

Narco: Reflections on a Mexican Myth

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English Abstract

The dominant discourse on the security crisis in Mexico is based on an official representation that compares criminal groups with mafias, as “parallel powers” whose interests “capture” the State. Against this vision, it is necessary to deconstruct the categories that make the “cartel” a phantom enemy, the “plaza” an imaginary territory and the “narco” a myth, in order to critically understand a criminal phenomenon whose political nexus is functional both to the maintenance of social order and to the accumulation of capital. In this sense, this paper constitutes a theoretical essay, that is, it is not intended to provide solid evidence or prove empirical validity, but rather to defend the need to think critically about crime, as a kind of philosophical invitation to an epistemological reflection. Its purpose is then to position itself against a dominant literature on organized crime, to discuss the main ideas that support this vision, and to argue, in logical terms, why the so-called “narco” is nothing more than a Mexican myth.

Resumen en español

El discurso dominante sobre la crisis de seguridad en México se base en una representación oficial que equipara los grupos criminales con mafias, como “poderes paralelos” cuyos intereses “capturan” el Estado. En contra de esta visión, es necesario deconstruir las categorías que hacen de los “cárteles” un enemigo fantasmal, de las “plazas” un territorio imaginario y del “narco” un mito, con el fin de poder entender de manera crítica un fenómeno criminal cuyo nexo político es funcional tanto al mantenimiento del orden social como a la acumulación de capital. En este sentido, este artículo constituye un ensayo teórico, es decir, no busca proveer evidencias sólidas o comprobar su validez empírica, sino, más bien, defender la necesidad de pensar críticamente acerca del crimen, como una especie de invitación filosófica para una reflexividad epistemológica. El propósito consiste entonces en posicionarse contra una literatura dominante sobre crimen organizado, para discutir las ideas principales que sostienen su visión y argumentar, en términos lógicos, porque el llamado “narco” no es más que un mito mexicano.

Resumo em português

O discurso dominante sobre a crise de segurança no México se baseia em uma representação oficial que equipara os grupos criminosos às máfias, como “poderes paralelos” cujos interesses “capturam” o Estado. Contra essa visão, é preciso desconstruir as categorias que fazem dos “cartéis” um inimigo fantasmagórico, das “praças” um território imaginário e do “narco” um mito, para poder compreender

criticamente um fenômeno criminoso cujo nexó político é funcional tanto para a manutenção da ordem social quanto para a acumulação de capital. Nesse sentido, este artigo constitui um ensaio teórico, ou seja, não busca fornecer evidências sólidas ou verificar sua validade empírica, mas, sim, defender a necessidade de se pensar criticamente sobre o crime, como uma espécie de convite filosófico para uma reflexividade epistemológica. O objetivo, então, é posicionar-se contra uma literatura dominante sobre o crime organizado, discutir as principais ideias que sustentam sua visão e argumentar, em termos lógicos, porque o chamado "narco" nada mais é do que um mito mexicano.

Introduction

In 21st century Mexico, organized crime is everywhere. Its shorthand, "narco," appears in the press, official speeches, the news, the internet, and even as the title of some TV series. It is also heard in public transport, meetings and on the street. Sooner or later, daily conversation ends up referring to it in regard to some situation or some individual. The so-called "narco" has become an important part of public life in the country. Generally, its mere mention is enough to end a discussion or take for granted the demonstration of any argument. Its rhetorical use has become a kind of logical sentence. If "it was the narco," there is no turning back, no need for further explanation. Silence means complicity; talking further would be dangerous. Everything has the appearance of being resolved, understood, explained, even if nothing is said. "It was the narco," "the narco did it," "he was with the narco," "here rules the narco," "the narco's hand," are some of the many expressions with which ordinary discourse closes the door to analysis about the daily routine of violence, weapons, homicides, shootings, dead bodies and blood.

This situation is not accidental, but rather the product of long, systematic media propaganda. If today the "narco" is in our minds, it is because it first appeared in official speeches and on the front pages of newspapers. If it now structures daily conversation, it is because we repeat what is announced day after day on television and radio. "The 'narco' appears in our society as a fearsome Pandora's box that, if opened, would unleash a kingdom of death and destruction. If we could overcome fear and confront what we call 'narco' by finally opening the box, we would not find in it any violent criminal, but the official language that invented it: we would hear words without object, as fragile and malleable as sand" (Zavala 2018, 24). In this sense, the mass media's handling of information has a lot to do with the omnipresence of "narco" in recent years. As Mexican sociologist Luis Astorga (1995) warned in his seminal book, *Mythology of the Drug Trafficker in Mexico* [1], "an archetype of evil has been established, repeatedly reproduced by the media, and, in addition, a domain of significance has been created where the signifier "narco" functions as a lexicological multiplier ... It is so fascinating

that those who fall under its spell no longer differentiate the designations based on reality from verbal pyrotechnics” (Astorga 1995, 41).

