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The Political Trajectory of Urban Violence: Organized Crime in Michoacán's Apatzingán

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The Political Trajectory of Urban Violence: Organized Crime in Michoacán's Apatzingán

Abstract

Contrary to the "narco-centric" explanation of homicidal violence in Mexico, this article proposes "the political trajectory of urban violence" (PTUV) as an additional analytical category to nuance the developmental process of today´s large-scale violence in Mexican urban enclaves. Building on previous research, this article argues that organized crime-related violence in Mexican cities today has unveiled –and exacerbated– intricate power tensions among private actors –both illegal and, perhaps more importantly, legal ones– which need to be explored by considering the historical evolution of these political processes within a given urban context. The PTUV, then, regards recent organized crime-related violence as part of a continuum of the socio-political complex in urban environments, and not only due to criminal conduct or activity per se. Because a concrete case study is central to advance on this research agenda, the article posits that repeated outbreaks of homicidal violence in the city of Apatzingán, Michoacán, Mexico, have been the result of a rooted local conflict over land access, economic hegemony, political dominance and increased urbanization.

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Introduction

Urban violence has swiftly become one of the most severe threats worldwide, mainly to democratic governance and citizen security on a local scale.[1] Specifically, homicidal violence perpetrated by violent non-state actors—chief among them organized crime groups (OCGs)—is currently the dominant form of armed violence in the cities, from Medellin Rio de Janeiro to Cape Town, Lagos, and Karachi.[2] This trend is occurring in Mexican cities as well.[3]

Building on previous research,[4] the present article delves into the following questions: What are the underlying sources and drivers of large-scale violence in urban settings in Mexico? What role do Mexican OCGs play in today's urban violence? Answering these questions may contribute to research on urban security challenges in the 21st century, contemporary conflict-crime nexus, and future trends of organized political violence.[5]

To advance this research agenda, this article proposes the political trajectory of urban violence (PTUV) as an additional analytical category to nuance the developmental process of today's urban violence in Mexico. By adopting a historical perspective on urban violence, the PTUV posits that today's organized crime-related violence in multiple Mexican cities has unveiled—and exacerbated—intricate power tensions and reconfigurations among private legal actors (especially economic and political ones), which need to be explored.[6] As such, the historical evolution of these political processes at the local level is critical to explaining current cases of urban violence commonly associated with criminal activity. The PTUV regards organized crime-related violence as part of a continuum of a political complex in urban environments and not only because of criminal conduct or activity, per se.

A concrete case study is central to testing the PTUV; this article focuses on the city of Apatzingán, Michoacán. Indeed, this exploratory research suggests that recent outbreaks of organized crime-related violence in Apatzingán have resulted from a rooted local conflict over land access, economic hegemony, and political dominance. The case study research was based on the "intensive study of a single unit … to understand a larger class of similar units (a population of cases)."[7] This said, and building on Flyvbjerg's work on case study designs, the present case study of homicidal

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violence in Apatzingán seeks to produce more generalizable knowledge on the political, social, and economic factors associated with the micro-dynamics of violence in Mexico beneath the macro-cleavage known as criminal violence.[8]

The article has the following structure: After briefly describing the methodology, section two outlines Mexico's security landscape and highlights why Apatzingán is a helpful case study for this research agenda. Section three scrutinizes from a historical perspective different sources of urban violence in Apatzingán and the processes through which urbanization took place. Section four analyzes the multi-sourced nature of today's lethal violence in the city of Apatzingán. This section argues that four chronologically ordered processes (the democratization process, criminal pluralism, criminal fragmentation, and political fragmentation), have exacerbated conflicts over land access, political domination, and economic hegemony. The article concludes with final comments, policy implications, and the next steps in the research agenda.

Methodology

This article is based on field research conducted in Apatzingán, Michoacán from August to November 2021. It portrays the testimonies of six key participants—political and economic elites in Apatzingán—who were interviewed in a semi-structured fashion. Interviews were carried out on the following dates: Interviewee 1 (local politician) on 24 August 2021; Interviewee 2 (rancher) on 19 September 2021; Interviewee 3 (state-level politician/businessman) on 9 October 2021; Interviewee 4 (agricultural entrepreneur) on 17 October 2021, Interviewee 5 (local party leader) on 22 October 2021, Interviewee 6 (businessman) on 8 November 2021.

