

Zones of State-Making
*Violence, Coercion, and Hegemony
in Twentieth-Century Mexico*

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You must understand, therefore, that there are two ways of fighting: by law and by force. . . . The ancient writers taught princes about this by an allegory . . . [of] the centaur, so that he might train them his way. All the allegory means, in making the teacher half beast half man, is that a prince must know how to act according to the nature of both, and that he cannot survive otherwise.

—Niccolò Machiavelli¹

Today, as in the past, the fundamental reinterpretations of Mexican history must originate in a moment of frightful crisis.

—Arthur Schmidt²



VIOLENCE IN MEXICO: A FIRST APPRAISAL

Acapulco, Guerrero, Wednesday, July 12, 2006. In the evening, the police discovered the dead bodies of two men wrapped in blankets in an abandoned van in the Costa Azul neighborhood of the mundane tourist center. One belonged to Eusebio Palacios Ortiz, the police chief of Acapulco and a former Navy officer, who had been abducted the previous day upon leaving a cinema with his family. The other was Marcelo García Nava, a Navy intelligence agent who worked for the DEA and was, presumably, engaged in undercover operations related to drug-trafficking.

He too had been abducted the previous day, but from his own home. Both victims had been cruelly tortured and then killed.³ This incident occurred in the immediate aftermath of the controversial 2006 presidential elections.

Monterrey, Nuevo León, July 24, 2006. In a press conference, Marcelo Garza y Garza, head of the Agencia Estatal de Investigación, the provincial branch of an agency equivalent to the American FBI, announced that the decapitated body of a seventeen-year-old boy had been found with his feet and hands tied. The victim's head, wrapped in a plastic bag, was found nearby. The killers had left two messages on the body; one read, "These are the guys responsible for the killings in Nuevo Laredo and the plaza of Guadalajara on behalf of *El Chapo's* people."⁴

San Pedro Garza García, Nuevo León, September 5, 2006. The day Felipe Calderón was declared president-elect by the Federal Electoral Tribunal, Marcelo Garza y Garza was shot dead point-blank in a square surrounded by a church, a playground, a school, and a cultural center. He had left the cultural center, where he was with his daughter, to attend a phone call. He was unprotected. Shortly before, he had denounced that former officials from an elite police team were working as *sicarios* (hit men) for drug lords and repeatedly announced his intention to investigate police corporations for corruption and links with organized crime.⁵

Oaxaca, Oaxaca, October 27, 2006. In violent confrontations among sympathizers of the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO), the police, local state officials, and supporters of the local government, four people were killed. Two days later, the federal government ordered 4,500 Federal Preventive Police to end the protests and restore order. Over the following five days, more protesters died as a result of the use of lethal force by the police, and scores of arrests were made.⁶

Nuevo Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, March 14, 2008. Around noon, a group of armed men approached peasant leader Armando Villareal Martha in front of his house and shot him in the head several times. Villareal had played an active role in peasant protests earlier that year in favor of a revision of NAFTA. He had also played a leading role in protests against rising electricity rates for agricultural producers.⁷

Petatlán, Guerrero, May 4, 2008. Around midnight, forty armed individuals dressed as members of the Federal Agency of Investigation attacked the house of Rogaciano Alva Álvarez, leader of a regional cattle ranchers union. The assailants allegedly put Alva against a wall and shot him dead from behind. In this incident, nine other people also perished. Alva Álvarez was a controversial figure, an old-style Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) *cacique* (local boss) and former mayor of Petatlán, purportedly linked

to drug-trafficking and the assassination of the human rights activist Digna Ochoa in 2001.⁸

The list of violent killings related to criminal activities and social conflict is endless. In recent years, spectacular narco-killings have undoubtedly caught more attention than the victims of the social struggles that often underlie them. Drug-related killings in Mexico increased from around 900 in 2004 to almost 2,300 in 2007, more than doubled to reach a staggering figure of 5,000-plus in 2008, and surpassed the 7,500 mark in 2009.⁹ In 2010, the numbers went through the roof, totaling more than 12,500 deaths. In December 2010, a government source put the number of drug-related killings during Calderón's four years in office at more than 30,000.¹⁰ The strategies adopted by the Mexican state to confront the violence and corrupting power of organized crime, including the militarization of increasingly large parts of the country, have included repressing social movements. Once the military takes control of contentious, violent regions, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the force employed to combat organized crime and that directed at curtailing social protest and political conflict. Nowhere is this more evident than in the impoverished, conflictive state of Guerrero, though this is certainly no exception.¹¹ The number of victims of social and political violence is *qualitate qua* more difficult to establish. In contrast to drug-trafficking, no one collects such data systematically. Nevertheless, there is a long list of notorious incidents, such as the massacres in Aguas Blancas (1995) and Acteal (1997), the repression in Atenco (2006) and Oaxaca (2006), the raid on strikers in Michoacán (2006), and the hundreds of atrocious crimes committed against women in Ciudad Juárez and elsewhere.¹² Drug-trafficking is by no means the only cause of violence and insecurity in today's Mexico. Social and political conflicts in Oaxaca (2006) led to political stalemate, repression, mass mobilization, provocations, and more violent repression, resulting in many deaths.¹³ Political violence in Oaxaca became a warning about the dangers of exacerbating the national postelectoral crisis that unfolded simultaneously.¹⁴ Developments in the summer of 2006 dramatically illustrate the contrast between violent political and social conflicts and pervasive criminal violence on the one hand and the nonviolent "ending" of the profound political crisis caused by the presidential elections on the other.¹⁵ How should we judge the perplexing coexistence of the violence of *México bronco* (untamed Mexico) and militarization, with the alleged resilience of civilian and institutional conflict-resolution, that is, bullets and ballots?¹⁶

