Special Collection:
Violent configurations of power in Mexico

Regional configurations of violence in Mexico: Accumulation, control and representation

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Abstract

How can we account for levels of violence, numbers of internally displaced people and territorial fragmentation in Mexico that are higher than most civil wars? In contrast with the literature, which isolates violence and crime from other social processes, we build on a comparison with civil wars to account for the specificities of the regional configurations of violence in Mexico. We argue that armed actors, far from contesting the existing political institutions and system, conform to the social order to whose reproduction they thus contribute. In this introductory article of the ERLACS special collection Violent configurations of power in Mexico we look into the modes of accumulation, social-control mechanisms, and forms of representation to consider together lawful and unlawful activities, private and public actors, and legal and violent instruments. Thus, we build on the contributions of this special issue to analyze how the violent actors fit into regional political configurations. *Keywords*: Violence, Mexico, drug trafficking, state formation, accumulation, representation.

Resumen: Configuraciones regionales de violencia en México: Acumulación, control y representación

¿Cómo podemos dar cuenta de los niveles de violencia, el número de desplazados internos y la fragmentación territorial en México que son más altos que la mayoría de las guerras civiles? En contraste con la literatura, que aísla la violencia y el crimen de otros procesos sociales, construimos una comparación con las guerras civiles para dar cuenta de las especificidades de las configuraciones regionales de violencia en México. Sostenemos que los actores armados, lejos de oponerse al sistema y las instituciones políticas existentes, se ajustan al orden social a cuya reproducción contribuyen. En este artículo introductorio del número especial de ERLACS Configuraciones violentas de poder en México analizamos los modos de acumulación, los mecanismos de control social y las formas de representación para con-

siderar en conjunto actividades lícitas e ilícitas, actores públicos y privados e instrumentos legales y violentos. Así, nos basamos en los aportes de este número especial para analizar cómo los actores violentos encajan en las configuraciones políticas regionales. *Palabras clave*: Violencia, México, narcotráfico, formación de Estado, acumulación, representación.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Cold War, scholars predicted that emerging democratization processes would be accompanied by a overall decline in violence in Latin America.[1] However, in Mexico, where the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) lost its 71-year grip on presidential power in 2000, violence blatantly *increased*. While coertion was central to forming the post-revolutionary state and to the PRI's continued rule throughout the twentieth century, it has changed in scale and taken on more dramatic forms. This surge is particularly evident since President Felipe Calderón launched the War on Drugs in 2006. The country has registered more than 250,000 dead, and around 100,000 have gone missing or disappeared. Millions are estimated to have been displaced within Mexico or to have fled to the United States as a result of violence.[2]

The practices of violence, their socio-economic dynamics and the daily experiences that shape local political configurations in Mexico have stirred multiple academic debates. We started a comparative discussion in the ERC project on Social Dynamics of Civil Wars (CIVILWARS), which brought together a group of Mexico specialists with experts working in contexts such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Mali, Central African Republic, South Sudan, and Ukraine. A key question sparked our reflections: if the Mexican context differs from civil wars, how can we account for levels of violence, internally displaced people and territorial fragmentation that are equal, or even higher than in civil wars? Over the course of five years, our dialogues proved particularly heuristic; they nourished our reflection, and motivated the collection of articles that make this Special Collection on Mexico. The sociological approach to civil wars that has been built within the CIVILWARS project (Baczko, Dorronsoro & Quesnay, 2018: 1-24), as well as the empirical research conducted for this issue, have enabled us to move the debate away from the existing, often normative, frameworks of comparison between Mexico and civil wars. Indeed, the use of concepts forged in conflict studies has created a field of study on violence detached from the rest of social sciences dealing with Mexico. This field is dominated by North-American political science and criminology, including offshoots such as security studies, crime studies, conflict studies, and governance studies, as well as by the work of international agencies and think tanks. Developed after the Cold War, these areas of study have contributed to identifying so-called organized crime as a global security threat along with other vague concepts such as new wars and narcoterrorism (Briquet & Favarel-Garrigues, 2010).

In the list of these global threats, Mexico has occupied an ever-growing space over the past decades (Hochmuller & Muller, 2014). Nowadays, the country is one of the global encarnations of dysfunctional models of democracy and Western norms of statehood; a paradigmatic site of rampant crime, of "danger, darkness, anarchy, and disorder" in the words of Adam David Morton (2012: 1635). Moreover, the comparison between civil wars and situations of high levels of violence such as Mexico is often characterized by reductionism, turning official homicide rates into what Dennis Rodgers (2009: 953) has called the "accepted benchmark for measuring violence." That allows the phenomenon be treated as an independent quantifiable variable, which then leads to building models that, as Stephen Morris pointed out, far from allowing rigorous comparisons, tend to mobilize isolated cases without questioning their sociological specificities (Morris, 2013).

