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In 2013, avocado producers in Tancítararo, a small municipality in southwest Michoacán, Mexico, formed an autodefensa (self-defense group) to end predatory extortion by the Knights Templar, a drug trafficking cartel that once operated in the state. They built barricades, set up checkpoints, punished cartel members, and relied on the participation of the entire community to defend against the return of the Templários. In La Unión, a neighboring municipality, berry sector workers also formed autodefensas in response to extortion by the cartel but instead of a single cohesive organization, multiple groups formed. Unable to solve their collective action problem, the different groups in La Unión were unable to provide the same degree of order and protection as in Tancítararo and eventually the groups came to violently compete with one another. This juxtaposition, which begins Eduardo Moncada’s excellent new book, Resisting Extortion: Victims, Criminals, and States in Latin America, presents us with primary puzzle he sets out to explain: Why does resistance to criminal extortion look so different across time and space?

The emergence of vigilantism and other forms of extra-legal resistance to a variety of organized criminal groups is, by no means, a new phenomenon in Latin America but, until now, no scholar has attempted to provide a generalizable theory to explain its variation. Moncada provides us a compelling answer. He argues that the nature of resistance depends on: 1) the time horizons of criminal actors, 2) whether criminals have captured the local police, and 3) the political economy of the market being extorted. The argument, simply, is that if criminal actors have long time-horizons, only subtle, individual forms of resistance can emerge, what Moncada calls everyday resistance.

Where criminal groups compete with rivals or the state, they will have short time-horizons, and the subsequent form of resistance will depend on whether police collaborate with criminal actors, and the fragmented or consolidated nature of the local industry being extorted. Where the industry is fragmented and the police captured, only everyday
resistance or piecemeal vigilantism is possible. When the industry is more consolidated, however, more significant resistance organizations become possible, leading to what Moncada refers to as collective vigilantism or the coproduction of order in which vigilante groups work hand in glove with the state.

Moncada builds and tests his theory using within and across case comparisons which span three countries with wildly different security environments. He analyzes the emergence of collective vigilantism and the coproduction of order by autodefensas in two municipalities in Michoacán, the piecemeal vigilantism of cash crop farmers in rural El Salvador to end extortion by maras, and the everyday forms of resistance that recyclers (informal vendors) employ to assert their agency and negotiate the price of extortion imposed by Convivir (former self-defense groups turned racketeers) in the heart of urban Medellín, Colombia.

Methodologically, the book is impressive. Moncada incorporates multiple forms of data, including 127 interviews with victims, journalists, judges, government officials, public security agents, and members of criminal groups, archival work on several judicial cases involving acts of lethal vigilantism, as well as focus groups with victims in which the author also employs drawing exercises to allow victims to express their perspectives and opinions not just verbally, but visually. The book is an incredible testament to the fieldwork that Moncada conducted and which, no doubt, required years of effort to develop the contacts and confidence—both on the part of the researcher as well as his informants—to gather this type of sensitive data. Throughout, Moncada’s book exhibits his ethnographic sensibility through his sensitivity to his interlocutors’ lived experiences and the attention he pays to his own positionality. The book’s appendix outlines all these considerations and should be read by any researcher planning to conduct fieldwork in similar contexts.

I also found the empirical portions of the book extremely compelling. The chapter on how Medellín’s recyclers use rhetorical strategies to negotiate lower extortion prices and affirm their sense of self-worth demonstrates Moncada’s attention to the subtlety of power in these relationships. Then, in the two chapters on the formation and evolution of autodefensas by avocado and berry sector actors in Michoacán, he expertly delves into the history of these two agricultural products and the complicated political economies involved in each. He traces how the
logistical and technological demands of avocados and berries (their growing patterns, shelf life, need for refrigeration, time to market, etc.) have shaped not only each industry (the size of farms, the producer organizations, and involvement of multi-national corporations), but the local political and social terrain, and, thereby, the manner in which these communities would eventually resist the brutal methods of extraction that the Knights Templars implemented. Any scholar interested in process tracing methods and how to leverage within and across case comparison could learn much from these chapters.

For all its considerable strengths, I am left with several enduring questions, which mostly concern the concepts Moncada employs to describe these actors and their relationships. Moncada prefers the term “extortion” to its more reputable equivalent “protection.” These two words are often used interchangeably but the difference is significant because the former stresses the coercive nature of these relationships while the latter tends to highlight the provision of an actual service, even if the threat of violence still underlies the exchange. In the more coercive and even grisly extortion practices Moncada describes, the use of the term extortion seems indeed warranted but in other arrangements—especially when criminal actors have long time-horizons and provide reliable protection as well as other goods and services—and in contexts where the state is unwilling or unable to provide such protection, I wonder if those extorted are not also sometimes willing participants. Moncada refutes this perspective by arguing, “beneath the provision of ‘legitimate’ protection there always lurks the threat of violence against the population being taxed for failing to adhere to the rules of the game. This is why we can consider those paying taxes even when they receive benefits from criminals to still be victims” (p. 19). His use of the word tax is interesting here since this immediately calls to mind how the state engages in a very similar practice. From this perspective, should we consider all tax-paying citizens to be victims of state extortion?

Perhaps this question is a bit tongue-in-cheek, but it reflects a real concern I have with some of the labels we (not just Moncada, but many scholars working on the politics of crime, myself included) apply to these arrangements and actors. Moncada frequently uses the terms “criminals” and “victims” to describe those who extort from those who are extorted but the further I read, I became less sure how stable these categories were because many of the resistance strategies involve lethal and non-lethal forms of extra-legal violence. We might say, well, the
victim engaged in this violence because they had no other legal options or that we are willing to overlook their otherwise criminal behavior because they were victimized first. On the other hand, many of the vigilante groups Moncada describes engage in many of the same unsavory acts and sometimes even become extortioners themselves.

For instance, Medellín’s Convivir emerged as self-defense groups to combat insurgent groups in the 1990s only to later turn into more straightforward criminal actors that extort local merchants throughout the city. One of the Michoacán autodefensas Moncada analyzes follows a similar trajectory, eventually producing and trafficking methamphetamines, murdering opponents, kidnapping political candidates, and even connecting itself to another of Mexico’s sprawling drug cartels. To Moncada’s credit, he does not shy away from these morally murky waters of extra-legal resistance though his framework little reflects this slippery terrain. This discussion also makes me wonder if the individuals and groups which Moncada characterizes as criminals are not also victims if we looked more closely at their own emergence. Hopefully, this is a reminder to scholars and policymakers alike that such labels, while perhaps useful analytically, often elide much more complicated realities on the ground that refuse simple dichotomous categorization.

All of that said, these critiques do not detract from Moncada’s admirable effort to interrogate the difficult decisions which millions of Latin America’s citizens face in responding to the various groups that extract money from them. Resisting Extortion takes the perspectives and agency of these individuals and groups seriously as should the rest of us if we are to understand the current and future of politics in the region.