POLITECNICO DI TORINO
Repository ISTITUZIONALE

Drug Wars and the Neoliberalization of the Space in Latin America

Original
Drug Wars and the Neoliberalization of the Space in Latin America / Asoni, E.. - In: DIACRONIE. STUDI DI STORIA CONTEMPORANEA. - ISSN 2038-0925. - ELETTRONICO. - 39:3(2019), pp. 1-26. [10.4000/diacronie.11908]

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/3003916 since: 2025-10-13T15:26:54Z

Publisher:
DIACRONIE Studi di Storia Contemporanea

Published
DOI:10.4000/diacronie.11908

Terms of use:

This article is made available under terms and conditions as specified in the corresponding bibliographic description in the repository

Publisher copyright

(Article begins on next page)

06 November 2026

Diacronie
Studi di Storia Contemporanea

39, 3/2019
Mafia e storiografia. Premesse culturali e prospettive attuali

Drug Wars and the Neoliberalization of the Space in Latin America

Ettore ASONI

Per citare questo articolo:
ASONI, Ettore, «Drug Wars and the Neoliberalization of the Space in Latin America», *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea : Mafia e storiografia. Premesse culturali e prospettive attuali*, 39, 3/2019, 29/10/2019,
URL: < http://www.studistorici.com/2019/10/29/asoni_numero_39/ >

Diacronie Studi di Storia Contemporanea → http://www.diacronie.it
Rivista storica online. Uscita trimestrale.
redazione.diacronie@hotmail.it
Comitato di direzione: Naor Ben-Yehoyada – João Fábio Bertonha – Christopher Denis-Delacour – Maximiliano Fuentes Codera – Tiago Luís Gil – Anders Granås Kjøstvedt – Deborah Paci – Mateus Henrique de Faria Pereira – Spyridon Ploumidis – Wilko Graf Von Hardenberg
Comitato di redazione: Jacopo Bassi – Luca Bufarale – Gianluca Canè – Luca G. Manenti – Fausto Pietrancosta – Elisa Tizzoni – Matteo Tomasoni – Luca Zuccolo

Diritti: gli articoli di *Diacronie. Studi di Storia Contemporanea* sono pubblicati sotto licenza Creative Commons 3.0. Possono essere riprodotti e modificati a patto di indicare eventuali modifiche dei contenuti, di riconoscere la paternità dell'opera e di condividerla allo stesso modo. La citazione di estratti è comunque sempre autorizzata, nei limiti previsti dalla legge.

4/ Drug Wars and the Neoliberalization of the Space in Latin America

Ettore ASONI

This paper criticizes certain representations of drug trafficking and organized crime in Latin America, which discuss organized crime groups as natural state competitors and sources of instability. These representations serve to justify campaigns of political and military warfare, so called "Drug Wars", which are deployed with the support of the United States. The article will review the existing literature on the subject, and particularly the voices that are most critical toward the official representations of "drug related violence". By building on the existing literature, I will argue that the current conflict in Colombia and Mexico should primarily be related to the neoliberalization of the countries' economy, and not the trafficking of drugs.

1. Introduction

This article offers a brief, critical analysis of political and military warfare strategies in Northern Latin America that commonly take the name of "Drug Wars". This term identifies a complex series of strategies that go from military actions to economic reforms, all comprehended within political projects that aim at eradicating drug trafficking and organized crime[1]. In order to fight organized crime, the Latin American countries that experience it the most have declared a militarization of their societies and they have signed bilateral agreements with the United States to promote a cooperation with the goal of eradicating the phenomenon. In fact, today the US' influence over Colombia, Mexico, and Central America is justified through the Drug War, that invests the US of the role of supporters and protectors in the fight of their allies against drugs. Whereas a few decades ago the US were mostly focused on not losing their neighbours to

1 In the United States the term "Drug War" or "War on Drugs" is no longer used at the institutional level due to the strong criticism and skepticism that surrounds it, after the perceived failure of the anti-drugs operations and the accusations of human rights abuses committed during Drug War campaigns. Nevertheless, I will continue to use it due to the fact that such campaigns have never ceased, regardless of how they are called. See: PALEY, Dawn, *Drug War Capitalism*, Oakland, AK Press, 2014.

communism or socialism, today they are concerned with promoting security[2]. Crime, as the ultimate threat to security, has become the new enemy for the state in the Americas, and the state's fight is not against subversives anymore, but against drug traffickers. Since the end of the Cold War, power and warfare in the Americas have transformed into tools for security, launching wars against an enemy that is not moved by an idea, but merely by greed. In the fight against organized crime the state is not attacking to protect the freedom of its citizens, but merely to protect their bodies and their lives. The Drug War is a war where soldiers become police officers, and the army is deployed internally to patrol the country.

In recent years, a growing number of journalists and scholars have focused on the Drug War concept in an effort to show the contradictions and shortcomings in the official discourse that describes it, highlighting the crucial links between neoliberalization and the military strategies that officially aim at eradicating drug trafficking and organized crime[3]. Borrowing from the existing literature on the subject, my article will focus on the case of Colombia and Mexico to explore alternative geographic representation of the Drug War, which might be more efficient in explaining the violence. I will argue that the Drug War does not consist in a war for legality, but in a war for the control of territory and natural resources. In this conflict, state forces and paramilitary groups either cooperate or fight with each other in an effort to extend their power over specific areas, that are eventually dominated and transformed so to allow for the investment and allocation of international capitals. The armed actors operate as agents of neoliberalism, by conquering a space and reorganizing its economic and social relations so to merge it with the global economy. In the midst of the violence, the neoliberalization of these countries advance, and transnational corporations and US interests appear to be the greatest beneficiaries from these developments.

At the moment, the US presence in Northern Latin America is mainly organized around three distinct projects: Peace Colombia, which has followed Plan Colombia (2000-2015) in 2017[4]; the Merida Initiative in Mexico[5]; and Operation Martillo, that mainly concerns the Northern

---

[2] BAYLIS, John, *The Concept of Security in International Relations,* in BRAUCH, Hans Günter, SPRING, Ursula Oswald, MESJASZ, Czeslaw (edited by), *Globalization and Environmental Challenges. Hexagon Series on Human and Environmental Security and Peace*, vol.3, Berlin, Springer, 2008.

[3] See among others: PALEY, Dawn, *Drug War Capitalism,* cit.; CORREA-CABRERA Guadalupe, *Los Zetas Inc. Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2017; OSORNO, Diego Enrique, *La Guerra de los Zetas,* Chapultepec Morales, Random House Mondadori, 2012; MASTROGIOVANNI, Federico, *Ni Vivos ni muertos*, Mexico City, Penguin Random House, 2014; ZAVALA, Oswaldo, *Los cárteles no existen. Narcotráfico y cultura en México*, Barcelona, Malpaso, 2018.

[4] US Congressional Research Service, Colombia: Background and US Relations, R43813, 8 February 2019. URL: < https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43813 > [consulted on 30 April 2019].

[5] US Embassy-Mexico, *Fact Sheet: The Merida Initiative - An Overview,* July 2015 URL: < https://photos.state.gov/libraries/mexico/310329/july15/MeridaInitiativeOverview-Jul15.pdf > [consulted on 8 September 2019]. United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), *MÉRIDA*

Triangle, which is a region made up of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras[6]. Each one of these plans runs concurrently and perhaps conditionally to neoliberal projects, in part sponsored by the IMF[7], that mostly regard the privatization of the countries' natural resources. Due to their "comprehensive" approach, all these plans share a common set of goals that define the US' involvement in these countries. While they are designed with the purpose of eradicating groups that engage in drug trafficking, which are defined under the umbrella terms Drug Trafficking Organization (DTO) or Transnational Crime Organization (TCO), these plans aim to do so through strategies of state building, cooperation on matters of security and justice, and the training, aiding, and funding of local state forces. Therefore, the vision behind these plans is that military warfare cannot be the sole tool to destroy organized crime, as they consider economic development through neoliberalization a key element to achieve security and stability[8]. That is to say, the point is not merely to attack TCOs, but also to change the economic and social fabric of these countries so to eradicate elements that might weaken the State and help the flourishing of organized crime[9].