Moving beyond limited theoretical approaches

In this Special Collection we aim to account for the similarities and differences that exist between civil-war cases and the Mexican contexts of violence. One interesting, central dynamic that is often overlooked concerns the stability of State institutions: Armed actors in Mexico do not claim or seek to overthrow existing political institutions and system. Building on this, we have collectively studied violent regional configurations of economic, political and armed actors without isolating violence and drug-trafficking. This approach allows us to reframe issues such as the specificity of 'criminal' violence and its presumed 'apolitical', or 'post-political' character, and the forms taken by state presence and practices of violence in our contexts of study.

In this introduction, we aim to show how widespread armed violence and institutional stability have coexisted in modern Mexico. In order to do so, we follow three axes of reflection. First, we move away from the notion of organized crime. Following a rich anthropological corpus, we consider that its use as a fixed category obscures rather than clarifies the global and national processes of criminalization led by public authorities, the local dynamics of violence (Parnell & Kane, 2003), as well as to the way they affect the social contexts in which they take place (Schneider & Schneider, 2008). We question perspectives that promote the idea that criminal groups – in Mexico, drug cartels – represent comparable, homogeneous, secret, pyramidal, and strictly hierarchized structures. In this viewpoint, both policy-making and academic discourses tend to portray drug trafficking groups as the flip side of the democratic order that corrupt and infect the rest of society (Escalante, 2012): The universe of crime is therefore regarded as dominated by powerful, violent, fascinating leaders rooted in masculine myths (Astorga, 1996). Fueled by television series and a vast grey literature, these stereotypes inform popular representations of organized crime, and then find their way into the academic and policy corpus that establish cartels as emblems of global crime.[3] In this context, these

groups are depicted as an endemic security threat to Mexico – and Central and Latin America more generally (Imbusch, Misse & Carrión, 2011). In contrast, this special issue strives not to reify the actors involved in illicit economies and activities. It describes the way they belong to, integrate, and operate in local, social, economic and political contexts, as well as the way the international market for drugs, and the "war" that aims at fighting it, crucially affects these dynamics. The billions of dollars that the United States has invested in Latin America over the past decades shape and fuel the militarized and prohibitionist approach to drug trafficking (Grisaffi, 2013) and influence national politics. Yet, in Mexico, at least since the 1950s, far from being a one-way street imposed by the United States on its southern neighbor, the "war on drugs" is part of a complex bilateral relation within which Mexico has had crucial agency for imposing or negotiating its terms (Pérez-Ricart, 2020). That is why drug production and trafficking must be studied, firstly, as part of the way the Mexican state actively controls its own territory, and, secondly, its capability to use the war on drugs to its best political interest, far from the idea of 'failure' or 'retreat' that is usually associated with the study of cartels and contemporary dynamics of violence.

Second, the comparison with civil wars calls for a discussion about the political character of violence in relation with the absence of claim to overthrow the state. The bulk of political science deduces the level of political contestation of the state, from rising homicide rates. In other words, higher statistics of violence mechanically reveal an increase of power and autonomy of criminal actors (Lupsha, 1989). Security studies thus usually link civil wars, terrorism and organized crime (the "crime and terror nexus"), and turn criminal organizations into models of "narco-insurgency" (Sullivan, 2009). While this corpus acknowledges that criminal organizations do not fundamentally seek to replace the state – *i.e.* civil war – the former are nevertheless said to engage in "cartel-state conflicts" (Lessing, 2015) that would aim to impose *criminal governance, extra-legal or shadow governing* regimes (Von Lampe, 2016). These approaches rely on a positivist approach of violence, without, for example, questioning its dissenting dimension. Thus, central references tend to oppose "political violence to non-political, post-political violence or social violence" without properly defining these categories, as pointed out by Dennis Rodgers (2009: 950). His work shows socio-economic dynamics of violence requires paying particular attention to what coercion expresses, despite the absence of a formalized political project. Moreover, multiple authors writing from a critical perspective have illustrated how, in fact, the use of armed violence by a wide array of state and non-state actors, far from solely representing obstacles or threats to order, can actually play a central role in market, investments and capital accumulation that are part of liberal development processes (Bates, 2001; Jones & Rodgers, 2016).

