

“We Had to Pay to Live!”

Competing Sovereignities in Violent Mexico

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article examines the emergence of self-defense forces (*autodefensas*) in Michoacán (Mexico) in the context of relationships between drug trafficking and the state, concentrating on the recent history of fragmentation, disorder, and violence. It traces how these processes generated comprehensive criminal sovereignty projects, which then triggered the emergence of armed defense forces in both indigenous and mestizo communities. Recent developments in Michoacán are described in light of anthropological theorizing about the relations between sovereignty, state-making, and (dis)ordering. The analysis elucidates the triangular dynamics of sovereignty-making among organized crime, the state, and armed citizens. Special attention is given to state interventions to dismantle de facto self-defense sovereignities because these have created an unstable and violent situation. It is argued that sovereignty-making is territorial and historical, and that it is embedded in political, economic, and cultural identities.

■ **KEYWORDS:** anthropology, Mexico, organized crime, self-defense forces, sovereignty, state, violence

On 27 December 2013, the Cartel del Golfo, based in the northeastern state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, posted a video on YouTube showing cartel members handing out pizzas and toys to passersby on the streets of Tampico. Images of mounted camels coming from the east slide into an image of two trucks crammed with plastic bags, followed by footage of men handing out gifts. It ends with the message: “Merry Christmas les desea el Cartel de Golfo.” (the Gulf Cartel wishes you Merry Christmas).¹ Flaunting criminal power by filming the action openly and putting it online demonstrates the de facto power of a drug-trafficking organization and its willingness to challenge state authorities and rival criminal groups. Nowadays, after a period of intense violence, Tamaulipas is under *pax mafiosa*—“criminal property,” a region where organized crime has penetrated the political system and media.² Organized crime has branched into human trafficking, extortion of ranchers, and stealing of cattle. Parts of the state have practically been abandoned, and people have been left stranded in fear and silence (Becerra 2014). Faced with organized crime, lawlessness, and weak law enforcement, “people in this area of ranches, cattle, horses and sorghum have become fed up and threaten to form self-defence forces as in Michoacán. Pamphlets have already been distributed ... about the right of citizens to carry guns” (Becerra 2014).

The reference to Michoacán, the central Mexican state on the Pacific coast, is no coincidence. It has witnessed the spectacular emergence of heavily armed self-defense forces that take on



major criminal organizations. Were self-defense forces to be formed in northern Mexico, history would take an interesting turn. Hitherto, Tamaulipas and Michoacán have been connected through the manifold criminal networks and organizations that are largely responsible for violence and insecurity in both states. This article explains the emergence of self-defense forces (*autodefensas*) in Mexico by placing them in a historical and conceptual framework.

Historically, I will examine the emergence of *autodefensas* within the broader evolution of organized crime and its relationships with the state. The history of relationships between the state and drug trafficking falls into three phases. I will study how and why (federal) state-dominated narco-state relations (1945–1985) mutated into a system in which powerful drug-trafficking organizations mounted serious challenges to the state, unleashing unprecedented levels of violence and insecurity (1985–2010). This reconfiguration has since given way to fragmentation and disorder. That breakdown is complicated by the emergence of armed defense forces and paramilitaries in response to enduring insecurity, criminal violence, and the state’s incapacity to protect its citizens. This third phase forms the main part of the article, where I concentrate on recent developments in Michoacán.

Conceptually, I frame my analysis in terms of anthropological debates on the complex relations between sovereignty, state, and (dis)order. Recent theorizing criticizes the notion of sovereignty as an indivisible “ontological ground of power and order, expressed in law or in enduring ideas of legitimate rule” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 297). From a static focus on legal or constitutional sovereignty, attention has shifted toward understanding *de facto* sovereignty as “a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 297). I therefore suggest examining developments surrounding organized crime, collective violence and organized civic responses in Michoacán in the processual terms of sovereignty-making. Furthermore, sovereignty is not deemed to coincide with the state (Latham 2000); the relationships are not singular, unequivocal, and linear but rather plural, ambiguous and contingent. Accordingly, I explore Cribb’s idea of “divided sovereignty” or multiple sovereignties. That stance enables us to view the state as “competing for power and legitimacy with alternative power groupings ... which themselves exhibit some of the same power features as the state” (Cribb 2009: 5). I build my argument on recent anthropological and sociological research and theorizing about competing, contested, and fragmented sovereignties (Buur and Kyed 2006; Davis 2010; Hansen 2006; Sieder 2011).

Claims to sovereignty are based on the ability to enforce punishment and protection through violence. In my approach, sovereignty extends beyond the capacity to kill with impunity (in the strict sense of Agamben [1998]) to encompass localized forms of social sovereignty, drawing attention to “the codes, practices and institutions that structure domains of social existence” (Latham 2000: 7) as well as “the ways of life that exist under conditions of sovereignty” (Humphrey 2007: 420). Although in present-day Mexico, sovereignty-making manifests itself in its rawest form—as decision making on matters of life and death, protection, and vital resource extraction—I will review the main features of a comprehensive criminal sovereignty project in Michoacán that sought to impose a system of rule and order that went beyond the effective control of organized violence. Thereby, I subscribe to van Dun’s (2014) notion of narco-sovereignty, which also goes beyond the use of violence and its economic dimension to incorporate social and political order-making and legitimation. For that purpose I employ the notion of criminal sovereignty. This is a form of authority “which is criminal both in its subversion of the formal political process and in its dependence on illegal trade, but which has important attributes of sovereignty by virtue of veto power [including over life and death, WP] within established polities and its control of territory which is then used for criminal purposes” (Cribb 2009: 8). I

examine how sovereignty and territoriality mutually constitute each other in the drug-trafficking and -producing regions of Michoacán.³

This article contributes to the research field in three ways. First, unlike most studies, it deals not only with the dynamics of statist and criminal sovereignty-making but also with the emergence of an alternative grouping that asserts its own claims, namely, the armed civilians or *autodefensas* that assume state functions. Second, as Wilson has argued, “under the appropriate local conditions” the fragmentation of the nation-state will turn competing substatist entities into the bearers of a “divisible sovereignty” (2009: 29). How, then, should the appropriateness of conditions in Michoacán be assessed? I argue that the sovereignty claims of criminal organizations and *autodefensas* are deeply rooted in specific social and cultural histories of mestizo and indigenous communities and are laid down in social institutions that “effectively structure practices and agency in a given area of social life,” that is, social sovereignty (Latham 2000: 3). Third, in contrast to studies about deeply rooted and stable criminal orders such as those of the Sicilian mafia or the Calabrian *’ndrangeta*, this article examines conditions that appear to enable more short-lived sovereignty (counter-) projects. Contemporary Mexico is characterized by intense, violent, and shifting competition between constantly transforming armed actors in rapidly changing alliances. In some cases, sovereignty lies in the hands of criminal organizations; in others it is unclear who exercises sovereignty in any form.⁴ The introduction of temporality raises interesting questions about the “boundaries” of the concept of sovereignty. Does it suppose a sense of (temporal) stability? Does the absence of stability of sovereignty projects imply disorder?