Although the information was not processed with qualitative data analysis software, these interviews were illustrative accounts of power dynamics and urban violence in Apatzingán. The participants came from different ideological, political, or economic backgrounds but shared similar viewpoints regarding the dynamics and cycles of urban violence in Apatzingán. To prevent potential data validity and reliability problems, the author employed open-source data from local and nationwide newspapers and literature on criminal violence, organized crime, and illicit networks in Michoacán.

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The questionnaire included the following themes: the role of federal, state, and municipal governments; the War on Drugs and its impact on Apatzingán; the crime-government nexus; organized crime and political violence; democratization in Apatzingán; urbanization and inequality; disputes over natural resources; role of economic and political elites at the local level; dynamics in homicidal violence; and criminal fragmentation. I took notes during the interviews and recorded them with a voice recorder. The participants' safety was ensured at all times.

An Illustration of Mexico's Criminal Violence

In December 2006, the newly sworn-in president Felipe Calderon implemented a campaign against OCGs operating in Mexico.[9] The strategy—commonly known as kingpin strategy—comprised large-scale joint operations by federal forces aimed at dismantling the most powerful criminal cartels by then.[10] However, the use of military force caused an utter fragmentation and reconfiguration of the criminal underworld, as well as the creation of illicit economies and an unprecedented increase in homicidal violence.[11]

Michoacán has been one of the most affected states in Mexico by large-scale violence ever since the fight against organized crime started.[12] In the words of a participant:

> During that time [2011] things got quite messy. Some places in Michoacán looked like a war zone. We don't need to go very far—you could see human corpses piled up in the middle of the streets and scenes like that here in Apatzingán. Yes, in the beginning I did support the government's actions against criminality, but eventually things turned out to be counterproductive, too much blood.[13]

Although considerable security improvements have been made since 2011, Apatzingán remains a violent municipality.[14] Between May 2022 and April 2023, it registered a rate of 27.7 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.[15]

Recurrent turf disputes and waves of homicidal violence in Apatzingán also have a geographic explanation.[16] It is a strategic city as it is the region's closest urban hub to the Pacific coastline (see Figure 1), in

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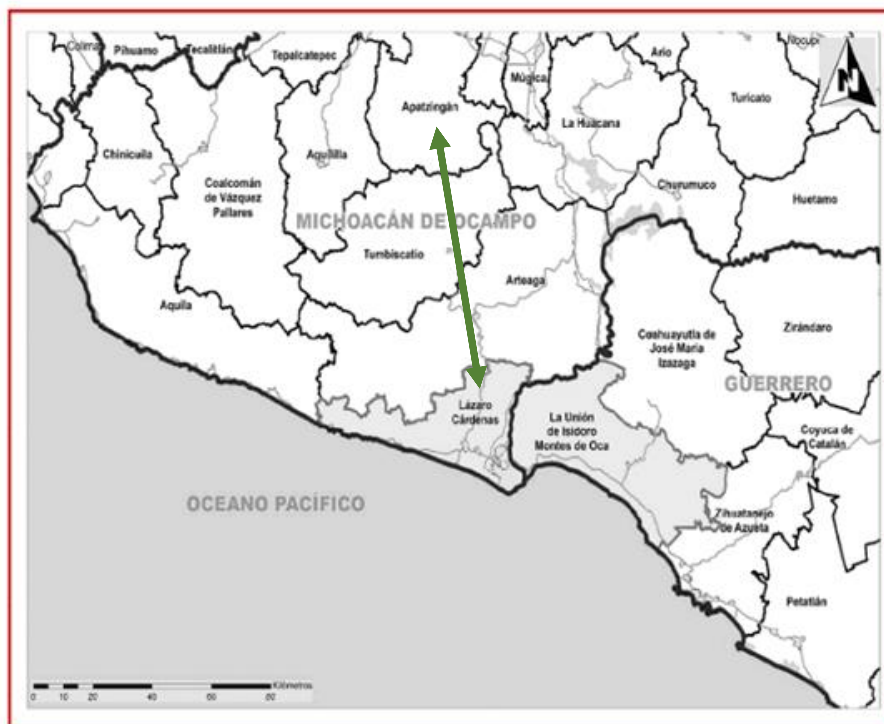
particular to Lázaro Cárdenas, one of the most important city ports in México and a central point for criminal activities, chief among these drug-dealing—particularly, synthetic drugs and precursor chemicals coming from China—as well as the creation of illicit economies such as the iron ore mining.[17] Although this article focuses on its urban aspects, the city of Apatzingán is a clear example of the urban-rural dichotomy. On the one hand, Apatzingán is one the most important urban enclaves in the state of Michoacán as it is home to government offices, agricultural companies, wealthy businesses, and drug lords headquarters.[18] The rest of the municipality is predominantly rural.[19] The combination of these traits makes the municipality of Apatzingán a well-known agroindustry powerhouse in Mexico and, more importantly, the economic and political urban epicenter of Michoacán's *Tierra Caliente* (Hot Land region)—a region in the central and southern part of Michoacán which encompasses 14 municipalities of this state.[20] It also stretches to 9 municipalities of Guerrero and five municipalities of the state of Mexico. Overall, this region is known for its elevated levels of violence, the operation of multiple organized crime groups, and the production and distribution of illicit drugs.[21]