Third, we aim at thoroughly questioning dominant theories of state-crime relations. Policy and academic discourses admit that criminal organizations

rely on forms of protection from public authorities as pure, rationalistic transactions and political exchange. In this perspective, state's collusion or, at minimum, its lack of intervention, is assured through threats and corruption, both understood as rigid forms of interactions and symptoms of a weakening democracy (Dal Bo, Dal Bo & Di Tella, 2006). Apparently breaking from these arguments, another line of research has studied state-crime relations in connection with regulating violence (Andreas &Wallman, 2009). Here, Mexico, analyzed through the PRI reign (1929-2000) and its posterior party alternation, is presented as a paradigmatic example of a state that is deeply corrupt, and yet was strong enough to dominate criminal actors in its territory. This PRI-inflicted control is seen as the key for the low-levels of violence the country had experienced before the 2000s, and the effective social control the PRI had before losing the presidency (Snyder & Durán-Martínez, 2009). Following this argument, the contemporary high levels of violence should be caused by disintegrating state-protection rackets, and the inability of state authorities to impose their will on criminal organizations, the latter being every day more brutal, uncontrollable, and autonomous, eventually able to impose schemes of extra-legal governance.

Besides their dissensions and differences, the above-mentioned approaches share one common hypothesis. Although the authors acknowledge the fact that the state and criminal actors do collude, they conclude that their interactions are based on a zero-sum game: Where crime makes inroads, state power can only retreat, and conversely. Mexican drug cartels, for example, are portrayed as ultra-violent enterprises ontologically opposed to state sovereignty. This binary vision of crime versus state impedes studying the diversity of actors that have historically gained authority using violence, including *caciques* (local bosses), local elites, entrepreneurs, community police, or self-defence militias (Kloppe-Santamaría, 2020). Even more crucial, this perspective turns a blind eye to the central role played by Mexican public authorities in fueling, regulating, and using coercion as a key tool for government (Rath, 2013; Gillingham & Smith, 2014). Contrary to these approaches, this special issue's articles build on work in anthropology, sociology, history, political economy and development studies that have shown that political authority and power in Mexico cannot be fully understood through a narrow Weberian, policy-inspired definition of stateness that opposes violence and social order (Maldonado-Aranda, 2010). Starting from the idea that violence can be a political resource and not an obstacle to power (Arias & Goldstein, 2010) and consolidating multiple institutions of government – be they in the hands of state or non-state actors (Blom-Hansen & Stepputat, 2005) – we study regional configurations and embed violent practices in broader power relationships.

The role of violent actors in upholding social order

In order to better understand the coexistence of widespread violence with institutional stability, we are particularly interested in the ways in which in Mexico, public or private actors engaging in violence also play a role in upholding the social order, especially at the local level. While these actors can occupy or orchestrate a subversive position in the public space, far from upsetting the political game they in fact lend a hand in reproducing the social order, to sustain, or achieve an advantaged position within it. We argue that, unlike civil wars, the contexts we study are not defined by producing rival social orders, in the sense of new competing, parallel economies of violence and hierarchization of different types of capital (Baczko, Dorronsoro & Quesnay, 2018). In Mexico, the practices of violence are inserted in power-relationship nodes: Although alternative authorities exist, they do not replace state structures, neutralize official authorities, or lead to an exclusive appropriation of the territory (Gibson, 2005). Local relationships between violent organizations, the population, and public institutions are part of political configurations, in which coercion acts as a means for social control. These situations of violence take place in what are considered as peaceful contexts, where elections lead to political alternation. In that sense, institutional stability coexists with extreme levels of violence. Thus, while Mexico is experiencing an unprecedented wave of homicides, the key parts of its economy (oil, mining, agrifood industry, tourism, finance, chemical industry) are preferred places of investment for both national and international economic actors, a remarkable vote of confidence in the system's stability. These contributions analyze the diversity of relations that exist between violent groups, and regional political orders. They oscillate from open confrontation to more discreet logics of co-optation, or even active integration into politics. Within these configurations, the boundaries between the legal and the illegal are *both* fluid and structuring. They enable collaboration, imitation, and delegation of governance between public institutions and criminal groups. For example, violence enabled new regional elites to emerge and was key in the political assertion of the army on the national scene.

