

‘The Mexican Drug Violence: Hybrid Warfare, Predatory Capitalism and the Logic of Cruelty’,

Summary PhD Dissertation Teun Voeten, 2018

Will be defended September 20th, 12.30 pm at Leiden University

For decades, Mexico has been plagued by drug related violence. The situation escalated dramatically when President Felipe Calderón declared in 2006 an all-out war on the drug cartels, resulting in bloodshed on unprecedented levels. Between 160.000 and 200.000 people are estimated to have died over 10 years in drug related violence, it has become one of the bloodiest conflicts in the Western hemisphere and there is no sign that it is abating. With an estimated 29.000 people killed, 2017 was the most violent year so far. Thousands have gone missing without a trace. Corruption has become endemic and impunity has reached an all-time high. The violence is affecting all levels of society and has become an intricate matrix, with cartels, authorities, police and armed forces and civilians all involved in confrontations on different levels.

This study explores the Mexican drug war from different angles, using a macro perspective as well as looking from a micro-level. From a political-military perspective it looks at the dynamics of the war that is unfolding, while from an economic perspective it focuses on how cartels can be seen as ultra-capitalist corporations. Finally, from an anthropological point of view, it looks how individuals can not only become killers, but transform into ruthless murderers, perpetrating unspeakable atrocities.

Is it an example of a so-called ‘new war’, a post-modern conflict in which armed groups merge with organized crime and deliberately create a situation of chaos and lawlessness? Or is the drug violence a logical consequence of decades of Mexican authoritarian politics that has embraced in the 1980s a neoliberal system resulting in growing inequalities and subsequently an exacerbation of criminality? And in the same light, can we see the drug cartels as extreme examples of predatory capitalism that thrive in a neoliberal environment? And what is the

rationale and what are the motivations, if any, of the actors that engage in criminal activities and extreme violence?

In the first chapter these three perspectives from a general point of view are introduced. It discusses how warfare evolved over the last centuries. Firstly, from classic warfare to interstate conflict where war is a means to an end and waged by uniformed armies on battlefields while respecting certain rules. More recently, it has evolved into irregular warfare, called 'new wars' where conflicts are an end in itself, where armed combatants exploit a situation for their own ends. The fragmentation of the state's monopoly on violence, a shift from ideological to economic motivations, the blurring of distinctions between war and peace and civilians and combatants, and finally the merger of crime, terrorism and war are important elements. One step further is the concept of hybrid warfare, the form of many current conflicts. It has elements of new wars, but essential is an ever-changing multidimensional matrix of violence, multiple goals, multiple fronts, multiple tactics and multiple intensities all at the same time, and the simultaneous use of primitive and sophisticated strategies.

From an economical viewpoint. neoliberal economic policies combined with globalization, has increased wealth, but also increased inequality. This inequality and a growing means-end disjunction creates strong motivations to correct this perceived injustice through crime. Social exclusion, inequality and poverty are important factors, but not the exclusive ones to explain crime. But a growing reservoir of excluded people provide the cannon fodder and the foot soldiers for criminal organizations that in fact function in many ways as legit corporations. In the first chapter attention is given to the New York based crack gangs and West-African child soldiers. WHY Dealing crack and joining a gang is for many young people in a rough urban environment the only escape route and it is important to understand the rationale of their actions. There is a logic in the atrocities committed by rebels in Sierra Leone, but some scholars go to far as to attribute a great rationale behind these actions. Still dismissing them as purely barbaric, as other do, is closing the door to academic inquiry. Theories of violence may be too narrow or too wide, but is necessary to bear in mind that symbolic, expressive and communicative aspects of violence in many cases dominate the instrumental dimension of violence.

Chapter 2 provides a historical contextualization for the Mexican case. It focuses on the emergence and growth of the drugs trade, how the narcotics industry became embedded in the political system and how the matrix of violence increased in complexity. This chapter describes in more detail the real nature of the drug war, trends and statistics, regional differences, remarkable incidents, in short, a topography of the drug violence and its evolution in time.