Figure 1: Central and southern Michoacán: Apatzingán and Lázaro Cárdenas.



Source: Diario Oficial de la Federación, https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5422684&fecha=14/01/2016#gsc.tab=0

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As stated, the city has gone on and off intense waves of homicidal violence due to turf disputes among rival criminal groups. In 2007, for instance, violence surged after the Zetas cartel—a non-native and extremely prone to violence and brutality criminal organization—arrived in Michoacán and made the city of Apatzingán its stronghold.[22] According to a participant,

> Native criminal groups joined to expel the Zetas because that felt like a sort of an outside invasion by an alien criminal syndicate, something that made Michoacán one of the most violent states by then.[23]

In February 2013, the city would see another surge in large-scale violence when *grupos de autodefensas* (self-defense groups) popped up against the once-hegemonic *Caballeros templates* (Knights Templar) throughout *Tierra Caliente* region.[24] Through this period Apatzingán reached a rate of 60 homicides per 100,000 residents.[25] Nowadays, a rather unstable mosaic of splintered local criminal groups under the banner of *Cárteles Unidos* have joined forces to fight Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) since 2019—a criminal group that once had allegedly financed many of those self-defense groups, as referred by two participants during fieldwork.[26] For example, Apatzingán witnessed another rise in criminal violence in late June—early July 2023 as a series of road blockades and shootings between the CJNG and *Cárteles Unidos* took place in and out of the city.[27] A symbolic event that attests to the worsening security situation in Tierra Caliente and that grabbed the Mexican headlines was the killing of the lemon farmer turned *autodefensa*, Hipólito Mora, in a municipality close to Apatzingán.[28]

The narco-centric explanation of violence would present armed violence in Apatzingán as a natural case of criminal groups warring against each other to control and expand a specific territory. This approach, however, assumes that Apatzingán is a politically neutral area whereas, actually, multiple actors with private interests interact with each other within a resource-rich geographic area.[29] In the words of a participant:

> We give criminal groups too much credit. Do you really think they are the only ones with interests here—political or economic ones?

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> They are not. Where are the politicians, the companies, the entrepreneurs, the central government?[30]

In this sense, violence—criminal violence being just one expression of it—has been a historical and useful means employed by private actors to harness political dominance, thwart economic competition, and solve land disputes. The central thesis of this article is best grasped by Interviewee 3:

> The security crisis in Apatzingán, adapting Gramsci, consists in the fact that old, historical dynamics of violence haven't died in their entirety while new have already born. This combination explains the morbid symptoms of today's violence.[31]

For this reason, the PTUV stresses the need to historicize large-scale violence in cases like Apatzingán to understand its multi-layered nature and linkages today.

