millionaires like Carlos Slim (owner of América Móvil),⁴¹⁵ Germán Larrea (Grupo México)⁴¹⁶ or Carlos Salinas Pliego (TV Azteca)⁴¹⁷ (Villanueva, 2024). One such critic is AMLO's former ally, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas.

In a left-wing government (...) it seems to me that the collective has to take precedence over the individual. (...) I do not understand that (...) income is increasingly concentrated in smaller and smaller groups when a democratic practice should have a more equitable distribution of wealth.⁴¹⁸ (La Saga, 2021)

For those on the right - for instance, Santiago Creel - Morena simply reproduces old PRI patterns. In a comment addressed to AMLO on Twitter, Creel writes:

You and your party behave in a way that is worse than the old PRI of the 70s: authoritarian, transactional (*clientelar*)⁴¹⁹ and anti-democratic, the

⁴¹⁴ "En realidad AMLO no se pasó a la izquierda, sino que el país se movió a la derecha."

⁴¹⁵ Telecommunications corporation.

⁴¹⁶ Mining conglomerate.

⁴¹⁷ Multimedia conglomerate.

⁴¹⁸ "En un gobierno de izquierda (...) me parece que se tiene llevar por delante lo colectivo a lo individual. (...) Yo no entiendo que (...) el ingreso se concentre cada vez en grupos más reducidos cuando una práctica democrática tendría que tener un reparto más equitativo de la riqueza."

⁴¹⁹ *Clientelismo* is the "political practice of obtaining and maintaining power by securing loyalty in exchange for favours and services". (Source: Royal Spanish Academy)

traits you idolise so much and today want to imitate.⁴²⁰

(@SantiagoCreelM, 2022)

Yet, as revealed by my survey, the perception of his supporters is that AMLO is very much a politician of the Left, working tirelessly to improve the lot of ordinary Mexicans. In other words, although AMLO's left-wing credentials are challenged by some, including a few highly influential politicians on both sides of the political spectrum, his supporters are not swayed by these arguments. Based on their replies, one finds that they stand firm in their belief that AMLO is a worthy - indeed: extraordinary - representative of the Mexican Left, and this, in turn, elicits their awe and their enthusiasm for his leadership. The respondents' spontaneous replies show that AMLO's election to the country's highest office really matters to the Mexican Left, which had, in effect, been in opposition since Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas' failed presidential challenge of 1988, marred by what Hanrahan and Fugellie have called "wholesale election fraud by the PRI" (Hanrahan and Fugellie, 2019, p.114). As they point out, "the Mexican Left was forced to wait 30 years, enduring many setbacks and affronts before taking power" (Hanrahan and Fugellie, 2019, p.114). AMLO thus embodies the hopes and aspirations of this disenfranchised Left. Many on the Left will consider him extraordinary precisely because he was - finally - able to break down the barriers that had kept the Left out of power for so long. Having accompanied him through his trials and tribulations - in particular, the *desafuero* - AMLO's supporters have an affective investment in his presidency. His victory was their victory. This reinforces their loyalty.

A second set of replies reflected the respondents' sense of national pride, which had been boosted by AMLO's public discourse on the splendour of Mexico and the admirable traits of the Mexican people (*el pueblo*). Several respondents expressed their admiration for the president's detailed knowledge of Mexican history and Mexican society. They applauded him for the work that he had put into improving the lives of his fellow Mexicans, transforming their country for the

⁴²⁰ "Ud y su partido se comportan peor que el viejo PRI de los 70's: autoritario, clientelar y antidemocrático, ese que tanto usted idolatra y hoy quiere imitar."

better. One respondent praised AMLO for his in-depth knowledge of every far-flung corner of the country and the people who live there, describing him as "a scholar of Mexican history" who is "knowledgeable about the needs of 'deep Mexico'" (*México profundo*) - a knowledge that he has acquired through his "constant visits to different parts of the country."⁴²¹ The comment may be read as a reflection both on AMLO's background (he does not hail from the cosmopolitan elite of Mexico City) and on his keen interest in Mexico's rural population, manifest through his active choice to regularly connect with those who do not find themselves at the epicentre of power in CDMX (his *giras* around Mexico's more remote towns and villages in the country's thirty-one federal states testify to this).

Another respondent stated that their main reason for supporting AMLO was the fact that "he has always fought to improve the lives of Mexicans."⁴²² A third one enumerated some of AMLO's recent books (he has published twenty in total,⁴²³ including *A La Mitad del Camino*⁴²⁴ (2021) and *¡Gracias!*⁴²⁵ (2024), released during his presidential term), and praised the president for his thorough understanding of "the country's present (...) and future."⁴²⁶ One respondent wrote: "As a people, he has given us back our self-esteem."⁴²⁷ The statement suggests that AMLO's construction of the people as a moral community is understood and welcomed by his followers. As Zúquete would describe it, "they are not mere individuals but are members of a moral community of the faithful and saved" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.269).

Four respondents highlighted the good work that AMLO is doing for Mexico through major infrastructure projects, which they believed would enhance the lives of ordinary Mexicans. One respondent remarked that "he has been

⁴²¹ "Estudioso de la historia de México y conocedor de las necesidades del 'México profundo' además de constantes visitas a diferentes lugares del país."

⁴²² "Ha luchado desde siempre por mejorar la vida de los mexicanos."

⁴²³ At the time of writing.

⁴²⁴ "Halfway There".

⁴²⁵ "Thank you!".

⁴²⁶ "La situación actual del país (...) y el porvenir."

⁴²⁷ "Como pueblo, nos ha regresado la autoestima."

consistent in his determination to transform Mexico",⁴²⁸ another noted that "he has built large-scale projects that will improve the lives of large swathes of the population",⁴²⁹ and a third provided a list of some of these projects, which would bring tangible benefits to the people of Mexico and enhance its international standing: "the construction of the Tren Maya, the [AIFA] airport, and the [Dos Bocas] refinery."⁴³⁰ A fourth respondent declared: "I know that he wants to work for Mexico."⁴³¹ It is worth noting the trust that two of these respondents placed in the president and in his judgment: "I *know* that he wants to work for Mexico" and "they *will* improve the lives of large swathes of the population" (emphasis my own). It is an indication of their belief in the president, "who *knows* what is best for the community" (Zúquete, 2017, p.457).

As for AMLO's praise of Mexico's cultural, moral and spiritual values, it is an aspect of his discourse that I have addressed in other chapters, in which I have argued that AMLO's moral community is predicated upon the purportedly noble and pure characteristics of *el pueblo mexicano*. However, my focus has primarily been on the people of Mexico - particularly its indigenous peoples - rather than the general feelings of patriotism that further strengthen the affective bond between the people and their president, as the survey suggests. The respondents' replies were therefore useful to me in widening my understanding of AMLO's charisma as the ultimate representative not only of the Mexican people, but also of the country itself - its history, its socio-cultural markers, and what it means to be Mexican. The findings tie in with my discussion in previous chapters regarding AMLO's exaltation, throughout his tenure, of all things Mexican, as well as his fierce defence of the country vis-à-vis its former colonial rulers, exemplified most strikingly by his demand that both the Spanish Crown and the Holy See apologise for their historic crimes against the Mexican people (cf. section 3.4). It is a patriotism that resonates with his supporters, judging by their spontaneous replies.

⁴²⁸ "Ha sido congruente con su determinación de transformar a México."

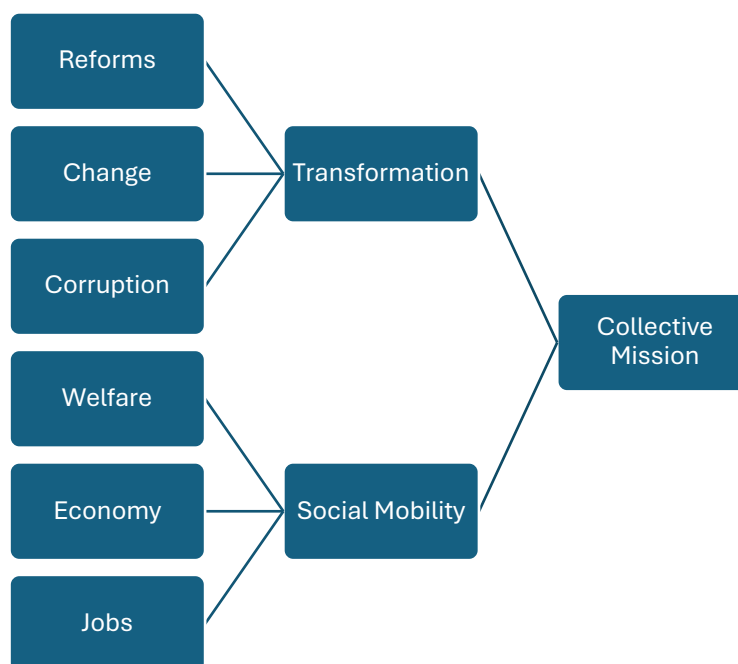
⁴²⁹ "Ha construido grandes obras que mejorarán la vida de amplios sectores."

⁴³⁰ "La construcción del Tren Maya, del aeropuerto, y de la refinería."

⁴³¹ "Sé que quiere trabajar por México."