The Development of Centralized Control

The current Mexican state emerged from the ashes of the revolutionary upheaval at the beginning of the twentieth century. As the federal state gradually centralized political power, economic strength, and coercive force, it gained a modicum of popular legitimacy through a unique form of civilian-led, corporatist and nationalist one-party rule. The overall strategies of the state against alternative sources of social, political, or even armed order and sovereignty, including groups associated with clandestine economic activities, consisted of subordination and incorporation into the ruling party through a combination of co-optation, *desgaste* (wearing down) and violence (Gillingham and Smith 2014; Pansters 2012)

Drug production and trafficking in Mexico goes back to the late nineteenth century. For marijuana, opium, and heroin, activity was concentrated in the mountainous regions of northern Mexico. Cocaine was traded and consumed in limited amounts. By the 1920s the northwestern state of Sinaloa had become a center of opium production (Knight 2012: 119). Whereas production and trafficking was still limited and decentralized in the 1920s and 1930s, the basic patterns of drug trafficking that were to persist in Mexico during most of the twentieth century were already present: the decisive importance of (external) demand, the role of violence, and the “incestuous relationship between criminals and the state apparatus” (Knight 2012: 120). Drug trafficking emerged from below, but in the shadow of the emerging postrevolutionary state. Guns were widely available and readily used to resolve conflicts.

Over time, state elites acquired a mass base through political and corporatist institutions. They also obtained regulatory powers in the areas of land, labor, education, development, and the (illicit) economy. In addition, they could increasingly rely on more competent law enforcement agencies. That was when professional police forces were created and the army’s provincial

autonomy and pistolero violence were curtailed (Gillingham 2012: 110). These processes added up to a trend of political, administrative, and coercive centralization. According to Knight (2012: 125), the state "performed the classic Mafia role of selling protection" as long as drug traffickers abstained from political ambitions and controlled levels of intracriminal violence, thereby creating a sense of order and stability.

The incorporation of drug trafficking into the state started in earnest during the Alemán presidency (1946–1952). That was when antidrug policies were transferred from the Ministry of Health to the Attorney General's Office and the Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS) was established (1947). The latter came to embody the structural connection between the political elite and drug traffickers (Aguayo 2001: 241). The DFS ensured that drug profits were taxed in exchange for protection and guaranteed that violence was kept at socially acceptable levels (Pimentel 2000). The case of Mexico validates the theory of Snyder and Durán Martínez (2009) that "state-sponsored protection rackets" have a pacifying effect on illicit markets. This system generated a modicum of stability under which growers and traffickers in northern Mexico—especially in Sinaloa but also in Chihuahua, Sonora and Durango—became "the professionals of the trade" who passed on know-how to new generations (Astorga 2004: 89); cultivation gradually moved southward towards Nayarit, Jalisco, and Michoacán.

The systemic arrangements between the state and the narcos facilitated the integration and centralization of leadership in the criminal world. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the demand for drugs—mainly marijuana and heroin—rose sharply with the emergence of the U.S. counterculture. Profits increased substantially. Less than a decade later, the popularity of cocaine engendered powerful Colombian drug-trafficking organizations. Through time Mexican criminal organizations came to play a role in smuggling cocaine to the United States (Astorga and Shirk 2010); they grew and consolidated in collusion with the DFS. The organization that benefited most had emerged from the ranks of Sinaloan traffickers and was headed by Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo. Widely known as the Guadalajara Cartel, it brought together traffickers who in the coming decades would dominate the Mexican drug world (e.g., the Arellano Félix family, Rafael Caro Quintero, Ernesto Fonseca, Hector Palma, and Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán). In the first phase, however, Félix Gallardo was able to impose a degree of order upon a coalition that enjoyed protection and impunity, generated huge profits and controlled violent infighting.

Until the early 1980s, state–crime relations featured a "double centralization" of state control mechanisms and coercive institutions, and a "significant degree of hierarchy and cohesion" of criminal organizations (Astorga and Shirk 2010: 16). However, as "the fundamentals of the illicit drug economy mutated, the federal system of control was sent into disarray" (Serrano 2012: 141). The disruption of the "double centralization" gave way to an entirely new constellation of actors and claims of sovereignty, ushering in an escalation of violence.

The Changing Political Economy of Drug Trafficking

Several developments converged in the 1980s, reinforcing each other and eventually transforming state–crime relations. First, U.S. counternarcotic efforts were increasingly effective in closing down the Caribbean routes between Andean countries and the United States. Pacific routes then gained importance, making Mexico a key territory for the trans-shipment of cocaine. The crackdown on Colombian drug organizations opened up opportunities for existing and emerging Mexican criminal organizations, which gradually took over cocaine trafficking to the United States (Serrano 2012: 140).

Second, the new generation of Mexican drug-trafficking organizations gained muscle, thanks in part to the transformation of Mexico's political system, initially manifest at local and regional levels. The pluralization of partisan political power as well as policies of decentralization shifted the balance from federal to subnational levels (Hernández Rodríguez 2008). Under federalism and decentralization, regional economic and political groups as well as drug lords gained greater independence (Piñeyro 2004). Regional elites established networks of complicity with the bosses of illegal economies, appropriating the spoils themselves (Rivelois 2003). In addition, a series of reforms of Mexico's law enforcement system (of the federal Attorney General's Office) weakened the erstwhile centralized command that had allowed effective and durable state-run protection rackets to arise in the first place (Snyder and Durán Martínez 2009: 74–76).

Third, trade liberalization boosted the proliferation and globalization of illicit businesses (Glenny 2008). In Mexico, a neoliberal export-oriented development model was adopted in 1985, opening new channels for trade and multiplying cross-border commercial traffic, especially after the start of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (1994). Trade increased spectacularly along the Mexico–United States border, and so did the capacity of traffickers to camouflage illicit shipments (Finckenauer 2001: 2). Mexican traffickers exploited the decreased effectiveness of border control.⁵ Indeed, neoliberal economic globalization and criminal internationalization make strange bedfellows. As U.S. demand boomed, Mexican traffickers took advantage of their longstanding know-how but also of endemic corruption and impunity. Finally, neoliberal economic reforms indirectly affected the political economy of drug trafficking by eroding opportunities for young Mexicans in rural-producing and urban-trafficking areas.⁶ The narco-economy provides people with economic exit options (Andreas 1998: 160). Altogether, these economic and political reforms constituted a profound reconfiguration (or dismantling) of the Mexican state. An exacerbation of criminal activities, violence, and insecurity in large parts of northern Mexico as well as in Michoacán (see below) can thus only be understood against the background of these larger forces of state and societal transformation (rather than merely as expressions of local governance voids).

Fourth, the above-mentioned systemic effects acquired additional weight when the corrupt relations between drug traffickers and law enforcement agencies led to the dramatic murder of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agent Enrique Camarena and his Mexican pilot Alfredo Zavala in 1985. They were assassinated in Guadalajara, presumably on the orders of Félix Gallardo, Caro Quintero and Fonseca, all linked to the DFS and who were ultimately prosecuted for the killings. Apparently they were assassinated in revenge for the seizure of tons of marijuana owned by Caro Quintero (Flores Pérez 2009) or for a DEA operation that seriously affected criminal financial flows and structures (Esquivel 2014: 54–57). The Camarena affair brought the complicity between drug traffickers and the DFS into the open and led to the dismantling of the latter and the imprisonment of Caro Quintero and others. More important, as Serrano (2012: 140) has emphasized, “Washington's unyielding pressures ... increased the cost of political protection and the exposure and vulnerability of traditional mediating mechanisms.” Unable to obtain reliable state protection, the Félix Gallardo organization started to fracture, resorting more frequently and openly to violence. Unable to maintain a degree of coordination and control, the state's effective coercive and political power weakened. The Camarena affair marked the end of double centralization and coordination. It inaugurated double decentralization and, in time, increased fragmentation (i.e., within the state and the criminal world). The fracturing of state sovereignty found its counterpart in aspiring criminal sovereignties.

