

Review Feature - Organised Crime in Mexico

Written by Richard W. Coughlin

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RICHARD W. COUGHLIN, JAN 17 2019

Los Zetas, Inc.: Criminal Corporations Energy and Civil War
By Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera
University of Texas Press, 2017

A Massacre in Mexico: The True Story Behind the Missing Forty Three Students
By Anabel Hernandez
Verso, 2018

State Transformation and the Drug War

In 2006, Mexican president Felipe Calderón deployed the Mexican military to attack organised crime in Mexico, which had become heavily militarised and capable of challenging the Mexican state's monopoly on the use of force. The subsequent war on drugs has raged in Mexico from 2006 to 2018. 250,000 people were killed in the course of this conflict and another 37,000 disappeared. The elections of 2018 were a major political transformation in Mexico. All of the major political parties – the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the National Action Party (PAN) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) – suffered heavy losses while the party of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (or AMLO) won 53% of the popular vote, supermajorities in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate and legislative majorities in 26 out of Mexico's 32 states. Whether AMLO's party can reduce violence in Mexico is open to question and even scepticism, as this review will suggest. The books under discussion here – Guadalupe Correa Cabrera's *Los Zetas, Inc.* and Anabel Hernandez's *A Massacre in Mexico* – provide important insights into the roots of Mexico's violence and the grave challenges that face Mexico's new government.

Any account of Mexico's drug war must begin by examining the decline of the PRI, which emerged from the Mexican Revolution and governed Mexico from 1928 to 2000. PRI hegemony assumed the form of vertical networks of patron client relationships linking together different segments of the Mexican political class to the central figure of the Mexican President. These networks included narco-trafficking organisations who were given the right to engage in narco-trafficking within specific jurisdictions – referred to as *plazas* – in exchange for bribes and under certain restrictions imposed by the state – traffickers were not permitted to carry arms or to sell drugs in Mexico (Watt and Zepeda 2012). With the debt crisis of the early 1980s, the PRI lost both political legitimacy and financial resources. Meanwhile, successful US drug interdiction efforts in the Caribbean and South Florida increased the flow of drugs through Mexico and augmented the power of Mexican narco-traffickers. They were rapidly outgrowing their subordinate relationship to a state in the midst of deep structural transformation.

Paramilitary Conflict and Civil War

As the title of her book indicates, Guadalupe Correa focuses on the Zetas. The Zetas were commandos within the Mexican army who received military training in the United States. They were deployed in the North-Eastern state of Tamaulipas, which had, since the 1930s, been a hub of illegal commerce from Mexico into the United States. The founder of the Gulf Cartel, Juan Guerra, smuggled whisky into the United States during the Prohibition era and later added prostitution, gambling and car theft to his portfolio of illegal activities. He operated his organisation by means of developing an extensive corruption network with state and federal level officials. Guerra was succeeded in his

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leadership of the organisation by his nephew, Juan Ábrego, who contracted with Cali based cartels to dramatically expand transshipment of South American cocaine into the United States from the mid-80s to the mid-90s. Like his predecessor, Ábrego relied on corruption networks to operate (Correa 2017, p. 15-36).

Ábrego's arrest and extradition to the United States in 1996 triggered a struggle for power over the Gulf Cartel. Osiel Cárdenas emerged as the new leader of the Gulf Cartel with the assistance of the Zetas. The innovation of the Zetas was to use force in place of historically cultivated corruption networks. Deserting the Mexican army for higher pay, the Zetas brought with them a new and unprecedented level of expertise in the use of force. Correa quotes US military analyst Hal Brands, who notes that the Zetas "make use of an astonishingly large and powerful arsenal" including the standard AK 47, but also shoulder fired missiles, bazookas, grenade launchers, 50 calibre machine guns, armour piercing ammunition, dynamite and plastic explosives. Over 90% of the weapons were acquired in the United States through arms dealers and gun show purchases and then smuggled over the border (Correa 2017, p. 90).

At stake in the war on drugs was not so much victory, which has proved elusive, but, as Dawn Paley (2017) has pointed out, new modes of state making. An important part of this project is the ideological conception of the state as a bastion of law and order, which defines itself against a criminal insurgency that is being waged against it (Zavala 2018). Reality is far more ambiguous. The virtue of Correa's book is that she decodes the ambiguity of the Mexican state. The paramilitaries, like the Zetas and other organised crime groups have no ideological programme. They are not out to change Mexican society but rather to loot it. The looting, however, is a complex, multilateral process, with many different points of resistance and collusion from both state and non-state actors. Correa argues that armed conflict in Mexico is similar to the intrastate conflicts that have been fought in the global South with increasing frequency and violence since the end of the Cold War. What is typical of these conflicts is that they are civil wars, fought for the sake of economic opportunities rather than as the result of deep-seated grievances (Correa 2017, p. 126-56). These economic opportunities emerge in a context where the centralised administrative capacities of post-colonial states have entered into precipitous decline. State and society become fragmented and fractured.