The following chapters apply on the specific Mexican context the analytical perspectives discussed in the first chapter. Chapter 3 explores the usefulness in using the new war concept, introduced by Mary Kaldor and Herfried Münkler, to understand the Mexican drug war. The conflict, with its multidimensional and unpredictable matrix of violence, is actually beyond a new war and can be best described as a hybrid conflict. These are conflicts with multiple goals, fought with ultra-modern weapons as well with low tech, primitive techniques, fought globally and locally at the same time. In this chapter methods and actors in the Mexican drug war are described in detail. Finally, this chapter compares the structure, dynamics and methods of the hybrid war currently being waged by ISIS against the Western powers with the Mexican drug war.

Chapter 4 assesses the ways neoliberalism is connected to the Mexican conflict. It discusses how neoliberal policies have affected the Mexican social context and in how far greater economic inequality has resulted in the drug violence. It also explores how the drug trafficking organizations in themselves should be interpreted as predatory capitalist enterprises that in many aspects function exactly as 'legit' corporations and how they flourish in a globalized world by establishing links with the formal economy.

Chapter 5 deals with the phenomenon of violence from an anthropological perspective, focusing on the actors and the act of killing. Why people join armed groups and how people can become ruthless killers? It compares actors in the Mexican drug war with West-African child soldiers and Western ISIS recruits and also look testimonies from fighters in World War I and II, and the Vietnam War. This chapter also presents some case studies of perpetrators and look at the subculture of violence in the Mexico. Finally, this chapter discusses the disturbing issue how people are able to commit unspeakable atrocities.

The main aim of this dissertation is to draw an analytical model of the Mexican drug war, using different and sometimes unconventional perspectives. This because it is a phenomenon of staggering complexity and researcher should be as wide and open as possible while avoiding methodological limitations that might close certain venues. That is why it is important to study the subject not only from macro- but from micro-perspective as well. We have to understand structures, but look at individual actors as well, and use the two grand traditions in the social sciences, the interpretational/understanding versus explanatory/positivist method as complimentary approaches. A multidisciplinary approach is also needed and findings from cultural anthropology, criminology, history, sociology, biology, ethology, evolutionary psychology, economics and political science should be incorporated in the analysis. Extreme theoretical positions should be avoided for the same reason. Therefore, this study takes a moderate middle position in the structure-agency debate as well as in the nature-nurture debate.

It important to transcend the local, specific context. That is why in the anthropological oriented last chapter, which is focused on individual motivation, some cross-cultural comparisons are made. This is done between perpetrators active in New York based gangs, West African child soldiers and ISIS recruits. The emergence of ISIS is a very recent phenomenon, and academic literature is rare since studies are unfolding at this very moment. However, it would be a grave omission to ignore that conflict since the brutality and tactics of ISIS are in many ways comparable with those of the Mexican cartels.

This thesis is based on theoretical research of existing literature, but also on the practical experience and empirical observations made by the author during 30 years working in international conflicts all over the world. During 20 trips in the period 2009 - 2017 he made to Mexico, he not only photographed the violence resulting in his photo book *Narco Estado: Drug Violence in Mexico*, but he also researched many subjects and conducted dozens of interviews with authorities, victims and perpetrators, notably 6 *sicarios*.

A historical analysis provides valuable insight in the Mexican drug violence. The study distinguishes three periods. The early period saw the transformation of the narco-trafficking sector from a small crop that gave farmers a supplementary income into an extremely profitable business. In this period, the seeds of cooperation between the informal sector and the authorities

were sown, but still at a rather, innocent village level. The second period was the post-war boom when narco-trafficking became a multi-billion business thanks to explosion in demand for marijuana and cocaine. The other factor was the US closing the Caribbean-Miami smuggling routes, so the Colombian cartels started to export through Mexico. But still, business was conducted in a rather nonviolent fashion. The final period was the escalation in violence that actually started during the political shake up in 2000 when after nearly 70 years, the PRI party was replaced by the PAN. Old arrangements were shaken up and had to be reconfigured. In the same vein, there are three important story lines. The first is the relation between organized crime with the authorities. Organized crime became increasingly entrenched in society and their relation with the authorities changed from submission to collaboration to a point where the criminal sector started to challenge the authorities and dominated them in certain areas. The second tendency is the increasing complexity of the war as more vectors in the matrix of drug violence emerge as new players enter the stage. The last theme is the increasing escalation of violence, from selective instrumental use of violence bound by a certain honor code, to indiscriminate, extreme violence where symbolic and communicative aspects dominate.

