

# States of Change: Power and Counterpower Expressions in Latin America's Criminal Insurgencies

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*Sustained penetration by transnational criminal networks (cartels and gangs) of state institutions is challenging Mexico and states throughout Latin America. This paper discusses 'criminal insurgencies' as a power-counterpower dynamic where criminal combatants use violence, corruption, and information operations (including new media) to challenge state capacity and legitimacy, and exert territorial control for supporting their illicit economic domains. Social/environmental modification, including information operations (e.g., narcocorridos, narcomantas, and narcopintas), alternative belief systems (i.e., narcocults), targeted symbolic violence (including attacks on journalists and government officials), direct attacks on the police and military by criminal bands (sometimes wearing uniforms), and the provision of social goods while adopting the mantle of social bandit or primitive rebel are stimulating a new narcocultura. This paper examines these irregular conflicts through a comparative ethnographic lens to inform intelligence analysis and practice supporting an understanding of strategic shifts in sovereignty and governance.*

**T**ransnational criminal networks (cartels and gangs) are challenging Mexico and Latin America. Technology, especially Internet Communications Technology (ICT) and "new media," provides potentially powerful tools for actors on all sides of the conflict. New media can be used to transmit *narcocultura* to support penetration of state institutions. New media also influences the struggle for state authority and can both empower and constrain transnational criminals. Violence, corruption, and information operations (including new media) are culminating as a force with the potential to challenge state capacity and legitimacy (solvency). Together they are an important element of the emergence of new state-forms and tool of criminal insurgencies in contested zones. To assess this situation, I will briefly look at attacks on journalists (or narco-censorship), *narcocultura*, and social banditry, and information operations (info ops) as a

means of stimulating a new *narcocultura*. I will view these through the lens of criminal insurgency (Sullivan 2012) and co-opted state reconfiguration (CStR) (Garay Salamanca and Salcedo-Albarán, 2010; 2011).

## Transnational Illicit Networks and State Transition

**A**ccording to Moisés Naím (2006), transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) operate on a global scale and derive economic and political power from their broad reach and accumulation of wealth. Gayraud (2005) observes that these organizations have abandoned operating from the margins and now seek to operate at the core of political and economic systems becoming a central driver of conflict. Indeed, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reports on the "Threat of Narco-Trafficking in the Americas" (UN-

ODC October 2008) and “The Globalization Of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment” (UNODC June 2010) highlight the impact of transnational crime on states. According to the 2008 report, both states and communities are caught in the crossfire of drug-related crime and the violence that it fuels in the Americas and across the Atlantic to Europe and Africa.

The resulting conflicts have been characterized as a battle for information and real power (Manwaring 2008; 2009). These state challengers—irregular warriors/non-state combatants (i.e., criminal networkers)—increasingly employ barbarization and high order violence, combined with information operations, to seize the initiative and embrace the mantle of social bandit (Hobsbawn 2000) in order to confer legitimacy on themselves and their enterprises. Sovereignty is potentially shifting or morphing as a result of these challenges.

## Mexico and Latin America as Laboratory for New Media in Contested Zones

Mexico and Latin America are currently experiencing a serious onslaught from organized crime (cartels and gangs) that challenges and erodes state capacity to govern, negates the rule of law through endemic impunity, and drives humanitarian crises through high-intensity violence and barbarization. In Mexico, ~50,000 persons have been killed in the crime wars between 2006–2011 according to analysis by the Trans-Border Institute (Molzhan, Rios, and Shirk 2012). New media is central to this quest for power. In this essay, I will briefly summarize the interactive impact of violence, corruption, and information operations to sustain concerted

assaults on state solvency (which I view as the net result of capacity and legitimacy). I view these assaults as criminal insurgency, a contemporary form of conflict where crime and politics merge. As such, cartel information operations are an expression of power-counterpower dynamics (Castells 2009).

The role of new media in drug war and criminal insurgency includes:

- the ability to communicate in real and/or chosen time, by all parties in the conflict;
- a means of providing warnings and signaling intent;
- a means of overcoming narco-censorship;
- a means of enabling traditional media reportage, as well as an alternative to traditional media;
- a mechanism to enable civil society and/or *narcocultura*.