These projects are built on specific representations of organized crime, meaning that cooperation can only exist as long as a representation of drug trafficking that is consistent with the plans' strategies is effectively spread. Because of this, we will find hegemonic representations of the *narco* in a variety of settings, from the media, to politics, to academia, that all share key features that represent drug trafficking as a threat for regional and national security, human rights, governance, etc... Military or security strategies against drug trafficking in Latin America rest on an understanding of TCOs as a source of instability due to the fact that they compete against the state. TCOs are considered natural state competitors because they aim at exerting power over legal and illegal transaction in their territories[10]. Under this framework, violence in

---

INITIATIVE: The United States Has Provided Counternarcotics and Anticrime Support but Needs Better Performance Measures, July 2010, URL: < http://www.gao.gov/assets/310/307523.pdf > [consulted on 24 May 2019].

[6] RAMÍREZ, John H., *Operation Martillo as a Tool to Reduce Drug Trafficking in the Northern Triangle Countries (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras)*, Fort Benning, Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), 2017.

[7] «Colombia: Peace is Good for Business», in *International Monetary Fund*, URL: < http://www.imf.org/en/Countries/COL/working-together-colombia-and-the-imf/ > [consulted on 24 May 2019].

[8] PALEY, Dawn, «Drug War as Neoliberal Trojan Horse», in *Latin American Perspectives*, 42, 5/2015, pp. 109-132.

[9] US EMBASSY-MEXICO, *Fact Sheet: The Merida Initiative - An Overview,* July 2015 URL: < https://photos.state.gov/libraries/mexico/310329/july15/MeridaInitiativeOverview-Jul15.pdf > [consulted on 8 September 2019].

[10] For an example of how TCOs are described in official documents see: TRUMP, Donald J. *Presidential Executive Order on Enforcing Federal Law with Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking*, 9 February 2017, URL: < https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-executive-order-enforcing-federal-law-respect-transnational-criminal-organizations-preventing-international-trafficking/ > [consulted on 8 September 2019].

the area is understood as either the product of struggle between TCOs, or as the outcome of the fight between the state and organized crime. More specifically, given that they are portrayed as anti-state, violent organizations, TCOs are often discussed as insurgents[11]. Phenomena of collusion between the state and TCOs that could contradict this representation are considered to be the effect of individual greed or systemic problems (such as low salaries or impunity)[12].

2. Plan Colombia

While Plan Colombia was officially signed in the year 2000, Colombia and the US have been close allies for most of the 20th century, and particularly during the Cold War[13]. The Colombian state has been fighting a war against communist guerrilla groups[14] since 1961, and the US have always been supporters of military efforts against the guerrillas for obvious political reasons. Guerrilla groups were the main targets of military efforts during Plan Colombia as well, and it would be incorrect to say that during the Drug War the military focused on generic drug trafficking groups, due to the fact that right wing paramilitary groups that controlled most of the drug trade have rarely been targeted, and have often cooperated with state forces instead.[15] The Drug War in Colombia has unfolded within a pre-existing conflict, which has started to be described as a conflict motivated by drug trafficking in the late 1990s, even though the armed actors did not change. It is true that the growth of cocaine trafficking has intensified the conflict, as it offered huge funds and created alliances that have increased the military capacity of the armed actors. But it is much less factual to consider the conflict to have become a Drug War since the fighters started trafficking cocaine. Moreover, Plan Colombia

For academic analysis of TCOs that follow this paradigms see for example: JONES, Nathan P., *Mexico's illicit drug networks and the state reaction*, Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press, 2016; DURAN-MARTINEZ, Angelica, *The Politics of Drug Violence*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2018.

[11] HAL, Brands, *MEXICO'S NARCO-INSURGENCY AND U.S. COUNTERDRUG POLICY, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle*, May, 2009; «Clinton says Mexico drug crime like an insurgency», in *BBC News*, 9 September 2010, URL: < http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada- 11234058 > [consulted on 25 May 2019].

[12] CORCORAN, Patrick, «Pay Rises Alone Won't Break Chain of Police Corruption», in *Insight Crime*, 29 September 2011, URL: < https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/pay-rises-alone-wont-break-chain-of-police-corruption/ > [consulted on 25 May 2019]. Insight Crime is an influential think tank that monitors organized crime in Latin America. At this moment, it constitutes one of the most authoritative voices in spreading this representation of organized crime that I am discussing.

[13] PALACIOS, Marcos, *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875-2002,* Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2006.

[14] In this essay I will only refer to two main guerrilla groups which are: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias - Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP or simply FARC), and *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN).

[15] SANÍN, Francisco Gutiérrez, «Telling the Difference: Guerrillas and Paramilitaries in the Colombian War», in *Politics and Society,* 36, 1/2008, pp. 3-34.

was only launched after the guerrillas became involved with the drug trade, while paramilitary groups have been financing themselves from drug trafficking since the early 1980s[16].

Colombian guerrilla groups have been accused of being involved with drug trafficking since the 1980s, even though they did not play a direct role in the drug trade until the 1990s. But initially, this accusation did not imply that the guerrillas were sorts of "drug cartels" that would claim political goals to mask their true nature. It should be kept in mind that the Colombian government needed to acknowledge the political nature of the guerrillas if it wanted to reach a successful peace process. In the late 1990s, the FARC were open to discuss disarmament, but only if political reforms would also be put on the table. Thus, the government could not simply deny their political nature or the process would have failed. But following the failure of the 1998-2002 peace process, the government embraced the rhetoric that discusses the guerrillas as *narcoterrorists*,[17] so to refuse acknowledging the insurgents as political actors. This rhetoric had already been employed by the DEA and the US State Department, which had previously prompted reservations from the Colombian government[18]. But since President Álvaro Uribe won the Colombian general election in 2002, the US and Colombian governments'

[16] GUIZADO CAMACHO, Álvaro, *Paranarcos y narcoparas: trayectorias delincuenciales y políticas,* in CAMACHO GUIZADO, Alvaro et al., *A la sombra de la guerra: Ilegalidad y nuevos órdenes regionales en Colombia,* Bogotá, Universidad de los Andes Facultad de Ciencias Sociales Centro de Estudios Socioculturales, 2009, pp. 7-97.

[17] MILLER, Abraham H., DAMASK, Nicholas A., «The dual myths of 'narco-terrorism': How myths drive policy», in *Terrorism and Political Violence,* 8, 1/1996, pp. 114-131. Also see the 1996's book of Luis Alberto Villamarín, who is an influential ex Colombian military and a protagonist in Colombian military literature in the 20th Century. In his book, Villamarin argued that the FARC should have been considered a "drug cartel". VILLAMARÍN PULIDO, Luis A., *El Cartel de las FARC,* Bogotá, Ediciones El Faraón, 1996.

[18] For example, in 1998 U.S. "Drug Czar" Barry Maccaffrey used the world "narcoguerrillas" to refer to the FARC, which prompted reservations from the Colombian government that at the time was busy developing peace talks with the group. Clearly, the usage of the term would have made those talks much harder, because it denies the political identity of the group. It is significant that the American State Department requested the US Embassy in Bogotá to clarify their position to avoid misunderstandings, clarifying that they did not intend to use antinarcotic funds for counterinsurgency purposes, but at the same time they requested to make clear that the US were worried about the drug trafficking activities of the FARC. Thus, the State Department asserted that guerrillas could be targeted whenever they were involved in drug trafficking.
Two years later, Joe Biden affirmed that the FARC were not a "drug cartel" in his report concerning Plan Colombia that was presented to the US Senate. And yet, when describing the attack against the Supreme Court building conducted by the guerrilla group M-19 in 1986, he refers to the guerrillas as "traffickers". These instances are useful to show how there appears to be an intended confusion in the usage of the terms, which I argue it is due to the fact that instead of simply referring to the guerrillas as traffickers, which would be hard to defend, the State Department preferred to blur the categories, so that while Plan Colombia was officially aimed at eradicating drug trafficking its funds could be used against guerrillas as well. See: «McCaffrey: Rebels working with drug gangs in Colombia; 'Unholy alliance' called threat», in *The Houston Chronicle*, 21 October 1997 ; «State Department cable, "Clarification of U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance"», 25 October 1997, *Freedom of Information Act Release to the National Security Archive*, URL:
< https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB69/col57.pdf > [consulted on 8 September 2019].
BIDEN, Joseph R. Jr., *Aid to Plan Colombia: the time for US assistance is now. A Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations*, Washington, US Government Printing Office, May 2000. URL:
< https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-106SPRT64135/pdf/CPRT-106SPRT64135.pdf > [consulted on 8 September 2019].

positions have converged. The true significance of this rhetoric is that it turns the war against communism into a war for security, and it allows the state to rhetorically reposition itself in the conflict. Moreover, it blurs the line between counterinsurgency and counternarcotics, and thus allows the US to fund the war without having to acknowledge the political nature of the conflict that they are involved in.