A Violent History of Urban Life

Multiple cycles of violence coexisting in the city of Apatzingán today relate to its foundation as an urban enclave. Therefore, in order to provide a comprehensive interpretation of today's homicidal violence in the city of Apatzingán, it is paramount to adopt a historical perspective and briefly discuss a violent practice commonly referred to as *caciquismo*. *Caciquismo* has been a distinctive trait in the Mexican state-making process as well as a source of para-institutional power of social and political control.[32]

At the birth of the twentieth century, President Porfirio Díaz consolidated his power (1876-1911) through informal power brokers known as *caciques*. This network of local landowners-cum-patrons-cum-politicians exerted political, economic, and social influence in a geographic area starting at the municipality.[33] Although Porfirio Díaz was ousted after a 35-year hegemony by a revolutionary movement in 1911, *caciquismo* survived civil war. Moreover, once the revolution's political and social turmoil ended in the 1930s, and the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) routinized the post-revolutionary regime in the 1940s, *caciques* were again fundamental to bring about peace and effective governance to the regime in a sub-national scale.[34] The chieftains once again became the informal

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intermediary that, arguably, connected local politics to the national political project.[35] C*aciques* would operate—and still do—on a basis of coercion, co-optation, patronage, and consensual interaction between patrons and clients. As for coercion, the federal government would entrust *caciques* with the control over public order to maintain socio-political discipline in remote areas with the help of the military.[36] In other cases, *caciques* would exert force primarily through the engagement of private militias or paramilitary forces that quickly would suppress any uprising or political opposition.[37]

Now, as a predominantly rural region in early twentieth century, Apatzingán was by no means exempt from *caciquismo*. Perhaps one of the most evident examples of this practice—and how the use of violent mechanisms permeated and conditioned the socio-political culture in the years to come—was the major land distribution that took place in the 1930s during Lázaro Cárdenas' presidency. Paradoxically, this distribution enabled local elites to further their economic control over land and, at the same time, to consolidate their political positions.[38] As a result, land distribution in Apatzingán, as in other regions of Michoacán, generated in reality, land concentration by few *caciques* widening social inequalities.[39] Also, land concentration in Michoacán reinforced a system of norms, values and attitudes that contributed to the normalization of violence as means for controlling territory and solving disputes. Tied into this, according to the testimonies of Interviewees 4 and 6, violence has been functional to the interests of *caciques*, specifically to the concentration of power and social control.[40] During this time *caciques* in *Tierra Caliente* would form armed militias to terrorize small *ejido*-land owners—*ejidos* are areas of land held collectively by inhabitants of a Mexican village and farmed cooperatively or individually depending on the size—, and would employ tactics such as targeted assassinations, mass killings, and state-led violence.[41]

The land issue, as Guerra-Manzo labels this process, was a defining element in the formation of Apatzingán as an urban enclave as it inevitably paved the way for social grievances, civil unrest and, in time, organized crime and political violence in the municipality.[42] When asked about the sources of homicidal violence, Interviewee 1 stated the following: "You know, violence has always been present in Apatzingán. One thing that generated a lot of disagreements and discord was land distribution. Land

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access in the seventies set the tone for alliances among power groups—including organized crime—, and for the use of violence. Even today that the city has expanded in many ways."[43]

In this sense, Apatzingán is yet another case study where unequal urbanization has been a natural environment for conflict over resources. By 1960, common theft, homicides, and kidnappings were normal practice in *Tierra Caliente*. New breeds of violence popped up. For instance, the creation of self-defense groups became part of the culture among big landowners.[44] Interestingly, state authorities would allow only big landowners to harvest narcotics. According to a participant: "During the 1960s and the 1970s a culture of tolerance to organized crime groups and their activities permeated in municipal and state authorities."[45] Similarly, Interviewee 4 stated that through this time "the Army would grant permission to harvest the dope, during the PRI governments at the state and federal levels."[46] Soon, local drug-trafficking groups, political authorities, entrepreneurs, and landowners started what later on would become a network based on friendship and kinship to control illicit crops (particularly marijuana) and drug smuggling to the United States. This is how Apatzingán, as well as Aguililla, Coalcomán, Tepalcatepec, Arteaga, and Lázaro Cárdenas, became areas controlled by, what Maldonado-Aranda called, corporate groups focused on the drug business.[47]

In parallel, during this period the federal government started a process of urbanization with large infrastructure projects under the *Comisión de Tepalcatepec y Balsas* (Tepalcatepec and Balsas Commission). In Apatzingán, as in other parts of *Tierra Caliente*, the government opened several kilometers of highways and dirt roads, built large-scale crop irrigation systems, and carried out mining-metallurgy and hydroelectric projects in an effort to integrate the region into Mexico's national economy and politics.[48]