The latter are distinctive of current media discourse. Multi-colored fireworks glow in the numerous utterances of the “narco-“ prefix, which is no longer restricted only to narcotics and, above all, to drug trafficking and those who participate in it (the “narcos”), but now also ventures into the fields of culture, technique, economics and politics. This trend is illustrated by the revealing press monitoring and content analysis that Colombian linguists Castañeda and Henao (2011) have developed, in which they have recorded the words derived from “narco” in several newspapers, as in the case of the Mexican *Excélsior* (Table). The enumeration of all these derivations reveals a truly delirious dimension. If this prefix’s use is so problematic, it is because it “operates magically and addictively in everyday language: it is enough to use it with any word to imagine that what is said is understood” (Astorga 2015, 215). Closer to the insult than to the concept, more typical of controversy than debate, this prefix contributes less to define than to be defined. As the means for veritable mental colonization, it does not account for what really happens.

Table. Words found in the Mexican newspaper *Excélsior*

narco-literature	narco-messages	narco-companies	narco-dependent
narco-car	narco-music	narco-politician	narco-executions
narco-pit	narco-violence	narco-shop	narco-soldiers
narco-politics	narco-payroll	narco-girl	narco-president
narco-model	narco-hostel	narco-juniors	narco-massacre
narco-demonstrations	narco-tunnels	narco-party	narco-pickup
narco-store	narco-submarine	narco-virus	narco-center
narco-hitmen	narco-boats	narco-plane	narco-policemen
narco-fiesta	Narca	narco-retail	narco-campaigns
narco-revenge	narco-show	narco-weapons	narco-house
narco-video	narco-conquest	narco-laboratories	narcodollars

Source (Castañeda and Henao 2011, 9)

Through systematic repetition, the image of a new enemy is constructed. This media discourse around the “narco” is nothing more than the corollary of a new official discourse. At this point, it should be remembered that, as Hegel warns, the illusion is not illusory; that is, that the official, although still a fiction, is not fictitious; that propaganda is not a simple ideological arsenal to justify the dominant powers, but rather constitutes the discourse by which they legitimize their domination without ever having to justify themselves. Therefore, the official discourse is much more than accompanying propaganda. It is a performative *logos*, a discourse constituted by and constitutive of the matter of the social world, according to Foucault (2005), which contributes to making exist what it tends to make see and believe, under the guise of enunciating what it is. This—always relative—effect of reality, which makes the enunciated (and announced) come into being, corresponds to the work of the self-fulfilling prophecy that the producers of the dominant discourse are in charge of—journalists, academics and all presented as “experts”—who put their ideas of success at the service of the success of their ideas.

Against the dominant discourse

In Mexico, the image of an enemy to “national security” has thus been constructed. At the beginning of the 2000s, a discursive shift was applied whose center is now occupied by the figure of organized crime. The issue of drug trafficking in itself was nothing new within national politics, but in the context of post-9/11 US foreign policy, the imposition of the so-called “fight against terrorism and drug trafficking” agenda emphasizes this question in the country. Thereafter, State institutions started systematically producing a discourse centered on the construction of a new enemy, the drug cartels.

In this matter, the rhetoric must be overwhelming. Statistics are managed for this purpose. To serve the logic of the “war on drugs,” the figures must be used eloquently, breathing life and continuity to the mythical numbers of drug trafficking (Reuter 1987). Despite all its inconsistencies and manipulations, the hyperbolic data feeds the “numbers game” (Thoumi 2005) or “dance of numbers” (Romero 2018). [2] Its main function is to present to the public a gigantic “narco,” before which “the continuity of policies is imposed, and setbacks or shortcomings are excused. Inventing numbers, however implausible and absurd they may seem, is then a bureaucratic survival tactic” (Hope 2011). Reports multiply as if by magic; there are plenty of vulgar inventions, deliberately vague and imprecise. “They offer precisely the kind of material that can excite public opinion: the image of a terrible threat that is impossible to apprehend definitively” (Escalante 2012, 102).

Moreover, equally ungraspable is the methodology used for obtaining the numbers that these reports present. This lack is not new, but historical, as demonstrated by the pioneering work of Carlos Resa (2005). [3] Based on an extensive literature review over a three-decade period, from 1970 to 2000, Resa (2005: 337) calculated that

73% of all the recorded estimates did not present any explicit methodology. He also calculated the variations that the estimates presented depending on their source, comparing academic works, the media, and public security agencies, between Mexico and the United States. Taking as reference the statistics produced by Mexican scholars on drug trafficking (certainly exaggerated, despite their good intentions), in comparison, the numbers presented by the media do more than double it, while those advanced by the security agencies tripled it. Likewise, the statistics handled by the United States, both by the media and agencies, quadruple the average of the academic estimates made in Mexico. As expected, the importance of the numbers is inversely proportional to the methodological rigor, as well as to the objective interests. Indeed, from the American perspective, it seems that the problem lies south of the border...