In the remainder of this introductory article, we discuss the importance of looking into the particular dimensions of modes of accumulation, social control mechanisms, and forms of representation. Based on fieldwork or archival research and building on analytical perspectives of history, political economy, and sociology, each article analyzes how the violent actors fit into regional political configurations. First, we will explore the dynamics of accumulation in contexts of territorial fragmentation and multiplication of authorities. This calls for an inquiry into what resources are available, how actors control them, and limit or grant access to them. Second, we will look into the processes of regulation or control implemented by violent actors. We will show how mechanisms of delegation, imitation and the use of violence actually reveal their *conformity* to the social orders to whose reproduction they contribute. Finally, we explore

the public positioning of violent actors, their modalities of local representation, and whether these constitute sources of political alternatives or contestation. By looking at the different ways in which they vindicate localness, the present issue brings to light the ambiguities between, on the one hand, claiming to take local interests into consideration and, on the other hand, reproducing territorial and social hierarchies.

Accumulating in the presence of, and through, violence

Paying attention to accumulation processes and their historical evolution helps to avoid the normative biases of focusing on groups' criminal character, making it possible to assess their economic activities, in order to examine their insertion into broader power structures encompassing local, regional, national and transnational scales (Beckert & Dewey, 2017). Attention to the modes of accumulation should not be limited to the most visible – i.e most violent – actors. Rather, it should also include less prominent forces and discuss the effects of the distinction between state-versus-non-state and legal-versus-illegal actors. We thus study economic practices in order to situate the violent actors within the social structure, beyond the usual focus on their most brutal and publicized practices. Doing so allows us to transcend the dichotomy between resource capture by actors labelled as criminals, and licit accumulation by public and private elites. We highlight the continuities between these accumulation modes, the structuring of elites – be they private, state or illegal – and the global economic sectors in which they can be observed, namely drug trafficking, mining, migration economy, port activities or agribusiness, and how they contribute to reproducing social order.

Concessioning, segmentation, and intermediation are three key social and economic dynamics that shape local violent configurations. With regard to concessions, the law appears to be just as central to accumulating as violence, if not more so. To begin with, maintaining formal institutions and upholding the legal/illegal boundary are crucial to defining economic niches, and which actors can profit from them. In particular, the ability of certain actors to alternate between what is lawful and what is not conditions the possibility of converting capital from one sector to another, or from one territory to another, as Mendoza shows in this issue with the case of mining concession in Sonora. Legal distinctions and their enforcement also creates spaces to produce value and surplus value, just as it can criminalize access to certain resources or skills. For example, this is the case of international border crossings: by making certain activities illegal – such as crossing drugs or migrant populations – the law opens up opportunities for violent value extraction, and contributes to consolidating dedicated, skillful actors who do so, as Sergio Salazar-Araya illustrates in his contribution on migration and disappearances. He conceptualizes the Mexico-Central American borders and internal Mexican tolls as chokepoints

that turn migrant populations into sources of profit, particularly through extortion by public and private actors.

At every crossing, the moving migrant generates value. His analysis demonstrates the entanglements between the forms of value extraction that these populations are subjected to. The illegality of their journey, which makes them captive and particularly vulnerable, enables multiple actors to extract value from them, and thrive on illegal flows of human displacement. The role of legal distinctions and their enforcement also appears to be key to reconfiguring control over drug trafficking. This can be observed in the case of Sinaloa in the mid-twentieth century, as Benjamin Smith and Wil Pansters analyze in this issue. The illegality of drugs created formidable profitmaking opportunities for many non-state actors, but also, if not more, for state actors: for example, by imposing a payment to use a specific road, or to obtain protection from law enforcement agencies. Such opportunities tend to feed brutal competition between different state agencies vying to regulate multiple illicit and licit activities, ranging from drug trafficking to logging, avocado production, and mining to electoral processes. Their aim is thus not necessarily to fight against illicit economies, but to gain control over preferential legal treatment, which underpins opportunities for accumulation. In short, characterizing activities as legal/illegal opens up opportunities for value extraction, including violent ones.

Strategically segmenting national territory is another essential mode of accumulation, with internal boundaries creating enclaves that make it profitable to set up checkpoints. This may be accomplished using violence – as Salazar shows with the economy of migrants' disappearances – which makes access to an area perilous for most, but conversely positions some as the only ones capable of entering and allowing passage. Similarly, law is used by those who have the means, as an instrument to control accesses to a sector or an activity, be they legal or not. Either way, the profits derived from regulating flows of goods and people are a distinguishing characteristic of the Mexican political economy. In the case of the border state of Sonora, Natalia Mendoza-Rockwell shows how violent groups' creating concessions, constructing gateways in the desert, enables them to reap the profits from paid passage. These benefits are notably achieved by owners' delegating these concessions and obligatory passes to local actors, who receive a share of checkpoint earnings, while the former extend their influence.