As I will discuss later in the article, the Colombian conflict has been about cocaine just like it has been about all other natural resources. But undoubtedly, cocaine is discussed in radically different terms than oil, water, or bananas. The Drug War discourse discusses resources as *commodities*, and it fetishizes cocaine giving it an inherent criminal nature that is extended to those that produce it and distribute it. According to this logic, the nature of an armed actor is primarily defined on the basis of its relation to cocaine. This representation is deeply flawed, because it cannot explain the state's contradictory behaviour, at times cooperating and supporting traffickers, and at times fighting against them. Moreover, it fails to highlight that the guerrillas are the only truly anti-state armed group in Colombia, and thus they operate very differently than the narcos or the paramilitaries. To focus on drug trafficking as a group's main determinant also implies that the historical allies of the Colombian army, which are the paramilitaries, can be labeled criminals as well, due to the fact that they are traffickers. Hence, the state can benefit from their violence while simultaneously denying any possible ideological closeness with them due to their intrinsic criminal nature.

The state's behaviour can easily be explained if we focus on the modes of production of the resources instead of their symbolic values. That is to say, we should focus on how and why resources, cocaine included, are produced and distributed. Under this alternative perspective we shall see how the positioning of each actor in the conflict is determined by its position toward the modes of production in the economy. Paramilitary groups, transnational corporations, and the Colombian state operate in accordance with the capitalist status quo, and benefit from capitalist modes of production. This explains why all three of them have cooperated in anti-guerrilla efforts, regardless of the fact that the paramilitaries have controlled most of the country's drug trade between the 1990s and early 2000s. The first element that should be considered to criticize the discourse that supports Plan Colombia is exactly the positioning of the armed actors in the conflict: if Plan Colombia truly were about eradicating drug trafficking, we should see a situation where the state coherently targets every group that is involved with the drug trade. Moreover, we should see *narcoterrorists* who operate purely to make profits and to impact the state's sovereignty. But this is not the case. In the next paragraphs, I will briefly explore the history of drug trafficking in Colombia to provide alternative and more convincing analysis of the Drug War.

The reason why Colombia is the birthplace of narcotrafficking, and not its neighbours, is the country's political geography[19]. In the 20th century Colombia was characterized by a general lack of control of the central government on the regions outside of Bogotá. Power at the local levels was maintained through a mixture of clientelism and violence, and regardless of the democratic structure, political power was always shared among the two main parties that were representative of the *oligarquia,* the Liberals and the Conservatives[20]. Power had always existed in this grey area, where state and non state groups operated together to maintain the status quo. Starting in the 1970s, Colombian traffickers developed in the Northwestern part of the country as a force to be reckoned with. Local elites welcomed these new capitalists, who would spread wealth and secure their positions by informally participating in the control of the territory, maintaining close relations with the economic and political elites[21]. In the '80s, drug traffickers funded paramilitary groups to fight the guerrillas in the department of Antioquia, with the support of the military and the local rural elites.[22]

In the '80s, the narcos enjoyed a great deal of autonomy and their power grew out of proportion. What worried them was the possibility of being extradited to the US on drug trafficking charges, which is why legendary trafficker Pablo Escobar decided to work toward a political legitimization of himself and his organization, the Medellín Cartel. Escobar ran for Congress and was elected in 1982. Its election created embarrassment in the government, and it was strongly opposed by a faction of Liberals who were able to prove he was a trafficker, forcing him to step down from political life. Escobar overreacted, killing the Minister of Justice Rodrigo Lara Bonilla and sparking a conflict against the government that escalated in terrorist attacks between 1989 and 1993. The conflict ended in 1993 with the killing of Escobar by the Colombian police, after that his major allies had already been killed or incarcerated[23]. His main competitors, the Orejuela brothers in Cali, were arrested and extradited shortly later, marking the end of the great drug barons in Colombia.

But in addition to Escobar, what concerned the government in this period were the guerrillas, particularly the FARC. From their stronghold in the South East, where they were the unchallenged true power, the FARC had been advancing in the rest of the country, and they proved capable of defeating the Colombian military[24]. The guerrillas were moving into territories rich in resources, particularly in the North West, "taxing" local landowners

[19] THOUMI, Francisco, *Economía política y narcotráfico*, Bogotá, Tercer Mundo Editores, 1994.
[20] PALACIOS, Marcos, *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875-2002,* cit.
[21] ALONSO, Salazar J., *La Parábola de Pablo,* Bogotá, Penguin Random House, 2007.
[22] RONDEROS, María Teresa, *Guerras Recicladas,* Bogotá, Penguin Random House, 2014, pp. 141-276 (Kindle edition).
[23] ALONSO, Salazar J., *La Parábola de Pablo*, cit.
[24] LEECH, Gary, *FARC: The Longest Insurgency,* London, Zed Books, 2011.

and foreign corporations to finance their war, and posing a serious threat to the state[25]. Paramilitarism developed as a reaction to the guerrillas, but until the mid 1990s the paras were organized in loose groups, who relied on external funding to fight in the areas where the guerrillas were present. They depended on drug traffickers, the army, local elites and foreign corporations, and their goal was to avoid the growth of the Left, whether guerrillas or pacifist leftist movements. They operated as agents of the status quo, using terrorism against the rural population and selected killings against progressive politicians[26]. This strategy was insufficient to stop the FARC and ELN, and in the 1990s the paras organized into a national group, the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC)[27].

The AUC were covertly supported by the state, and they developed into a formidable war machine thanks to drug trafficking among other sources. Since the mid 1990s Colombia became a producer of coca, and the paras co-opted the Narco, subordinating cocaine production into their structure. Their growth prompted the guerrilla's reaction, and the FARC started to grow their coca fields as well, so to obtain funding for a war that was being fought at levels unseen before[28]. The AUC's strategy was bloody but effective. They conceived the war as a war for the territory[29], and they saw themselves as agents of the state. In the absence of a state capable of exercising control, the AUC would move into territories, conduct campaigns of social cleansing or massacres so to establish their rule, and "modernize" the regions by developing capitalist projects. Similarly to how Plan Colombia considers the neoliberalization of the economy the best tool for avoiding the growth of the narco-guerrillas, the AUC believed that the guerrilla could only be defeated by changing the economic organization of the country, neoliberalizing and modernizing agriculture, reconverting the spaces that were occupied by the rural communities of campesinos whose way of life was not compatible with the country they had in mind[30]. This strategy consisted in the transformation of the rural social space, that had to be dominated, destroyed through terror, and then reconverted into a capitalist space that could be merged with the national economy. While they proved to be inadequate to military challenge the guerrillas, the paras were able to marginalize them by establishing in areas where the insurgents could not find support after that the AUC had conducted their terrorist campaigns.

[25] *Ibidem*.

[26] For a general overview of the violence against civilians in the conflict, and particularly by the paramilitaries see: GMH, *¡BASTA YA! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad,* Bogotá, Imprenta Nacional, 2013. For a detailed account of the campaign of extermination conducted against the leftist party *Unión Patriotica* see: CENTRO NACIONAL DE MEMORIA HISTÓRICA, *Todo pasó frente a nuestros ojos. El genocidio de la Unión Patriótica* 1984-2002, Bogotá, CNMH, 2018.

[27] RONDEROS, María Teresa, *Guerras Recicladas,* cit.

[28] NORMAN, Susan V., «Narcotization as Security Dilemma: The FARC and Drug Trade in Colombia», in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 41, 8/2018, pp. 638-659.

[29] REYES POSADA, Alejandro, *Guerreros y campesinos: Despojo y restitución de tierras en Colombia,* Bogotá, Ariel, 2016.

[30] RONDEROS, María Teresa, *Guerras Recicladas,* cit., pp. 448-576 (Kindle edition).

Foreign corporations would enthusiastically support and fund the paras, as they were the only force capable of providing the conditions for secure investment, by butchering local opposers and taming the population through atrocious violence[31].