Decentralized Disorder, Competing Sovereignties, and Violence

By the mid-1990s, Mexico had become a key region in the international drug economy, which boosted homegrown drug trafficking organizationally, financially, and in coercive capacity. Mexico's centralized institutions and mechanisms of political, social, and criminal control weakened and leaked power to subnational levels, while the United States pressured Mexico to clean up its act. All this was propelled by the whirlwinds of neoliberal reform that deepened the socio-economic vulnerability of many Mexicans. A new generation of drug-trafficking organizations boldly exerted influence in and sometimes domination over local and regional societies. By exercising *de facto* sovereignty, they subverted their erstwhile subordinated position in the narco-state arrangement. Competition and divisions caused a new wave of intracriminal violence.

In 1985, the first fractures appeared in the disciplined and hierarchical model of organized crime in Mexico. With the voluntary defection of Hector Palma from the Guadalajara group in 1988 and the arrest of Félix Gallardo himself in 1989, fierce competition and violence broke out between the trafficking organizations (based in Sinaloa, Tijuana, and Ciudad Juárez) that rose from the ashes of the Guadalajara group.⁷ The situation was complicated by the consolidation of the Gulf organization headed by García Ábrego, who obtained cocaine from the Cali cartel and enjoyed considerable state protection during the Salinas presidency (1988–1994) (Andreas 2000: 64; Rotella 1998: 250–251). After his arrest and extradition in 1996, the new capo, Cárdenas Guillén, bought off an entire elite group of army officers and hired them as enforcers (Los Zetas).⁸ By the end of the 1990s, four major drug-trafficking organizations (and several other intermediate or small ones) fought each other for the control of an increasingly profitable drug trade with high levels and gruesome forms of violence, a trend that would escalate after 2000.

Coordinated protection arrangements between organized crime and the state became ineffective, but the demand for protection increased with new competition and conflicts. At that point, a disorganized market of private (e.g., Los Zetas) or "privatized" public protection emerged, further fracturing the landscape of law enforcement. Rivalry between police forces and federal agencies and their (partial) incorporation into criminal organizations increased throughout the 1990s, bringing confrontations between these organizations and the state out into the open (Andreas 2000: 62–63). Between 1985 (dismantling of the DFS) and 1995, drug trafficking and its relationships to the state profoundly changed.

Criminal Fragmentation and Militarization

Astorga and Shirk (2010) state that the disruptions suffered by Mexican drug-trafficking organizations contributed to a process of fractionalization. This involved the breakup of existing organizations and the emergence of new ones, processes accompanied by a spiral of (extreme) violence. At one moment, the Tijuana and Gulf groups formed a coalition that battled against La Federación of the Sinaloa and Juárez groups, which also included smaller organizations such as the Valencia Cartel in Michoacán. However, a few years later the former Sinaloa and Juárez allies were at each others' throats, the Tijuana group suffered major splits and conflicts, the Beltrán Leyva group separated from the Sinaloa group, and, finally, Los Zetas separated from the Gulf organization. In Michoacán, a new group emerged, La Familia, which then split and gave rise to Los Caballeros Templarios.⁹ The fragmentation of trafficking groups, with their continuously shifting alliances, created a demand for private protection, adding to the multiplicity of armed actors in Mexico.

As the authorities confronted an increasingly complex landscape of criminal organizations, corrupted police forces, a vortex of violence, and U.S. pressures for law enforcement, they gradually moved toward the militarization of antinarcotics policy (Piñeyro 2004: 166). The militarization of public security in Mexico and the struggle against organized crime goes back to the late 1980s (Mazzie 2009; Sierra Guzmán 2003; Zavaleta Betancourt 2006). Yet it was not until late 2006 that President Calderón (2006–2012) put the armed forces entirely in charge.¹⁰ The army put 45,000 men on the street. With the appointment of top military officials to the now extinct Secretaría de Seguridad Pública, the army was also in charge of 38,000 police officers (Carrasco Araizaga 2008). Budgets for the different security agencies increased substantially.¹¹ From 2006 onward, militarization became the key feature of Mexico's security landscape.¹² Militarization evidences a struggle over the bare essentials of sovereign power: control over coercion, violence, and territory. As will become clear, the return to power of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 2012 has not changed this in any meaningful way (Hope 2013). The militarization of public security has great risks. Soon, Human Rights Watch (HRW) concluded that Mexico's militarized security policy did not reduce violence; instead, it increased grave human rights violations and exacerbated lawlessness and fear (HRW 2011: 5). Michoacán would not be the exception.

The politically motivated attack on organized crime "totalized" the drug war and violence. Between 2006 and 2012 more than 60,000 people were killed in drug-related violence and tens of thousands went missing (HRW 2013). In August 2014, the Tijuana-based magazine *Zeta* counted almost 37,000 drug-related killings during the first 20 months of the Peña Nieto government. Notwithstanding government rhetoric, there is no difference in lethal violence between Calderón's last year in office and Peña Nieto's first (*Zeta* 2014). Corruption seems unstoppable. Despite all efforts, police reforms have by and large failed (Sabet 2012). Perhaps most important, the waves of violence and insecurity have profoundly affected the social fabric. The brunt of the suffering has fallen, as always, on the underprivileged, the young and women. The gap between the aggressive rhetoric of the Calderón government and the experience of violence, insecurity, and injustice has grown. It is only through a focus on the lived experiences of people, such as those in Michoacán, that the real drama of the violence unleashed in Mexico can be understood.

Michoacán and "The Tranquillity of Our Communities"

In response to rising levels of insecurity, violence, and ineffective law enforcement, local communities look for their own solutions (Goldstein 2012). In Ciudad Juárez, for example, tens of thousands of people left the embattled and economically troubled city during 2009 and 2010 (Bowden 2010). Elsewhere armed defense forces emerged, especially in regions with strong communitarian institutions. Caught between drug traffickers and corrupt law enforcement, local (indigenous) communities founded "community police forces", especially in drug-producing areas on the southern and central Pacific coast. According to one recent report, they operate in 13 states (Asfura-Heim and Espach 2013). Although defense forces have a long history in Mexico, during the neoliberal era the state of Guerrero has undoubtedly the richest experience in this respect (ICG 2013; Sierra 2013).