This logic mirrors mining-concession structuring, in theory granted in strict accordance with the law. In practice, this prerogative is regularly privatized by various officials and local violent groups who control crossings and movements, and by mining companies that formally hold concessions. Here again, legal arrangements are co-constructed, and coexist with violence. In fact, rather than instruments of transparency, the law and the judicial system should be understood as a resource that dominant actors may wield to establish their authority. In the case of Sonora, studied by Natalia Mendoza-Rockwell, the state does not disappear; on the contrary, it continues to hold a monopoly on legal

violence. This configuration matches what Béatrice Hibou has described as the "lack of a precise boundary between what is punished and what is allowed, between what is authorized, tolerated and condemned, between licit and illicit, and the games surrounding conflicts of principles – [all this creating] the space for political intervention and the exercise of arbitrary power at all times, [which] leads to permanent negotiations among actors" (Hibou, 2004: 16).

This leads to our third focal point: political intermediation. Drawing internal borders underpins the modalities of accumulation through intermediation, *i.e.* the control of the relationship between local social groups and nation and transnational power fields. Segmenting and enclaving specific areas sets the stage for monopolizing local resources, what Wil Pansters and Alan Knight have characterized as "political junctures" or "synapses" (Knight & Pansters, 2006: 47). Then, by controlling accesses, traffic, economic opportunities and political contacts, intermediaries can administer a variety of resources and base their accumulation on holding this position. As Adèle Blazquez has shown in the case of Badiraguato, this strategy of intermediation goes beyond the legal or illegal nature of elites' activities. In a municipality that has historically been structured as a geographical enclave (enabling poppy growing), local politicians' accumulation strategies are based on exploiting the isolation of Badiraguato – and thus fueling it further (Blazquez, 2022). The broker's challenge is to maintain this structural distance by becoming indispensable to the parties involved in intermediation. Thus, the more *effective* the broker is*,* the less its multiple audiences can bypass it ("down" or "up") and the greater its accumulated profits are likely to be. In Alexander Aviña's article on the Mexican state of Guerrero, it is clear how violence was, and still is, used as a tool to secure a position of political intermediary. Here, landowners that actively supported the army during the "dirty war" waged against social opposition movements and various guerrillas between the 1960s and 1980s also consolidated their control of intermediation channels and political protections. It enabled them to build a monopoly over certain legal activities, but also over drug production and trafficking in the region, a position they are still fighting to maintain nowadays.

Similarly, in Romain Le Cour Grandmaison's article, brokers claiming to regulate violence in Michoacán – political bosses, *caciques,* traffickers, members of self-defense groups – profit from controlling the flow of lawful and unlawful resources. Case in point, the Cartel Los caballeros Templarios managed, at least between 2011 and 2013, to monopolize intermediation channels between center and periphery, before being overthrown by armed competitors trying to regain their place in the local political economy (Le Cour Grandmaison, 2021). This dynamic underpins the rise of Autodefensas de Michoacán, allied with the Mexican federal forces. Indeed, although the self-defence militias initially consisted of a wide coalition of local citizens – farmers, ranchers, merchants, landowners, politicians, entrepreneurs, and drug traffickers – a long-lasting conflict and the federal government's active role, then regeneratedf the previous local elite. In the Michoacán case, as in many other Mexican

states, a handful of strongmen, able to mobilize capital and force in licit and illicit arenas, are progressively able to consolidate their intermediary position with the federal authorities. As the conflicts and violence grow, the strongmen accumulate power as intermediaries, which then helps them build political and financial capital in the form of land, electoral opportunities or participation to different illicit economies. Yet, in Michoacán, the more these leaders were able to accumulate influence with public authorities, the more they lost the local population's support, who saw them as mere opportunists; and losing popular support, exposed them to losing their *raison d'être* as intermediaries, and therefore their government support as well.

The logics of intermediation studied in this special issue thus reveal that actors laying claim to a position of authority must be understood and analyzed as part of larger political configurations. If they fail to do so, they get relegated to micro-local power positions where the most profitable intermediation, tapping, and redistribution channels are beyond their reach. Segmentation, enclaves, and intermediation are therefore deeply intricated in Mexican contexts of violence. Although in some cases – such as Sinaloa and Guerrero – elites and intermediaries have been in place for decades, Michoacán, or the Sonoran case presented by Natalia Mendoza-Rockwell show how fragile these violent enterprises can be, how difficult their integration within a larger political game, and the associated accumulation possibilities.