As a result of this propaganda, today there is a kind of standard knowledge, a common sense about the criminal phenomenon, based on a language made up of terms whose apparent technicality only hides a deep ignorance. It is a precarious mix, coming from various sources: prison slang, police jargon, criminal procedures, military manuals, consulting reports, journalistic chronicles and detective novels. In this language, in addition to “narco,” there are terms such as “cartel,” “plaza,” “lord,” “lieutenant,” “financial operator,” “hitmen” and “hawks” (*halcones*), among many others. In short, as Fernando Escalante (2012, 57) warns, “it is not properly a language, nor a discursive genre, but merely a vocabulary—and little else—with enormous appeal, especially for the media, because it allows for summarizing, sparing details, ignoring what is not known, and offering explanations for any audience.” Therefore, it is necessary to deconstruct the dominant discourse that is sustained by this vocabulary, in order to cancel the performative capacity of the “narco” and break with the function of depoliticization that its terms fulfill.

Now, if we leave aside the “narco-“ prefix as well as these other related terms, how can we understand the real phenomena to which “narco” commonly refers? How do we build explanations about drug trafficking and crime? In social sciences, broadly speaking, there have been three main theoretical approaches for dealing with the question of criminal organization, each emphasizing a particular dimension of the phenomenon: 1) the institutional approach, which studies the internal structure of criminal groups, understood as clandestine bureaucracies based on the mafia model; 2) the economic approach, which focuses on illicit businesses and market relations for the provision of goods and services prohibited by law; and, 3) the anthropological approach, which analyzes the power relations in which criminal activity is framed as part of a broader system of socio-political relations.

These three main approaches are the ones that I will mobilize in this text, in dialogue with the philosophical perspective that I adopt for a critical discourse analysis. In this sense, this text seeks to be a bridge between social sciences and philosophy, in order to bring philosophers closer to an issue that they usually see as an object of study for sociologists, political scientists or economists. In addition, it constitutes a theoretical essay, that is, it does not intend in any way to provide solid empirical evidence—beyond

some concrete examples—, but rather to position itself critically against a dominant literature on organized crime. In other words, it is not about testing the empirical validity of my criticism—which I try to do in other publications, of a sociological nature (Gaussens 2018, 2020)—, but about defending the need to think critically, as a kind of philosophical invitation to an epistemological reflection on criminal matters.

Finally, following the three perspectives I have mentioned, this essay is divided into three parts: first, I will defend the idea of a truly disorganized crime, far from the fiction that portrays the mafia model; second, I will show that the ghostly “cartels” actually resemble small family businesses; and, third, I will try to explain why the criminal phenomenon cannot be understood as being against the State, but on the contrary, through the political-criminal nexus that unites the official institutions with criminal groups.

Disorganized crime

What is usually understood by “narco” refers to organized crime, which was recognized in international public law by the Palermo Convention in 2000. Therefore, organized crime constitutes a legal term. It is the result of the security policies of the main States worldwide, their coordination for harmonizing national laws and building shared tools against the globalization of illegal markets. In other words, “the need to create bridges of understanding and practical collaboration between the different participating States has favored the generation of broad concepts with an eminently practical purpose” (Flores Pérez 2009, 75).

In Mexico, organized crime is understood based on the American mafia model, as an idea of a “counter-society” or even a “parallel State.” It was gradually replacing “the old image, more or less folkloric, of drug traffickers, a little farmers, a little caciques, a little bandits” (Escalante 2012, 104). From the adoption of the Federal Law against Organized Crime and its successive reforms, a new mafia-like image was consolidated in the collective imaginary, based on the Hollywood prototype of the Italian *Cosa Nostra*. Supported by the mythical numbers that some officials, journalists and other “experts” shamelessly release, especially regarding drug money, the “narco” mythology as a true mafia gained more and more strength. In consequence, today “the distance between the real traffickers and their world, and the symbolic production that speaks of them is so great that there seems to be no other way ... to refer to the subject but in a mythological way” (Astorga 1995, 14).

In this sense, the epistemological coordinates of national security policies have permeated the field of cultural production to such a degree that they condition *a priori* any reflection on crime, whether from art, literature or journalism. In the same way, the academic production specialized in organized crime is characterized by a chronic lack of criticality, reflected in a circularity of information that has generated its own inertia, through texts that quote each other and end up referring to the same official sources.

Dominated by a criminological approach, this scientific literature is broad, and its perspective is mostly quantitative. In Mexico, it is also strongly influenced by American and Anglo-Saxon literature in general. Its main exponents are Jorge Chabat, Raúl Benítez Manaut, Mónica Serrano, John Bailey, Sergio Aguayo, Marcos Pablo Moloeznik, and Laura Atuesta, among others.