## Violence, Corruption, and Info Ops

It is no surprise that organized crime groups (gangs and cartels) use violence as a tool in the course of business. Threats, coercion, and instrumental violence punctuate their activities. That said, these enterprises usually seek to elude detection and prefer co-opting (corrupting) the instruments of state rather than engaging in direct confrontation. Organized crime usually operates in a state of what Sabet (2009) calls ‘collusive corruption’. Yet, as the current crime wars illustrate, these actors can directly confront the state when their interests are challenged (Bailey and Talyor 2009). Criminal insurgency is the mechanism of the confrontation with the state that results when relationships between organized crime and the state fall into disequilibrium.

One key element of the security threat resulting from disequilibrium is the impact of transnational gangs and cartels on sovereignty where illicit networks try to reconfigure states. Such reconfiguration could include erosion of state capacity (or the exploitation of a state solvency gap), corrupting and co-opting state organs (government, the police, and the judiciary) in all or part of the state—through the development of criminal enclaves—or at the extreme edge, state failure. State reconfiguration is potentially a more common outcome than abject state capture or state failure and co-opted state reconfiguration (CStR) where the cartels and gangs use a range of actions to obtain social, economic, political, and cultural benefits outside the effective control of the state (Garay Salamanca and Salcedo-Albarán 2010; 2011). Criminal insurgency is the means of effecting CStR; this process is currently in play in Brazil's favelas, Mexico, and many parts of central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras).

## Criminal Insurgency

Criminal insurgency presents a challenge to national security analysts used to creating simulations and analytical models for terrorism and conventional military operations. Criminal insurgency is different from conventional terrorism and insurgency because the criminal insurgents' sole political motive is to gain autonomy and economic control over territory. They do so by hollowing out the state and creating criminal enclaves to maneuver.

The capture, control, or disruption of strategic nodes in the global system and the intersections between them by criminal actors can have cascading effects. The result is a state of flux resulting in a struc-

tural "hollowing" of many state functions while bolstering the state's executive branch and its emphasis on internal security. This hollowing out of state function is accompanied by an extra-national stratification of state function with a variety of structures or fora for allocating territory, authority, and rights (TAR). These fora—including border zones and global cities—are increasingly contested, with states and criminal enterprises seeking their own 'market' share. As a result, global insurgents, terrorists, and networked criminal enterprises can create 'lawless zones,' 'feral cities,' and 'parallel states' characterized by 'dual sovereignty.' Criminal insurgencies can exist at several levels (Sullivan 2012):

- *Local Insurgencies* (gangs dominate local turf and political, economic, and social life in criminal enclaves or other governed zones).
- *Battle for the Parallel State* (battles for control of the 'parallel state.' These occur within the parallel state's governance space, but also spill over to affect the public at large and the police and military forces that seek to contain the violence and curb the erosion of governmental legitimacy and solvency).
- *Combating the State* (criminal enterprise directly engages the state itself to secure or sustain its independent range of action; cartels are active belligerents against the state).
- *The State Implodes* (high intensity criminal violence spirals out of control; the cumulative effect of sustained, unchecked criminal violence, and criminal subversion of state legitimacy through endemic corruption and co-option. Here, the state simply loses the capacity to respond).

## Attacks on Journalists

**A**s noted in “Attacks on Journalists and “New Media” in Mexico’s Drug War: A Power and Counter Power Assessment” (Sullivan 2011):

*An increasingly significant component of this violence has been directed against journalists and media outlets in an effort to silence the media so the cartels can operate with impunity. Television stations (such as Televisa in Tamaulipas and Nuevo León) have been attacked with grenades, journalists assassinated, kidnapped or disappeared. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2010), at least 30 journalists have been killed or disappeared in Mexico in the past four years, and 11 have been killed this year [2010] alone. A detailed map tracking violence against Mexican journalists has been developed by The Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas, Austin (Knight Center 2010).*

As I have previously recounted, on September 18, 2010, Ciudad Juárez’s newspaper *El Diario* (currently edited across the international frontier in El Paso) printed an unprecedented editorial ¿Qué quieren de nosotros? In English, simply “What do you want from us?” Published the day after one of its photographers was murdered, the editorial provides a stark illustration of the intense assault against Mexico’s free press by cartel gangsterism. The *El Diario* editorial (translation at *Los Angeles Times, La Plaza*) read in part:

*Gentlemen of the different organizations that are fighting for the Ciudad Juarez plaza, the loss of two reporters of this news organization represents an irreparable breakdown for all of us who work here, and in particular, for our families.*

*We’d like you to know that we’re communicators, not psychics. As such, as information workers, we ask that you explain what it is you want from us, what you’d intend*