Violent control and domination

Actors' modes of accumulation engaged in organized violence insert them into the economic, political and legal structures guaranteed by states. Therefore, practices of violence contribute to state formation and consolidation, as a central political space, specifically by strengthening its role in regulating the economy of violence (Tilly, 1985; Joseph & Nugent, 1994). While crime is in certain places and at certain times a form of political contestation, the contributions in this issue underline conversely the conservative nature of violent groups in Mexico. Following the subversive figure of the social bandit drawn by Eric Hobsbawm (1971), Mexican traffickers are portrayed as seditious, even revolutionary. In reality, violent groups controlling given territories do not translate into building subversive orders. Similar to Anton Blok's *mafiosi*, the violent groups studied in this issue act more like guarantors of the political and social status quo than protest elements (Blok, 1972, 1988).

In the first place, instances of delegation reveal how violent groups conform to and integrate with existing power structures. Historically, these issues are particularly heuristic in that they resonate at different stages in forming the modern State, from colonial to contemporary times. At the local level, practices of power and political domination have hinged on a state presence deployed specifically through local strongmen – *caciques* or *caudillos,* among others – whose authority and legitimacy depended mainly on their ability to maintain

order, if need be through violence (Rubin, 1996). The central state is therefore accustomed to using private intermediaries whose authority it *recognizes* over a territory or field of activity, so long as they do not overtly challenge its own power. In that sense, we argue that violent groups and criminal organizations initially integrate into the political sphere in the same way. They can be tolerated or fought, but are part of power configurations, and they eventually reveal how public authorities have built themselves – and still do – through governmentality that is linked to, and sometimes confronts, unofficial powers.

These practices, at the intersection of public/private authorities, and drug traffickers, are well described in the contributions of Alexander Aviña, Le Cour Grandmaison and Salazar. Aviña shows how the landholding elites of Guerrero, historically providing local auxiliaries and support for Mexican Armed Forces, consolidated their role as guarantors of social control in the context of growing drug trafficking. By assuming part of the dirty work in the dirty war, these landowners helped ensure territorial continuity for the Mexican State and its armed forces, and positioned themselves as key actors in drug production and trafficking, a role they still maintain today. A similar phenomenon is observed in various groups operating in Michoacán, as shown by Le Cour Grandmaison. For example, since the structural adjustment reforms of the 1980s and the simultaneous development of agribusiness and mining in this region, various vulnerable populations living on, or possessing prized land – such as land located next to avocado farms, properties situated on virgin beaches on the Pacific Coast, or arid strips of mountains located in mining areas – have been targeted by violent private groups protected by public authorities. While the latter's liability rarely comes to light, collusion is generally revealed in granting property title to land colonized by force. This is when the links between illegitimate strongmen, including traffickers, and their legitimate counterparts – local elected officials, economic elites, and federal authorities – materialize and demonstrate their effectiveness (Gledhill, 2000). Sergio Salazar's article also makes this argument about the machinery that ties state officials and violent groups when it comes to exploiting and disappearing migrants. Although official regulations and Government discourses attempt to turn disappearances into a solely private, criminal matter, searches led by civil-society organizations unveil the process through which disappearances are associated with forming the state and reproducing criminal capital at the same time.

Secondly, as shown in these contributions, these actors fit into the social and political structure, mimicking state practices, including when they provide public services. While the groups under consideration rarely become institutionalized, this aspect deserves special attention. The most advanced case of institutionalization in Mexico concerns the cartel Los caballeros Templarios in the state of Michoacán, studied by Romain Le Cour Grandmaison. His article shows how they were able to establish particularly holistic social control practices, from regulating movement in public spaces to establishing a system of

taxation on virtually all commercial, economic and political activities falling under their territorial control. Without going that far, many of the violent actors studied in this issue stage their services for public awareness, for example, by electrification projects or building roads. More broadly, by providing access to jobs and economic markets in communities marked by very high levels of poverty, these actors consolidate their social legitimacy and control.

Thirdly, coercion plays an active part in social control and constitutes a key dimension of enforced compliance. Two modalities of exercising violence must be distinguished here: one establishes a form of predictability by creating sanctioned standards in a given territory, and one is used arbitrarily as a deterrent. Indeed, on the one hand, the disciplinary scope of coercion practices is embedded in territorialization strategies led by public and private violent actors, part of the established political order. Therefore, territorialization, understood as the ordering and "spatial organization of inhabitants" not only "structures a physical space": It also organizes "the social and political perception of it," particularly when based on producing norms (Lund, 2006: 1205). Combined with producing and disseminating social and moral norms, territorialization is integral to violent actors' local governance ambitions. It also gradually enshrines itself as the essential political intermediary. As shown in Natalia Mendoza-Rockwell's article, this can be accompanied by practices of violence designed to control strategic geographical and social spaces to the maximum extent possible. In the Sonoran desert, as well as in Sergio Salazar's case in southern Mexico, this type of control is operationalized with checkpoints, armed patrols, and multiple forms of violence and surveillance – all designed to sanctuarize the territory and exert constant pressure on the people who live in it. Yet, as Alexander Aviña shows in his recount of state violence and collaboration with private militias in Guerrero, these practices do not contradict the state's continued presence with its security forces.