This article, however, concerns neighboring Michoacán for several reasons. For a decade, Michoacán has been engulfed by drug-related violence and has recently witnessed a proliferation of armed actors. It was here that Calderón, himself from Michoacán, started his militarization campaign with the Joint Michoacán Operation in December 2006. Although initially successful in terms of arrests and the confiscation of drugs, arms, and communication equipment, the operation also entailed human rights violations and worsening violence and insecurity.

city. It was here that a few months before Calderón assumed the presidency a new organization that called itself La Familia Michoacana burst onto the scene with “a display of raw power that used blood and crowds to stake its claim,” tossing five severed human heads onto a nightclub dance floor in Uruapan (Garland 2005: 817). This act of unprecedented brutality—later mimicked many times—was designed to make the existence of La Familia known. It exemplifies “sovereign power at its purest,” instituting a new order “through its very lack of restraint, instilling fear and fascination” (Hansen 2006: 282). In Michoacán’s capital, Morelia, another game changer occurred in Mexico’s vortex of violence: two fragmentation grenades were thrown into a crowd during Independence celebrations in September 2008, killing eight civilians and injuring hundreds (Maldonado 2013: 61). It was also in Michoacán that in May 2009 federal police and military arrested dozens of local authorities and imprisoned them in Mexico City on suspicion of collaborating with La Familia. This so-called *michoacanazo* seriously undermined the relationships between different levels of government. A year later most officials had been released. By then La Familia was the most powerful criminal organization in the state and was especially active in the southern *tierra caliente*, where it “ran the largest amphetamine factory in the world” (Maldonado 2013: 61). It was here that in March 2011 another group, calling itself Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán, emerged from the ranks of La Familia. The newcomer featured an even more enigmatic regionalist and messianic discourse combined with equally brutal and violent “sovereignty markers”. And finally it was here that in 2010 and 2011 the Purépecha community of Cherán ousted the municipal authorities and established a self-defense force after a conflict with the Templarios about forest exploitation. After federal intervention, the conflict was resolved with the establishment of a new local government based on customary law and a security body of its own (Aragón Andrade 2013).

The privatization of security in the form of communitarian self-defense forces gained momentum and spread, first across the Purépecha highlands. Then, in early 2013, the trend appeared in the rich mestizo but narco-infested *tierra caliente* and *sierras* to the south of Michoacán.¹³ The spectacular emergence of these latter *autodefensas* added a new dimension to an already complex landscape of violent actors. In May 2013, president Peña Nieto acknowledged the de facto absence of (regional) state sovereignty, appointed a military man as public security director in Michoacán and sent in hundreds of troops. More than six and a half years had passed since Calderón’s minister of the interior boasted about “the recovery of public spaces grabbed by organized crime; this recovery will end the impunity of criminals who endanger the well-being of our children and the tranquility of our communities.”¹⁴ Between December 2006 and May 2013, according to official statistics, 4,635 people were killed in Michoacán.¹⁵

History, Geography, and Crime in Southern Michoacán

A more detailed look at the self-defense forces in Michoacán sheds further light on the (local) dynamics of sovereignty-making, contestation, and the dimensions of (criminal) sovereignty projects. I gained insight in these processes from different sources, such as newspaper reports and investigative journalism as well as Web sites of news agencies. I also relied on information provided by José Manuel Mireles, who in February 2013 became a key leader and spokesperson of the *autodefensas*. Mireles has given interesting accounts of the local experiences, objectives, and strategies of the *autodefensas*.¹⁶ What drove a 56-year-old doctor from the town of Tepalcatepec to take up arms and become a prominent *autodefensas* leader? The answer lies in the consolidation of a criminal organization that dominated the regional economy and society in ways that profoundly affected the lives of ordinary people and their communities.

What are the roots and features of that criminal sovereignty project in Michoacán? Due to its geographical isolation and its reputation as a “peripheral, indomitable, indolent place,” southern Michoacán has historically been ruled by mestizo caciques, rancheros, and hacendados (Maldonado 2013: 48). Since the late eighteenth century they had migrated from the central Mexican highlands toward the Pacific coast of Michoacán, thereby “conquering” new territories and pushing out indigenous communities. This process involved “two centuries of history, and three hundred kilometres of distance” and occurred outside the reach of the state (Cochet 1991: 14). The migrants’ livelihoods and security depended entirely on their own efforts. These experiences contributed to a strong sense of practical autonomy and social identity. When the state attempted to intervene, they defended themselves with privatized means of violence, effectively keeping external institutions at bay. Their strong ranchero culture has been characterized as “gritty individualism, opposition to government, valuing the family above society, and an extreme form of popular Catholicism” (Maldonado 2013: 48, 50). These processes laid the foundations for a strong sense of social sovereignty, embodied in localized control over economic resources and the means of violence, and expressed in particular social and cultural institutions.

Historical records show that drug cultivation and trafficking have deep roots in the area. After World War II, southern Michoacán was targeted by state-led developmental projects. Huge investments poured into the area in the form of highways, credit, irrigation, hydroelectricity, and, finally, the seaport and mining-metallurgic complex in Lázaro Cárdenas. All this helped to create a prosperous (mainly) agrarian regional economy, especially in the *tierra caliente* around Apatzingán, where lemons, mangoes, and melons are produced, largely for the U.S. market. The transformation of the regional economy and the emergence of transnational commercial networks also benefited local drug traffickers, especially in the sierras to the south of Apatzingán. Tucked away in this mountainous region are numerous “narcopueblos”, such as Aguillilla, with a long history of drug cultivation on forest lands. Coalcomán and other parts of the southern Sierra Madre saw a spectacular rise in marihuana cultivation during the 1980s. When the army targets marihuana-growing ranchers, the latter respond by reactivating their historical sense of territorial belonging, de facto sovereignty and even antagonism toward the state. In the 1980s, growing marihuana was simply a matter of economics. Cochet (1991: 193) calculated that at the time 50 kilos of labor-extensively produced marihuana generated as much income as 50 calves, one year’s work in the California fields, and as much as spending ten years as an agricultural worker in Mexico! Through time, drug production also moved to the more temperate mountainous zone around Uruapan, the world’s main avocado-producing area. A major study of the history of southern Michoacán has shown how development projects were abandoned in the 1980s and how an illicit drug economy started to fill the void (Maldonado 2010).

Michoacán has been disputed turf for the past 15–20 years. It is an important poppy- and marijuana-producing region, and its geography, with the major port of Lázaro Cárdenas, makes it an attractive reception area for South American cocaine. As an entry point for chemical precursors from China, the port also played a key role in turning the *tierra caliente* into Mexico’s major synthetic drug-producing area. The region’s first homegrown drug-trafficking organization was run by the Valencia brothers. While deeply rooted in local ranchero society, they migrated to the United States, where they formed networks that enabled them to establish their own drug business. With contacts in the drug-producing areas of southern Michoacán and in the United States, they built business relations with Colombian cocaine producers. During the 1990s, when Mexican drug trafficking changed profoundly, the Valencia or Milenio cartel shipped tons of cocaine through Michoacán to the United States. It also got involved in the production of synthetic drugs. At first, the Valencias operated in close cooperation with the Sinaloa organization. By the turn of the century, they had an efficient coercive and extortion network to

protect their interests. However, the success of cocaine trafficking, marihuana and poppy cultivation, and synthetic drug production also made southern Michoacán a much-coveted territory among rivals. The alliance with the Sinaloans not only helped consolidate the Valencia cartel but through it the latter became embroiled in the violent conflicts between the Sinaloa and Gulf organizations. It was in this context that the Gulf cartel sent Los Zetas to Apatzingán. After 2000, confrontations between Los Zetas and the Valencias turned southern Michoacán into a battlefield. The arrival of Los Zetas, perceived as an “external intervention”, meant that brutal violence increased and that local society was increasingly affected by the activities of criminal organizations (México Evalua, 2014: 6–7). It also meant that *ranchero* sovereignty and autonomy came under threat.