Most of this production tends to take for granted the dominant representation of organized crime and the “drug cartels”, based on the following assumptions: the existence of an internal bureaucracy, division of labor, territorial control, networking, chain of command, honor codes, cutting-edge technology, industrial production, economy of scale, diversification strategies, regional alliances, marketing, global ramifications and, above all, multi-million dollar profits. These are the main parts of the “narco” myth. The dominant mafia model, by equating criminal groups with clandestine bureaucracies, “had a great impact on the public perception about professional crime. Its influence persists until now” (Flores Pérez 2009, 73), even among scholars.

Contrary to this dominant view, I argue that there is no so-called organized crime in Mexico, but a disorganized one, to use the title of a famous book written by the economist Peter Reuter (1983). Crime is disorganized for various reasons. The first and most obvious of these is that the illicit nature of criminal activities means high transaction costs, due to the volatility of the low confidence that defines commercial relations within illegal markets, such as the contingency and uncertainty of any potential repression or opposition against it. In other words, the illegal condition of criminal activities dramatically affects the way in which they are carried out, insofar as it tends to automatically stop any possibility of a process of consolidation or expansion towards greater sustainability or a larger scale.

Because clandestinity requires invisibility, illegality condemns operations to a micro scale. “The groups engaged in criminal activities are usually and relatively small, unstable, and poorly organized; the conditions in which they operate, the precariousness of predatory relationships and the nature of illegal markets, make it difficult for larger organizations with complex structures to exist” (Escalante 2012, 107). Criminal groups with a large and stable membership, an internal bureaucracy and real control over wide geographical areas can hardly be integrated. Therefore, in the same way that the idea of relatively important and stable membership is wrong, so is the idea of ritual mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that would make the criminal group homogeneous and similar to a self-regulated system, characterized by its illegal activities and separated from legal society. It is a mistake to take the mafia as an analytical model, universalizing a scheme that responds to a particular history and culture. The thousands of members attributed to the “cartels” are ghosts, like their territories (*plazas*), mirages of the spirit of our times. Again, we face mythical numbers.

In Mexico, instead of the supposed big organizations, there are plenty of small criminal groups with minimal operating conditions, without bureaucracy or an established hierarchy. Due to the rudimentary nature of criminal tasks, they present low

division of labor, a permanent lack of coordination and frequent conflicts. If criminal groups are disorganized, it is because most of their members are momentarily brought together by occasional, often accidental, and especially opportunistic ties. In sociological terms, they lack organicity for their solidary integration. Far from constituting small societies, they instead exhibit the smallness of a society whose individuals associate in fortuitous groupings in which they come to be juxtaposed, serially, in their shared desire for profit. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult to draw borders between agents whose participation in crime has a great diversity of form, degree and scope. Criminal activities often take place in the gray areas that unite the legal and illegal worlds. In practice, it is almost impossible to delimit where a criminal grouping begins and ends, or to know with certainty when an individual belongs to it or not. I do not mean that crime is an imaginary problem in Mexico, but that “there is an imaginary dimension of organized crime” (Escalante 2012, 69). In this sense, if criminal groups have recently become stronger in the country, it is due more to exogenous factors than to their own organizational capacity.

The drug cartels do not exist

The argumentation about the disorganized nature of criminal groups is reinforced by any economic analysis of the illegal markets where they operate. While the comparison between criminal groups and legal companies might seem exaggerated, legal and illegal markets are counterparts in their operation, and there are businesspeople in both sides of the law. Likewise, both feature merchandises, costs, prices, taxes, profits, sellers and buyers, exporters and importers, intermediaries, distributors and final consumers. Furthermore, “the great trafficker as a business symbol would seem to be heresy and yet ... it is the great traffickers who embody the business ethos idealized by neoliberalism ... and have also been the pioneers of ‘modern’ trade liberalization. In this logic, drug trafficking becomes a contemporary form of original accumulation” (Astorga 1995, 32). Therefore, the main difference between legal and criminal businesses is only the sanction of the law. While in legal markets companies look for the income generated by establishing monopolies, in illegal ones, differential income rests on the cost of illegality; that is, prohibition itself makes illicit businesses profitable.

The possible products penalized by law are diverse and vary from one country to another. In Mexico, “although the crimes typified by law are several, to speak of organized crime is generally to refer to organizations whose criminal income is obtained mainly, though not exclusively, from illegal drug trafficking” (Astorga 2015, 153). In the country, the drug trade has a long history, at least a century old. I am not going to pick up this story here—written by Astorga (2016)—but will simply emphasize the importance of the income generated by the illegal drug trade for criminal groups. It is in relation to this situation that the dominant discourse talks about “drug cartels,” originally coined in US foreign policy in regard to Colombia and then applied to Mexico. However, strictly speaking—that is, understanding a cartel as an agreement between several

organizations in order to avoid competition and regulate prices in the market—then the so-called “drug cartels” do not exist, to borrow the title of the last book by Oswaldo Zavala (2018), professor of literature at CUNY. [4]

These are discursive fictions, inventions that systematically overestimate both the strategic marketing capacity of traffickers and the organizational strength of the commercial networks that structure illegal markets. Like the “narco,” the “drug cartels” are just another linguistic fetish, because “there is not and there was not a single universal model—applicable to every place and particular historical experience—that can be symbolically captured with a magical, addictive label, such as the ‘cartel.’ It is a kind of epistemological straitjacket which would subsume all possible forms of criminal organization and would give to those who use it the illusion and the tranquility of spirit, without further reflection, of having adequately defined and understood the phenomenon they seek to describe and explain” (Astorga 2015, 215).