Between the mid 1990s and early 2000s the paras expanded in most of the country, but their presence was stronger around natural resources. In the late 1980s, they expanded in Urabá, a small region on the Caribbean coast, that is nevertheless of central importance in Colombia due to its production of bananas. Banana production in Urabá was mainly controlled by three American corporation, Chiquita Brand, Castle and Cook, and Del Monte Corporation[32]. In the 1980s, the campesinos who worked the banana fields organized into unions in order to get better wages and to improve their working conditions, and they created serious problems for the banana industry. The guerrillas would also try to expand into the movements, by supporting the workers and offering military support against the repression. This prompted the reaction of the paras, who could count on the support of the foreign banana masters. The paramilitaries launched a war for the control of the region that escalated in the late 1990s. The AUC successfully restored the order for the banana industry, by massacring civilians, terrorizing the population, and forcing entire communities into displacement[33]. Among the corporations that financed them was Chiquita, which was once called *United Fruit Company*, that admitted paying the paras for "security"[34].

Hebert Veloza García, aka 'HH' was the paramilitary commander that led the AUC operation in Urabá, establishing absolute control and expropriating lands from the peasants to redistribute it to people in his circle[35]. Today, the paramilitary *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC)[36] continue to exert power in Urabá, obstructing the process of restitution of the land and running all sorts of criminal operations, drug trafficking included. But in spite of this,

[31] PALEY, Dawn, *Drug War Capitalism*, cit., pp. 64-99 (Kindle edition).

[32] GARCIA DE LA TORRE, Clara Inés, ARAMBURO SIEGERT, Clara Inés, *Geografías de la guerra, el poder y la resistencia: Oriente y Urabá antioqueños 1990-2008,* Bogotá, Universidad de Antioquia, Editorial Códice, 2011, pp. 273-372.

[33] For a study over paramilitary violence and displacement against leftist supporters in Urabá see also: STEELE, Abbey, *Democracy and Displacement in Colombia's Civil War,* Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2017.

[34] KENNARD, Matt, MACWILLIAM, Nick, «Chiquita Made a Killing From Colombia's Civil War. Will Their Victims Finally See Justice?», in *In These Times,* 27 January 2017, URL: <http://inthesetimes.com/article/19834/chiquita-multinationals-killing-colombias-civil-war-paramilitary/> [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[35] GARCIA DE LA TORRE, Clara Inés, ARAMBURO SIEGERT, Clara Inés, *Geografías de la guerra, el poder y la resistencia: Oriente y Urabá antioqueños 1990-2008* , cit., pp. 273-372.

[36] For a history of this neo-paramilitary formation see: DALY, Sarah Zukerman, *Organized Violence after Civil War,* New York, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 172-217.

the government insists on referring to them as "criminal gangs" (BACRIM), and thus drug trafficking groups without any political allegiance and only focused on making a profit[37].

In the department of Casanare, the AUC expanded in the 1990s following the development of oil wells by foreign corporations, namely British Petroleum (BP), that currently stands accused of having supported paramilitary violence in Colombia[38]. BP and other corporations negotiated with the Colombian government the deployment of the army in Casanare so to grant them protection. The AUC were invited in by the army to offer their services against ELN and FARC, that "taxed" the companies and threatened them and their workers with attacks. Under the guerrilla perspective, foreign companies in Colombia are stealing the people's resources and "taxes" are a mandatory payment to continue operating. On the other hand, the AUC would be funded by corporations to secure their territory and handle not only the guerrillas, but also trade unions and social movements[39]. The paras would mainly go after civilians, while claiming their victims were armed fighters. This strategy has been utilized by the army as well, a phenomenon that is known in Colombia as *falsos positivos*: to put it simply, the army would kill civilians and then dress them as fighters, so to claim the dead were guerrilla members. This was effective for targeting political opposers without any backlash, and also for the soldiers to obtain financial rewards in exchange for their killings[40]. In terms of relations with the foreign corporations we see crucial differences between the armed actors: the guerrilla does not support corporations, it merely lets them operate in exchange of payments, and it also forces them to guarantee better working conditions to their Colombian employees. On the contrary, the AUC ensured that corporations could operate as they liked, and the only workers they targeted were Colombians, and not the foreign specialists that were brought to work on the wells.

[37] The government is so committed to refuse acknowledging the paramilitary structure of the AGC that go so far as to refuse calling them AGC, and instead it refers to them as *Clan del Golfo.* Another name that some organizations or writers use to refer to AGC is *Urabeños,* while BACRIM is the term used by the government to describe all Colombian paramilitary formations that are active at this moment. «Desarrollo económico y crimen organizado: las dos caras de Urabá», in *Verdad Abierta*, 14 May 2017, URL: <https://verdadabierta.com/desarrollo-economico-y-crimen-organizado-las-dos-caras-de-uraba/> [consulted on 15 June 2019]; RESTREPO, Juan Diego, «La tardía guerra contra las llamadas Bacrim», in *Semana*, 9 February 2011, URL: < https://www.semana.com/opinion/articulo/la-tardia-guerra-contra-llamadas-bacrim/235294-3 > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[38] CARSON, Mary, GATTON, Adrian, VÁZQUEZ, Rodrigo, O'KANE, Maggie, «Colombian takes BP to court in UK over alleged complicity in kidnap and torture», in *The Guardian*, 22 May 2015, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/may/22/colombian-takes-bp-to-court-in-uk-alleged-complicity-kidnap-and-torture > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[39] PEARCE, Jenny, *Beyond the perimeter fence: oil and armed conflict in Casanare, Colombia*, London, Centre for the Study of Global Governance, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2004 URL: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/23438/1/DP32_BeyondthePerimeterFence.pdf > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[40] VIVANCO José Miguel, «Los incentivos perversos detrás de los "Falsos Positivos"», in *Semana*, 11 November 2017, URL: < https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2017/11/11/los-incentivos-perversos-detras-de-los-falsos-positivos > [consulted on 15 June 2019]. For Casanare see also: «Jep recibe informe de falsos positivos en Casanare y Boyacá», in *El Tiempo*, 16 August 2018, URL: < https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/jep-colombia/entregan-informe-a-la-jep-de-falsos-positivos-en-casanare-y-boyaca-256640 > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

After that the AUC' demobilized, between 2003 and 2006, the military has become the main provider of security for the oil industry in Casanare, and under Plan Colombia state forces have been financed and trained by the US so to secure the conditions for economic development[41].

The demobilization of the AUC was caused by Plan Colombia, and by the renewed support offered by the US government to the Colombian army. The American support gave the army the necessary resources for attacking the FARC, and it made the paramilitaries' presence unnecessary. Under those circumstances, the AUC became an embarrassing presence for the government, and they also turned into potential rivals as the state intended to take back the territories that were under paramilitary rule. Because of this, the AUC demobilized, even though some of them reorganized and are still waging war up to this day.[42] From then on, the army has been the main protagonist in the counter insurgent front and it has fully undertaken the paramilitaries' role. Massacres have decreased but they continue to happen, and transnational corporations keep developing projects in areas where the local population is attacked through terror or the selective killings of their leaders[43]. Meanwhile, US sponsored coca eradication program have been used to destroy coca fields and all forms of agriculture in the areas with a strong guerrilla presence, displacing or famishing the local population and weakening the insurgent front, a tactic that is very similar to that of the AUC, but conducted from planes in the sky, a technological warfare that the guerrilla cannot challenge[44].

This brief description of the conflict is sufficient to highlight how the war on the ground does not match the governmental discourses and Plan Colombia's vision. On the ground, we do not see "narcoterrorist" going against state forces. Instead, we see state forces, paramilitaries, and transnational corporations establishing their rule over the civilian population, through terrorism whenever that is necessary. Not only foreign corporations are not a neutral actor in this conflict, they actually have an active role as supporters of paramilitaries or state forces. In order to represent the Colombian conflict in a critical way, we shall stop focusing on the negative goals of the counterinsurgents and describe what they were fighting for, and not what they fought against. This is a war *for capitalism,* and not simply anti-guerrilla or anti-drugs. If we describe the events by focusing on the positive goals of the counter insurgents, we can easily highlight why they were fighting together, and why the majority of their victims were

[41] PALEY, Dawn, *Drug War Capitalism*, cit., pp. 64-99 (Kindle edition). See also: CUELLAR RAMÍREZ, Francisco, *The Profits of Extermination: How U.S. Corporate Power is Destroying Colombia*, Monroe (ME), Common Courage Press, 2005.
[42] *Ibidem*.
[43] PALEY, Dawn, *Drug War Capitalism*, cit., pp. 64-99 (Kindle edition).
[44] LEECH, Gary, *FARC: The Longest Insurgency,* cit.

civilians and not armed guerrillas[45]. Terror against civilians is necessary to prompt a social reorganization of territories that are yet to be fully converted into spaces of production. Displacements, massacres, public mutilations of bodies,[46] are all strategies that normalize a general violence, which can tame and defeat rural communities, so to reorganize the modes of production under a neoliberal vision.