In the Mexican case, military conflicts with organised crime proceeded through two phases: an effort to decapitate the leadership structures of the major organised crime groups giving way to a low intensity mode of conflict focused on clashes between different paramilitary groups that have occurred in the penumbra of the military's widespread deployment across Mexico's national territory (Correa 2017, p. 136). The paramilitary forces that have emerged in Mexico are highly heterogeneous in character. They include groups like the Mata-Zetas in Veracruz, who are thought have had links to cartels opposed to the Zetas (like the Sinaloa Cartel), but also participation from the Mexican Marines (Correa 2017: 113-5). They also consist of the formation of vigilante self-defence paramilitaries. In Monterrey, local elites financed paramilitaries as private security forces to fight against the Zetas, yet many participants had links to rival cartels. In Michoacán, another epicentre of Mexico's criminal violence, the federal government provided supported to self-defence groups, which were also infiltrated by the rival cartels. The resulting decentralisation of violence has enabled the military to delegate the use of force to vigilante groups and avoid the legal and normative problems associated with human rights abuses (Correa 2017, p. 107-25).

Drug War Winners and Losers

Correa discusses the outcomes of the Mexican drug war rather than focusing on the intentions of its major actors. This assessment of the Mexican drug war is warranted because its proximate causes are distinct from its ultimate outcomes, which are still unfolding. Felipe Calderón initiated this conflict after a highly contentious electoral victory (of less than one percent of the vote over AMLO in 2006) and in response to the deployment of more powerful military capabilities by the leading cartels of the day. The scale of the resulting violence greatly exceeded the expectations of the major political actors, generating new and unforeseen consequences. One major consequence of the drug war is that Mexico has become, in Correa's estimate, a fragile rather than a failed state (Correa 2017, p. 97). The difference is that centralised political authority has not disintegrated in Mexico, but it has rather become one of numerous different modes of power, which both antagonistically and collaboratively co-exist. Antagonisms can be understood in terms of power struggles between rival political factions, organisations, business interests and organised crime groups, both inside and outside the state. But the collaborations between these groups are perhaps more significant.

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They can be seen, for example, in the Zeta assault on the town of Allende near the US border, in retribution for the betrayal of two Zeta affiliated traffickers who operated an important plaza (Eagle Pass) on the US border. The Zetas disappeared 300 residents of Allende, disintegrating their remains in barrels of diesel fuel. The assault lasted for several days, but it never prompted a response by the Mexican army, stationed at a nearby base (Osorno 2014). This is, as Correa suggests, collaboration by omission rather than commission (Correa 2017, p. 223). The result has been to depopulate the town of Allende and its surrounding region. The region is the source of several water springs in an otherwise arid region. Allende is situated within the Burgos Basin, an area that contains rich deposits of natural gas that can be extracted through fracking. But fracking requires large supplies of water. The depopulation of Allende works, in this sense, to the advantage of transnational energy investments, which, in Mexico, have been authorised by the 2014 energy reforms that now encourage foreign investment in Mexico's energy sector.

One conclusion to draw from Correa's analysis is that the Mexican drug war has given rise to a series of what Saskia Sassen terms predatory formations (2014) that facilitate transnational investment and expulsion of people from highly valued regions. Consider another example of this point: the Goldcorp Corporation's mining facilities in Guerrero form part of an emerging gold belt in the state. Goldcorp pays royalties to ejidos for the use of the subsoil, but these payments have piqued the interests of organised crime groups that compete to establish their capacity to extort peasants (Correa 2017, p. 184-5). The result of violent competition for the right to extort is the progressive depopulation of the area. Correa sketches out similar dynamics in Coahuila and Michoacán. In the latter state, high prices for iron ore, exported to China through the port of Lazaro Cárdenas, instigated inter-cartel conflict to control these natural resources. A similar dynamic has played out in Coahuila with respect to coal mining. In these locations, cartels have displaced small and medium sized firms while integrating themselves into the commodity chains dominated by Mexico's more powerful economic elites (Correa 2017, p. 167-85). These commodity chains straddle the supposed divide between law and criminality, which the official discourse of the state loudly reifies, but which exists, in reality, quite tenuously.

The strength of Correa's book is that she links security and political economy outcomes in Mexico in a way that is not reductionist. That is, she avoids ascribing the economic outcomes of the Mexican drug war to the logic of neoliberalism or of capitalism more generally, but rather considers the complex political mediations between the calculations of political elites and the expansion of transnational extractive activities in Mexico. And, indeed, she does so by focusing on the organisational dynamics of the Zetas rather than the stratagems of political elites. This is a welcome shift of emphasis that avoids the often misleading stereotypes that are often associated with organised crime in Mexico (Zavala, 2016).