Instead of the new war concept, authors describing drugs-related conflicts in Latin America use similar concepts like 'New Violence' and 'Violent Pluralism' for a new chaotic reality where the state's monopoly on violence has disintegrated. Mexico is no failed state since many institutions function rather well. Many authors therefore prefer concepts as 'weak state' or 'security failure'. Still, some regions of Mexico are effective criminal enclaves where non-state actors have created a new, alternative modes of economy, governance and redistribution, in some case even providing social services.

The matrix of the drug violence is intricate and many conflicts fought out at the same time, in fact at least seven wars are taking place simultaneously with authorities, drug trafficking organizations, police forces, civilians, paramilitaries, civilians and petty criminals as parties involved. Their roles tend to overlap and can take different positions. The relation of organized crime versus authorities has evolved from a submissive role, through a mutual beneficial to a dominant position. In many cases organized crime and authorities have completely merged and it is no longer possible to differentiate between them. Drug trafficking organizations are not

homogenous monolithic organizations like street gangs, but have an executive board, a middle management with professionals and the lower echelons where most of the foot soldiers are found. All actors involved having different motivations and backgrounds. Violence is not random and gratuitous, but selective and instrumental. Drug trafficking organizations evade all out confrontations with the government forces and opt for insurgency tactics. Methods are often ultra-violent with mutilations and beheadings. They are filmed and distributed on social media. The symbolic and communicative aspects of the violence is a form of propaganda and psychological warfare, similar to ISIS-tactics. The drug war has evolved to hybrid warfare with multiple strategies, tactics and motivations of its actors. The foot soldiers are often recruited from excluded class, crime and insurgency and terrorism merges, giving rise to pockets of alternative control. The war ISIS had declared with the West is a perfect example of hybrid warfare with a ideological-religious component that is absent in the Mexican drug war.

The liberalization of the Mexican economy and dismantling of the welfare state has created new economic opportunities for criminal entrepreneurs while increasing poverty and inequality, resulting in pool of excluded people that are easily recruited by the parallel narco-economy. The direct relation between poverty and crime is complex. Middle and upper management do not come from an impoverished underclass.

Drug trafficking organizations follow the same logic as legit corporations. The difference is that they operate outside the law but cannot appeal to the authorities in case of disputes. Non-violent conflict resolution is preferred since violence alerts authorities. Drug trafficking organizations have human resources, public relations, networking, franchising, diversification, branding and corporate social responsibility issues as well. Personnel voluntarily joins or is sought out by headhunters. Sometimes Drug trafficking organizations openly advertise for people. Creating a brand name and reputation of invincibility is done through a public relations strategy where extreme violence is a important element. Providing social services and infrastructure is a form of corporate social responsibility resulting in public support. Networking is done through corrupting local officials and intermarriage.

Different Drug trafficking organizations follow different business models. So for instance, the Zetas are a network of independent cells that expand through franchising. They have a

diverse portfolio and need to control territory through intimidation. The Sinaloa cartel is specialized in narco-trafficking and only need to control corridors. Drug trafficking organizations are flexible, embrace innovation and take risks. New products - synthetic drugs - are created and new markets are explored. Drug trafficking organizations are flat networks of independent cells making them resistant against law enforcement efforts. The king pin strategy of the government, eliminating cartel leaders, has resulted in fragmentation with smaller and more aggressive criminal groups.

Globalization has created unprecedented opportunities for international organized crime, exploiting loopholes while avoiding regulations. Transnational crime is not a separate, concurrent and independent universe but can only exist grace to cooperation and links with the formal economy. It may not dominate the world but the erosion of moral standards and social fabric do constitute a serious security threat.