The development model, however, had two negative externalities. On the one hand, commodities production and export made not only entrepreneurs and political bosses wealthier but also benefited drug traffickers who took advantage of the new infrastructure and commercial networks to crop and transport narcotics.[49] On the other hand, the urbanization projects incentivized migration flows to *Tierra Caliente*. According to one participant:

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> Migration during this period was perhaps one of the most important negative transformations of Apatzingán and *Tierra Caliente* in general: it meant many people without access to economic benefits.[50]

This statement matches with Guerra-Manzo's research: During this period population growth became unsustainable causing insufficient job opportunities and a lack of land access.[51]

Eventually, there was a huge setback in the urbanization of Apatzingán when two major economic crises hit Mexico through the 1970s and 1980s, severely affecting the entire region's agroindustry—Mexico went through two serious economic crises characterized by an inflationary spiral, stagnant GDP growth, a large and growing foreign debt, a contraction of private investment, a financial sector in critical conditions, a devalued currency and an unstable exchange rate, and a loss of confidence in the State's ability to lead the country economically.[52] It is no surprise that during the mid-80s the first big criminal organization with regional and international capabilities emerged in Michoacán: The *Milenio* cartel.[53] Drug-trafficking boomed as local elites-landowners substituted watermelon and lemon exports with drugs (marihuana and, later on, poppy).[54] In turn, *Milenio Cartel* would diversify its portfolio of revenues in the real estate market and other commercial interests in municipalities like Apatzingán.[55]

The account of Interviewee 1 illustrates the situation:

> In addition to drug-trafficking, the *Milenio* cartel started creating companies and private business particularly in the construction, real state, and service sectors First they started with restaurants, bars, and brothels. Then they made the numbers bigger and bigger for they started to build, hotels, apartments, and house residential zones.[56]

Similarly, according to one participant, this was something that eventually the *Familia Michoacana* (Michoacán Family cartel)[57] took to another level in the twenty-first century: "They even infiltrated the sports: One professional soccer team was financed by the Familia. Strikingly, the team

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was registered as part of a company based here in Apatzingán."[58]

Overall, dynamics of violence through the 1960s and 1980s were related to economic dominance through land concentration, an unequal as well as disorganized urbanization process, the establishment of a network of kinship among OCGs and political and economic actors, and the consolidation of organized crime in Apatzingán after two major economic crises. Up to this point, violence performed a means to guarantee a sense of stability and social control in Apatzingán. However, the democratization process provided another dynamic of violence that shook up the status quo. Something it will be necessary to delve into next.

Politics by Other Means

Carl von Clausewitz asserted that war is the continuation of politics by other means. Foucault, instead, inverted the statement saying that politics is the continuation of war by other means.[59] Although they feed each other at some point, the reasoning would suggest both belong to two opposite sides of a political spectrum. However, in Apatzingán such duality doesn't exist. Instead, violence and politics have coexisted at the same time and space. To a great extent, this has been a residual effect of the democratization process, particularly political and criminal pluralism as this article will now explain.

In 2000, the center-right National Action Party (PAN), the dominant opposition party at the time, ousted PRI from Mexico's presidency, thus ending its 70-year hegemony in the central government. The political changes associated with democratization at a national scale in Mexico "undermined the pyramidal composition of power structures (in other words, single-party government and centralized authority of the president) meaning the loss of social control."[60] However, at the local level the political system started to crack since the 1970s.[61] By this time, state, and municipal authorities—often controlled by *caciques* themselves—gained more autonomy.[62] Moreover, local political and economic elites adopted a more competitive approach in their relationship vis-à-vis the central government. In this sense, the democratization process made more evident that *caciquismo* was in reality a set of subnational regimes operating within the context of a national polity and economy.[63]

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As for the city of Apatzingán in the early stages of this political rupture, local elites consolidated yet again their predominance in the economic and political realms. Unexpectedly, it was in Mexico's democratic onset that coercive mechanisms of strongmen enjoyed a sort of parallel sovereignty the most.[64] Also, in municipalities like Apatzingán, PRI's decline at a national level strengthened local/regional arrangements between organized crime and state as well as municipal governments.[65]