Correa's text has its limits, as any text does. Several of these merit brief consideration. The first is that there is very little discussion of the role of the United States in supporting, through various policies of the Merida Initiative, the Mexican state's militarised response to organised crime (Frantzblau 2016). What might emerge from this discussion is a consideration of the similarities and differences between Plan Colombia and the Merida Initiative. The former was much more unabashedly focused on the expansion of transnational investment in Colombia, but in Mexico the relationship between security policy and economic outcomes was far more attenuated (Paley 2014). What accounts for this? Nor is there any discussion of the very strong policy preferences in the Obama administration, particularly Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for an opening of Mexico's energy sector to foreign investment. How did these policy preferences shape US policy with Mexico in terms of the drug war (Fang and Horn 2016, Blake 2014)? With respect to Mexico itself, Correa pays too much attention to the energy sector and not enough to the expansion of mining in Mexico, which has been facilitated by violent intimidation by organised crime (Lemus 2018). Additionally, there is little discussion of how violence in Mexico was aimed at criminalising dissidents or by obscuring their elimination by means of the sheer magnitude of the violence unleashed by the Mexican drug war (Paley 2014). Finally, there is little discussion of how the state's use of violence during the drug war was not aimed at organised crime, but rather at political opponents that could be discredited by the federal government's unwillingness to intervene effectively in targeted regions (Trejo and Ley 2016). A single text cannot do justice to the immense complexity of the Mexican drug war, but Correa's text could be more self-conscious about situating the reader within a broader labyrinth of Mexican drug violence.

The "Historical Truth" of Ayotzinapa

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As noted above, the war on drugs in Mexico has resulted in new forms of state making – in particular, the development of new modes of state/society relations that incorporate political elites, transnational businesses, domestic economic oligarchs and organised crime into predatory formations that facilitate transnational modes of accumulation. Anabel Hernandez's (2018) inquiry into the disappearance of 43 education students from the Raul Isidro Normal College in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero in September 2014 reveals both the corruption at the heart of the Mexican state but also the state's deep need to construct a false narrative of itself as the central protagonist in the war on drugs.

Hernandez has painstakingly examined media, human rights and judicial records of the disappearances and interviewed scores of people who witnessed the events or who became caught in the state's subsequent fabrication of evidence. Anyone expecting an account of why these disappearances happened is going to be disappointed by this text. Hernandez stays focused, for the most part, on the facts that immediately surrounded the disappearance of the 43 students and the investigations that ensued afterward. The central facts of the case centred on the participation of students from the Raul Isidro Normal School (a teacher's college) in the commemoration of the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico City. This was an annual event for which students hijacked commercial buses, with the forbearance of the local and state political authorities. 2014 was different, however, because one of the buses that students hijacked was loaded with heroin.

As the two of the commandeered buses departed Iguala, at approximately 10:30 of the night of September 26, they were stopped by the municipal police in Guerrero and then attacked by a combination of state and federal police as well as plainclothes federal agents. Because the students witnessed security forces recovering the heroin, they had to be eliminated. Hernandez draws this conclusion on the basis of an interview with the drug trafficker whose heroin had been intercepted (2018, p. 327-30), but there is no additional evidence from survivors or witnesses to support this claim. Here is a point where the narrowness of Hernandez's account becomes apparent. The disclosure of heroin on the bus points toward the main cause of disappearances, but withholding this key point to the very end of the text and grounding it on an interview with an undisclosed source makes the factual basis of the work as a whole teeter on a precarious set of claims for which we must simply take the author's word.

An additional criticism is that Hernandez never examines any of the details of the heroin trade in Iguala or Guerrero, more generally. One would think that the testimonies of surviving students and police would focus on the presence of the heroin on the night of September 26 as a rationale for the disappearances of the students. But it is not clear that Hernandez even asked her interview subjects about this. This is one rather considerable hole in her analysis. Another is that there is no discussion in her text of the migration of poppy cultivation in Mexico from the Golden Triangle in Northern Mexico to the state of Guerrero, a development that might illuminate the interests of state and federal political and military actors.

The strength of Hernandez's book, on other hand, is her relentless focus on the brutal and farcical investigation undertaken by the Mexican state in the aftermath of the disappearances. State federal investigators immediately threw the blame on municipal police forces and the mayor of Iguala in order to blunt the criticisms of national and international audiences and to maintain the fiction that Mexico is a functioning democratic state (Ackerman 2016). That this version of events appeared to be true, at least to some observers, was due to the presumption that municipal police across Mexico are invariably corrupt and because of the way in which the mayor of Iguala resigned his post and went into hiding after the events of September 26. The government's narrative held that local appendages of the Mexican state have been co-opted by organised crime, but that the centres of political authority (the state and federal governments, dominated by the existing political class) remained committed to the restoration of law and order.