Building a Criminal Sovereign Order

As a result of the shifting alliances and ruptures typical of the period of fragmentation, a faction around Carlos Rosales Mendoza, once associated with the Valencias, joined forces with the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas. Rosales, who was detained in 2004, took with him, among others, Jesús “El Chango” Méndez and Nazario “El Chayo” Moreno, and formed La Empresa, which provided security services to the Gulf Cartel. In 2006, under growing tensions with the Gulf/Los Zetas from Tamaulipas about territorial control of Michoacán (especially Lázaro Cárdenas), La Empresa broke away and mutated into La Familia Michoacana (Grayson 2010: 13–17). The latter drove Los Zetas practically out of the state and La Familia became a major criminal organization in Michoacán (Hernández 2013: 8). After the alleged death of its ideological leader “El Chayo” in December 2010, La Familia announced it would disband, only to reappear in March 2011 as Los Caballeros Templarios. Both organizations were modeled upon Los Zetas (which combined drug trafficking with taxing social and economic actors) but introduced new criminal styles and strategies (Valdés Castellanos 2013: 268).

The distinguishing feature of La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios was their aspiration to construct a comprehensive project of rule and sovereignty that went beyond criminal force and violence only, and was also grounded in a history of *ranchero* sovereign order. It was built on three pillars: political influence and protection; an ideological project; and a complex system of illegal activities and resource extraction. Ever since the *michoacanazo* in 2009, the political influence of criminal organizations in Michoacán had been widely acknowledged. In a rare interview, a drug trafficker authorized by the Caballeros Templarios to buy and trade marihuana in the *tierra caliente* spoke of how they work with all political parties, support the campaigns of certain candidates, and hence acquire influence on political appointments and law enforcement but also on government policies and contracts (Padgett and Martinez 2011). Despite much-publicized efforts by the federal government to combat political domination by criminal interests, the situation worsened. In the 2011 elections more than 10 percent of all local candidates for public office withdrew from the race due to pressures from organized crime (Maldonado 2014: 159). What is more, recent publications suggest that the return of the PRI to the government of Michoacán in 2012 (after 10 years) was possible due to “a political electoral strategy and mutual agreements” between the Caballeros Templarios and senior advisers of the later PRI governor Fausto Vallejo.¹⁷ Videos appeared with Vallejo’s son in a meeting with a top leader of Los Caballeros Templarios, which, according to a journalist, bears out the “symbiosis” between the PRI and organized crime in Michoacán (Gil Olmos 2014). Governor Vallejo resigned in June 2014.¹⁸ In sum, political influence has been a crucial building block of criminal sovereignty claims in Michoacán for years.

La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios presented themselves as the legitimate defenders of Michoacán against outside forces, either criminal organizations (Los Zetas) or the federal government (especially the federal police and the army).¹⁹ They developed a regionalist discourse or a “territorial rhetoric” emphasizing their local roots (“hard workers from the *tierra caliente*”) and their willingness to use any means to return order to the state. In November 2006, La Familia announced in two regional newspapers their intent to end kidnapping, extortion, and thievery: “Our only reason is that we love our state and are no longer willing to accept that the dignity of the people is violated” (quoted in Padgett 2013a). The statement also referred to the “oppression” and “humiliation” suffered by Michoacán. Two months earlier La Familia had shown it was serious by beheading six Zetas. The heads were rolled onto a nightclub dance floor accompanied by the message, “La Familia only kills those who deserve to die ... this is divine justice” (Valdés Castellanos 2013: 267). The narco-messages, printed declarations and live radio interviews all point toward a propagandistic capacity aimed at gaining public recognition. An elaborate communication campaign about their political and social projects generated a level of visibility no other criminal organization had ever achieved.

The reference to “divine justice” discloses an additional dimension of the self-ascribed identity of La Familia and Los Templarios. Recently branded as “criminal messianism”, it employs quasi-religious and spiritual symbols and narratives ostensibly designed to give sovereignty-making moral grounds. That framework was pieced together by a charismatic Nazario Moreno, aka “El más loco” (the craziest one), who penned a booklet pompously called “Pensamientos” (Thoughts). It was strongly influenced by the writings of the U.S. sectarian Christian John Eldredge about aggressive masculinity and willpower. Allegedly thousands of copies of *Pensamientos* were printed and distributed among followers and supporters.²⁰ Later, “El más loco” purportedly drafted the code of conduct of the Caballeros Templarios: 53 articles specifying its objectives, moral foundations, and practical rules. The “mission statement” reverberates with localist ideology: “to protect the inhabitants and the sacred territory of the free, sovereign and secular state of Michoacán”; it makes religious claims (“God is the truth ... the Templar must always seek the truth”), moral imperatives (“The Templars ought to love and serve disinterestedly the whole of humanity”), but also codes typical of criminal organizations such as discipline, loyalty, and omertà. The official ideology of the Caballeros Templarios was steeped in images of the medieval Catholic Knights Templar, as was their hierarchy of “apostles” and “preachers” at the top and “celestial warriors” at the bottom (Padgett 2013b).

Although shrines of “San Nazario” have been found, particularly after Nazario Moreno’s alleged death in 2010 (he was in fact killed in combat in March 2014), it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of the ideological bricolage in establishing a system of “legitimate” criminal sovereignty. There can be little doubt, however, that the discourses of regionalism, autonomy, Catholicism, sacrifice, work, and violence resonate among the rancharo communities across southern Michoacán; the identities they express connect to historically rooted and lived practices and values of rancharo sovereignty. Nor can there be much doubt that La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios had some legitimacy, at least in their initial phases. Several accounts have shown that the ideological and quasi-religious project gained content through concrete actions: conflict resolution, the establishment of order, social development, and economic opportunities. Le Cour Grandmison, author of an informative report on Michoacán, argues that the Caballeros Templarios functioned as “a state, a local and regional government, a legislator and efficient organizer of daily life”; that is, they constituted an enlarged form of (criminal) social sovereignty (México Evalúa 2014: 7). According to the Mexican journalist Denise Maerker (2014), La Familia and later the Caballeros were well received by the local population because they were able to impose an order, one that may have been illegal and precarious, but an order neverthe-

less, which the authorities were unable to provide. As late as August 2013, a top leader of Los Caballeros walked openly on the central plaza of Tumbiscatío in the presence of sympathizers and clients. According to a German researcher who had penetrated “territorio templario”, in certain parts of the state the Templarios enjoyed social protection, since they were able to institutionalize a functioning “alternative governance” system (Ernst 2013). Even so, the criminal system of La Familia and then of Los Caballeros Templarios was fraught with contradictions, internal divisions, excesses of violence, and the escalating dynamics of the criminal activities themselves. Unsurprisingly, such disarray limits the capacity for durable and stabilizing criminal sovereignty-making.