7.4.2 Respondents' Perception of the Collective Mission

Table 15: Allocation of replies to the collective mission⁴³²



The second overarching theme that emerged from my engagement with the survey data reflected the respondents' associations with what this thesis has called the collective mission. The theme encompasses the meanings that respondents attribute to the empty signifier of the 4T (category: transformation), which represents both a break with politics as usual and an overhaul of a political system tainted by graft (codes: reform / change / corruption), as well as a long overdue effort to lift *los de abajo* out of poverty (category: social mobility), achievable through a restructuring of social policy, the job market and the country's economy (codes: welfare / jobs / economy), in a way that benefits the working and middle classes, as opposed to the elite.

Several respondents expressed their faith in AMLO's transformative agenda. They spoke of their support for his reforms, with one respondent stating: "I believe in his reforms"⁴³³ and another citing "his policies"⁴³⁴ as their main

⁴³² Creator: PGR.

⁴³³ "Creo en sus reformas."

⁴³⁴ "Por sus políticas."

reason for supporting the president. Many laid special emphasis on his fight against corruption, with five respondents citing it as one of their main reasons for supporting AMLO:

- "Because of his fight against corruption;"⁴³⁵
- "He has fought corruption;"⁴³⁶
- "Because of the need to fight corruption;"⁴³⁷
- "Because of the great levels of corruption and violence in the country;"⁴³⁸
- "He has done his best to fight corruption in government".⁴³⁹

One of them lamented the corrosive effect that corruption had had on Mexico's social fabric - "unfortunately, this country is very much affected by it [corruption]"⁴⁴⁰ - and another applauded AMLO for tackling this scourge, which no other president before him had even attempted to address: "It is something that has never been seen before in this country."⁴⁴¹ These comments underscore the transformative nature of AMLO's politics and the centrality of the fight against corruption within his overall political agenda. It echoes AMLO's own description of the very essence of the 4T: "To put an end to corruption, that's the plan" (López Obrador, 23.02.2023).

The survey results also revealed that many respondents supported AMLO because they could not countenance a return to the past. The desire for political and societal change was a recurring theme in the responses. "His message has been one of change,"⁴⁴² wrote one respondent, while another welcomed AMLO's fight against poverty, "something that we had not seen in any other

⁴³⁵ "Por su lucha contra la corrupción."

⁴³⁶ "Ha combatido la corrupción."

⁴³⁷ "La necesidad de combatir la corrupción."

⁴³⁸ "Por la gran corrupción y violencia que sufría el país."

⁴³⁹ "Ha combatido hasta donde es posible la corrupción en el gobierno."

⁴⁴⁰ "Desafortunadamente, este país está muy contaminado."

⁴⁴¹ "Algo que jamás se había visto en este país."

⁴⁴² "Su mensaje ha sido el del cambio."

government."⁴⁴³ In their replies, several respondents voiced their disillusionment with the hegemonic parties of the past, particularly the PRI and the PAN, but to some extent also the PRD. To them, AMLO represented a break from politics as usual, which they were keen to embrace. A total of seven respondents made it clear that they had had enough of politics as usual. One described their choice to support AMLO as "the only viable alternative for change."⁴⁴⁴ For another, AMLO represented "change" and "a progressive Left."⁴⁴⁵ In reference to the landslide vote that brought AMLO to power in 2018, one respondent said that "for the first time, we have a government in my country that has been elected by the majority,"⁴⁴⁶ another noted that "Mexico needed a government that would break with the previous inhumane way of governing,"⁴⁴⁷ and a third respondent stated that "the alternative in 2018 was more of the same, which would have been unbearable."⁴⁴⁸ In addition, two respondents emphasised the fact that 2018 had represented a real sea change in Mexican politics, describing AMLO's candidacy as "the only viable proposal capable of breaking with the imposed party system (PRI PAN PRD)"⁴⁴⁹ and citing "his fight against the PRIAN"⁴⁵⁰ as their main reason for supporting him. The desire to break with the past was thus an important motivating factor for these AMLO supporters: they may not think their president is perfect, but they cannot imagine turning the clock back. AMLO would no doubt welcome this as a *revolución de las conciencias*.

As regards the category of social mobility, it was clear from the respondents' answers that many of them attributed great importance to the president's efforts to reduce the socio-economic gap between rich and poor, under the slogan "*por el bien de todos, primero los pobres*" and that they supported him for this very reason. Two respondents cited his social welfare programmes as their main motivation for backing the president: they lauded his "UNIVERSAL assistance

⁴⁴³ "Es algo que no se había visto en otro gobierno."

⁴⁴⁴ "Única alternativa viable de cambio."

⁴⁴⁵ "Alternancia y una izquierda progresista."

⁴⁴⁶ "Por primera vez [había] en mi país un gobierno electo por mayoría."

⁴⁴⁷ "Era necesario en México un gobierno que rompiera la forma de gobernar inhumana previa."

⁴⁴⁸ "La alternativa en 2018 era más de lo mismo lo cual era insoportable."

⁴⁴⁹ "La única propuesta viable capaz de romper con el sistema de partidos impuesto (PRI PAN PRD)."

⁴⁵⁰ "Su lucha contra el PRIAN."

programmes"⁴⁵¹ (caps in original) and "the constitutional increase in old-age pensions"⁴⁵² introduced during AMLO's mandate. One referred to the fact that AMLO's various programmes had generated "more jobs"⁴⁵³ - an important observation in a country where 54% of the labour force work in the informal economy (or work in the formal economy, but without a contract), according to the government's official statistics (INEGI, 2024). Two respondents mentioned AMLO's sound handling of the economy, which had "remained stable despite the pandemic"⁴⁵⁴ and had not jeopardised Mexico's standing on the international financial stage: "The dollar has remained stable against the peso, which has benefited the national economy."⁴⁵⁵ The last comment could be understood both as a rebuttal of those who had predicted that AMLO's well-known opposition to neoliberal policies would harm the Mexican economy and jeopardise the independence of the Bank of Mexico, and as an acknowledgment of AMLO's efforts to transform the economy in a way that benefited *los de abajo*.

In sum, by citing AMLO's break with Mexican politics as usual and his efforts to bridge the gap between haves and have-nots as their main reasons for supporting the president, the respondents drew on both material considerations (the benefits to be derived from job creation schemes, economic stability, pensions and welfare programmes), nonmaterial considerations (the hopes and aspirations generated by a sense that the country was undergoing a transformation for the better), as well as hybrid considerations (in particular, AMLO's frequently referenced fight against corruption, which would serve a material purpose in clawing back lost revenue and redistributing the proceeds to those in greatest need, as well as a higher-order moral purpose of governing on the basis of honesty and accountability).

⁴⁵¹ "Programas de ayuda UNIVERSAL."

⁴⁵² "Por el aumento constitucional en la pensión para adultos mayores."

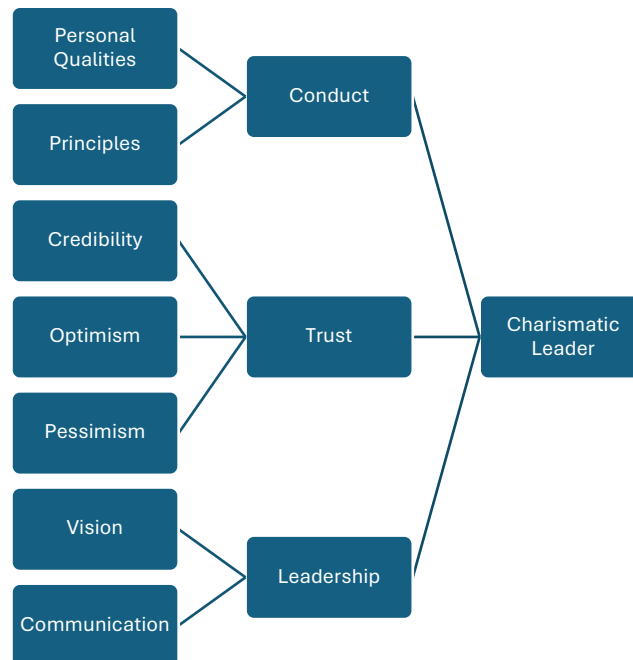
⁴⁵³ "Más trabajo."

⁴⁵⁴ "La economía se ha mantenido estable a pesar de la pandemia."

⁴⁵⁵ "El dólar se ha mantenido estable frente al peso lo cual ha beneficiado a la economía nacional."

7.4.3 Respondents' Perception of the Charismatic Leader

Table 16: Allocation of replies to the charismatic leader⁴⁵⁶



The third overarching theme that emerged from my engagement with the survey data reflected the respondents' specific associations with what this thesis has called the charismatic leader. While all the respondents' replies ultimately referred to reasons for supporting AMLO (that was the question that they had been asked), the previous two subsections summarised the responses that articulated these reasons with the moral community and the collective mission, whereas this subsection specifically focuses on the motivations given by respondents which directly refer to the supporters' perception of AMLO himself: his exemplary behaviour (category: conduct), characterised by his integrity (codes: personal qualities / principles), his reliability (category: trust), which inspires the confidence of his supporters, even if that trust is sometimes put to the test (codes: credibility / optimism / pessimism), and finally, his ability to take the people with him (category: leadership) through his discourse and his ability to inspire others to follow him (codes: communication / vision).

⁴⁵⁶ Creator: PGR.

Eight respondents identified AMLO's honesty as their main reason for supporting him. Their exact formulations are listed below:

- "*su honestidad*" ("his honesty");
- "*su honradez*" ("his integrity");
- "*la honestidad que proyecta*" ("the honesty that he projects");
- "*por su honestidad*" ("because of his honesty");
- "*es honesto*" ("he is honest");
- "*creo que realmente es un hombre honesto*" ("I think he really is an honest man");
- "*la honestidad*" ("honesty");
- "*principalmente creo que es una persona honesta*" ("basically, I think he is an honest person").