This proliferation of distinct forms and meanings of violence in Mexico is no exception in the region, nor is their puzzling coexistence with,

and connections to, formal democratic processes and institutions. Democratization in Latin America was not accompanied by diminishing violence and coercion, but rather their displacement, or even democratization and decentralization; where violence previously revolved around defending or challenging state power, recent decades have seen the emergence of a greater variety of social actors pursuing a wide range of objectives using coercive strategies and methods.¹⁷ The violent actors of postauthoritarian Latin America are not so much (or only) guerrillas and repressive armies, but gangs, criminal organizations, trigger-happy or corrupt police forces, paramilitaries, and privatized security agencies, including vigilantes. Recent comparative research has analyzed specific aspects of the broader field of violence, coercion, and insecurity in Latin America, such as urban violence, state violence, crime, policing, drug-trafficking, nationalistic violence, and state failure.¹⁸ All these pose serious threats to democratic legitimacy and the rule of law. In general, this work rarely mentions Mexico. Moreover, cross-national comparison crowds out the historical and systemic embedding of particular aspects (e.g., drugs or policing) of violence, insecurity, and state-making. In contrast, this volume examines the interconnections and historical roots of different dimensions, actors, and manifestations of violence, coercion, and insecurity in relation to broader processes of state-making in Mexico. Also, it places the comprehensive and in-depth case study of twentieth-century Mexico in the context of violence in Latin America as a whole (especially in Koonings' concluding chapter). Interestingly, in debates about the transformation of state and counterstate violence associated with military regimes in South America and equally repressive oligarchic regimes in Central America, toward more decentralized forms of economic, social, and political violence, Mexico has long occupied a somewhat exceptional position. Is the country "normalizing" to a Latin American pattern?

VIOLENCE, COERCION, AND STATE-MAKING IN MEXICO: THE ARGUMENT

It is fair to assert that much scholarly work on Mexico has tended to focus on "ballots" but has had troubles accommodating the "bullets" in a comprehensive interpretation. Political scientists tend to attribute the nonviolent end to the crisis of the 2006 presidential elections to the civic-mindedness and political maturity of the Mexican citizenry, and to the stability and legitimacy of Mexico's institutional and legal framework.¹⁹ This interpretation rests on the voluminous research on Mexico's sociopolitical and political-economic transformations over the last twenty years.

Research and countless conferences have led to the publication of a staggering number of books, edited volumes, and journal articles about the forces that have driven and shaped the dynamics of Mexican politics, state, and society since the early 1980s. The key concepts in this work are democratization and transition, operationalized in research on party development; shifting electoral behavior; political culture; the changing relationships among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches; the role of the media; institutional, legal, and public sector reform; the connections between market reform and political change; and the dismantling of the authoritarian, corporatist state.²⁰ Upon looking at Mexico through the lens of this body of work, we see a country that is moving, haltingly, from authoritarian one-party rule to democratic pluralism; a country that is building democratic institutions, whose electorate is coming of age and leaving behind state and partisan tutelage; one that sticks to its *institucionalidad* while advancing toward democratic consolidation with yet another round of institutional and legal reforms.²¹ The general trend of this work has been “optimistic but . . .” Schedler’s study of Mexico’s political transition suggests that the defeat of the PRI in 2000 “marked the symbolic end of the democratic transition [and] signalled that democratic consolidation had been accomplished too.”²² Similarly, Levy and Bruhn, writing in 2006, recognized the persistence of antisystem threats (notably drug-trafficking) and the negative trade-offs of profound inequality, but nevertheless concluded on an optimistic note.²³ The fact that the most severe political crisis of the last two decades (the 2006 presidential elections) did not lead to violence dovetails with the interpretations of the transformations of Mexican politics produced by this influential *institutional perspective* and supports its basic claims.