This also makes it so that once the guerrillas do not pose a military threat any longer, their presence can actually benefit the state. The lack of peace justifies military actions and the suspension of the rule of law in territories that are at the center of the conflict. The reorganization of the rural space cannot be achieved in the absence of generalized violence, and neither in the presence of a functioning democracy. In 2016, President Juan Santos was able to broker a peace deal with the FARC, that was accepted by the vast majority of the guerrilla fighters. Since 2018, newly elected President Ivan Duque has instead opposed the project on the basis that it is too generous toward the FARC,[47] and the US have supported him, attempting to illegally extradite FARC leaders[48] and threatening Colombia's war tribunals with the cutting off of aid[49]. The result has been a general pessimism toward the process by the FARC, who are also being targeted by the army after having laid down their weapons[50]. In the midst of this situation, many fighters are rearming, and the peace process is faltering. Having the FARC fighting allows the current right-wing government to accuse social movements of having been infiltrated by the guerrilla, paving the way for brutal repression. This is exactly the strategy that Duque is using against ndigenous movements in the Cauca department.[51] Meanwhile, at the time of this writing indigenous leaders in the North-West are silently being slaughtered by the paramilitaries AGC, which is something that the government is reluctant to

[45] GMH, *¡BASTA YA! Colombia: Memorias de guerra y dignidad,* cit.

[46] For the strategic use of mutilated bodies in the Colombian conflict see: URIBE, María Victoria, «Dismembering and Expelling: Semantics of Political Terror in Colombia», in *Public Culture,* 16, 1/2004, pp. 79-95. For a detailed report of how paramilitaries massacres were organized see the CNMH report on the Salado massacre: CENTRO NACIONAL DE MEMORIA HISTÓRICA, *La Masacre del Salado: esa guerra no era nuestra,* Colombia, CNRR, Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2009.

[47] «¿Cuáles son las tres reformas (además de las seis objeciones) que propone Duque?», in *Semana*, 12 March 2019, URL: < https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/cuales-son-las-tres-reformas--ademas-de-las-seis-objeciones--que-propone-el-uribismo/604983 > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[48] ROMERO, Laura Dulce, «Así es la extradición para los ex Farc que se acojan a la JEP», in *El Espectador*, 20 May 2019, URL: < https://www.elespectador.com/colombia2020/justicia/jep/asi-es-la-extradicion-para-los-ex-farc-que-se-acojan-la-jep-articulo-861527 > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[49] ALSEMA, Adriaan, «US ambassador threatened aid cut if Colombia's congress backs war crimes tribunal: report», in *Colombia Reports*, 17 April 2019, URL: < https://colombiareports.com/us-ambassador-threatened-with-aid-cut-if-colombias-congress-backed-war-crimes-tribunal-report/ > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[50] CASEY, Nicholas, «Colombia Army's New Kill Orders Send Chills Down Ranks», in *The New York Times*, 18 May 2019, URL: < https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/18/world/americas/colombian-army-killings.html > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[51] ALSEMA, Adriaan, «Duque claims south Colombia indigenous protests infiltrated by illegal armed groups after cop killing», in *Colombia Reports*, 20 March 2019, URL:
< https://colombiareports.com/duque-claims-south-colombia-indigenous-protests-infiltrated-by-illegal-armed-groups-after-cop-killing/ > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

acknowledge, because from its perspective the AGC are simply drug traffickers, and not right wing armed groups.[52]

Following up from these thoughts I will briefly describe the case of the Mexican Drug War.

3. Mexico

The Merida Initiative in Mexico operates within an ongoing conflict[53], the Mexican Drug War, which started in 2006 with the newly elected President Calderón's decision to declare war against organized crime groups, so called «drug cartels»[54]. While in the case of Colombia the Drug War has substituted a pre-existing conflict, in Mexico there was no conflict before the government decided to take on drug traffickers. The Drug War was declared in the name of security, even though violence in Mexico had steadily decreased since the 1990s as it is represented in the graph below[55]. Violence started to rise only after the war was declared, reversing the decline in murders that Mexico was experiencing up until that point. Violence rose in 2008, and after a small decline between 2011 and 2014 it has risen again, making 2018 the bloodiest year in Mexico's recent history[56].

[52] ALSEMA, Adriaan, «Native Colombian leader assassinated in war-torn northwest», in *Colombia Reports*, 14 April 2019, URL: < http://colombiareports.com/native-colombian-leader-assassinated-in-war-torn-northwest/ > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[53] Some scholars, already cited Correa-Cabrera among them, consider the conflict to be a civil war. For an introduction to the debate about the definition of the term civil war, and the differences between "old" and "new" civil wars see: KALYVAS, Stathis N., «New' and 'Old' Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?», in *World Politics*, 54, 1/2001, pp. 99-118.

[54] CHALK, Peter, «Mexico's New Strategy to Combat Drug Cartels: Evaluating the National Gendarmerie», in *CTC Sentinel*, 6, 5/2013, pp. 16-18, URL:
< http://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/05/CTCSentinel-Vol6Iss52.pdf > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[55] For a regularly updated graph of Mexico's murder rate since 1990 see: «HOMICIDES SINCE 1990», in *MEXICO CRIME REPORT: UP-TO-DATE CRIME INFORMATION FROM MEXICO*, URL:
< http://elcri.men/en/index.html > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[56] *Ibidem*.

Besides the murders, Mexico is experiencing a humanitarian crisis due to forced disappearances: the number of Mexicans who have disappeared is unclear, but the most prudent estimates put the number at around 40 thousands, and this is in addition to tens of thousands of Central and Southern American migrants who have disappeared while traveling to the United States[57]. State forces appear to be behind some of the disappearances and the violence, which is something the government is reluctant in acknowledging as it would open the door to prosecutions for crimes against humanity[58].

Similarly to Colombia, the Drug War discourse in Mexico blames the violence on drugs. The official explanation is that Mexican drug cartels have become too powerful in the 2000s, which has prompted the state's reaction and started the war. The war in question consists in the massive deployment of the military throughout the country, concentrating it in the regions where the presence of organized crime groups is more visible. In many Mexican states and municipalities the army has substituted the police in the control of public order, and Mexico is a militarized country that is experiencing an internal conflict that sees concentrated peaks of violence and disappearances in specific regions. While the murder rate in Mexico is in line with the levels of other Latin American countries, its growth is unprecedented, as it has almost tripled in 10 years, and this is in addition to the number of forced disappearances[59]. The violence is not homogenous in the territory as it suddenly spikes and falls in specific areas[60]. According to the Mexican and American government the violence stems from cartels fighting against each other for *plazas*[61], meaning territories that have a strategic value for drug trafficking, but as in Colombia, the geography of the conflict does not follow the drugs, but the natural resources[62]. As researched and explained by journalist Dawn Paley and scholar Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, Mexico has seen the paramilitarization of drug trafficking groups that have expanded in areas rich in natural resources, and particularly around oil wells, shale gas deposits, ore mines, and fruit plantations[63]. These groups have prompted a reorganization of economic and social relations in the territory, and the violence follows infighting between them or against the army. Given that in these territories the press is effectively silenced, it is

[57] MASTROGIOVANNI, Federico, *Ni Vivos ni muertos*, cit.
[58] OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS, *Undeniable Atrocities: Confronting Crimes Against Humanity in Mexico,* New York, Open Society Justice Foundation, 2016.
[59] CALDERÓN, Laura, RODRÍGUEZ FERREIRA, Octavio, SHIRK, David A., *Drug Violence in Mexico Data and Analysis Through 2017,* Justice in Mexico - Department of Political Science & International Relations, University of San Diego, April 2018.
[60] *Ibidem*.
[61] BEITTEL, June S., «Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations – CRS Report Prepared for Members and Committees of Congress», in *Congressional Research Service*, 3 July 2018, URL: <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41576.pdf > [consulted on 15 June 2019].
[62] CORREA-CABRERA, Guadalupe, *Los Zetas Inc. Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico*, cit.
[63] PALEY, Dawn, *Drug War Capitalism*, cit., pp. 99-130 (Kindle edition).

hard to comprehend the real dimensions of these developments, but the state's behaviour is often contradictory as state forces not only fight violently against these groups, they also cooperate with them.