Along similar lines, two respondents mentioned the fact that he was a man who stood by his word:

- "He keeps his word";⁴⁵⁷
- "He has shown by his actions that he is a man of strong principles".⁴⁵⁸

Three respondents ascribed their support for AMLO to his sincere commitment to the people:

- "I have seen him walk hand in hand with the people";⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁷ "Tiene palabra."

⁴⁵⁸ "Ha demostrado con sus acciones que es un hombre de firmes principios."

⁴⁵⁹ "Lo he visto caminar palmo a palmo al lado de la gente."

- "He cares for his people";⁴⁶⁰
- "He has worked hard for the good of the people".⁴⁶¹

One spoke of his exceptional qualities - "I think he is exceptional"⁴⁶² - and another of the fact that he was a natural "leader"⁴⁶³ - a figure who is "personally regarded as someone who is inwardly 'called' to the task of leading men", as Weber would put it (Weber, 1994, p.312). Two respondents spoke openly of their admiration for AMLO:

- "I have never met a person who is so aware of each and every one of the problems that this country has;"⁴⁶⁴
- "AMLO has my support and admiration."⁴⁶⁵

Another two mentioned the values and aspirations that he embodies:

- "He projects love for others, peace and trust;"⁴⁶⁶
- "He embodies the hope that another Mexico is possible."⁴⁶⁷

One respondent expressed their complete trust in the president:

- "I believe in what he says, I trust him."⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁰ "Cuida a su gente."

⁴⁶¹ "Ha trabajado mucho por el bien del pueblo."

⁴⁶² "Me parece un hombre excepcional."

⁴⁶³ "Es un líder."

⁴⁶⁴ "No había conocido nunca a una persona que esté enterada de todos y cada uno de los problemas que tiene este país."

⁴⁶⁵ "Mi apoyo y admiración por AMLO."

⁴⁶⁶ "Proyecta amor al prójimo, paz y confianza."

⁴⁶⁷ "Enarbola la esperanza de que otro México es posible."

⁴⁶⁸ "Creo en lo que dice, confío en él."

This last response refers directly to the concept of *fiducia* (personal trust). Other respondents may not have expressed it in so many words, but their references to AMLO's honesty, integrity, transparency and loyalty point in the same direction: AMLO is a credible political figure in the eyes of his followers, an ordinary Mexican like themselves ("I have seen him walk hand in hand with the people"), but at the same time an extraordinary leader ("he embodies the hope that another Mexico is possible"). The respondents' words echo Zúquete's figure of the charismatic leader who offers the moral community a "narrative of salvation" and redeems it "from its putative crisis", (Zúquete, 2013a, p.263).

In addition to AMLO's personal conduct, respondents also referred to his perceived leadership skills as reasons for supporting him. Two respondents referred to his clear-sightedness, with one simply stating that they supported him "because of his vision"⁴⁶⁹ and another providing a slightly more detailed motivation: "He has a very clear vision of international and national politics."⁴⁷⁰ Another respondent spoke of AMLO's transparency as a key reason for supporting him, adding that this was "part of his charm."⁴⁷¹ Two respondents mentioned his communication skills, calling him "an excellent communicator"⁴⁷² who "communicates with the citizens in his daily morning press conferences."⁴⁷³ Therefore, in addition to his vision and candour, respondents also cited AMLO's openness - his commitment never to lose touch with the people, as promised in 2018: "I will never lose communication with you, the people" (López Obrador, 01.12.2018) - and his stamina (the energy required to hold early morning press conferences, lasting several hours, every single weekday of the year - a commitment that few politicians would undertake, let alone honour) as reasons for supporting him. AMLO's vision, sincerity and communication skills thus represented exceptional leadership qualities in the eyes of these supporters.

⁴⁶⁹ "Por su visión."

⁴⁷⁰ "Tiene una visión muy clara de la política internacional y nacional."

⁴⁷¹ "Es transparente (eso es parte de su encanto)."

⁴⁷² "Un excelente comunicador."

⁴⁷³ "En sus diarias conferencias matutinas (...) se comunica con los ciudadanos."

With reference to the main question addressed by this thesis, namely the role of faith in charismatic leadership, respondents who referred directly to AMLO's leadership skills, trustworthiness and exemplary conduct as key reasons for supporting him essentially gave voice to their personal trust in the leader. Their replies indicated that they perceived AMLO as a leader who had the vision, courage and determination required to lead them towards a brighter future ("he embodies the hope that another Mexico is possible"). As Zúquete would put it, AMLO is a leader who "has the capacity to embody the mission (...) to the followers" (Zúquete, 2017, p.457). Whether it is because of his perceived personal qualities or the principles that appear to govern his actions, in the eyes of his followers, AMLO comes across as truthful and trustworthy ("I believe in what he says, I trust him"). In other words, the supporters who provided these types of answers signalled that they stood by him "because they believe in him" (Weber, 1994, p.312).

The final two responses that I wish to analyse in this subsection also relate to trust, and were coded as pessimism and optimism, respectively. The two replies in question were more nuanced than other responses received through the survey. They were helpful to me in terms of my analysis, albeit in ways that I had not anticipated. The first one (coded pessimism) was from a respondent who appeared somewhat disillusioned with the president's actual performance during his six-year term. Having promised so much - nothing short of a transformation of public life in Mexico and a *revolución de las conciencias* - AMLO seemed to have fallen short on some of his pledges: "I thought that López Obrador did represent that change; (...) However, I think that (...) the fundamental and systemic problems continue."⁴⁷⁴ The respondent still chose to answer my survey, which suggests that they continued to back the president. There may still be some residual affective investment on their part, in other words. However, what their reply revealed is that any enthusiasm or awe they may have felt initially were now a thing of the past. I concluded from this reply

⁴⁷⁴ "Yo pensé en que López Obrador si representaba ese cambio; (...) sin embargo pienso que (...) los problemas de fondo y sistémicos continúan."

that in the eyes of this particular respondent, AMLO had fallen from grace, and could no longer be considered a charismatic leader.

In an almost perfect mirror image, the second respondent wrote of their disappointment that the president had not achieved more during his term of office. Yet at the same time, their belief in AMLO appeared undiminished: "Despite a limited impact, he continues to work for a twenty-first century Mexico."⁴⁷⁵ In other words, this respondent had also felt somewhat disillusioned by a below-par performance on the part of their leader, but they continued to have faith in his dedication to the cause: a leader "who *knows* what is best for the community, would *never* do anything to harm the community," as Zúquete would put it (Zúquete, 2017, p.457). This respondent gave AMLO the benefit of the doubt, it would appear.

In my everyday conversations with Mexicans, I have met some who supported the president unreservedly and some who impugned his every motive. These two survey responses reminded me of the existence of a third demographic: those who, having supported AMLO in 2018, now felt somewhat underwhelmed - or even: disappointed - by his actual achievements during his presidential mandate. Both survey respondents indicated that their belief in the president had been shaken. In the absence of any in-depth interviews with the respondents concerned - interviews did not form part of the survey design, and the anonymity of the respondents was guaranteed by the methodology I had chosen - it is impossible for me to establish why one respondent still believed in AMLO's dedication to the collective mission, notwithstanding the setbacks, while the other had concluded that AMLO had been defeated by some of Mexico's more intractable problems, despite all his pledges to redeem the nation. Nevertheless, the two replies offered by these respondents, succinct though they may be, still proved valuable to me in terms of my research, since they both pointed towards the question of faith. Through their spontaneous replies, the respondents confirmed Weber's original argument, namely that

⁴⁷⁵ "A pesar de una falta de envergadura, sigue trabajando para un Mexico del siglo XXI."

charisma is always in the eye of the beholder, and that the leader to whom followers attribute charismatic authority only ever enjoys a temporary state of grace. Should the leader no longer be perceived as someone capable of performing miracles, the followers' faith will be shaken, and some may cease to express their "entirely personal devotion to, and personal trust in, revelations, heroism, or other qualities of leadership" (Weber, 1994, pp.311-312) of the individual in whom they had previously placed their absolute trust. This, in turn, may result in the leader's fall from charismatic grace.

7.5 Conclusion

This thesis primarily addresses the ways in which AMLO's discourse and performance help construct the persona of a charismatic leader, both ordinary and extraordinary, in the hope that this will elicit the awe and enthusiasm of his supporters, and it pays close attention to the responses of the led to the leader's appearances before them. Consistent with the overall approach of the research, which addresses charisma as a relational phenomenon, chapter seven has more specifically explored the other side of the equation, namely the perception of AMLO's leadership by his supporters, drawing on the supporters' own words. Their reflections serve as a useful benchmark against which the overall findings of the research may be compared and contrasted; in the event, the survey responses provide robust support for the arguments advanced in previous chapters. In order not to formulate a leading question, the survey did not ask about charisma as such, but the replies sent in response to the survey spontaneously threw up a number of pointers towards the followers' perception of AMLO as a charismatic leader who elicited their enthusiasm and their awe.

The exercise was also instructive in that it flagged certain areas that warranted closer attention than originally anticipated, such as the significance of AMLO's status as the leader of the Mexican Left and the *Amtscharisma* that went with it, or the appeal of his patriotic discourse to many of his followers. Along with the perception of his extraordinary leadership qualities (his vision and determination), his embodiment of political change for Mexico (in particular: his

fight against corruption), and the credibility that he manifestly enjoys in the eyes of his supporters, these factors help explain the followers' motivations for investing their trust in their leader.