Unsurprisingly, many of these publications pay scant attention to the challenges of violence (political or criminal), the militarization of public security, and repression of popular movements. A recent volume on the dynamics and prospects of Mexico’s democratic transition contains only one chapter about law enforcement and crime, and only from the perspective of institutional performance.²⁴ Those studies, though they are important and not to be criticized for what they do not do, insist on an interpretation of the transformation of politics and the state that fails to appreciate the role of violence and coercion. I therefore agree with Raquel Sosa, who once ironically observed that although the authors of many of those works recognize the penetration of drug-trafficking networks into the highest circles of government, they do not fundamentally alter their belief that Mexico is a consolidating democracy.²⁵

The first point that this volume intends to establish is that there has been a remarkable lack of theoretical and empirical work that critically

engages the issues of violence, coercion, and insecurity in postrevolutionary state-making in Mexico with the capacity to propose innovative answers. Violence, coercion, insecurity, and impunity speak of realities that have long been hidden from systematic scholarly attention, as if they constituted aberrations or issues relevant only to the fringes of mainstream Mexico. Also, the book impugns the view that these contrasting realities are separate and disconnected, as if they pertained to two different worlds, one interesting to most of the social science community, the other perhaps to criminologists and journalists.²⁶ Is it logical to regard the current security crisis as one in which the world of crime and violence is foreign and inimical to the institutions of the state and the political system? What does it mean when President Calderón portrays the state as endangered by violent nonstate adversaries and stresses the state's responsibility to "reconquer territories" from narco-interests?

Despite studies of political and electoral violence and publications on urban crime, policing, judicial reform, and security, what is needed is a fresh, systematic, comprehensive, and historical analysis of the significance and meanings of violence, coercion, and crime for state-formation, power, and politics in Mexico. After all—and this is the second focal point of this volume—the study of Mexican politics, power, and the state after circa 1985 has been dominated by an influential conceptual framework that privileges changing institutional and noncoercive forms and modalities, thereby (unintentionally) obscuring the harsh realities of a darker Mexico of bullets and blood, one that seems to exist (and to have existed) at a distance, albeit functional, from the institutional realities of ballots and legal battles. On a deeper level and from a long-term perspective, this framework builds on the broader theory of Mexican exceptionalism.²⁷ Typically, scholars have stressed the incorporative and co-optational capacities of the state: "Since 1940, Mexico has had a pragmatic and *moderate* authoritarian regime . . . an *inclusionary* system, given to cooptation and incorporation rather than exclusion or annihilation; an *institutional* system, not a personalistic instrument; and a *civilian*-dominated government, not a military government."²⁸ The point is not to dispute Mexico's peculiarity compared to the rest of Latin America, but to ask if the influential conceptual and methodological perspective of Mexican exceptionalism has not unintentionally contributed to underestimating or masking violence and coercion—the "dark side"—in state-making during much of the twentieth century, and their increasingly destabilizing effects on democratic development, the rule of law, and social integration. This book argues that the theory of Mexican exceptionalism has prevented the concerted, systematic study of violence and coercion, not only during the last two decades, when their visibility has grown notably, but throughout the postrevolutionary period.

From a broader historical perspective, this comes as no surprise. Since Independence, major political and social transformations were accomplished only after prolonged periods of violent conflict and civil war. One need think only of the years preceding the *Reforma* in the second half of the nineteenth century, the devastating violence during the Mexican Revolution (1910–17), and the many armed uprisings in the ensuing decades. The subordinated incorporation of the armed forces into the ruling elite and party from the late 1930s onward gradually, though haltingly, began to change this, certainly when compared to the prominent role of the military in politics in the nineteenth century, that “marathon of violence,” and the (c)overt involvement of the armed forces elsewhere in Latin America during the twentieth century.²⁹ Nevertheless, we should not overlook numerous “lost” rebellions, (unsuccessful) armed mobilizations, and varied forms and conjunctures of state repression, especially at the local level, since they pointedly question the institutional nature of conflict resolution.³⁰ One can think of the repression of different labor, peasant, and popular movements and protests from the 1920s through the 1940s (Padilla’s important study of the Jaramillista peasant movement unequivocally argues that “state terror undergirded Mexico’s ‘perfect dictatorship’”), railroad workers in the 1950s, students in the 1960s, peasants again in the 1970s, and political opposition during the entire period.³¹ Undoubtedly, “long before 1968, [the Mexican state] was willing to make massive shows of force to curtail social activism.”³²

The third key question raised here, therefore, concerns the dominant perspective on the nature of Mexico’s sociopolitical system and state-making process during the period between circa 1938 and 1982, which includes the so-called golden years of PRI rule, allegedly based on a combination of economic growth, modest redistribution, mass clientelism, and institutional (i.e., nonviolent) conflict resolution. Recent historical work suggests that this perspective is flawed and incomplete, certainly for the period until 1952, and even beyond.³³ How peaceful was the *pax priísta* and how long did it last? Could it be that just as much scholarly work on current Mexico misjudges the significance of violent social, political, and criminal conflict (recall Sosa’s irony), the overall interpretation of post-revolutionary state-making, nation-building, and sociopolitical development has also been misleading in its appreciation of the role of violence and coercion? The thrust of this book’s historical perspective is that the current interpretative disjunction of Mexico as a country that simultaneously moves toward democratic consolidation and rule of law *and* toward violence, coercion, insecurity, and militarization compels us to ask questions *ex post facto* about the history—the PRI-history—of the current situation and, more importantly, the dominant interpretations of that history.