Due to their fragmented nature, illegal markets make cooperation more difficult. They tend to foster competition by preventing the formation of monopolies beyond the local scale. There, criminal agents are more takers than price-setters. In effect, illegality makes these markets exhibit an intrinsic antitrust trend, so their price structure tends to escape the control of economic agents. Contrary to the common doxa, “illegal markets have no immanent tendency towards the development of large-scale criminal enterprises, that is, criminal organizations, as is often implied by the very expression ‘organized crime’” (Paoli 2002, 64). Within highly competitive markets, where illicit businesses are in permanent dispute, and with numerous links in the value chains, “there are no large organizations whose tentacles extend to the last street drug dealer; therefore, they lack the capacity to control violence beyond certain limits and strategic interests ... Attributing tens of thousands of members to a given organization is a simple fantasy of the authorities, which in turn feeds popular fantasies and mythologies. There are many people involved in illegal business, but not all belong to the largest and strongest organizations ... There is outsourcing, with smaller groups dedicated to their own tasks” (Astorga 2007, 52).

In general, the sanction of illegality implies a series of strong limitations for the organization of crime. Illicit businesses lack the most basic microeconomic elements, such as contractual guarantees, accounting, central bureaucracy, regulation, legal security and representation, among others. Furthermore, commercial diversification strategies for crime, through the integration of illegal businesses—be it vertical or horizontal—are soon frustrated by the exponential impact that these strategies have on transaction costs, due to both higher levels of information dissemination and exposure to the outside, which require task coordination between higher and multiple areas and zones. In this sense, “it is neither simple nor frequent to jump from one class of crime to another, nor to articulate different kinds of crime in the same organization ... that common denominator is relevant to the penal code, nothing more” (Escalante 2012, 109). The diversification of criminal activities is another piece of the “narco” myth.

The permanent threat of repression or opposition prevents criminal businesses from having long-term investment, condemning them to less profitable short-term logics. The same happens with the scale, insofar as the risk proportional to the communication distance tends to restrict the scope of criminal activities to the local level. Despite technical innovation—particularly in the media and transport—“the new technological changes have not been extensive enough ... to offset the constraints created by product illegality” (Paoli 2002, 70). Similarly, the impossibility of commercial advertising for brand building strongly limits the potential of economies of scale for illicit products. For the above reasons, contrary to the formal economy, “it is rather unlikely that large, hierarchically organized firms will emerge to mediate economic transactions in the illegal marketplace” (Paoli 2002, 66).

In short, illegality condemns this marketplace to a state as far from big industry as it is close to small manufacturing, with limited production and trade units, always localized, not diversified, fragmented and ephemeral. “Hence the uselessness of the obsessive and sterile insistence of labeling organizations that are not and have never been ‘cartels’ ... There are simply criminal groups of different sizes and capacities” (Astorga 2015, 181). In other words, if the legal sanction condemns them to smallness, the criminal groups that operate in the illegal markets, in fact, integrate a complex world of micro, small and medium-sized crime companies. These little businesses are deeply familiar, to the extent that the trust and reciprocity that characterize kinship ties can offset the uncertainty inherent in illegal markets. Far from the mafia-industrial archetype, this is the harsh reality of disorganized crime in deep Mexico.

Political-criminal nexus

Based on the mafia model, another dimension of the “narco” myth rests on the idea of a fundamental opposition to the State. At this point, the dominant discourse mobilizes the following false premises: a) the State is in principle hostile to criminal activities; b) the majority of the officials in charge of prosecuting crimes are unrelated to them, except in some extraordinary cases—a few “bad apples”—; c) these cases are the product of individual strategies that do not obey institutionalized practices; and, d) in any case, it is the crime that infiltrates the State and the criminals who corrupt the officials.

Following these postulates, criminal actions represent a threat that must be fought so that they do not “infiltrate,” “contaminate” or “penetrate” the State, or become a “parallel power,” a “counter-society” or a “State within the State.” From this perspective, within academic production, “it is common to find papers that seem to be direct emanations from government advisers ... without appointment. Apologies for government measures focused on the use of the army and the police ... to combat mainly the last link in the chain” (Astorga 1995, 33), be it small producers, street dealers

or simple consumers, that is, the main people convicted of crimes “against health” in Mexico (Pérez Correa and Meneses 2014). Likewise, there are few studies on crime that include in their perspective the link with the State.