The respondents' replies correlate with the overall arguments presented by this thesis: while material considerations (such as the jobs created through AMLO's flagship programmes or the far-reaching social welfare benefit schemes that he has rolled out) account for some of the reasons why followers support AMLO, nonmaterial considerations (such as a restored sense of national dignity and a nascent hope that Mexican society may have turned a page on endemic corruption) weigh just as heavily - if not more heavily - in the overall balance. Although the sample was relatively small, and may therefore be considered indicative rather than representative, the results of the survey nevertheless suggest that any investigation into charismatic populist leadership should be mindful of "the creative dialogue between [the] material and nonmaterial realms" of populist theory (Zúquete, 2013a, p.265), and should not underestimate the "optimism, enthusiasm, and passionate commitment" (Zúquete, 2011a, p.13) generated by the nonmaterial considerations in this equation.

The conclusion to this thesis will revisit the key findings emerging from this research and set out the main contributions made by this thesis to the existing scholarship on charismatic populist leadership.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

8.1 Synopsis

Having set out the problem identified in the literature and the research questions to be addressed by the thesis in chapter one, chapter two examined the relevance of both spiritual and political religion in modern-day Mexico and discussed the extent to which AMLO may be seen as drawing on these elements in his own style of charismatic populist leadership. In chapter three, the thesis analysed AMLO's discursive construction of the moral community and the conspiratorial enemies against which this community is defined in his rhetoric. Chapter four explored AMLO's construction of the 4T (Fourth Transformation of Public Life in Mexico) as a collective mission designed to lead the people of Mexico from crisis to salvation. In chapter five, the research turned its attention to the central figure of the charismatic leader, highlighting the ways in which AMLO uses the public stage to project himself as a figure of redemption, and how his followers signal their allegiance to the leader, to whom they submit "not because of custom or statute, but because they believe in him" (Weber, 1994, p.312). Chapter six incorporated all the key concepts of missionary politics into its detailed examination of a major public event that saw more than a million AMLO supporters take to the streets to show their solidarity with the president. Finally, chapter seven unpacked the motivations cited by AMLOvers when asked about their main reasons for supporting the president; in its analysis, the chapter connected each reply to the salient themes addressed by the thesis (the moral community, the collective mission and the charismatic leader). Each chapter has thus shown how the key concepts of missionary politics are constructed in AMLO's discourse and how the followers call for and respond to these discursive constructions.

8.2 Key Concepts

The research has addressed three key themes: populism, charismatic leadership and missionary politics. In its examination of populism, the research has challenged the political-strategic assumption that charismatic populist leaders are solely concerned with gaining and retaining power by whatever means necessary (the hallmarks of autocratic rule) and have little interest in serving the common good (populist rhetoric notwithstanding). Furthermore, the research has queried the narrative according to which populist constituencies are either manipulated by the charismatic leader's skilful rhetoric or prepared to offer their support in exchange for material rewards (*clientelismo*). The research has shown that followers have a number of different reasons for supporting their charismatic populist leader, not least of which are what Pedro Zúquete calls "nonmaterial values", which "transform the community of followers into a moral community, united by feelings of love, brotherhood, idealism, and righteousness" (Zúquete, 2017, p.458).

Throughout the thesis, charismatic leadership has been addressed as a relational phenomenon, in which the leader uses his public appearances to project the figure of an individual who is both ordinary (a man of the people, approachable, trustworthy, someone who understands *el pueblo* and genuinely has its interests at heart) and extraordinary (a visionary leader who has the wisdom, courage and determination to overcome any number of obstacles to defend the interests of the people). At the other end of this relationship stand the people on behalf of whom the leader makes a representative claim. They are the ones who decide whether or not to attribute charisma to the leader. They will base this decision on their own appreciation of the congruence between the leader's words and deeds, their perception of him as an ordinary and at the same time extraordinary individual - and ultimately, on their faith in his trustworthiness and truthfulness. The research has shown that if the leader is deemed charismatic, the followers will convey their affect both orally and corporeally, expressing their faith in his leadership through the channels of communication available to them - be it on social media, at public gatherings, or even in answer to this researcher's questions. The identity formation made possible by this two-way populist discourse – in Pierre Ostiguy's words, a "populist fusional discourse [which] is often explicitly a discourse of love"

(Ostiguy, 2017, p.83) – has been viewed as essential in terms of understanding the phenomenon of charismatic leadership within populism.

Based on the findings of the research, which has involved a close examination of encounters between AMLO and his supporters in a variety of settings over a six-year period, the thesis has highlighted the importance of the affective bond between the leader and the led, as expressed not only through a discourse of love, but also through a mutual desire for physical proximity. Although the thesis acknowledges the importance of immediate material rewards (financial support schemes, welfare programmes, bursaries for the young and pensions for the elderly) - which for some might constitute sufficient grounds, in and of themselves, to support the president - it has also contended that nonmaterial considerations weigh just as heavily in the balance, if not more. The research has argued that although "grand narratives" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.264) bring neither immediate nor tangible rewards to the people, they still act as a powerful mobilising force within the charismatic leader's support base. This argument is substantiated by the findings revealed throughout the thesis, both in the chapters that carefully examine the discursive and performative interaction between AMLO and his followers (chapters three to six), and in the penultimate chapter, which analyses the reasons given by AMLO supporters (in their own words) when asked about their main motivations for throwing their weight behind the president (chapter seven).

In the examples provided in this research, there is ample material to substantiate Zúquete's argument regarding the salient role of "beliefs, emotions and nonmaterial forces, such as symbolism, in human affairs" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.263). As one Mexican interlocutor put it to me, AMLO has given ordinary people back their sense of "dignity" and this has given them "hope and the enthusiasm to move forward again"⁴⁷⁶ (Luna, 2023). By referring to dignity, hope and enthusiasm, the comment aptly sums up the importance of nonmaterial considerations in the dynamics of charismatic populist leadership.

⁴⁷⁶ "La dignidad (...) ha hecho que las personas vuelvan a tener esperanza y ganas de salir adelante de nuevo."

The theoretical framework used to structure the research has been Zúquete's concept of missionary politics:

Missionary Politics is a political religion that has at its center a charismatic leadership, a narrative of salvation, ritualization, and the creation of a moral community invested with a collective mission of combating conspiratorial enemies and redeeming the community from its putative crisis. (Zúquete, 2013a, p.263)

In 2013, Zúquete expressed "the hope (...) that a new wave of research (...) will reflect [the] nexus between religion and politics in the twenty-first century" (Zúquete, 2013a, p.268). This research has answered the call, applying Zúquete's "Contribution to the Study of Populism" (Zúquete, 2013a) to the case of Mexico, hitherto unexplored from this angle. The research has combined Zúquete's concept of missionary politics with Ernesto Laclau's theory of populism as a logic of articulation, identifying the signifiers with which AMLO associates the salient concepts of missionary politics. In the president's discourse, the moral community is articulated with ordinary people (*el pueblo*), who are portrayed as honest, good, hard-working, resilient and wise, thanks to the legacy of Mexico's indigenous peoples (*los pueblos originarios de México*), whose spiritual and cultural values inform the conduct of the moral community. The collective mission is articulated with the Fourth Transformation of Public Life in Mexico (4T), AMLO's crusade against corruption, designed to cleanse the government of kleptocracy and return to the people what is rightfully theirs, leading the country from crisis to salvation. Finally, the president himself embodies the central figure of missionary politics, the charismatic leader. It is by discursively and performatively constructing a public persona that is both ordinary (a man of the people) and extraordinary (a courageous and visionary leader), and which is deemed credible by his followers, that AMLO succeeds in eliciting their affective response, their expressions of *fiducia* (personal trust) and their attributions of charisma.

8.3 Contributions of the Research

The research has made three significant contributions to the scholarship: it has offered a better understanding of the inner workings of charismatic leadership in left populism, it has explored AMLO's charismatic leadership style and offered insights into twenty-first century Mexican politics which are helpful in terms of understanding contemporary Latin American politics more broadly, and most importantly, it has analysed a largely overlooked aspect of charismatic populist leadership, namely the question of faith (both secular and religious).

While charisma may be considered an elusive concept (cf. chapter one), by drawing on Laclau's post-structural discourse theory (PSDT), the research has removed part of its elusiveness by revealing the ways in which charisma is discursively and performatively elicited and acknowledged, and by showing how the attribution of charisma is subject to constant negotiation between the leader and the led. It has also argued that charismatic leadership is essential to populist politics, by illustrating how the populist leader's charismatic appeal acts as the glue that holds the populist constituency together, and by showing how affective investment in the charismatic populist leader is a requirement for the viability of populism's characteristically radical policy proposals.

To substantiate its arguments, the research has drawn on the example of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and in so doing, it has offered the reader some valuable insights into the inner workings of charismatic leadership in left populism. The research has illustrated how AMLO uses both discourse and performance to construct a "popular identity" (Laclau, 2005b, p.77) that unites him to his moral community; it has done this by identifying the signifiers with which AMLO articulates the collective identity of the people (which include honesty, industriousness, wisdom, resilience, cultural and spiritual values, inherited from Mexico's indigenous peoples), as well as the terms that he uses to signify the "constitutive outside" (Panizza, 2005, p.356) against which this popular identity is constructed (namely a self-serving and corrupt neoliberal elite).