Correa-Cabrera and Pawley notice how the neoliberalization of the Mexican economy is advancing and benefiting from the violence. The big winners in this situation are transnational corporations, which are developing huge projects in the midst of the fighting, where local opposition is attacked or made outright impossible by the massacres and kidnappings of civilians[64]. The privatization of resources is accelerating, and in 2013 the government of Pena Nieto made an historic reform that has put an end to the nationalization of oil in the country, and it has opened the doors for private investments[65]. The privatization was followed by fracking projects in the North-East, and between 2011 and 2013 the North-Eastern States of Tamaulípas and Coahuila have seen two cartels, the *Cártel del Golfo* and *Los Zetas,* fighting each other allegedly for the control of drug trafficking routes. According to the government the situation got out of control, with massacres, displacements, the silencing of the press by organized crime, and a complete lack of state's control over the area. In this period the Drug War took unprecedented dimensions, and Tamaulípas appeared to be under the control of organized crime groups that would move undisturbed in large armed convoys, attacking and massacring the local population with impunity[66]. Correa-Cabrera notices how transnational oil companies have been able to start fracking projects in the midst of the fighting, projects that they would have had a much harder time in getting approved without a terrified or displaced local population, raising questions about how is it possible that these companies felt that a territory that was experiencing these levels of violence was secure enough for investment[67].

While the state appears to be incapable of protecting its citizens, the privatization of oil has also been favored by the poor performance of the national oil company, Pemex, which has been

[64] *Ibidem*.

[65] MORRISON, Kelly, «The End of an Era: The Sun Sets on Mexico's Pemex», in *Council on Hemispheric Affairs,* 19 June 2014, URL: < http://www.coha.org/the-end-of-an-era-the-sun-sets-on-mexicos-pemex/> [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[66] EMMOT, Robin, «Violento cártel Golfo se vuelca contra ex aliados "Zetas" México», in *Reuters, 5* March 2010, URL: < https://lta.reuters.com/articulo/latinoamerica-delito-mexico-drogas-idLTA SIE6241N120100305 > [consulted on 9 September 2019]; OSORNO, Diego E., «How a Mexican Cartel Demolished a Town, Incinerated Hundreds of Victims, and Got Away With It» , in *Vice News*, 31 December 2014, URL: < https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/pa8wk9/how-a-mexican-cartel-demolished-a- town-incinerated-hundreds-of-victims-and-got-away-with-it > [consulted on 9 September 2019]; RAMOS, Javier G., «La venganza de Los Zetas en Allende, la masacre que no conocimos», in *El País*, 10 October 2016, URL: < https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/10/10/mexico/1476113913_312701.html > [consulted on 9 September 2019]; TURATI, Marcela, «A la luz, los secretos de las matanzas de Tamaulipas », in *Proceso*, 2 November 2013, URL: < https://www.proceso.com.mx/357024/a-la-luz-los-secretos-de-las-matanzas-de-tamaulipas-2 > [consulted on 9 September 2019]; AGUAYO, Sergio, DAYÁN, Jacopo, *El Yugo Zeta: Norte de Coahuila, 2010-2011,* Mexico City, El Colegio de México, 2018; OSORNO, Diego Enrique, *La Guerra de los Zetas,* cit.

[67] CORREA-CABRERA Guadalupe, *Los Zetas Inc. Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico*, cit., Positions 2913-4235 in the Kindle edition.

attacked by organized crime groups that steal the oil and kidnap or kill Pemex employees[68]. In fact, organized crime has accelerated the privatization process by making Pemex incapable of guaranteeing oil supplies. Moreover, Pemex has also claimed that foreign corporations are buying the stolen oil from the cartels, getting a win-win situation in which they buy cheap oil and also accelerate the decline of their competitor[69]. Another consequence of the violence is the displacement of small local land owners and entrepreneurs, who are targeted by organized crime groups. Their displacement accelerates the transition toward an economy dominated by the new big transnational players[70].

As in Colombia, what we see in Mexico is the paramilitarization of groups that fund their war through the exploitation of resources. Also like in Colombia, we see how these groups indirectly support the transition to a neoliberal model in the areas they control, and the state both fights and cooperates with them. Furthermore, there appears to be a lack of cohesion between state forces, as there have been several incidents where police forces at the municipal and state level have been removed by the army or by the federal police, allegedly because of corruption. This hints to the fact that there might be power struggles between the various levels of government, and the federal government is not always on the same board with state or municipal administrations[71].

4. The Mexican State and its enemies

The Mexican case poses the question of how this situation was put into motion, meaning why a civil war was declared in the absence of an internal security crisis. Drug trafficking cannot be the answer, because it existed for decades before the war, and it had always been under tight state control and never considered as an emergency until 2006[72]. This is the crucial difference between Mexico and Colombia, as in the latter the Drug War intervened in a pre-existing conflict, and it

[68] «Pemex se dobla ante el chantaje de los Zetas», in *Proceso*, 18 June 2010, URL: <https://www.proceso.com.mx/105235/pemex-se-dobla-ante-el-chantaje-de-los-zetas > [consulted on 9 September 2019]; VELASCO, Elizabeth C., «En cuatro años han sido *"levantados*" 16 trabajadores, sostiene Pemex », in *Periódico La Jornada*, 12 January 2011, URL: < https://www.jornada.com.mx/2011/01/12/politica /007n3pol > [consulted on 9 September 2019]; OSORNO, Diego Enrique, 2012, *La Guerra de los Zetas,* cit., pp. 125-165 (Kindle edition).

[69] ROSENBERG, Mika, «Mexico's Pemex files fresh suit in stolen fuel case», in *Reuters*, 12 April 2012, URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-gas/mexicos-pemex-files-fresh-suit-in-stolen-fuel-case-idUSBRE83B02920120412 > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[70] CORREA-CABRERA, Guadalupe, *Los Zetas Inc. Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico*, cit. Positions 2913-4235 in the Kindle edition.

[71] LINTHICUM, Kate, «Mexican federal forces disarmed local police in Acapulco. Will it work?», in *Los Angeles Times*, 26 September 2018, URL: < https://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-acapulco-20180926-story.html > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[72] GRILLO, Ioan, *El Narco: The Bloody Rise of Mexican Drug Cartels,* cit., position 1984-2395 on the Kindle edition.

was radically determined by the presence of a communist guerrilla that constituted a threat to the status quo. In Mexico, the war was a unilateral move from the Calderón government and hence it is more puzzling. Some critics have hypothesized that Calderón declared war because of the massive protests that he encountered upon being elected, due to accusations of election fraud. Under this explanation, Calderón thought of the war as the best way to deviate the public attention from the scandal, and unite the country as a sort of military leader[73]. There is certainly merit to this theory, but I argue the explanation is more complex, because the processes of militarization and neoliberalization of Mexico had started long before 2006, and Calderón's strategy appears to be in line with the previous developments. Because of this, any hypothesis on this matter should make the effort to locate the Drug War in Mexico's recent history, instead of considering it a random crisis. If the Mexican and US governments stress the fact that the crisis is due to the explosive growth of drug trafficking, we should consider other developments in Mexico's history that might work as more convincing explanations.