In this sense, the “narco” functions as a “conceptual formula behind which lies the idea of an external corrupting power that undermines political and civil institutions, forgetting that it is from within some institutions—especially those oriented towards repression—that the successful operation of what is being fought has been organized, without external ‘contamination’” (Astorga 1995, 10). In other words, the fallacies that sustain the “narco” myth fulfill a function of depoliticization, insofar as they “empty the political dimension and preclude a critique of the historical causality of the State in relation to drug trafficking” (Zavala 2018, 64). Thus, those who speak of a State “capture” by crime advance the thesis of a power “parallel” to public institutions, or warn about the “invisible hand” of drug trafficking, “would first have to explain how, in a country of political centralism and exacerbated presidentialism, such an important domain has escaped its control” (Astorga 2016, 199). Then, they should demonstrate the empirical foundation of the idea of virginal purity that they have about the State. Finally, they should explain the reason why, today, the criminal field would be in conditions to subvert and even reverse the old subordinate relationship that it has historically maintained with the State in Mexico, demonstrated by numerous investigations (Resa 2005, Astorga 2007, Flores Pérez 2009, Escalante 2012, Gledhill 2017).

Against Manichaeism, it is essential to adopt a critical perspective that allows us to understand the complex system of relations that unites State institutions with crime and drug trade. [5] Only in this way can we understand that the sustainability of criminal activities and illegal markets requires minimum levels of political protection, without which they could not operate. It is what Roy Godson (2017) calls the political-criminal nexus, according to which organized crime is nothing more than a forced synonym of State corruption (understood as the illegitimate use of public power for private purposes). In other words, without official corruption, it is simply impossible to organize crime, because “throughout the different stages involved in the development of illegal businesses, the activities of the criminal organization can be detected by the different State institutions, to the extent that they regulate many of the essential legal domains for the operation of drug trafficking” (Flores Pérez 2009, 128). Thus, drug trade requires some political protection by the legal authorities. Corruption is a requirement (Buscaglia and Van Dijk 2003), giving rise to a social field of criminality in which patronage networks of cooperation are reproduced between criminals and officials for the distribution of illicit profits whose obtaining, as a last resort, will be determined in a violent way. Definitely, when we talk about crime, we are not only referring to professional criminals, who live from illicit activities and make illegal markets the place of their profession, but also to officials who cooperate with them, giving the protection of the State in exchange for their corruption.

The political-criminal nexus occurs in undermined social fields, that is, in highly risky spaces, in which “violent and distrustful sociabilities dominate, where any misstep can be fatal. In this sense, they are a sample of the volatile sociabilities of hybrid economies, located between legality, illegality and informality,” according to Colombian jurist César Rodríguez Garavito (2012, 14). Therefore, it is not about looking for the truth, or discovering the precise links that unite criminals and officials—which would expose anyone to serious dangers (many journalists have been killed in Mexico for investigations of this kind). Rather, it is about explaining the historical processes that underlie the contradictory relationships that State institutions have with criminal groups. “The key lies in the particular history of the field of drug trafficking in Mexico as subordinate to political power, and in the transformations over time of both fields and their interrelation” (Astorga 2015, 217). Accordingly, it is necessary to recognize the historical fact that, from its origins at the beginning of the 20th century—with the adoption of prohibitionism—the drug trade “was born in the shadow of political interests and subordinated to the political field. So, it went on for decades” (Astorga 2016, 203). In Mexico, illegal drugs are a political matter, as the political scientist Carlos Flores Pérez (2013) demonstrated in a very well documented way. More than the criminal groups that operate their commerce, illegal drug trafficking is a matter of the State and its institutions, and especially of those officially charged with fighting it: the police and the army.

In general terms, the nature of the political-criminal nexus is dynamic. It depends as much on the general configuration of the State and its security policies as on the characteristics of criminal activities. The polarity of the nexus varies following the changing state of the relations between officials and criminals, which unite and oppose them at the same time. In this regard, it is possible to affirm that the strength of criminal groups is always inversely proportional to the political power of State institutions. In other words, the stronger the criminal groups are, or the less legitimate a government is, the less necessary official protection becomes, or the more willing the criminals will be in the face of political guidelines. In this manner, the nexus constitutes a dynamic relationship in which officials or criminals can interchangeably predominate.

However, in historical terms, it is important to underline that this relationship has benefited the former more than the latter, insofar as, unlike the criminals, officials permanently have the symbolic capital of the State to support their actions. While the criminals’ power resources are personal, those of the officials are institutional. This advantage is fundamental since it makes the political-criminal nexus an unequal exchange that allows officials to extort criminal groups in exchange for their protection. Here the roles are reversed: the extorted are the criminals, while the crime is committed by those who must fight it, the officials. “For this reason, the expectations of the latter to impose themselves to protect the illicit businesses are, in principle, higher ... Hence the probability that the informal rules of various illegal businesses can be imposed by the State apparatus. This consideration does not presuppose that, when officials prevail in the collusion bond, they are necessarily directing all aspects of the production chain and

managing the illicit business. It is only about the ability to impose general guidelines for the development of illegal activity” (Flores Pérez 2009, 134).