The research has also revealed how AMLO succeeds in constructing a public persona that is perceived as both ordinary and extraordinary in the eyes of his followers. The ordinary side of AMLO's charismatic persona is perhaps best illustrated by his relaxed demeanour when meeting with fellow Mexicans. As this research has shown, he is clearly at ease when engaging with members of the public and is seen to enjoy these encounters. He never appears to be lost for words and does not shy away from robust exchanges (as evidenced by his *Mañaneras*). His use of plain language, which "disrupts the gentrified domain in which politics is enacted in liberal democracies" (Arditi, 2003, p.26), adds to his populist charismatic appeal, as does his sense of humour. AMLO is an intuitive politician - I have heard many Mexicans refer to him as an "*animal político*" (political animal) - with a gift for projecting authenticity. All these characteristics shore up the credibility of his ordinary persona, which his followers deem convincing (as evidenced by the great number of Mexicans who refer to him as a man of the people). "*Es del pueblo*", an interviewee told me without hesitation (Ramos Hernández, 19.02.2023). The research has documented various instances in which AMLO's followers acknowledge the appeal of his ordinary and approachable persona: the laughter with which they respond to his in-jokes, the eagerness with which they reach out to embrace him as one of their own, the social media posts in which they defend his humility, the hand-made placards on which they inscribe their affection for *el Peje* (AMLO's nickname and a reminder of his rural Tabascan origins, far from the metropolitan elite), to name but a few examples.

The research has also noted AMLO's omnipresence in the public eye; he is broadcast into Mexican homes through his weekday *Mañaneras* and meets with local constituents during his weekend tours (*giras*) around the country. Many of the *giras* are organised around Mexico's indigenous communities, in whom the president takes a special interest (the thesis has argued that they form the heart of his constructed moral community). As the research has shown, these public appearances are used as opportunities to communicate humour and affect (reciprocated by his audience). This constant interaction with the Mexican people not only allows AMLO to render his particular discourse on the moral community and on its collective mission hegemonic (his oft-repeated phrases

now form part of everyday conversations in Mexico), it also reinforces the ordinary side of his public persona; he comes across as a man of the people, approachable and trustworthy, who understands the needs of the people, feels eminently comfortable in their midst and speaks their language. It is an essential part of his charisma, and a quality that the former UK Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who is a personal friend of the Mexican president, summed up to me using the following words: "He has a wonderful common touch about him" (Corbyn, 2023).



Figure 119: AMLO / Jeremy Corbyn (Financial Times, 2018)

As this thesis has argued, the left-wing populist leader's convincing construction of such an ordinary persona is indispensable to his perception as a charismatic figure. However, it is not sufficient in itself. The charismatic populist leader must also be perceived as extraordinary - someone who is capable of great deeds, who keeps his word and uses his political mandate not for his own benefit but to defend the *volonté générale* (the general will of the people). The research has shown how the followers acknowledge AMLO's extraordinary leadership, by rallying *en masse* to his public events and marches, by centring their prayers around him (as seen in indigenous spiritual practices), by bestowing gifts upon him or by submitting petitions to him in the hope that he will resolve their problems, as an all-powerful *tlatoani* who truly cares for his people. As the interviewee cited earlier put it to me: "I think that if suddenly someone in a position of power tells you that he is going to help you and when he becomes president he really does it, you don't need to be told anything else, you become

part of his movement out of pure gratitude"⁴⁷⁷ (Luna, 2023). The comment speaks to AMLO's integrity in the eyes of his followers.

The research has shown that AMLO is able to credibly construct the figure of an extraordinary leader on the strength of his long trajectory as a social justice campaigner, from his beginnings in his home state of Tabasco where he worked with Chontal indigenous communities, to his time as Mayor of Mexico City where he implemented many of the social welfare programmes that he now replicates as President of Mexico (financial support programmes for single-parent households, the elderly or people with disabilities, to name but a few). AMLO may not have performed any miracles, but his words have been followed by deeds and he has demonstrated his commitment to *los de abajo* over nearly five decades in the public eye. The research has argued that this track record and AMLO's dogged determination to pursue his left-wing agenda, especially in the face of adversity (in particular, the *desafuero*), have helped inspire his followers' "entirely personal devotion to, and personal trust" (Weber, 1994, pp.311-312) in what they consider to be his extraordinary leadership qualities. If anything, AMLO's setbacks have galvanised the support of his followers, who trust him rather than his opponents. As this thesis has recalled, charisma is in the eye of the beholder, and whereas AMLO's detractors view his public image as implausible, to his followers, AMLO cuts the credible figure of a public persona who is both ordinary and extraordinary, one of them yet at the same time a visionary and courageous leader; in other words, they have faith in his truthfulness and trustworthiness.

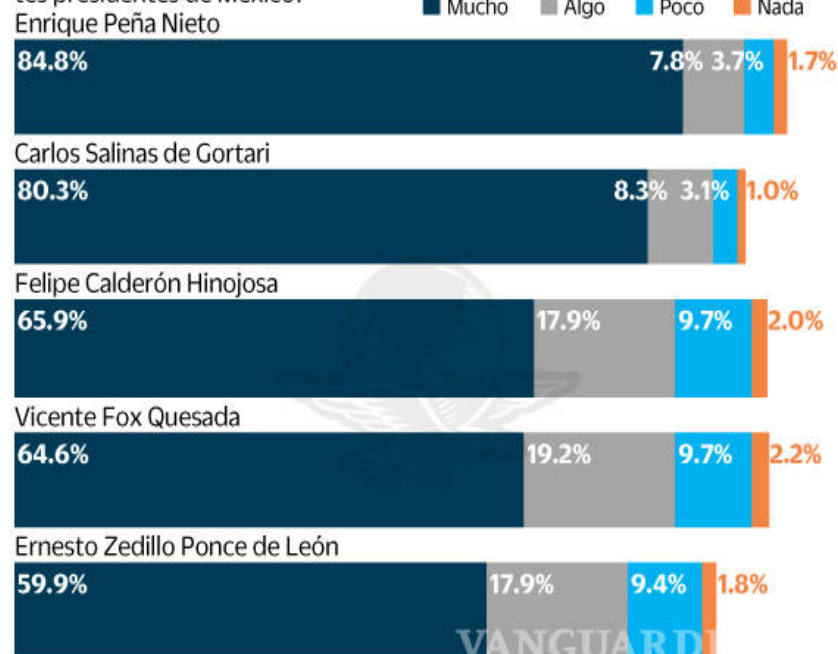
The research has also shown that there is more than just *Amtscharisma* to AMLO's perceived extraordinary leadership. His personal charismatic authority - defined by this thesis as his ability to inspire and motivate his followers through the discursive and performative construction of a public persona that is both ordinary and extraordinary and which is deemed convincing to his followers - has been built up gradually over almost five decades in the public eye and is

⁴⁷⁷ "Yo pienso que si de repente algún personaje con poder te dice que te va a ayudar y cuando se vuelve presidente lo hace realmente, no necesitas que te digan nada más, te vuelves parte de su movimiento por pura gratitud."

not solely associated with his current presidential office. AMLO's resilience in the face of setbacks has helped consolidate the extraordinary side of his charismatic persona, as has his personal frugality (*austeridad republicana*) during his time as president. Indeed, to retire from presidential office without having amassed a large fortune (Función Pública, 2024) is perceived as something quite exceptional by many Mexicans, judging by the *Vanguardia* survey reproduced in Figure 120:

Encuesta corrupción

En su opinión, ¿qué tan corruptos han sido los siguientes presidentes de México?



NOTA: El porcentaje restante corresponde a la respuesta No sabe/No contestó

Figure 120: Perceived Corruption (Vanguardia, 2020)

However, it should also be noted that AMLO is not a politician who aims to please all of the people all of the time, by telling them whatever they want to hear. While he will seek to win over his audience in most instances (even in somewhat hostile environments), he is mistrustful towards what he calls "*la llamada sociedad civil*" ("so-called civil society") and prone to impugning the motives of feminist organisations and environmentalist groups (*inter alia*), whom

he suspects of being manipulated by a conservative opposition. These outbursts (particularly his tin-eared approach towards Mexico's feminist movement, in a country where feminicides are a daily occurrence) have lost him the support of many who voted for him in 2018. Furthermore, some of AMLO's policies - in particular, the mission creep of the armed forces which he has overseen during his *sexenio* - have been met with consternation by many Mexicans, who view it as a blatant contradiction of the slogan he used on the campaign trail: "*Abrazos, no balazos*" ("hugs, not bullets"). Yet his followers seem prepared to overlook these inconsistencies. None of the Morena or AMLO supporters I spoke to brought them up as reasons for doubting what they consider to be his exceptional leadership skills. It would appear, therefore, that AMLO's supporters are prepared to forgive him his trespasses (i.e. his intransigencies and contradictions) because they trust him as a leader "who *knows* what is best for the community" (Zúquete, 2017, p.457). The charismatic bond thus revolves around faith - even at times when it is put to the test.

AMLO's particular style of leadership has also revealed a number of elements that challenge the assumptions commonly made about charismatic leadership in populism, particularly by the political-strategic school. For instance, the research has illustrated that although AMLO applies a populist political logic to his public discourse, drawing an "internal frontier" within society (Laclau, 2005b, p.77) between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2004, p.543), this populist discourse is not incompatible with his determined pursuit of a left-wing political agenda – in AMLO's case, fighting poverty and promoting social justice (traditional left-wing concerns).