*for us to publish or to not publish, so that we know what is expected of us.*

*You are at this time the de facto authorities in this city because the legal authorities have not been able to stop our colleagues from falling, despite the fact that we’ve repeatedly demanded it from them. Because of this, before this undeniable reality, we direct ourselves to you with these questions, because the last thing we want is that another one of our colleagues falls victim to your bullets.*

Here we see the raw response to cartel info ops and narco-censorship. This pattern is repeating itself in a brutal fashion. As noted in the companion paper to this piece:

*An increasingly significant component of this violence has been directed against journalists and media outlets in an effort to silence the media so the cartels can operate with impunity. Television stations (such as Televisa in Tamaulipas and Nuevo León) have been attacked with grenades, and journalists assassinated, kidnapped or disappeared. One of the most visceral artifacts of the cartel counter-power struggle is brutal attacks on journalists. According to Article 19, in 2011 there were 172 attacks on journalists in Mexico. These figures include 9 murders of journalists, 2 murders of media workers, 2 disappearances of journalists, and 8 assaults with firearms or explosives against media facilities or installations (Article 19 2012). Since 2000, 66 journalists have been killed, 13 journalists have disappeared, and 33 media buildings or facilities have been targets of explosive or firearm attacks (Article 19 2012).*

As I recounted in my 2011 paper on cartel info ops (Sullivan 2011):

*News blackouts have become a feature of the Mexican drug war. This has two facets: government information operations and cartel info ops. According to the Knight Center, “coverage of drug trafficking in Mex-*

ico has been based generally on an official view of the facts...Releasing information a bit at a time allows Mexico's government to construct a public image of winning the war" (Medel 2010, 22). Coupled with cartel efforts to obscure their hand through instrumental attacks and threats against journalists, the resulting pressure has resulted in near complete media blackouts in some areas.

The Fundación MEPI (Fundación Mexicana de Periodismo de Investigación) recently completed a six-month study of 11 regional newspapers in Mexico to gauge the impact of cartel interference or influence on reportage of cartel crime. The Fd. MEPI study relied on content analysis of the papers' coverage and interviews with journalists. The report found that the regional newspapers were failing to report many cartel/narco crimes. In order to conduct the study, Fd. MEPI constructed a list of execution-style murders tied to cartel actions and then compared it to regional coverage. In all regions, the number of stories mentioning cartel violence from January to June 2010 amounted to a small fraction of the actual incidents. Consider for example that cartel murders in Ciudad Juárez averaged an estimated 300 per month in 2010, but during the study period El Norte, the regional paper mentioned less than 10% or 30 per month. The impact appears even greater in eastern Mexico, where *El Mañana* in Nuevo Laredo published only 3 stories out of a potential 98 in June. Areas controlled by the Gulf and Zeta (e.g., Tamaulipas) cartels appear particularly impacted by the cartel blackout effect with between 0-5% of cartel violence stories reported.

The Fd. MEPI analysis is presented in Table One. Specifically, it reviewed the crime stories published in January-June 2010 from the following newspapers: *El*

*Noroseste* (Culiacán), *El Norte* (Ciudad Juárez), *El Dictamen* (Veracruz), *Mural* (Guadalajara), *Pulso* (San Luis Potosí), *El Mañana* (Nuevo Laredo), *El Diario de Morelos* (Morelos), *El Imparcial* (Hermosillo), *La Voz de Michoacán* (Morelia), and *Milenio* (Hidalgo). In 8 of the 13 cities studied, the papers reported only one of every ten narco violence stories; in the cities with more reportage, only 3 out of 10 were published.

The cartels do not seek simple silence and impunity, they notably seek to influence perception, using a type of "narco-propaganda." This strategy employs a range of tools. These include both violent means—beheadings, *levantóns* (kidnappings), assassinations, bombings, and grenade attacks—and informational means—*narcomantas* (banners), *narcobloqueos* (blockades), *manifestacións* (orchestrated demonstrations), and *narcocorridos* (or folk songs extolling cartel virtues). Simple physical methods such as graffiti and roadside signs are now amplified with digital media.