Both La Familia and Los Templarios imposed a form of criminal sovereignty that touched every domain of social life. Apart from their grip on local drug production and smuggling networks, they also tapped into the legal economy on the basis of their control over territory and the means of violence. Though claiming to protect and defend the people of Michoacán, both groups started to prey on the local population and economy. When the Templarios started to take control of the *tierra caliente* in 2010 and 2011, they arranged community assemblies and told inhabitants they would limit themselves to drug trafficking and not get involved directly with the population. That proposition was acceptable to most inhabitants, who had long lived alongside drug producers and traffickers (Cano 2010). However, the Templarios eventually engaged in kidnapping, extortion, and racketeering. By imposing “cuotas” on businesses—a type of property tax—the criminals tapped into the legal economy. Cattle ranchers were forced to pay 1,000 pesos (approximately US\$80) for each cow sold, whereas butchers paid 15 pesos for each kilo of meat, and tortilla makers 4 pesos for every kilo of tortillas. Nonpayment would elicit violence; a wealthy family of cheese makers from Tepalcatepec was executed after refusing to pay a monthly tax of 50,000 pesos (Maerker 2014). Farmers who produce avocados, lemons, or mangoes were charged when they transported their products to markets or agribusinesses. Moreover, packaging companies were either controlled or owned by Los Templarios.²¹ The fight about controlling lemon production and distribution in the western part of the *tierra caliente*, one of the most fertile and productive regions of the entire country, would play a key role in the emergence of the self-defense forces in nonindigenous communities. While the extortion of legal businesses generated millions, local enforcers of the Templarios also preyed directly on families. People had to pay for every meter their property measured along the road, 500 pesos for every car they owned, and 20 pesos weekly for every child in school: “O sea, ya tuvimos que pagar por poder vivir!” (In other words, we had to pay to live!).²² The depth of this system of extortion fueled feelings of anger and frustration and clashed with a historical sense of economic and social sovereignty.²³

In addition, the Templarios expanded into the export of iron ore. Michoacán produces the bulk of Mexico’s iron ore, most of which is exported to China. At the beginning of 2014, it was reported that the Templarios had quickly moved into the business. They contributed to a substantial increase in exports through a system that rested on three pillars: control of the transportation lines from the mines to the port; the acquisition or taxation of mining grounds; and finally paying off the port authorities so that the iron ore could leave Mexico unhindered. It was estimated that in 2013 half of the mining business in the area operated without proper documentation and authorization. In April 2013, an employee of the metallurgic giant ArcelorMittal who had complained about illegal mining was assassinated (*La Jornada* 2014a). Recognition of the huge amount of money diverted from mineral exploitation, transportation, and export, especially around the port of Lázaro Cárdenas, compelled the federal government to take over the city militarily in November 2013. A few months later, the government seized more than 100,000 tons of iron ore as well as heavy machinery in Lázaro Cárdenas, allegedly controlled

by the Templarios, with an estimated value of US\$15 million. A federal government envoy to Michoacán referred to undisclosed reports that extortion alone generated an astonishing weekly income of between US\$800,000 and US\$1.4 million for the Templarios (Animal Político 2014).

***Autodefensas* as Social Contestation (and the State Strikes Back)**

The oppressive and violent system of economic control, the dendritic networks of extortion, an elaborate intelligence system, as well as the idiosyncratic political-cultural practices of the Caballeros Templarios, in combination with political and administrative influence and hence ineffective and corrupted state institutions—together these form the basis for a comprehensive criminal sovereign order. Ernst (2013) speaks of a “paralegal system” whereas Padgett and Martínez (2011) and Maldonado (2014) prefer to call it “parallel government”. Similarly, an unpublished intelligence report concluded that by the time La Familia gave way to the Caballeros Templarios, the former had “converted into a delinquent structure that acts like a *parallel state* involved in extortion, attacks on police corporations, control of smaller criminal groups, and community projects” (Hernández 2013; emphasis added).

Despite the breadth and depth of criminal sovereignty, José Manuel Mireles, the *autodefensa* leader from Tepalcatepec, has argued that what detonated the formation of armed self-defense forces was that the Templarios “started to mess [*meterse*] with the family.” When local Templarios started to rape young girls and demanded the daughters and wives of rancheros for sexual abuse, when they threatened the moral and sexual basis of these ranchero communities, the latter decided to start a “levantamiento” (an uprising). For many years, the rancheros had lived with members of La Familia and Los Caballeros Templarios, and before that with other traffickers (“like it or not, we still had to live together with them”). But it was when organized crime penetrated the family that they got organized and took up arms.²⁴ This clearly reverberates with nineteenth-century ranchero practices and values of “defensa del hogar” (protection of the home).²⁵

On 24 February 2013, inspired by the Purépecha communities and building on historical ranchero autonomy and sovereignty, cattle ranchers, farmers, and professionals from Tepalcatepec, La Ruana, and Coalcomán launched the first *autodefensas*. Their move marked the beginning of a process aimed at taking essential decision-making powers concerning morality, sexuality, gender, life and death, and work and income away from the Templarios and returning them to the ranchero families. José Manuel Mireles became a key spokesman of the self-defense forces in Tepalcatepec; other visible regional leaders were Estanislao Beltrán and Hipólito Mora. Despite community support and legitimacy, setting up armed self-defense forces complicated the (in)security landscape in Michoacán, and in Mexico at large. It triangulated sovereignty claims between organized crime, the state, and armed citizens, and it deepened the competition over the means of violence and coercion. The Templarios perceived this initiative as an attack on their interests, so they fought back. In April, dozens were killed in shoot-outs between *sicarios* and members of self-defense forces (Martínez Elorriaga 2013a). The new geometry of violence urged the federal authorities to launch a new security strategy in May 2013. It involved appointing a general as secretary of security in Michoacán and sending more soldiers and federal police to the region to stop the killings, kidnappings, and roadblocks.

The *autodefensas* welcomed the armed forces and federal police. The leader of the *autodefensas* of La Ruana (in Buenavista Tomatlán), Hipólito Mora, stated that his men would “lower their guns” because the federal government promised to combat organized crime head-on. However, president Peña Nieto’s first military operation also made clear that the state viewed

the de facto sovereignty claim to the means of violence by the self-defense forces with measured suspicion. As General Cienfuegos, who was in charge of the operation, stated from the outset: “We will not allow that people remain armed, even though we know that it is a complex situation, because there are authentic [self-defense—WP] groups ... but also people financed [by criminal interests—WP]” (Martínez Elorriaga 2013b). After all, there were already rumors that self-defense forces were operating as proxies for criminal enemies of the Templarios (Asfura-Heim and Espach 2013: 144, 148; Gil Olmos 2013). In other words, competition over sovereignty manifested itself not only between the rancharo communities and organized crime but also between the former and the state.

Although the situation calmed down temporarily, tensions between the state and the *autodefensas* increased and soon caused a new wave of violence. Mireles and others noted that the military patrolled the area but did not really go after the Templarios.²⁶ Distrust was growing. A bloody incident took place on 22 July 2013 in the town of Los Reyes. Templarios assassinated 5 people, among them 3 members of communitarian defense forces from surrounding indigenous villages. Elsewhere in the state, a shoot-out between self-defense forces and alleged criminals left 1 dead (Martínez Elorriaga 2013c; *Reforma* 2013). In the southern Sierra Madre region around Arteaga, a stronghold of the Templarios, hit men attacked federal police convoys in 6 coordinated incidents, leading to 22 fatalities, most of them Templarios (Martínez Elorriaga 2013d). The federal government intervened, yet again, but this time with a plan to send an additional 2,500 soldiers and federal police to the most violent parts of Michoacán. Interestingly, they were now authorized to cooperate with the self-defense forces, and shortly afterward the minister of the interior called for dialogue (Méndez and Pérez Silva 2014).