In its examination of AMLO's political trajectory, the research has also shown that although he has made some strategic choices in his political career (for instance, moving from the PRI to the PRD, before founding his own political party, Morena), these choices were arguably necessary for him to overcome the obstacles along the way (most notably, the *desafuero*) and reach the apex of political power in order to begin implementing his transformative project, the 4T. The research has thus offered an alternative reading of the reasons why charismatic populist leaders sometimes resort to strategic tactics; while there

may be personalistic reasons for these choices, they may also be motivated by sincerely held ideological convictions.

By choosing AMLO as its case study, the research has provided some insights into contemporary Mexican politics which help explain the phenomenon of charismatic populist leadership. By way of an example, the research has pointed towards several structural elements in Mexican society that arguably predispose people towards the acceptance of charismatic political leadership. As Armando Bartra has noted, there appears to be an expectation in the collective Mexican consciousness that an all-powerful president will deliver great things for the people - Bartra uses the term "*papá gobierno*" (daddy government) (Bartra, 2015, p.200). In the Mexican political system, power is very much centralised in the hands of the president, who sits atop the Mexican political pyramid, to use Larissa Adler-Lomnitz's analogy (Lomnitz, 2004, p.56). In addition, Mexico has a long-standing tradition of *caudillismo* (strongman politics), exemplified by rulers such as Antonio López de Santa Anna (1833-1855) or Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). These factors provide fertile ground for the political success of charismatic political leaders, who promise extraordinary achievements in a discourse that chimes with the electorate's expectations.

In addition, the research has argued that Mexico's "baseline religiosity" (Tuckman, 2012, p.142) makes the Mexican electorate receptive to a political discourse that incorporates moral precepts borrowed from Scripture. In AMLO's case, this has proven to be an important element in the construction of a collective identity which unites him to the people. Whereas some would argue that AMLO's popularity amongst ordinary Mexicans is derived from the material support that he has provided for them through his social welfare programmes, essentially viewing the relationship between AMLO and his supporters as a contemporary iteration of the type of *clientelismo* (political patronage) that flourished under the PRI (Zuckermann, 2021), this research has argued that the bond between AMLO and his followers owes just as much (if not more) to a sense of shared identity and a faith in "a moral community, united by feelings of love, brotherhood, idealism, and righteousness" (Zúquete, 2017, p.458). Religion, which is so deeply rooted in Mexican society, plays a significant role in this dynamic.

Finally, the research flags up some similarities and differences between charismatic populist leadership as experienced in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America. Like its Latin American counterparts, Mexico has seen its fair share of charismatic left populist leaders in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries - in particular: Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024) - but unlike their neighbours to the south, the term of office of these presidents has always been limited to six years, owing to the country's Constitution (article 59). Consequently, although they centralise a great deal of power during their mandate (as modern-day *tlatoanis*), Mexican presidents do not have the option of seeking re-election. The charismatic authority of Mexican presidents is therefore to some extent associated with the office they hold (*Amtscharisma*), and some of them have been perceived as charismatic only for as long as they are wearing the presidential sash.

Despite his considerable popularity throughout his presidential term (cf. Figure 52), AMLO has never sought to amend article 59 of the Mexican Constitution. On the contrary: he called a presidential recall referendum in 2022 to ascertain whether he still had the support of the electorate and has repeatedly promised to retire at the end of his *sexenio* to La Chingada,⁴⁷⁸ his farm in Palenque, from which he intends to "care for plants, write and go out to teach history classes to young people in Tabasco and Chiapas"⁴⁷⁹ (López Obrador, 2017, p.68).

⁴⁷⁸ La Chingada is AMLO's ranch in Chiapas; the name is a play on words, attributed to the Zapatista leader Genovevo de la O who, when asked where he was going, would reply "a la chingada" - translated either as "off somewhere else" or as "to hell".

⁴⁷⁹ "Trabajaría en labores de (...) cuidado de plantas, escribiría y saldría a dar clases de Historia a jóvenes de Tabasco y de Chiapas."



Figure 121: La Chingada (Quién, 2022)

AMLO's example thus provides an interesting contrast to other twenty-first century Latin American populist left-wing *Marea Rosa*⁴⁸⁰ leaders, who have sometimes been known to resort to "plebiscitarian mass support" (Weyland, 2013, p.22) in their attempts to perpetuate their time in office *ad infinitum*:

Like their Venezuelan role model and generous patron [Hugo Chávez], Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Manuel Zelaya in Honduras (...) called for constituent assemblies with the aim of boosting the presidency's powers and paving the way toward indefinite reelection to that office. (Weyland, 2013, p.22)

The present case-study has shown that this penchant for life-long mandates is not an inevitability in Latin American left populism.

⁴⁸⁰ Mexico was a relative latecomer to the *Marea Rosa*, which had begun with the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez to the presidency of Venezuela (AMLO's left-wing administration came to office some 30 years later). As many Latin American countries pivoted to the left at the turn of the century, Mexico experienced a turn to the right, following seventy-one years of PRI rule.

Thirdly, and most significantly, by carefully exploring the inner workings of AMLO's charismatic bond with his followers, the research has brought to light the relevance of faith in the discursive construction of charismatic left populist leadership, thereby answering the main research question of the thesis. Bringing a novel contribution to the academic literature, the research has explored the role of faith within the populist leader-led dynamic, discussing the ways in which spiritual faith is woven into the discourse of both the leader and the led and how it strengthens the affective identification between the two. The research has also explored how appeals to secular faith - the belief that "man is redeemable in history" (Oakeshott, 1996, p.23) - inspire support for the collective mission and for the enlightened leadership of a charismatic leader "who *knows* what is best for the community" (Zúquete, 2017, p.457).

Referring back to Zúquete's original concept, the research has highlighted the prominence of nonmaterial aspirations in AMLO's leadership discourse and has argued that their acceptance necessarily requires an act of faith on the part of the followers (they are lofty ambitions, rather than tangible goals). Conversely, the research has emphasised AMLO's own faith in the ordinary people of Mexico (*el pueblo*), in their honesty and wisdom, and in their ability to help bring about the Fourth Transformation of Public Life in Mexico (4T), the collective mission that will bring salvation to the nation.

In its careful consideration of AMLO's discourse, the research has noted the president's consistent use of certain key words and phrases, which constitute the mantra of his mission: the fight against corruption ("*acabar con la corrupción*"),⁴⁸¹ the preferential option for the poor ("*primero los pobres*"),⁴⁸² the sovereignty of the Mexican people ("*el pueblo pone y el pueblo quita*"),⁴⁸³ his love for the people ("*nada se logra sin amor al pueblo*"),⁴⁸⁴ and the virtues of Mexican humanism ("*hagamos realidad y gloria el humanismo mexicano*"),⁴⁸⁵ to

⁴⁸¹ "Ending corruption."

⁴⁸² "First and foremost the poor."

⁴⁸³ "The people give and the people take away."

⁴⁸⁴ "Nothing can be achieved without love for the people."

⁴⁸⁵ "Let us make Mexican humanism a glorious reality."

name but a few. These phrases do not promise immediate material rewards but refer instead to distal goals and moral values. As such, their acceptance requires an element of faith on the part of the followers, who may never see the realisation of these goals, but who feel sufficiently inspired and motivated by AMLO's charismatic persona to embark on this collective mission under his leadership.

The research has found that while material considerations matter to the followers of left populist leaders such as AMLO - lifting approximately nine million Mexicans out of poverty (CONEVAL, 2023)⁴⁸⁶ is most certainly something that his supporters will appreciate - nonmaterial aspirations, including people's "transcendent hopes for a more fulfilling existence" (Zúquete, 2017, p.461), matter just as much, if not more. These aspirations are reflected in the Morena administration's government programme (PND),⁴⁸⁷ published in the first year of AMLO's mandate:

In July 2018, the Mexican people expressed their desire to build a just, peaceful, free, united, democratic, prosperous and happy Mexico in a resounding way at the ballot box.⁴⁸⁸ (PND, 2019, p.32)

Nonmaterial considerations also account for most of the replies to the anonymous online survey conducted as part of this research. While the sample size may have been modest (fifty-four respondents), the results of the survey may still be deemed indicative. Since these nonmaterial considerations (including a desire for collective identification, hopes, values and aspirations) produce no immediate rewards and yield no quantifiable gains, they necessarily involve an element of trust: the belief that Mexico can indeed be a "just, peaceful, free, united, democratic, prosperous and happy" country under AMLO's extraordinary leadership. As the *sexenio* reaches its end, it is clear that not all of Mexico's problems have been resolved during AMLO's mandate.

⁴⁸⁶ CONEVAL: National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy.

⁴⁸⁷ National Development Plan.

⁴⁸⁸ "En julio de 2018 el pueblo mexicano expresó de manera contundente en las urnas su anhelo de construir un México justo, pacífico, libre, solidario, democrático, próspero y feliz."

Some of them, such as the issue of drug-related violence, appear intractable: in its latest report, the UN International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) declared that "illicit drug-related activity by cartels and criminal gangs in Mexico continues to result in high levels of violence, in particular homicides, in the country" (INCB, 2023, p.76). Furthermore, despite the president's stated objective of ridding the country of corruption, "from top to bottom, like sweeping the stairs"⁴⁸⁹ (López Obrador, 08.02.2020), corruption has clearly not been eradicated altogether.

President López Obrador has claimed numerous times that his term in office is the first in which corruption has not been tolerated. That may be true, but it is a fact that corruption still happens. To deny it would be laughable.⁴⁹⁰ (Arreola, 29.08.2024)

Yet many millions of Mexicans continue to support the president and his political project, nonetheless. It points towards the element of faith discussed throughout this thesis - "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen"⁴⁹¹ - and it provides an essential key to understanding AMLO's charismatic leadership in the eyes of his followers.