Since 1982, Mexico has undergone a process of neoliberalization of the economy which has created a situation of instability similar to that of other Latin American countries that went through a similar path[74]. The need to globalize the country's economy has disrupted social and political orders that rested on clientelism, creating power vacuums that have been filled by the state with the military. The situation took a turn with the signing of NAFTA, the free trade agreement between Mexico, the US, and Canada, in 1993. In 1994, the government was confronted by an armed uprising in the State of Chiapas, where an indigenous marxist guerrilla, the EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional),* took control of a series of municipalities in an effort to criticize the government and oppose NAFTA. President Salinas reacted by sending the army, a move that was strongly opposed internally and internationally. The EZLN was able to portray itself as the political heir of the Zapatista Revolution, and it became an international symbol of indigenous rights and the struggle against globalization. As it was unable to stand the pressure, the government ordered a cease fire and it tried to negotiate with the rebels[76]. The case constituted a crisis for the government, because regardless of the fact that EZLN was not a military threat for the army, the rhetoric over human and indigenous rights did not allow it to simply destroy the insurgents, who nevertheless had to be

[73] *Ibidem*, position 1984-2395 on the Kindle edition; FLORES, Linaloe R., «Calderón lanzó la guerra para legitimarse, y su personalidad lo llevó al punto de no retorno», in *Sinembargo*, 6 December 2016, URL: < https://www.sinembargo.mx/06-12-2016/3122368 > [consulted on 9 September 2019].
[74] OTERO, Gerardo, *Neoliberalism Revisited: Economic Restructuring and Mexico's Political Future,* New York, Routledge, 1996; HARVEY, David, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.
[75] MOKSNES, Heidi, «Militarized Democracies: The Neoliberal Mexican State and the Chiapas Uprising», in *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, 48, 1/2004, pp. 116-125.
[76] *Ibidem*.

contained, or else the process of neoliberalization would crumble. This was felt in Washington too, and the Chase Manhattan Bank, which had huge funds invested in Mexico, called for the Mexican government to retake control of the territory in the name of *security policy*[77]. Clearly, the problem extended beyond Chiapas, because a victory for the indigenous would have produced a precedent capable of putting at stake every future neoliberal project in the country, and it would have echoed throughout all Latin America. The tactic of the government was to maintain a huge military presence, but its efforts were fruitless against the strategy of the Mayan villages that refused the violent uprising and opposed the state on the basis of international law, human rights, and the right to a peaceful resistance[78]. We see in this case how the crisis is not provoked by the violence, but exactly by its absence: the crisis developed because the government could not strike, and the Mayans were calling for the respect of the international laws that protected them. We also see how security means something different than peace, and how the rhetoric of security opposes the rhetoric of human rights.

In the following years, the army covertly supported paramilitary groups who displaced and massacred the civilian Mayan population, destroying their communities and committing atrocious crimes, most notably the Acteal massacre in 1997 when 45 people were slaughtered, 15 children among them[79]. Far from being a sign of state's weakness, terror and violence represent the process of (in)stabilization against a peaceful resistance that threatens the state. The case of Chiapas illustrates how neoliberalism calls for the destruction of communities and social spaces that are not compatible with the reorganization of the economic relations in the globalized space. Given that the violence has to be launched while simultaneously being wary of human rights, to secretly ignite a conflict against the civilian population might be the most effective path for the state to take. The usage of paramilitary groups, from Chiapas to Colombia, allows the state to benefit from the violence while simultaneously blaming the responsibility on non-state groups. This is what is meant in making an area *secure.* The contradiction is not there, because at this point it should be clear that by security is meant security for the capital, and certainly not for the people.

Far from being a phenomenon only concerning Chiapas, social and indigenous struggles have multiplied throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, and the Drug War was launched shortly after the protests in the State of Oaxaca, where Federal and State police, alongside death squads, were deployed by the government against protesters in an effort to repress an opposition

[77] *Ibidem*.

[78] MOKSNES, Heidi, «Factionalism and Counterinsurgency in Chiapas: Contextualizing the Acteal Massacre», in *Revista Europea De Estudios Latinoamericanos Y Del Caribe*, 76, 1/2004, pp. 109-117.

[79] *Ibidem*.

that received international media attention. [80]

Another crucial element of instability that preceded the Drug War was the erosion of the power of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) party, that culminated in its defeat in the 2000's general elections. After winning every election since 1929 (not without frauds)[81], the PRI experimented a crisis in the 1980s. In 1988 the PRI should have had lost the election to the leftist *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD), but the PRI candidate Carlos Salinas was elected president through electoral fraud.[82] These elections were extremely significant, as this was the government that negotiated and signed NAFTA in the early 1990s. Eventually, the PRI was defeated by the *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) in the 2000 presidential election. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, the PRI lost control of many states which voted out PRI governors, and struggles for power developed ending the traditional control that the PRI exercised on Mexican politics. The 2000's elections intensified a situation of conflict between the PAN-led federal government and the Mexican states that were still solidly under PRI control[83]. In 2006, the PAN won the elections again, most likely stealing them from the PRD with fraud, and President Calderón declared the Drug War intensifying a process of militarization that had been growing for more than a decade. Journalist Diego Enrique Osorno has hypothesized that Calderón's true goal was in fact to invade those states that were opposing the transition from a PRI to a PAN-led federal government, particularly Tamaulípas, a traditional PRI stronghold[84]. It should also be noted that the lack of cohesion within the state due to multi-party politics can be particularly significant in a period of transition toward neoliberal policies, due to the spontaneous oppositions that rise against them. In the presence of various political formations that aim to capitalize on the protests, the government can have huge trouble in pursuing its goals, because it has to worry about electoral support. Moreover, the erosion of the PRI's control on the elections created incentives for other parties to denounce the collusion between PRI politicians and organized crime, which fragmented the traditional control exercised by the Mexican government on drug trafficking. This is particularly significant in Mexico, because the federal government can launch federal operations against organized crime groups that operate with the support of state or municipal governments,

[80] DIANA, Denham, C.A.S.A. Collective, *Teaching Rebellion: Stories from the Grassroots Mobilization in Oaxaca*, Oakland, PM Press, 2008.
[81] OLMOS, Jose G., «Un siglo de fraude», in *Proceso,* 11 September, 2013, URL: < http://www.proceso.com.mx/352522/un-siglo-de-fraudes > [consulted on 15 June 2019].
[82] THOMPSON, Ginger, «Ex-President in Mexico Casts New Light on Rigged 1988 Election», in *The New York Times*, 9 March 2004, URL: < https://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/09/world/ex-president-in-mexico-casts-new-light-on-rigged-1988-election.html > [consulted on 15 June 2019].
[83] OSORNO, Diego Enrique, 2012, *La Guerra de los Zetas,* cit., pp. 268-273 (Kindle edition).
[84] *Ibidem*.

which sparks a conflict that is truly about politics while apparently being about organized crime.

Within this interpretation, Calderón's Drug War was most likely an attempt from the PAN government to extend its power in a situation of crisis. By declaring the war, the government was able to extend an oppressive military presence throughout the country, and particularly to the areas more rich in resources that have attracted the interest of non-state armed groups. The war has broken the historical protection that cartels have enjoyed in the past, particularly in non-PAN states such as Michoacán and Tamaulípas, and this has prompted their reactions. In other words the Drug War is not a crisis, but rather a strategy to handle a crisis that was present before. Even though the conflict seems to have gotten out of control, the war allows the state to exert its power in ways that are not feasible in a democracy. While the violence calls for the state to suspend the rule of law and fight for security, neoliberalism can advance by benefiting from the deadly risks that are encountered by its opposers, and by a general state of terror that discourages collective organization.

5. Drug War as social practice

Following up from these arguments, we can hypothesize that the Drug War involves a complex set of political and military warfare strategies that is concurrent to a reorganization of economic and social relations in the spaces where it is waged. Under this framework, the Drug War represents a strategy for neoliberalizing spaces that cannot be transformed through democratic methods, and it is the solution to the problem that neoliberalism poses to the democratic state: switching to a new economic and social model disrupts old social orders, which calls for violence but also to an apparent respect to humanitarian and international laws[85]. In the chaos of the conflict, state or non state groups target every space that can offer opportunities for the investment of capital, they conquer it, destroy it, and reproduce it as a source of revenue in the global market. This strategy extends beyond natural resources, as it also develops in urban dwellings where campaigns of social cleansing against the poor population often precedes the gentrification of poor neighborhoods[86]. The cost of this process is the destruction of the living communities that occupy such space, as they constitute an obstacle for the investment. Terror and violence in this war are social practices, that annihilate

[85] MOKSNES, Heidi, «Militarized Democracies: The Neoliberal Mexican State and the Chiapas Uprising» cit.

[86] For research on the connection between drug related violence and gentrification in the Mexican city of Juárez see: WRIGHT, Melissa W., «Feminicidio, Narcoviolence, and Gentrification in Ciudad Juárez: The Feminist Fight», in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 31, 5/2013, pp. 830-845. Additionally, for a more general overview on how "tough on crime", gentrification policies are often accompanied by

the communities and obliterate them from the public space that they previously occupied. More than simply killing, violence reorganizes life, steering the living toward and into its domestic, private space from where it cannot constitute a threat no more.