Within the social order thus constructed, violence can appear as an element of predictability. Protection against groups, which are presented as external, is often associated with practices of disciplining and regulating the social body in these regions. Recurrently using terms such as *limpiar* (clean up) in violent groups' vocabulary testifies to these ambitions, as does the constant will to separate "insiders" from "outsiders" (*la gente de 'fuera' y la gente de 'aquí'*). The guise of ensuring security also imposes moral order. Violent actors – be they public or private – participate in ordering local society, often in line with state interests and local elites' structures, as Benjamin Smith and Wil Pansters demonstrate in the case of Sinaloa. Yet, the predictable, arbitrary modalities of exercising violence are not mutually exclusive. For example, brutality and arbitrariness can be used to control social behaviors, and their concrete consequences for local populations must be thoroughly studied. Pansters and Smith highlight these violent control practices' fluidity between state and non-state actors in Sinaloa. By studying the internal state agencies' competition to control drug-trafficking revenues in Sinaloa, they show the impact it has on the

practices and dynamics of traffickers' violence. Here, the action of public forces leads to greater instability and exposes local populations to multiple sources of coercion. Finally, massacres and the display of mutilated bodies in public spaces are decisive in massive population movements, including forced internal displacement and international migration flows that expose populations to further forms of violence, as Sergio Salazar and Natalia Mendoza show in two different instances. In both cases, brutality is an essential part of the control exerted on moving bodies, an activity that tends to strengthen the ties between private actors and public authorities thriving on migrant flows through Mexico.

Disputed representations

Paradoxically including these actors in the social order, as evidenced by their modes of accumulation and their practices of regulation and violence, compels us to critically consider their claim to embodying a political alternative. The forms of authority they wield succeed under the crisis of representation affecting the state (Lomnitz, 2016). This line of inquiry concentrates on how violent actors are represented in public, political space. This derives from relationships between the center and the peripheries, but also from multiple frustrated social demands upon the state. This is what Sergio Salazar shows about the discursive, representative battles that develop around the issue of migrants' disappearances. Disputes between migrants' families and multiple organizations searching for them, and authorities (attorneys, migration agencies, embassies, public ministry) reveal the continuities between legal/illegal, state/private forms of co-constructing a violent social order, but also citizens' claim to hold the state accountable. Representing disappeared migrants becomes political: It leads to debunking and highlighting the conditions in which they vanish, both from earth and from any available records.

In contexts of institutional and political stability, claims to local legitimacy by violent actors reveal interesting contradictions. First, as several case-studies show, violent actors attempt to fashion their autochthony – i.e. geographical origin and nativeness – into a bundle of resources and principles of hierarchization they use in their quest for authority and legitimacy (Rétière, 2013). As a resource, autochtony lets these groups establish alliances with public security institutions, elected officials at the local and federal levels, and with key economic sectors. Then, constructing autochthony and the associated ongoing conflicts are at the heart of both private and public actors' capacity for legitimation in contexts of violence. Second, the construction of autochtony as a political resource lies more broadly in groups' branding – which almost systematically names the region/city they are from – with discourses stressing their protection for the area's inhabitants against the state's armed forces or competing groups. For example, Le Cour Grandmaison shows how violent organizations (e.g. la Familia Michoacana Cartel, Los caballeros Templarios cartel, and the Michoacán self-defense groups) constantly mobilize arguments based on autochthony.

They deploy these against those who they stigmatize as *gente de fuera*. This distinction goes with the desire to impose protection and social control over a certain category of individuals, both based on geographic origins and a moral construct of belonging. At the regional level, these elements help to better understand groups' implantation and the social support they may enjoy, both from the population and the regional authorities, which may find a fruitful ally in these socially embedded groups.

This local enrollment builds role models that integrate the ability to use violence alongside a prestige repertoire. The most famous members of the violent organizations studied in this issue regularly boast of their modest origins and how they rose on their own, a discourse that resonates strongly with people who struggle to subsist in these places. Thus, the social characteristics of traffickers are important insofar as they appear as local, legitimate emanations, as well as figures of power, prestige and authority. In contexts of destitution and marginalization, these organizations also represent opportunities for social mobility and disseminate masculine models of success that more broadly legitimize their presence and economy.