With the events of Iguala, a dual image of state terror and obfuscation emerges. The state can inflict terror and then claim impunity through the fabrication of evidence, based on the use of torture to extract confessions from the accused. Much of Hernandez's account focuses on the different waves of arrests by the state: first the Iguala police, then the mayor of Iguala and his wife, then the Cocula police, who allegedly conspired with Iguala police to deliver the students to Guerreros Unidos, the local gang, who, allegedly, killed them. Finally the state arrested alleged gang members, who turned out to be impoverished peasants. Like the coerced confessions of the Iguala and Cocula

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police, the accounts of the framed gang members were inconsistent. One claimed that all the students were dead when they arrived at Cocula garbage dump. Another said they were still alive. A third maintained that only 30 students were transported to the dump (Hernandez 2018, p. 206-15). The impression that one forms while reading this is how the state could be so careless or incompetent when formulating its case? Hernandez merely reports the facts. What the English language reader also needs is an interpretation of Mexican political reality, for which he or she will need to look elsewhere.

While the state coercively manufactured the guilty parties, it also manipulated and distorted evidence that might have inculpated state and federal security forces. The state put forward the idea that the bodies of the disappeared were incinerated, so that their remains could not be identified. These claims followed earlier reconstructions of the killing of the students at different locations, which were rebutted by the lack of DNA remains of the students. To prove that the killings of the students happened in Cocula, the state produced remains of one of the disappeared students, Alexander Mora.

But the provenance of this evidence has never been adequately accounted for. The International Group of Independent Experts, affiliated with the Inter-American Court on Human Rights, contends that the state planted this evidence (Hernandez 2018, p. 254). This group, invited by both the Mexican government and the parents of the disappeared to provide technical assistance in the resolution of this case, also concluded that a fire of the magnitude required to completely incinerate the bodies of the disappeared could not have occurred in the Cocula garbage dump (Hernandez 2018, p. 234).

These rebuttals demolished the government's assertion of the 'historical truth' of what happened to the 43 missing students. The case of Ayotzinapa ignited a catharsis of rage and grief from Mexicans, leading to large-scale protests in Mexico City, highway blockages and seizures of government buildings in Guerrero. Public support for Peña Nieto cratered, with his approval rating dropping from 50% to well under 20%. This was a prelude to the massive losses the PRI suffered in the 2018 elections – often in regions where it had been the dominant political force for generations – eliminating it as a major political actor in Mexican politics. But none of the political consequences of Ayotzinapa are discussed by Hernandez and this, again, signals a key weakness of her book: its tendency to convey facts without interpretations. So we are left with a discussion of a pivotal occurrence in recent Mexican history, but little sense of why it occurred and why it proved so significant.

The Mexican Deep State

In light of the limitations of Hernandez's book and the recent election of AMLO, several points concerning the significance of the events of Ayotzinapa and the future of Mexican politics can be advanced. The historical defeat of the PRI does not imply the transformation of the Mexican state. The 27th Infantry Division in Iguala remained immune from the investigation, at one point turning away state investigators (from Guerrero) on grounds of national security (Hernandez 2018, p. 103-4). Fifty-five members of the Peña Nieto administration, thirteen of whom are naval officers, have been accused of torture. The PRG (Mexico's Attorney General's Office) ruled that nineteen engaged in torture, but none have been sentenced (Hernandez 2018, p. 370-75). While AMLO, the new president, has convened a commission to investigate the disappearances of Ayotzinapa, he also indicated his unwillingness to prosecute past cases of corruption (Dresser 2018). Indeed, his undersecretary of Human Rights has indicated that military personnel will not be subject to any investigations related to the disappearances (Carrasco 2018, p. 7). While AMLO campaigned on a promise to demilitarise security in Mexico, his new security plan, issued days before assuming office, calls for creating a National Guard under the command of the military. Mexican analyst Monica Serrano argues that this is on account of the growing dependence of the civilian government on the military to maintain domestic order – a result of how the Mexican government has fought the war on drugs – even as this order is laced with protection arrangements for organized crime (Carrasco 2018).

AMLO has also resisted calls to establish an independent Attorney General's Office (PGR), opting to appoint his attorney general, retaining a long-standing arrangement through which law enforcement acts as an arm of executive authority. AMLO is rejecting calls for a systematic restructuring of the PGR, ridding it of its legions of poorly trained and corrupt prosecutors (Navarro 2018). In short, the political impact of the Ayotzinapa was to blow away the outer

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shell of corruption – in the form of ruling party – but the ‘deep state’ remains anchored in place. As both Correa and Hernandez’s accounts illustrate, however, it is not only the state that matters but its disparate and complex interconnections with organised crime, business elites and transnational corporations. These are the modalities through which contemporary neoliberalism operates in Mexico. Their historical transformation will require more than just electoral change.

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