The *autodefensas* were therefore in a position to extend their influence throughout the *tierra caliente* and into the mountains. At the end of October 2013, Mireles boasted that in Tepalcatepec alone he could raise 3,000 armed men in 24 hours, whereas Coalcomán leaders claimed they could raise 5,000. As their territorial influence increased, the *autodefensas* negotiated with the army that they would march unarmed into the region’s main city of Apatzingán, a power base of Los Templarios. What was meant to be a show of force and support for the population of Apatzingán nearly turned into a bloodbath when snipers fired shots. The incident put relations between the *autodefensas* and the military under further pressure.²⁷ In late 2013 and early 2014, the former were on the offensive. Shortly before Christmas they were successful in La Huacana, to the east of Apatzingán, declaring it the thirtieth municipality liberated from organized crime. Of course, territorial control by the *autodefensas* was mostly limited to the head towns, leaving many surrounding villages and hamlets beyond their control. On 4 January 2014, Parácuaro rose up in arms with the support of *autodefensas* of neighboring villages. Their influence slowly moved toward Apatzingán, with roadblocks, intended takeovers by new self-defense groups, shoot-outs, and fires. The *autodefensas* were becoming ever more self-confident. At the entrance of Buena Vista Tomatlán, a warning sign showing 3 coffins read “Territory Free of Templarios” (Rodríguez García 2013). With more than 100 pickup trucks, and in the presence of the army, self-defense forces took over the town of Nueva Italia (30,000 inhabitants), disarmed the local police and called upon the population to drive out organized crime. With the Templarios’ stronghold of Apatzingán practically surrounded, Hipólito Mora boldly announced that self-defense forces would take the city within days (Méndez and Pérez Silva 2014).

In response to the territorial expansion of the *autodefensas* and their success in fracturing the criminal sovereign order of Los Templarios, and most likely to avoid a violent confrontation in Apatzingán, the federal government attempted to regain the initiative. In mid-January 2014, federal officials signed a security agreement with the government of Michoacán and asked the *autodefensas* to disarm and return to their villages. The federal government also appointed a

fully mandated special envoy, Alfredo Castillo. This was a key moment in what I have called the triangulation of sovereignty claims between organized crime, self-defense forces, and the state. What followed can best be understood as a struggle among aspiring sovereigns to redefine their relative strength. The federal government sent additional troops. At the end of January 2014, an agreement was brokered with the *autodefensas* about the terms of the latter's disarmament. From then on, relations between the federal envoy and the *autodefensas* steadily worsened. The government pushed to retake control of the areas "cleaned up" by the *autodefensas*, but the latter refused to lay down their weapons as they revamped nineteenth-century sentiments of local sovereignty. For several months to come, the major source of tensions shifted from conflict between *ranchero* communities and their self-defense forces and organized crime toward conflict between the communities and the state.

The arrival of presidential envoy Castillo—along with huge (in)formal decision-making powers, financial resources, and an impressive team of policymakers and technocrats—practically subordinated the state government to the federal executive. Although federal intervention was welcomed, Castillo was also perceived in Michoacán as a "colonial viceroy" (Hernández 2014). But it was a game changer not only in redefining the political context but also in terms of the dispute about sovereignty and control over the means of violence. In the midst of increasing tensions between the federal state and the *autodefensas*, and among different *autodefensas* themselves—Hipólito Mora was charged with murder by rivals and arrested in March 2014—a second agreement was pushed through in mid-April by Castillo. He described the key aim as "the complete demobilization of the *autodefensas*" by 10 May 2014 (*La Jornada* 2014b). This would involve the registration of *autodefensa* members and weapons (and the turning over of heavy arms to the army). The agreement also involved "legalizing" the *autodefensas* through their reconstitution as rural defense forces controlled by the Ministry of National Defense. After tacitly supporting the *autodefensas* in hunting down the Templarios, the government now wanted to "transfer" their de facto sovereignty into the official law enforcement structure. Individual *autodefensa* members had to request their entry into new state-controlled law enforcement agencies and submit to screening procedures. In exchange, the government would provide "certainty", which meant guaranteeing security and taking over the effective prosecution of criminals.

It was here where disagreements and eventually conflicts were bound to arise. Who would establish if and when security and protection had returned to the state? What would that mean for the *autodefensas* in the process of being dismantled? Could they reconsider their position if dissatisfied with how the federal authorities managed the security situation? There was also the gray area of the right to possess and/or carry arms. For Castillo and the federal executive, however, there was no doubt. They wanted the job done, and quickly: by 10 May the *autodefensas* in 27 municipalities would no longer exist as such. After that Castillo would form a new police force that would be called "Fuerza Rural" and substitute the municipal police. Some groups within the *autodefensas* movement, such as that of Beltrán, immediately signed up and participated in the registration and demobilization process. Another group, that of Hipólito Mora from La Ruana, also agreed after the latter was suddenly released from prison. Mireles, however, who had acquired a substantial following and political capital in Michoacán but also enjoyed a national presence, had ever stronger reservations and voiced criticism. His main point was that the federal authorities were ineffective in restoring security, so his armed followers were unwilling to demobilize. The standoff deepened tensions with former allies of Mireles in the *tierra caliente*, while his following increased in the coastal mountain region.²⁸

During May and June 2014, the conflict over the coercive capacity of the *autodefensas* controlled by Mireles escalated. Just as happened to Hipólito Mora, it was rumored that Mireles

would be charged with murder. As Mireles’s critique of the government radicalized, he concentrated his followers in the conflictive coastal region and moved toward the port of Lázaro Cárdenas. A few days after a major political crisis, in which governor Vallejo of Michoacán was forced to resign (although his real power base had already been dismantled by the presidential envoy), Mireles was charged with murder and possession of drugs and sent to a maximum security prison in the north of the country. His arrest provoked protests across Mexico. Meanwhile, in Michoacán, presidential envoy Castillo continued with the formation of state-sanctioned contingents of Fuerza Rural. Moreover, in mid-August he launched Fuerza Ciudadana (citizen force), yet another new law enforcement body that would replace the state’s preventative police.²⁹ The reestablishment of firm state authority “grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy” (Hansen and Stepputat 2006: 297) appears far from over.

In July 2014, in an open letter from his prison cell, Mireles launched a desperate attack against Castillo, who “tramples our sovereignty, humiliates Congress, and despises the michoacanos.” In more general terms, but drawing on the formal language of the (postrevolutionary) state, he added, “Mexico is a Republic with a Constitution that has lost its authority due to the rebellion of organized crime and the corrupt government that supports it.” (*La Jornada* 2014c). Toward the end of the year deadly violence broke out between rival factions within the Fuerza Rural of La Ruana, leaving 11 casualties (Martínez Elorriaga 2014b). Meanwhile, coastal communities started to rearm because of persistent insecurity and the alleged failure of integrating former *autodefensas* into the Fuerza Rural. Despite Castillo’s declarations to the contrary—as well as the arrest of the leader of Los Templarios, Fernando “La Tuta” Gómez, in March 2015—many argue that his mission has failed and that he simulates security. A leader from Ostula stated that the government wants to finish the *autodefensas* one way or the other but added, ominously, “They will not succeed” (Martínez 2014).