Moreover, claims of nativeness regularly entail explicit criticism of the state. Thus, the autochthony lexicon takes on an anti-authority tinge, to the extent that it contrasts the popular embeddedness of violent actors with the remoteness and inattention of public authorities. Being *from here* and *operating here* supports a discourse of concern for local issues. Paradoxically, economic betterment through participation in trafficking in areas where deprivation and underemployment are pervasive, even though it requires predatory forms of accumulation and exploitation, buttress this promise of tending to local interests. In addition, drug trafficking groups, for example, tend to present themselves as both independent of the state, and in opposition to political figures or intermediaries that depend on public relations and financial resources to stay in power. Although the groups' actions and strategic positioning may contradict these claims, they do not necessarily negate the performativity of the argument for valuing individual enterprise, which, in effect, largely joins in and appropriates the dominant neoliberal governance models in the country – and more broadly in the region. In this regard, the effectiveness of local rhetoric – and the fact that it is a necessary condition for maintaining these groups' dominance – is a powerful indicator of contradictory expectations, often disappointed, from the state.

Yet, as the contributions also make clear, the rhetoric of being local does not just address local people; they are part of intermediation strategies that are also intended to reach regional, national and global audiences. Hence, we distinguish among several varieties of discourse. The rhetoric of autochthony does not point to processes of local empowerment, but, on the contrary, are signs of insertion into regional, national or global power structures. The localism claimed by violent groups is an instrument within their negotiation with supralocal authorities; a strategy that fits particularly well with governments' ne-

oliberal reforms. Indeed, among state administrations, the local scale is valued as the most effective one for policy implementation and political representation. As shown by critical development studies, local arrangements and accommodations are seen as more authentic and valuable (Nader, 1999).

Several keywords of neoliberal policies – such as citizen participation and local empowerment – draw their depoliticization potential from the abstract conception of a idealized local community based on consensus (Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007). For example, the label of community policing, initially used by Mexican self-defense groups in Michoacán and Guerrero, enjoys a favorable aura in the media, although in practice it covers a wide variety of realities, including the takeover of drug-trafficking. In this context, the recurrent use of a localist rhetoric derives from frustrated demands for representation, plus the decentralizing character of neoliberal government, and inscription within policy trends and discourses. This rhetoric is therefore part of a hegemonic discourse. The recurrence of localist claims highlights the importance of siloing the two audiences – the local population and regional and national authorities – thus enabling the intermediation position their discourses want.

Finally, violence is an essential tool as it allows access to resources or territories, and thus enables taking control of intermediation channels between the state and local society. By promising to defend local interests against the outside world, violent actors fuel a dissident reputation in spite of the conservative nature of their social and economic practices. In the end, in a circular dynamic, they act as guarantors of social hierarchies and participate in maintaining the marginality of spaces, which in turn enables them to perpetuate their role as unique representatives towards the outside world.

In short, contrary to approaches which build on the disappearance, failure or capture of the state by violent actors, our collective work shows how high levels of violence coexist with institutional stability and booming capitalism. Unlike civil wars, these practices of violence and the configuration that they produce are inserted in power relationship nodes that do not replace state structures or neutralize official authorities. This situation is not unique to Mexico: in Colombia, Pakistan, or the Philippines, public or private actors that engage in violence, especially at the local level, far from challenging social order, use coercion in parallel with the atate's institutions, and therefore appear as agents of its reproduction. The Mexican case thus invites to account both for the tragic entanglements that create these territories where daily life is organized for some to prosper at the expense of many, and for the limited possibility of being represented depending on violent actors hard to circumvent yet who reinforce these profoundly unequal worlds.

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Notes

1   For a discussion of these approaches, showing especially how the questions of violence, criminalization, and militarization are glossed over in works on Mexico's democratic transition, see Wil Pansters (2011).

2   For Mexico alone, between 2011 and 2018, the Mexican Commission for Defense and Promotion of Human Rights estimates that 8,726,375 persons had to temporarily or permanently abandon the place where they lived to escape fighting and violence. See Pérez-Vázquez (2018).

3   The *Narcos* TV series, produced and distributed worldwide by Netflix, is a paradigmatic case of the fictional treatment of reality and, particularly, contributing to building up myths around the Latin American cartels. Unquestionably, they are ultraviolent entities and thus always fascinating. This gulf between fiction and reality vanishes with many analysts and journalists who now describe the dynamics of violence in Mexico with expressions like "like on Narcos" or "like on Netflix". For a study of the way such representations influence local contexts, see: Cabañas (2014); Mercille (2014); Blazquez (2021).

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