Things started to change dramatically when the regime's rupture brought about political pluralism in Michoacán. In the words of Interviewee 5:

> Violence has been present in our history. In recent times violence has been instrumental to politics. Now imagine when there is a multiplication of local *caciques* [local landowners-cum-patrons-cum-politicians]; everyone wants to be a boss. This anarchy demands the use of force, demands the elimination of the enemy to gain or maintain power.[66]

In this sense, political alternation, and the rotation of parties in the state level undermined the informal networks of protection that had facilitated the cartels' operations under one-party rule.[67] As for Michoacán, this shift can be traced back to the late 1980s when Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas—son of Michoacán-born President Lázaro Cárdenas—founded the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), a left-leaning splinter group from PRI. By the early 1990s, the PRD had already gained social traction in Michoacán by exacerbating historical social contradictions in the state—something relatively easy considering the dynamics of physical and structural violence mentioned in section 3. In cities like Apatzingán, the PRD soon became an appealing political alternative to the excluded people from the agrarian reform and urbanization.

The political tensions that entailed the existence of another political proposal added another layer of violence, where the use of coercive mechanisms was already common practice to harness political power. In Apatzingán, the appearance of another party inevitably meant the disruption of the local political environment, thus detonating political violence between the PRD's ideologically oriented mobilization, on the one hand, and PRI's resistance to hand in power, on the other. Some estimates suggest that violence in electoral strife in Michoacán caused as many as 50

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murders between 1986 and 1993.[68] Eventually, the city of Apatzingán—and *Tierra Caliente* altogether—had become a bastion of political opposition led by the PRD. Malkin suggests that political opposition may well have served from the emergence of new generations of traffickers who opposed local elites still associated with the PRI.[69] Also, PRI in Michoacán started to implode due to diverging political aspirations from different inner factions. Interviewee 5 portrayed this idea in the following way:

> Party discipline in the state [Michoacán] relied to a great extent on the hegemonic power of the central government. In this sense, once one candidate as major was picked the other party members would join ranks. This changed when other parties became competitive enough to win an election. The angry political-economic actor that was not selected in the PRI's inner process would switch 'cap' [party], taking with him his political and social capital—sometimes criminal groups included. In some occasions local actors were not picked to run for office because they allegedly had ties to organized crime groups. They would go to other parties instead, and those parties were willing to compromise if that supposed winning an election.[70]

Accounts from other participants also reveal this trait in Mexico's democratization process. For instance, Interviewee 3 frequently talked about powerful political or economic actors who would knock on the opposition party's door after not having obtained a PRI candidacy for major or local congress.

> The PRD—and, eventually, other parties as they were having more presence in Michoacán—would welcome new party members with all its political scaffolding, including sometimes the support of a criminal group.[71]

Interviewee 2, for instance, stated that

> political alternation brought up a huge reconfiguration of *plazas* [turfs] in *Tierra Caliente*, benefiting criminal groups, more recently Jalisco New Generation Cartel.[72]

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In consequence, a downside of political pluralism was the use of political connections to favor one organized crime group over another.[73] In this context, political pluralism made even more competitive—and violent—forthcoming electoral processes in urban areas insofar as they had the backing of a criminal group. None of Mexico's major parties remained ethically or genetically immune from this kind of corruption.[74] In a way, it was a natural response to political competitiveness: Political parties had to use additional sources of persuasion—and coercion—such as the ones provided by the already politically plural organized crime. By this time, the demise of rigid socio-political structures from the ancient regime, as Aguayo puts it, had emancipated the groups of power embedded in the Mexican political landscape, namely, unions, civil organizations, private sector and, certainly, criminal organizations.[75] In this new normal, criminal groups had more margin to choose any political group they thought best. This is how criminal pluralism became a decisive element in an already highly politically contested environment—especially in urban contexts like Apatzingán where most of the government offices, agricultural companies, wealthy businesses, and commercial opportunities were based.