The neoliberalization of the space is the common goal of all the groups I considered in this article, except for the Colombian guerrillas that represent the only entity whose cause of existence is the armed opposition toward capitalism and neoliberalism. All other groups, whether drug cartels, transnational corporations, or the states themselves share these goals, and they violently accelerate the production of neoliberal spaces in Northern Latin America. Which, as I said before, is exactly what the Drug War discourse tries to hide, by fetishizing cocaine and ignoring the true economic relations in the territory.

Clearly, it is extremely difficult to recognize and identify precise responsibilities and intentions in the midst of the conflict, and this is especially true for Mexico, given that the violence and chaos are still fully in motion. To assert what happened, and why, it will be the job of future historians. And yet, I argue that it would be naive not to consider how the official political discourse and the state's representation of the conflict are extremely flawed, and they voluntarily exclude certain actors from their description of the events. Mexico is undergoing critical changes in its economy, and is turning much of its natural resources to foreign corporations, a process that is advancing with the current presidency. How the violence follows and shapes this changes, in many cases reinforcing them, should be observed and kept in mind as requested by many of the communities that are being slaughtered and displaced by the so called Narco, while gigantic economic projects take place on their doorstep[87].

How general violence, from Argentina to Chile[88] and Central America[89] has historically followed neoliberalization of the economy to tame resistances should be kept in mind as well. The point is not to make arduous comparisons between different countries and historical

social cleansing in Latin America see: SWANSON, Kate, «Zero Tolerance in Latin America: Punitive Paradox in Urban Policy Mobilities», in Urban Geography, 34, 7/2013, pp. 972-988.A

[87] «Comunidades de Guerrero cierran totalmente su territorio para "evitar masacre" de grupos narcoparamilitares», in *DesInformemonos*, 7 June 2019. URL: <https://desinformemonos.org/comunidades-de-guerrero-cierran-totalmente-su-territorio-para-evitar-masacre-de-grupos-narcoparamilitares/> [consulted on 9 September 2019]; ELIO, Henríquez, «Denuncian ataques de "narco paramilitares" en comunidades indígenas», in *La Jornada*, 5 June 2019, URL: <https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/estados/2019/06/05/denuncian-ataques-de-201cnarco-paramilitares201d-en-comunidades-indigenas-3158.html> [consulted on 9 September 2019]

[88] FEIERSTEIN, Daniel, *Genocide as Social Practice: Reorganizing Society under the Nazis and Argentina's Military Juntas,* New Brunswick NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2014.
GUNDER FRANK, Andre, *Economic Genocide in Chile: Monetarist Theory Versus Humanity*, Nottingham, Spokesman Books, 1976; HARVEY, David, *A brief History of Neoliberalism*, cit.
TEICHMAN, Judith A., *The Politics of Freeing Markets in Latin America: Chile, Argentina, and Mexico* , Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 2001, pp. 65-97.

[89] PALEY, Dawn, Drug War Capitalism, cit., pp. 204-232 (Kindle edition).

events, but to reflect on how dramatic changes to economic and social relations cannot happen peacefully in the face of extreme social inequalities. Neither all this should be taken as a sort of a conspiracy theory, with obscure figures in control of events that in reality are hardly under somebody's control. Instead, this article has the goal of complicating the linear picture of the Drug War, pointing out how its main protagonists are not flamboyant narcos in luxury cars, but waves of terror that are shaking and breaking relations in the public space.

To conclude, I want to better reflect on the role that the United States play in these developments. I do not believe that anti-drugs efforts from the US are not sincere. There is no disputing that in the last decades, and particularly since the Reagan presidency, the US have made counter narcotic efforts a central part of their agenda when it comes to Latin America, particularly operating through the State Department and the DEA, an agency whose importance has grown exponentially at the end of the last century[90]. But these anti-drugs campaigns have consisted in an intrusion in the neighboring countries' affairs, extending the US' influence on a variety of issues that have little to do with drugs. Through Plan Colombia, the US have provided support for militarized efforts against guerrillas, and they have allowed the Colombian government to launch campaigns that were apt to avoid a growth of progressive movements and to repress indigenous communities. Foreign corporations have operated with the support of both governments, and they greatly benefited from a state-issued violence that broke local oppositions. In Mexico, the US have enthusiastically supported Calderon's Drug War, greatly increasing Mexico's military capacity and therefore sharing a great deal of responsibility for the disaster that followed. This support is historically consistent with the strategy of supporting foreign countries in exchange for neoliberal reform of their economy, which has been a policy of IMF and the US since the 1980s[91]. The crucial elements that inform the cooperation between Mexico and the US are exactly the free trade market and the privatization of natural resources, which, as I argued above, are indirectly being accelerated by the Drug War.

Finally, it should also be highlighted how the rhetorical support for the war on drugs has tones that are very similar to what was the war against Communism until a few decades ago. Here, it is important to cite the case of Guatemala, where in the 1980s the Mayan population suffered a Guatemalan and US sponsored genocide, which was justified on the basis that the Mayans

---

[90] SACCO, Lysa N., *Drug Enforcement in the United States: History, Policy, and Trends,* Congressional Research Service report, 2 October 2014, URL:
< https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ab4b/1e5f3f159020ad29ab63a3a4bcfa72081abc.pdf > [consulted on 9 September 2019].
[91] HARVEY, David, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* cit.

were supporting communism against the state[92]. Today, Mayan communities are often accused by the government of being involved in drug trafficking, and the army has thus an excuse to pressure them into leaving their territories and make space for investment[93].

The concept of narcotrafficking, which as I argued above rests more on literary inventions than rigorous analysis, provides the US and their allies with a hideous enemy, whose destruction is considered as mandatory for security purposes. This allows to provide funds for launching military campaigns that could not take place otherwise. However, how the DEA distinguishes between various types of organized crime based on political reasons is blatant. The DEA and the White House consider narcos to be natural state competitors, but only in those countries that are US allies: in Venezuela, on the other hand, apparently the government itself controls organized crime and drug trafficking, which obviously calls for anti-state policies instead of policies of state building.[94] Even more interestingly, according to the DEA the Venezuela government is conspiring with Hezbollah and Iran to traffic drugs into the US, even though no clear proof of this conspiracy have been provided.[95] It is illuminating to consider how so called "Mafia-States" are in countries that the US consider invading, and for reasons that have nothing to do with drugs. If stopping drug flows remain an imperative in the US' agenda, all that comes with it is much more shadowed and hidden, and it deserves much stronger attention.

[92] NAVARRO, Mireya, «Guatemala Army waged "Genocide" new report finds», in *The New York Times*, 26 February 1999, URL: < https://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/26/world/guatemalan-army-waged-genocide-new-report-finds.html > [consulted on 9 September 2019].

[93] PALEY, Dawn, *Drug War Capitalism*, cit., pp. 204-232 (Kindle edition).

[94] This representation of organized crime of Venezuela is particularly supported by Insight Crime, which is an influential American think-tank that covers organized crime in the Americas. Insight Crime goes so far as referring to Venezuela as a "Mafia-State". Insight Crime represents one of the most authoritative voices that support the Drug War discourse. They also refer to the FARC as "Ex FARC-Mafia" as they believe the FARC have stopped being a communist group and are pure drug traffickers.
Venezuela Investigative Unite, «Venezuela: A Mafia State?», in *Insight Crime*, 17 May 2018, URL:
< https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/venezuela-mafia-state/ > [consulted on 15 June 2019].

[95] CLARK, Colin P., «Hezbollah is in Venezuela to stay», in *Foreign Policy*, 9 February 2019, URL:
< https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/09/hezbollah-is-in-venezuela-to-stay/> [consulted on 15 June 2019].

L'AUTORE

Ettore ASONI, è dottorando in Geografia presso la San Diego State University e l'University of California Santa Barbara. I suoi interessi di ricerca riguardano: flussi migratori attraverso il confine Messico-USA e il Mediterraneo; la geografia della segregazione razziale e il razzismo negli Stati Uniti; il conflitto interno e il crimine organizzato in Colombia e America Latina.

URL: < http://www.studistorici.com/progett/autori/#Asoni >