Motivations why people joined armed groups are cross-culturally rather similar. Poverty, lack of education, the need to protect community, the presence of war, ideology and religion and forced recruitment are common reasons. Social-economic exclusion is important but so are psycho-social factors such as peer pressure, sense of belonging need for respect. Lust for adventure, resentment against the establishment, urge to prove oneself, quest for glamour, boredom, escapism and a suicidal, nihilistic attitude are other factors.

Humans have a potential for selfish, aggressive as well as altruistic, empathic behavior. The inhibition against killing is nearly universal but is circumvented with equally universal mechanisms. Creating distance (moral, cultural and spatial), positive as well as negative sanctioning and altering one's state of mind are the three most common tactics. Dehumanization creates distance, so does shifting responsibility to a group or higher authority. Forced killing helps to overcome the initial inhibition. Drugs or religious ecstasy altering the state of mind. The attraction of war lays in the escape from daily routine while creating strong feelings such as a sense of belonging and love for comrades. For some, killing is a very empowering experience. Case studies from *sicarios*, show the same multitude of reasons and also how one becomes a

hitman, usually accidentally, sliding down a scale from petty crime. The first homicide is often accidental or self-defense.

Extreme violence is not outside the realm of human nature and needs serious, multi-disciplinary inquiry that looks for the 'sense' in 'senseless violence'. Roy Baumeister suggests four roots: Instrumental, materialistic greed; ideological religious convictions; personal emotions and finally sadism which is actually rare. Displaying extreme violence facilitates a criminal career. Ideology and religion decrease personal responsibility by creating utopian ideals that need sacrifices. Strong personal emotions as hurt self-esteem and need for respect can develop its own dangerous dynamics. Disgust and shame are powerful emotions that facilitated cruelties in Nazi-death camps, as well as in the West-African wars and the contemporary Mexico.

In Mexico, the situation escalated since a few conditions concurred at the same time. The three main ingredients for crime are all present - motives, opportunities, and weak control. A neoliberal system results in a large excluded class that accepts crime as an alternative means of living. Geographically, Mexico has a 3000-kilometer, soft, porous border with a country that has an enormous demand for drugs. Mexico has remote, inaccessible areas and many transit point and is ideal for cultivation, production and transport. Culturally, Mexicans have an independent and enterprising spirit and a tolerance for unlawful behavior and embrace opportunities the narco-business offers. A century old tradition of patrimonialism and a weak central state have produced mutual beneficial relations between authorities and the criminal world and have resulted in a endemic corruption and impunity. The changing of the guards from PRI to PAN also shook up the security landscape. The law enforcement strategy has been counterproductive by breaking up Drug trafficking organizations into smaller, but more violent groups. Glorification of narco-culture made drug trafficking an attractive alternative for the ever-growing class of unemployed people. All these factors together created the perfect storm.

It is nearly impossible to make a comprehensive theoretical model of the drug violence that does justice to the complexity on the ground since there are so many vectors in the matrix of violence that transform themselves and influence each other constantly. In that way, it is 'Wizard's Chess on Steroids' where there are no rules and all players constantly switch roles and act as they please with total liberty and impunity. To paraphrase Howard Campbell and Zygmunt

Bauman, 'the Drug War Zone' is a 'Liquid Reality' that defies definition and is impossible to grasp in its full complexity. With an elusive and continuously changing matrix of ultra-violence, fueled and accelerated by drugs and mind-boggling profits, the conflict in Mexico is actually a hybrid war taken to the next level, for which I propose the term hyper-hybrid warfare. The urge to find a static theoretical model is motivated by a desire to control the uncontrollable. And that is rather impossible. Still, we do not have to retreat into explanatory defeatism. The theoretical explorations provide some clues of the functioning and dynamics of this illicit and elusive parallel universe that coexists with legal society. Especially the concept of a hybrid network structure and the corporate character of the drug trafficking organizations provide helpful frameworks to understand the drug war zone.