Thus, democratization in Mexico took the crime-government nexus to a higher level—albeit eventually with highly unstable alliances because of criminal and political fragmentations, as the next paragraph will mention. As Interviewee 1 asserted, organized crime in Apatzingán "became a system of relations and acquaintances that reached the legal world via city contracts, the acquisition of public budget, or symbiotic connections with local law enforcement corporations. Politicians needed their support [criminal groups] to win an election, and so they made a deal with the devil that even changed the balance of power, of course, in organized crime's favor."[76] This nexus also affected social urban life, where organized crime became the enforcer of the political group in power. The criminal underworld implemented disciplinary mechanisms such as curfews, checkpoints, or bans on assembling in public squares in cities, to name some of them. Interviewee 6 describes these disciplinary mechanisms in the following terms: "Organized crime is functional to either local, state or national [political] power. To these powers, organized crime represents today an opportunity for control, stability, and security."[77]

However, the crime-government nexus eventually became more complex

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and an additional source of urban violence in Apatzingán. From 2006 onwards, in the context of the War on Drugs, the criminal underworld has gone through a severe process of fragmentation. Some recent estimates suggest that the number of criminal groups grew by 900 percent.[78] This reconfiguration of the criminal underworld—accompanied by internal fractures, defections, and shifts of alignment—was the outcome of increased competition between various organized crime syndicates and joint operations by the police and military.[79] Inevitably, the system of relations between organized crime and the government is also fragmented, with severe implications at the local level. In other words, the federal government's security strategy did not only contribute to a reconfiguration of the criminal landscape but also to a general political fragmentation in Apatzingán, hence generating a yet more unstable and competitive political and economic environment—and thus setting up the foundations for more homicidal violence. Interviewee 5 puts it in the following terms:

> The central government's notion of "order" at that time [in 2008] was not the same notion of "order" here [in Apatzingán]. They came here and faced a weak institutional framework that was not prepared to address Apatzingán's reality, say, for instance, the municipal police. The federal government crashed with the way things are done here, not now, since a long time ago....On the other hand, it was non-sense, except from the armed forces, they came without institutions, and made the environment and the set of relationships here more divided, more complex.[80]

Le Cour Graindmason argues that instability and violence in places like *Tierra Caliente* have been due to a constant process of political reconfiguration generated by criminal groups.[81] In a subtle way, this viewpoint reproduces the narco-centric approach of violence: Any political reconfiguration relies on the existence of criminal groups. Although this thesis may have explained sources and dynamics of violence before the fragmentation of the criminal underworld, it falls short to bring granular knowledge on how, in turn, political fragmentation has caused a constant process of criminal reconfiguration as well. In this sense, the political trajectory of urban violence posits the need to analyze instability and criminal violence in a community as the result of a constant process of political reconfiguration, if not generated, at least fed by local elites. In

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other words, political or economic actors have employed organized crime groups to concentrate power, meaning that those local elites also contribute to the escalation—and perpetuation—of sub-national homicidal.[82] This is best portrayed by one participant: "Ok, for instance, there was a case of an alliance between big avocado producers and organized crime groups. This alliance favored the illicit appropriation of avocado orchards so that the big producers could expand their production area, hence benefiting economically from the 'green gold'."[83]

Apatzingán as in other parts of *Tierra Caliente* cycles of violence and counter-violence include a range of different types of legal groups, chief among them rivalries between local elites. Interviewee 2 explains the idea in the following terms:

> In my perspective, the organized crime related violence is just the surface of homicides here—we have been killing each other for year, way before the war on drugs. And if you ask me, in many ways, different expressions of violence here are the result of rivalries among families whose interests—political or economic—have been affected.[84]

The most important flaw around the narco-centric approach of violence is in assuming that territories like Apatzingán in which criminal groups operate, or migrate to, are politically neutral. Instead, testimonies like the above suggest the intricate power relations—and tensions—among other groups with private interests in the same community (for example, local and national entrepreneurs, local political elites, syndicates, and multinational companies). Indeed, criminal groups undoubtedly play a political role in Apatzingán because they seize, concentrate, and exert power. It is not only that; criminal groups play a political role because they help other actors—illegal and legal—to seize, concentrate and exert power.

In other words, and contrary to common knowledge, criminal groups in Apatzingán may no longer be able to impose their will and conditions in strategic territories, even if these groups are more than willing to employ violence as their preferred means. Instead, to a great extent due to the fragmentation of the criminal underworld, criminal groups have been in the need to integrate themselves into the correlation of either political or economic forces, and to forge alliances with various actors operating at the

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local level.