In seeking to better understand the reasons why so many followers remain loyal to AMLO despite some of his unfulfilled promises (the Ayotzinapa case remains unsolved, and organised crime continues to hold sway over many of Mexico's federal states), I have come to the conclusion that AMLO's followers do not expect perfection; what they do expect is honesty and commitment to the common cause. AMLO's supporters will continue to attribute charismatic authority to him for as long as they believe that he is "truthful and trustworthy" (Wood, 2015, p.668).

⁴⁸⁹ "De arriba para abajo, como se barren las escaleras."

⁴⁹⁰ "El presidente López Obrador ha afirmado numerosas veces que su periodo de gobierno es el primero en el que no se ha tolerado la corrupción. Puede ser cierto, pero es un hecho que las acciones corruptas se continúan practicando. Negarlo sería risible."

⁴⁹¹ Hebrews 11:1.

Finally, the research has discussed the fact that in the eyes of some of his original supporters, AMLO has lost his charismatic appeal, whereas for others, he continues to be perceived as a charismatic leader. The research has argued that this is because the latter continue to believe that AMLO "would *never* do anything to harm the community" (Zúquete, 2017, p.457). In other words, AMLO's supporters are keeping the faith. Since Mexico's Constitution limits the presidential mandate to a single term, these supporters are now transferring their faith to the next incumbent, Claudia Sheinbaum, who will take over the reins of power on 1 October 2024 and who will take the 4T to its next level ("*el segundo piso de la 4T*").⁴⁹² It is one of the particularities of the Mexican political system: while the charismatic leader plays a central role, it is by definition temporally limited, and it therefore falls to the government's political programme (the collective mission) to provide continuity over the long term and to rally the support of the electorate (the moral community). The 4T must hold, in other words - and this requires an act of faith on AMLO's part, just as much as it does on the part of his followers. As the Morena Congress member Martha Ávila Ventura explained to me:

We are not going to let this project fall apart, because it has been a struggle for him [AMLO], it has been a big struggle for us, it was a struggle for people who are no longer with us, who gave their lives. So we are determined to continue.⁴⁹³ (Ávila Ventura, 2023)

8.4 Further Research

At the time of writing (in the last month of his presidential term), AMLO's approval ratings remain remarkably high (65% on 2 September 2024)⁴⁹⁴ and his charismatic appeal seems to have endured throughout his *sexenio*. However,

⁴⁹² Sheinbaum was head of Mexico City's environment secretariat when AMLO was mayor of Mexico City. Together, they built the second level of the city's ring road ("*el segundo piso*") - hence the reference to the second level of the 4T.

⁴⁹³ "Nosotros no vamos a dejar que este proyecto se caiga, porque a él le costó, nos costó mucho a nosotros, nos costó a gente que ya no está, y que dieron su vida. Entonces nosotros tenemos un gran compromiso de continuar."

⁴⁹⁴ Cf. *El Financiero* poll (Figure 52). By way of a comparison, his predecessor Enrique Peña Nieto ended his presidential term with an approval rating of 24%.

one should not forget that his "gift of grace" (the original meaning of charisma) is only ever a "state of grace" granted by his followers. It therefore remains to be seen whether, over time, AMLO will fall from grace in their eyes, or whether his charismatic appeal will live on (like that of Lázaro Cárdenas).

The research has analysed primary data collected during the six-year term of President López Obrador. In its analysis of the bond between the leader and the led, it has drawn both on AMLO's discourse and performance (recorded and transcribed on the government's official website) and on his followers' reactions, gleaned through video recordings of their encounters with the leader (in which they are seen to express their affect), press articles, comments found on social media, interviews, as well as the responses provided to the anonymous online survey conducted in the final year of this research. In terms of future research, it would be interesting to conduct a similar exercise towards the end of the next *sexenio*, and to explore two questions in particular: one regarding AMLO's post-presidential charismatic authority, to gauge the extent to which his followers continue to attribute charisma to him once he is no longer in the public eye (and no longer wearing the presidential sash); and another on the question of transfer of charismatic authority, to discuss the extent to which the transfer of the *bastón de mando* (command staff) from AMLO to Claudia Sheinbaum has also resulted in a transfer of charismatic authority from AMLO to his successor.



Figure 122: Passing the Baton (UnoTV, 2024)

Such further investigation would contribute to ongoing discussions about the "lasting influence" of "original charismatic attachments" (Andrews-Lee, 2021, p.199), which endure even after the departure from the political stage of the charismatic leader (Andrews-Lee cites the example of Juan Perón), and about the possibility (or impossibility) of charisma transfer within populist movements, a point raised by David Smilde, who compares the charisma of Hugo Chávez to the lack of charisma of Nicolás Maduro, the self-styled "son of Chávez": "As any sociologist can tell you, the Achilles' heel of charismatic leadership is always succession" (Smilde, 2015, p.51).

8.5 Final Remarks

My inspiration to conduct this research began on 1 December 2018; I happened to be in Mexico City that day and was able to watch AMLO's presidential inauguration and subsequent address to the nation from the Zócalo on Mexican television. I had never seen anything quite like it. At the time, I was not familiar with the work of Pierre Ostiguy, but I now recognise the experience for what it was: a "populist fusional discourse [which] is often explicitly a discourse of love" (Ostiguy, 2017, p.83). Having observed the interaction between AMLO and his followers for six years, I have learned to discern different discourses of love that sustain the faith that lies at the heart of the president's charismatic bond with his supporters: a discourse of love for Mexico - both the homeland (*la patria*) and the people (*el pueblo*) - which inspires faith in a collective mission designed to improve the lives of present and future generations of Mexicans; a discourse of spiritual love, which nurtures the followers' underlying faith in potential redemption and salvation; a discourse of love for humanity, which translates into a faith in the moral community and its ability to bring transformative change to the nation, under the enlightened guidance of its truthful and trustworthy charismatic leader.

This thesis will be submitted just as AMLO reaches the end of his mandate, in almost perfect synchronicity. I first embarked on this journey because I perceived something extraordinary in the enactment I witnessed on 1 December

2018, an elaborate and emotive presidential inauguration ceremony that would be unimaginable in the undemonstrative culture of my own country of birth (Sweden). AMLO's charismatic appeal (his centrality, but also his humility) in the midst of that ceremony had certainly piqued my curiosity, and I was keen to investigate further. It has been a most rewarding journey. As an outside observer and researcher, I now feel I have a better understanding of how AMLO's charismatic appeal works, and why it finds acceptance among so many Mexicans, who - as my research has shown - express their faith in AMLO's leadership and communicate their love for the leader on a daily basis. On the one hand, the president's charismatic authority in the eyes of his followers is derived from the congruence of his words and deeds when it comes to the defence of ordinary Mexicans (*el pueblo*), his steadfast determination to lift *los de abajo* out of poverty, to root out government corruption and to redistribute the nation's wealth more equitably. I would call this his secular charismatic authority. On the other, I have come to realise that AMLO also enjoys what I would call a spiritual charismatic authority; from a European perspective, this is more unusual (appeals to religious faith are not common practice in the politics of the old continent). The research process has therefore been a learning curve for me; whilst my first instinct was to consider that religion has no place in politics, I have learned to interpret the material before me from a Mexican point of view, and to understand that the religious codes to which both AMLO and his followers so frequently refer help secure the affective bond between them, which is an essential ingredient in the dynamics of charismatic populist leadership.

Consequently, in light of all the material I have gathered and analysed, I would conclude this thesis by arguing that AMLO's charismatic leadership cannot be fully understood without an acknowledgement of the importance of faith (in both its secular and religious dimensions). Nor can the appeal of AMLO's missionary politics be understood without due consideration for the ways in which his discourse and performance tap into the "baseline religiosity" of his fellow Mexicans (Tuckman, 2012, p.142). For me, it is the most instructive conclusion to be drawn from this research, through which I hope to have provided a

significant contribution to the study of charismatic leadership in contemporary left populism.

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PART 4: PHOTOGRAPHS REPRODUCED IN FIGURES

NB: All figures reproduced from the following sources are screenshots:

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- NMás

- Sin Embargo Al Aire

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Canal oficial de Andrés Manuel López Obrador. 2022. *Celebración por 4 Años de Transformación*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024].

Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/live/UMyhThWuWdw>

Figure 78:

Crónica / Canal oficial de Andrés Manuel López Obrador (composite). 2022. *El INE si se toca; Celebración por 4 Años de Transformación*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

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Figure 79:

tar.mx. 2022. *Las portadas de periódicos impresos hoy en México*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

Available from: <https://tar.mx/periodicos-mexico/?fecha=2022-11-28>

Figure 80:

tar.mx. 2022. *Las portadas de periódicos impresos hoy en México*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

Available from: <https://tar.mx/periodicos-mexico/?fecha=2022-11-28>

Figure 81:

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Figure 82:

Notiguía. 2022. *Ilustra con el video de una señora histérica sus argumentos de que los marchistas son "clasistas y racistas"*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

Available from: <https://notiquiatelevision.com/2022/11/14/casi-3-horas-de-la-mañanera-dedica-amlo-a-detractar-la-marcha-en-defensa-del-ine/>

Figure 83:

Radio Turquesa. 2022. *Los "indios patas rajadas" tomaron las calles en CDMX*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

Available from: <https://noticias.radioturquesa.fm/los-indios-patas-rajadas-tomaron-las-calles-en-cdmx/>

Figure 84:

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Available from:

<https://www.sinembargo.mx/27-11-2022/4290460>

https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2022/11/27/galeria_imagenes/marchan-miles-en-apoyo-a-amlo/

<https://laeducacion.us/los-indios-patas-rajadas-hacen-suya-la-movilizacion-de-la-izquierda-y-lo-dijeron-con-orgullo-y-buen-humor-acarreando-quien-tiene-alas-para-llegar-volando-a-las-movilizaciones/>

<https://www.jornada.com.mx/2022/11/28/politica/010n1pol>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXj-jEI94KI>

<https://laeducacion.us/los-indios-patas-rajadas-hacen-suya-la-movilizacion-de-la-izquierda-y-lo-dijeron-con-orgullo-y-buen-humor-acarreado-quien-tiene-alas-para-llegar-volando-a-las-movilizaciones/>

<https://www.sopitas.com/noticias/galeria-marcha-zocalo-amlo-cdmx-27-noviembre-fotos-videos/>

Figure 85:

Canal oficial de Andrés Manuel López Obrador. 2022. *Celebración por 4 Años de Transformación*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024].

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Figure 86:

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Available from: <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/nacional/2022/11/27/marcha-amlo-27-de-noviembre-del-angel-al-zocalo-corcholatas-sheinbaum-ebrard-adan-augusto/>

Figure 87:

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Figure 88:

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Available from: <https://www.milenio.com/politica/amlo-marcha-5-selfies-empujones-regalos>

Figure 89:

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Figure 90:

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Figure 91:

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Figure 92:

NMÁS. 2022. *Marcha de AMLO por cuatro años de gobierno - Despierta*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR2Yjzi-G6I>

Figure 93:

Canal oficial de Andrés Manuel López Obrador. 2022. *Celebración por 4 Años de Transformación*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/live/UMyhThWuWdw>

Figure 94:

tar.mx. 2022. *Las portadas de periódicos impresos hoy en México*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024].

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Figure 95:

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Figure 96:

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Figure 97:

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Figure 98:

El Universal. 2022. *Estas son las marchas que ha encabezado AMLO desde hace más de 30 años*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024].

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Figure 99:

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Figure 100:

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https://apiperiodico.jalisco.gob.mx/api/sites/periodicooficial.jalisco.gob.mx/files/este_soy_yo_-_andres_manuel_lopez_obrador.pdf

Figure 101:

El País. 2022. *Presidentes que marchan: López Obrador vuelve la mirada a Lázaro Cárdenas.* [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

Available from: <https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-11-27/presidentes-que-marchan-lopez-obrador-vuelve-la-mirada-a-la-epoca-del-presidencialismo-priista.html>

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Figure 103:

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Available from: <https://www.publimetro.com.mx/nacional/2022/11/16/5-marchas-que-marcaron-la-vida-politica-de-amlo/>

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Available from: <https://aristeguinoticias.com/2711/mexico/amlo-30-anos-de-encabezar-marchas/>

Figure 105:

Nación321. 2018. *López Obrador vivió, durante el tiempo que duró "la asamblea permanente", en el Zócalo capitalino*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

Available from: <https://www.nacion321.com/elecciones/por-que-el-zocalo-es-tan-importante-para-amlo>

Figure 106:

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Figure 107:

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Available from: <https://www.publimetro.com.mx/nacional/2022/11/16/5-marchas-que-marcaron-la-vida-politica-de-amlo/>

Figure 109:

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Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LS3uvFagTA8>

Figure 110:

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Figure 111:

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Available from: <https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/discurso-integro-colosio-6-marzo-1994/1639582>

Figure 112:

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Figure 113:

Imagen de Veracruz. 2022. *Retomará FGR el caso sobre asesinato de Luis Donaldo Colosio*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

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Figure 114:

NMÁS. 2022. *Marcha de AMLO por cuatro años de gobierno - Despierta*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

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Figure 115:

NMÁS. 2022. *Marcha de AMLO por cuatro años de gobierno - Despierta*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

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SDP Noticias. 2024. *Diana Laura Valdez Plasencia marchaba contra los femicidios en Jalisco*. [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024).

Available from: <https://www.sdpnoticias.com/estados/jalisco/diana-laura-valdez-plasencia-es-encontrada-muerta-en-jalisco-marchaba-frecuentemente-contralos-femicidios/>

Figure 117:

Canal oficial de Andrés Manuel López Obrador. 2024. *¡Gracias!* [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024].

Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vu2Lyck5Xpk>

Figure 118:

La Jornada. 2022. *Muchos acudieron en familia a la movilización, que fue reportada sin incidentes mayores.* [Online]. [Accessed 2 September 2024].

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Figure 119:

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Figure 120:

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Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/09e16222-7aef-11e8-bc55-50daf11b720d>

Figure 121:

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Available from: <https://www.quien.com/politica/2022/11/13/funcionarios-morenistas-felicitan-amlo-cumpleanos-69>

Figure 122:

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Appendix A

All transcripts of AMLO's speeches may be found by following this link:

<https://lopezobrador.org.mx/transcripciones/>

Appendix B

All video recordings of AMLO's speeches may be found by following this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/@lopezobrador>

Appendix C

The video recording of the event in Atlacomulco may be found by following this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=baBgC4ClkP4>

The transcript of this event may be found by following this link:

<https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2020/02/08/version-estenografica-dialogo-con-pueblos-indigenas-en-atlacomulco-estado-de-mexico/>

Appendix D

The video recording of the press conference on 23 February 2023 may be found by following this link:

<https://youtu.be/SfUaN-rU0k8>

The transcript of this event may be found by following this link:

<https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2023/02/23/version-estenografica-de-la-conferencia-de-prensa-matutina-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-916/>

Appendix E

The video recordings and transcripts of the President's government anniversary speeches may be found by following these links:

2019:

https://www.youtube.com/live/VlrFfriKOY?si=OSw3dWrYW7Md3_m9

<https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2019/12/01/discurso-informe-primer-ano-de-gobierno/>

2020:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/sRkw3e8jsRc?si=O5aVzcxnRjn-kepT>

<https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2020/12/01/discurso-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-informe-2-ano-de-gobierno-2018-2020/>

2021:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/lzid3w-q7us?si=0V61wqzHgiLgKY22>

<https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2021/12/01/discurso-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-a-3-anos-de-gobierno-2018-2021/>

2022:

https://youtu.be/dP0W_isqpf?si=spRtk1Te8a3qTd8g

<https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2022/11/27/discurso-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-en-la-celebracion-por-4-anos-de-transformacion/>

2023:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/w6JrzhXHwHs?si=XFKKLutR8M3WB1wq>

<https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2023/12/01/discurso-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-en-la-inauguracion-del-aeropuerto-internacional-felipe-carrillo-puerto-desde-tulum-quintana-roo/>

Appendix F

The video recording of the President's address to the nation on 1 December 2018 may be found by following this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/QR-JWPTp-T0?feature=shared>

The transcript of this event may be found by following this link:

<https://www.gob.mx/presidencia/articulos/discurso-de-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-presidente-de-los-estados-unidos-mexicanos?idiom=es>

Appendix G

The video recording of the *Marcha del Pueblo* (27 November 2022) may be found by following this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/live/UMyhThWuWdw?feature=shared>

The transcript of the President's speech may be found by following this link:

<https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2022/11/27/discurso-del-presidente-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-en-la-celebracion-por-4-anos-de-transformacion/>

Appendix H

The video recording of "¡Gracias!" may be found by following this link:

<https://youtu.be/Vu2Lyck5Xpk?feature=shared>

Appendix I

University of Leeds BESS + FREC favourable ethical opinion (01.12.2023):

Dear Barbara Grut

Your research ethics application reference: 0801

Amendment reference number: BESS+ FREC 2023-0801-1118 2 25/11/2023

Your research project: "Charismatic Leadership in Left Populism: The Missionary Politics of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador"

I am pleased to inform you that the above amendment application has been reviewed by the Business, Environment, Social Sciences BESS+ FREC Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) for [Committee Name] which has issued a favourable ethical opinion based on the application submitted. **Please retain this email in your project file as it is evidence of the Committee's approval.**

Matters you should note:

- Ethics approval does not infer you have the right of access to any member of staff or student or documents and the premises of the University of Leeds. Nor does it imply any right of access to the premises of any other organisation, including clinical areas. The Committee takes no responsibility for you gaining access to staff, students and/or premises prior to, during or following your research activities.
- It is your responsibility to comply with all relevant Health and Safety, Data Protection and other legal and professional requirements and guidelines.
- You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms, risk assessments and other documents relating to the research project. This should be kept in your project file.
- Audits are undertaken on approved ethics applications. Your project could be chosen for such an audit. You should therefore ensure your project files are kept up to date and readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is selected.
- Please always include the above research ethics application reference and Amendment request reference in any correspondence with the Research Ethics team.

If you need to make amendments to the original research project as submitted, you are expected to seek approval from the Committee before taking any further action. Changes could include (but are not limited to) the project end date, project design or recruitment methodology, or study documentation. Please see <https://ris.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics-and-integrity/applying-for-an-amendment/> or contact the Research Ethics team for further information at EthicsEnquiries@leeds.ac.uk.

I hope your research project continues to go well.

Best wishes,

Ms Taylor Haworth, Research Ethics Administrator, Secretariat

On behalf of Dr Judith Hanks, Chair, BESS+ FREC