Concluding Observations

In this article I have demonstrated how processes of decentralizing disorder and violence play out locally in continuously changing circumstances and form the basis for competing sovereignty claims between organized crime, organized and armed citizens, and the state. Triangular sovereignty-making in southern Michoacán is conditioned by broad political-economic transformations of state and society. But it is also deeply territorial and historical, and embedded in political, economic, and cultural processes and identities. The conceptual framework of (enlarged) sovereignty-making allows me to complement other approaches that explain the dynamics of state–crime relations and violence primarily “from above” in terms of the workings of illicit markets and state-sponsored protection rackets (cf. Snyder and Durán Martínez 2009).

I have stressed my intention to frame sovereignty-making as a comprehensive project, involving moral and (de facto) legal authority and legitimacy, in contemporary Michoacán and Mexico at large. Ultimately, however, it is about violence, protection, and life and death. For ordinary people these are not (only) abstract categories. In December 2014, after Don Amador’s brother was killed, his nephew kidnapped, his properties confiscated, and his cattle stolen, the 60-year-old single father decided he had had enough, got himself an AR-15 rifle and joined the *autodefensas* because “the life of our families is at stake” (Martínez 2014).

Don Amador’s reading of the situation raises another point. My analysis of complex and competing sovereignty projects in contemporary Mexico is not only about the pluralization of potential (state and nonstate) sovereigns, nor only about the relative importance of violence or noncoercive systems of authority. It is also about temporalities. An effective sovereignty proj-

ect presupposes a degree of stability or durability; it involves building and maintaining legitimate authority and order. Whether the sovereign is criminal or not seems less relevant; after all, the difference is often indistinguishable. Concerted law enforcement interventions can also destabilize a relatively nonviolent and durable system of narco-sovereignty, triggering a cycle of lethal violence and disorder (van Dun 2014). Here, I have shown how, over time, the mounting internal contradictions of the criminal sovereignty project of Los Templarios triggered a cycle of violence and insecurity, provoking the emergence of heavily armed *autodefensas* as well as the massive intervention of federal law enforcement agencies, thereby deepening violence and disorder. Intense competition between state agents, armed citizens, and criminal organizations (as well as among the latter) and, perhaps most important, their continuously shifting relations, make it hard to build a durable sovereign order at all. This is precisely what has been at stake in Michoacán in recent years. Refining an anthropologically informed understanding of sovereignty requires further research on its temporal dimension.

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■ NOTES

1. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LJiLTJ0jKI>. See also an article in *El País*, “Los reyes narcos,” 2 January 2014, <http://elpais.com>.
2. The article contains the message that for safety reasons the names of the reporter(s) have been omitted. “Tamualipas, propiedad criminal,” in *Proceso*, no. 1943 (26 January 2014): 16–19.
3. See Wilson (2009: 43) for a more general conceptualization of sovereignty and territorial control as constitutive of the Westphalian state system.
4. Van Dun (2014) examines how an illegal sovereign order in Peru subverted by state-sponsored forced eradication operations lead to an increase in violence.
5. The U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (2001: 71) notes that customs officials expedited their searches and interrogations.
6. Most accounts of socioeconomic developments in northern border cities point to the ravages of maquiladora-capitalism and the dead-end employment structure for young males. See, for example, the particularly unforgiving interpretation of Charles Bowden (2010). For rural Mexico, see, for example, the excellent analysis of Salvador Maldonado (2013).
7. The remaining part of this section owes much to Astorga and Shirk 2010.
8. The Grupos Aeromóviles de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFES) were trained by the U.S. army in the 1990s. For an analysis of the history of Mexican special forces and their close relationship to the U.S. army, see Sierra Guzmán (2003: 251–275).
9. Mexico’s attorney general’s office recently counted 9 drug-trafficking organizations, which control more than 40 gangs (see Ramírez 2014).

10. During the Fox presidency (2000–2006) overtures in this direction had already been made. For reports about the militarization of the U.S.–Mexican border in early 2008, see *Proceso*, no. 1639 (30 March 2008): 6–20.
11. The budget of the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública increased from almost 20 billion pesos in 2008 to 33 billion pesos in 2009; see Carrasco Araizaga (2009: 10).
12. For an early analysis of this tendency see Doyle (1993). Artz (2007) investigated the militarization of the attorney general’s offices. See also Sierra Guzmán (2003) and Zavaleta Betancourt (2006).
13. For an interesting account of the *autodefensas* in the Purépecha highlands, see José Gil Olmos (2012).
14. Press conference of Francisco Ramírez Acuña in Mexico City, <http://calderon.presidencia.gob.mx/2006/12/anuncio-sobre-la-operacion-conjunta-michoacan/>.
15. Between 2001 and 2004, the average number of homicides in Michoacán was 435; during 2005 and 2006 the average rose to 594, and between 2007 and 2012 it was 706. See Aristegui Noticias, <http://aristeguinoticias.com/2911/mexico/epn-un-ano-despues-17-mil-asesinatos/>.
16. A particularly important source of information is a long interview with Mireles that took place in the midst of a series of violent events, on 26 July 2013.
17. A confidential security report leaked to the press in 2014 speaks of secret meetings in 2011. See <http://aristeguinoticias.com/0704/mexico/jesus-reyna-se-reunio-con-templarios-documento-de-ssp-michoacan>.
18. Although suffering from serious health problems, Vallejo’s resignation cannot be seen as disconnected from the rumors about his links to organized crime.
19. Van Dun (2014: 409) found something similar in the Peruvian Upper Huallaga.
20. Journalist Humbert Padgett (2013a) has examined this text in detail. The booklet can be consulted at <http://www.sinembargo.mx/10-03-2014/927030>.
21. Interview with José Manuel Mireles Valverde, leader of Consejo Ciudadano de Autodefensas de Tepalcatepec, Michoacán, 26 July 2013. The video of the Consejo Ciudadano de Autodefensas is called “El pueblo que venció al crimen organizado”; <http://aristeguinoticias.com/2607/multimedia/video-el-pueblo-que-vencio-al-crimen-organizado-en-michoacan/>.
22. *Idem*, Interview with Mireles, video, <http://aristeguinoticias.com/2607/multimedia/video-el-pueblo-que-vencio-al-crimen-organizado-en-michoacan/>.
23. Maerker (2014) suggested that organized criminal organizations started to prey on the local population perhaps as a consequence of a sustained government campaign against them.
24. Interview with Mireles, 26 July 2013.
25. I owe this insight to historian Raymond Buve, personal communication, 12 December 2014.
26. Interview with Mireles, 26 July 2013.
27. The *autodefensas* claim that the army had guaranteed their safety. Aristegui Noticias, 28 October 2013; <http://aristeguinoticias.com/2810/mexico/ejercito-nos-pidio-ir-desarmados-a-apatzingan-pe-ro-nos-dispararon-desde-catedral/>.
28. Based on official statistics, journalist Anabél Hernández (2014) indeed demonstrated that between January and June 2014 several indicators of violence and crime (including homicide and extortion) were higher than in Michoacán’s most violent year hitherto (2011).
29. CNN México, “Fuerza Ciudadana inicia operaciones como nueva policía en Michoacán”; <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2014/08/18/fuerza-ciudadana-inicia-operaciones-como-nueva-policia-de-michoacan> (accessed 12 December 2014). See also Martínez Elorriaga (2014a).

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