The main contradiction of the political-criminal nexus is that, depending on the polarity of the relationship and its dynamics, both parties may have common and antagonistic interests at the same time, allowing for both their probable agreement and their possible dispute. Indeed, for criminal groups, in the unequal exchange they develop with officials, cooperation is often less expensive than confrontation. However, the State institutions have a political obligation to present minimum results in the fight against crime in order to legitimize their existence, reinforce their authority and justify their policies and the resources put at their disposal. This obligation leads to certain levels of conflict with criminal interests. Besides, the necessarily clandestine nature of the extortion of criminals by officials means that the pacts that both parties can agree on are always precarious. The crime committed by officials prevents the institutionalization of extortion and the permanence of protection over time. The validity of the nexus in a determined period will depend, fundamentally, on the maintenance of the common interests that structure the relationship between the parties.

As expected, within the Mexican State, the institutions in charge of prosecuting crime are the most affected by the corrupting effects of the political-criminal nexus, in particular, the judiciary, the penitentiary system, the military forces and, of course, the police at all levels (Martínez de Murguía 1999). Between the three levels of government (federal, regional and municipal), it is the smallest—the municipality—that is the most vulnerable to corruption due to its institutional weakness. On this scale, those who speak about a “capture” of the State claim that drug money can finance electoral campaigns and that criminals can use the local political structure to promote the candidacy of individuals directly linked to them. In this situation, the dominant discourse presupposes an interest of criminal groups for politics. This is the last part of the “narco” myth.

Although data and evidence are lacking, “there is free terrain for rumors, attacks, disqualifications, suspicions, imagination, fantasies, myths and literature. This type of financing is not improbable but given the reconfiguration of political power in Mexico and the lower concentration of power in parties and officials, it would seem to be more useful, less expensive and more profitable as a strategy for traffickers to invest in institutions like the police and the army, and not in the political arena” (Astorga 2007, 43-44). Although, so far, no party manifesto or government plan has been published by any criminal organization, the mythology needs to attribute to criminal groups a natural will to compete in the political arena.

To fully operate, the myth requires presenting the “drug cartels”: first, as transnational corporations with multimillion-dollar incomes that compete with legal markets; second, as cultural references that guide collective subjectivities; and, third, as factual powers opposed to the State, which manage to territorially control wide geographies. With this great narrative, crimes are converted into the illegitimate means

of a new elite who, in an insatiable search for power, would be contesting the State for sovereignty over national territory. Hence the need to strengthen State power over entire regions, whose territories would be controlled by the factual powers of drug trafficking. In this point, the idea of a dispute over territorial control is key. On the one hand, it gives an appearance of explanation to the violence unleashed among criminal groups fighting for territories (*plazas*). On the other hand, militarization is justified as the only option and the last resort in the fight against crime, since it is no longer a matter of maintaining public order or pursuing crime, but of waging a war to reconquer the territory usurped by an enemy called “narco.” As Zavala (2018, 246-47) sums it up,

the myth of the ‘narco’ should fall under the weight of its ridiculous inconsistency. But the virtual explanation of the ‘cartel wars,’ always restarting with protagonists of changing and volatile identity, prevails precisely because of its coordinated—although illogical—insistence: prosecutors, police chiefs, DEA agents and security experts, all in unison, repeat the essential structure of the plot: the ‘cartels,’ no matter which, will enter a war and cause an undetermined but high number of homicides ... What begins as mere statements by some officials soon becomes, as has happened in the last two decades, a whole field of cultural production: novels, music, cinema, art, journalism and most of the academic work that studies and signifies the ‘narco’ phenomenon accept the ‘cartel wars’ as something real ... Our intellectual class entertains itself by imagining endless wars between drug traffickers that the political system has cleverly invented to avoid all critical examination.

Mexico towards a new political-criminal nexus

While the combination of the three analytical approaches mobilized in this text allows to deconstruct the main elements that structure the “narco” mythology, it provides other guidelines for a critical intellection about crime. In 21st century Mexico, the omnipresence of the “narco” is symptomatic of a deep transformation of the political-criminal nexus. According to Flores Pérez (2009), it is possible to say that, since the neoliberal shift of the 1980s, this nexus has lost the relative stability that it had maintained until then, based on centralized and pyramidal State control —through the almighty Federal Security Directorate (Aguayo 2001), which disappeared in 1985. Instead, the new configuration—called “atomized-multidirectional-incremental” by Flores Pérez (2009)—is characterized by: 1) the dispersion of State power, in the context of an administrative decentralization that sharpens the competition between the different levels of government for control over the protection of criminal activities, 2) the intensification of the permanent struggle between officials and criminals for the definition of the nexus that unites them, and 3) the rise of violence in general, understood as the means of regulating this situation of increasing conflict which opposes official institutions against themselves and against criminal groups for control over illegal markets.