Although possibly subtle, this epistemological turn in the political trajectory of urban violence demystifies a subordination of all actors to criminal groups. This is all the more relevant considering the criminal underworld's fragmentation as it has caused a considerable loss of leverage for criminal groups vis-à-vis other actors.[85] This dynamic of homicidal violence—and the role OCGs performs on it—represents a bigger challenge for urban security insofar as it is privatized by a legal actor. In this scenario, urban violence tends to perpetuate from the moment it is employed to achieve either political, economic, or environmental private interests.

Conclusion

This article argued that today's urban criminal violence in Mexico links to a long historical process of violence(s) and counter-violence(s). In other words, cases of contemporary urban violence in Mexico are a structural continuation of the political conflicts of the past. In particular, this case study research attested that homicidal violence in urban Apatzingán, Michoacán, has been historically related to disputes over access to land, political dominance, and economic hegemony. Also, Apatzingán attests why rapid urbanization processes have been frequently—and historically—connected with increasing rates of crime as well as urban and collective violence

However, the article argued that in more recent years Mexico's War on Drugs worsened these historical disputes in Apatzingán, as it has provided an unmatched platform for political and economic actors with local presence to redefine their positions of power in their own urban environments. In light of this, the article proposed the "political trajectory of urban violence" as an analytical category to juxtapose criminal violence nowadays to a historical continuum of the socio-political complex in urban settings.

The city of Apatzingán depicts how urban violence must be seen as a result of interactions where a multiplicity of actors—illicit and legal actors—have been permanently in search of the concentration of power. Indeed, criminal groups may play a political role in many Mexican cities as far as

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they seek, concentrate, and exert power. However, in addition to this, criminal groups play a political role at the local level as they help other private actors—legal and illegal ones—to seek, concentrate, and exert power through coercive means and high-intensity violence. Briefly put, the political trajectory of urban violence posits that organized crime-related violence is a fragment of a bigger power system.

Tied into this, this research emphasized that recent waves of large-scale violence in Apatzingán have not only been because of competition between organized crime groups, particularly those battling for the control of multiple illicit activities. Instead, violence in Mexico is also because of the constant reconfiguration of the political-economic-criminal factions in Apatzingán, fighting each other either for political or economic power. The pattern repetition in this exploratory research indicates this phenomenon. In this sense, the interviews that informed this article were illustrative accounts of power dynamics and urban violence in Apatzingán.

This said, the main findings of this case study have at least three important policy implications. First, any security crisis is, in essence, a political one. Deep-rooted and complex political issues, the most damaging of which are the weakness of local-level law enforcement institutions and social distrust in local government authorities, exacerbate any security crisis. In this sense, the use of military force by the central government has not delivered long-term political goals. It is worth reminding that the usefulness of force lies in its ability to generate conditions for state-building, economic development, generation of governmental capacity, and the establishment of rule of law, particularly at the local level.

Second, no institutional design will, on its own, be able to shape local politics and collective will. Aiming at imposing or re-imposing the State should bear in mind the limits of state building in complex urban settings. Moreover, any security policy from the central government should bear in mind the community's sociopolitical environment and its components, namely key groups, relationships, and tensions among groups, and narratives resonating within the community. In other words, the objectives, means, and ways of the national government must couple the realities and intricacies of local politics.

Third, any strategy attempting to pacify or stabilize violence in urban zones, such as the city of Apatzingán, will fail if it doesn't work as a mediator among local political and economic actors and balance their potentially conflicting interests. Any security strategy should aim to build local institutions but also to generate conditions for reconciliation at the local level. Ultimately, to consolidate institutions of local unity in urban enclaves—for example, a local police force—communities need a social covenant first. Otherwise, paradoxically, state-building could have undesired effects in divided communities where, most likely, a logic of existential politics will eventually beget political instability. After all, negotiation, reconciliation, peace-building processes, and post-conflict justice mechanisms are prerequisites to nation-building at the local level.

Avenues for further research should expand on how cycles of violence originate and persist across history in urban environments. In doing so, it will be necessary to delve into how historical processes of violence endure when new violence dynamics arise. Equally important will be to determine how this cocktail of violent dynamics can impact urban settings, especially those where organized crime groups operate.

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