## Narcocultura and Social Banditry

The concept of social/environmental modification is based on research into cartels and "*narcocultura*" by Robert J. Bunker and others (Bunker 1997; Bunker and Bunker 2010a; 2010b; Hazim 2009a; 2009b) and reportage on the "Santa Muerte"<sup>1</sup> and "Jesús Malverde" cults by Guillermprieto (2009) and La Familia Michoacana cartels with its own theological practice by Logan and Sullivan (2009). Guillermprieto (2009) defines *narcocultura* in a broad sense as a "twisted relationship with power" often exemplified by corruption. In a social or cultural context—the one we are examining

<sup>1</sup> While Santa Muerte is often translated into English as Saint Death, a more accurate translation would be "Sacred Death" or "Holy Death."

here—she defines *narcocultura* in a narrower sense: *the production of symbols, rituals, and artifacts—slang, religious cults, music, consumer goods—that allow people involved in the drug trade to recognize themselves as part of a community, to establish a hierarchy in which the acts they are required to perform acquire positive value and to absorb the terror inherent in their line of work.*

According to Bunker and Bunker (2010b), social environmental modification is an element of non-state warfare; specifically: “This warfare—manifesting itself in ‘criminal insurgencies’ derived from groups of gang, cartel, and mercenary networks—promotes new forms of state organization drawn from criminally based social and political norms and behaviors.” Key elements of social/environmental modification include alternative worship or veneration of “narco-saints,” symbolic violence (including beheadings and corpse messaging—*i.e.*, attaching a message to a corpse), the use of *narcocorridos* (epic folk songs), and social media to spread messages and confer legitimacy of a cartel. Womer and Bunker (2010) mention the importance of social media in social environmental modification in the context of gangs and Mexican cartels. A notable example of a band crafting *narcocorridos* extolling the virtues of cartels is *Los Tigres del Norte*.<sup>3</sup> Other forms of messaging conferring potential legitimacy or shaping public perception include *narcomensajes* (essentially communiqués), *narcomantas* (placards and banners), and *manifestaciones* (demonstrations).

Together these means can be combined to cast legitimacy on the cartel or gang in a form of post-modern ‘social banditry’ as described by Hobsbawm (2000).

*Narcocultura* and social banditry are mechanisms for securing cartel and gang legitimacy in the areas they seek to dominate. They join raw violence and barbarization as tools of social domination and a means of accumulating and solidifying political power (Sullivan and Elkus 2011). Cartel info ops thus not only seek to silence adversaries and criticism, they become means of extending political reach and reconfiguring the state to a structure that furthers its objectives. Here cartels both use and are confronted by new media. As they seek to gain legitimacy—or submission—from the populace on the one hand (also providing utilitarian social goods in furtherance of this objective), civil society seeks to strike back and retain order and security on the other. Here we see cartels broadcasting their brutal attacks, wearing cartel uniforms,<sup>4</sup> and developing and deploying their own encrypted microwave communications networks<sup>5</sup> to spread their words and deeds.

## Conclusion: The New Narcocultura and Intelligence

Cartels and gangs are essentially non-state violent actors. When they conduct operations they clearly display a range of signatures that can be detected by assessing their transactions to discern their intent and tactical, operational, and strate-

<sup>3</sup> According to Guillermoprieto, *Los Tigres del Norte* originated in Sinaloa and emigrated to California where they play norteño music with corrido lyrics glorifying narcotraffickers.

<sup>4</sup> See Kelly Vlahos, “Bloody Mexican Gangs Make It ‘Official,’ with Uniforms, Insignia,” *Fox News*, May 23, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> See Ronan Graham, “Mexico Seizes ‘Zetas’ Communications System,” *InSight Crime*, December 2, 2011 and “Marines dismantle Los Zeta communications network in Veracruz,” *Borderland Beat*, September 8, 2011.

gic objectives. Identity intelligence is one approach to assign their tactical and operational disposition and the position of cartel/gang actors within the illicit networks. This can be reinforced through red team analysis (Sullivan and Elkus 2009).

*Narcocultura* enables the cartels by transmitting their strategic (and tactical/operational) status; identity intelligence (I2) and social network analysis can help translate this into an understanding of the group's current status, order of battle, operational tempo (optempo), and intended targets (for operational purposes and campaigns to control territory). Not only can new media enable the cartels/gangs and their civil society rivals, it can empower intelligence and enforcement operations. As new media (horizontal mass communications)—as seen in micro-blogs (Twitter), YouTube, Facebook, and blogs such as *NarcoRed*, *El Blog del Narco*, and *CiudadanaMtySur* (an excellent site for monitoring real-time attacks)—helps mitigate the impact of narco-censorship, it can also fuel real-time situational awareness and intelligence analysis. Understanding and exploiting new media is an essential tool for addressing criminal insurgency, co-opted state reconfiguration, and shifts in sovereignty.

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