In recent years, the relative strengthening of criminal groups has lied in the legitimacy crisis of the Mexican State. Indeed, after several decades of neoliberalism,

the profound discrediting of the national political system allowed for a reorientation of the nexus in favor of criminal interests. The relative political autonomy that criminal groups gained is inseparable from the disarticulation of the old intermediations and control mechanisms that had been built throughout the past century in the post-revolutionary State. As a result of the neoliberal shift, “the conditions are met for the traffickers to express their spirit of revolt, their desire for power and autonomy, their will to shake off the historical guardianship more openly, not to take the place of political force under the protection of which they grew and became stronger, but to be considered under new rules of the game, given the change in power dynamics. This is in order to achieve the best possible conditions in the reorganization and distribution of the business, since they know that it will not disappear as long as the legal-coercive and now military vision continues to prevail” (Astorga 2000, 112).

The decline of the old post-revolutionary regime with the advent of multipartyism, in the combined framework of decentralization and neoliberal economic policy, has caused the transformation of the political-criminal nexus from a traditional dependency to a new situation of autonomy. Then, “those who talk about a ‘penetration’ of the criminal world into the political one conflate the greater relative autonomy that the criminal field presents ... that allows it to subvert the old relationship of structural subordination to the political field, with an idealized virginal purity of this field” (Astorga 2015, 220). Today, what we are witnessing is a criminal world more fragmented than ever, but also freer, whose internal struggles tend to repeat in an infinite cycle of violence due to the absence of traditional mediation. The invisible hand of the market appears more and more, in all its harshness.

From this perspective, the rise of the criminal logic would respond to the construction of a new social order, controlled by a political regime whose power is exercised through crime (Simon 2007). The arrival to power of a new political party (MORENA) in 2018, with the election as President of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, does not seem to have altered this general pattern. Although the new government has undertaken a stronger policy to fight against it, corruption is still seen as a political issue, not directly related to organized crime. The idea of a State capture by criminal interests continues to predominate in official discourse, around the topic of a “narco-State”—term officially used by López Obrador—in which officials would be at the service of criminal groups. Finally, the deepening of the militarization of public security, with the creation of a National Guard, indicates that the state of war that has characterized the contemporary history of Mexico, far from ending, will remain as long as the militaristic scheme that supports it is reproduced (Gaussens and Jasso 2020).

Beyond the political change that the 2018 elections have supposedly represented, we would be facing a vast reconfiguration of the field of power in Mexico, oriented towards illicit purposes (Flores Pérez 2019). The contemporary rise in crime is only one facet of this process, among the most visible. Likewise, it is probable that the key piece of this criminal mutation is found in the municipality, as the local order of domination and the basic level of a State in crisis. However, this great transformation—

taking up the concept of Karl Polanyi—does not fully materialize in a way that is identifiable, inscribing itself within a societal transition that, to be better understood, must be read in historical terms. Thus, behind the “war on drugs,” Fernando Escalante (2012: 241) warns that “other things are happening that do not look good, that are not well understood ... These things that are not yet finished, and that we do not know how to name, are manifested in part in the fight against organized crime, in the phantom and in the methods of exorcism.” For his part, Luis Astorga (2016: 206) states that “the strong shaking of the old power structure in Mexico and its transformations exposed some of the intermediation and control mechanisms ... as if the structure’s cover was crumbling.” As if, with the new century, the neoliberal storm had removed the veneer of legitimacy with which the post-revolutionary regime had covered the Mexican State, revealing the criminal nature of its power.

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Notes

[1] Luis Astorga's research work constitutes an obligatory reference in drug matters in Mexico. However, his work evolved from a critical position towards increasingly conservative approaches, which ended up reproducing the myth that he himself had helped to unveil. This paradoxical situation makes this essay much closer to his first works than to his last.

[2] A good example of how mythical numbers are produced in Mexico is found in the research work of Romero (2018), based on a press monitoring that has allowed him to document the important variations and contradictions that the estimates present about drug market. For example, in two consecutive years (2010 and 2011), the Mexican government reported an eradicated number of hectares of poppy crops greater than the number planted... according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. In his work, Romero (2018: 24) concludes that most of the estimates “do not have solid support and that are often established based on the bureaucratic or political interests of those who formulate them.”

[3] Resa had reached the same conclusions as Romero. According to his calculations, Mexico would have been for decades the country that destroyed the most marijuana in the world. For example, throughout the 1990s, the Mexican authorities declared that the Army eradicated 84% (on average) of all illicit crops in the country (Resa 2005: 382), a number that is totally implausible.

[4] Although I share the same research results with Zavala, the way in which they have been obtained is different. While Zavala reaches this conclusion from journalistic

practice and literary criticism, I have come to it thanks to an anthropological fieldwork, carried out in the southern state of Guerrero, which has allowed me to make an ethnography of crime (Gaussens 2020).

[5] Recent research works on Latin America have provided new empirical evidence about the relations between the State and crime, such as those of Desmond (2017), Sobering and Auyero (2019) or Feltran (2020).

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