# DRUGS, VIOLENCE, AND LIFE IN MEXICO

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**El narco: La guerra fallida.** By Rubén Aguilar V. and Jorge G. Castañeda. Mexico City: Punto de Lectura, 2009. Pp. 143. MXN$105.00 paper. ISBN: 9786071103154.

**The Last Narco: Inside the Hunt for El Chapo, the World's Most Wanted Drug Lord.** By Malcolm Beith. New York: Grove Press, 2010. Pp. xxiv + 261. $24.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780802119520.

**Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields.** By Charles Bowden. Photographs by Julián Cardona. New York: Nation Books, 2010. Pp. xiv + 320. $27.50 cloth. ISBN: 9781568584492.

**Narcos over the Border: Gangs, Cartels, and Mercenaries.** Edited by Robert J. Bunker. New York: Routledge, 2010. Pp. 238. $125.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780415560726.

**Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez.** By Howard Campbell. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. Pp. vi + 310. $24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780292721791.

**Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?** By George W. Grayson. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010. Pp. xiv + 339. $34.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781412811514.

**Impunidad: La quiebra de la ley.** By Julio Scherer Ibarra. Mexico City: Grijalbo Mondadori, 2009. Pp. 136. MXN$159.00 paper. ISBN: 9786074296600.

Although a steady stream of drugs has flowed northward into the United States for many decades, recent drug-related violence in Mexico has unleashed a flood of studies on trafficking, organized crime, and the Mexican government's war to stop them. The sample of works under review here represents a cross section of this literature. It includes analyses by journalists, political scientists, security analysts, and anthropologists about the border region of Ciudad Juárez, the intricate inner workings of drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs), the traits of key cartel leaders, and national trends and policies. Collectively, the books profile the nature of the drug trade in Mexico, the horrors of the drug wars, and their impact on people's lives, thus raising questions about failed policies and failed states.

## A PORTRAIT OF LIFE AND DEATH IN MEXICO IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Most of the studies under review brilliantly describe—often in graphic and depressing detail—life and death in Mexico in the twenty-first century. They depict how the illicit trade in drugs, corruption, impunity, and violence have become

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deeply ingrained in everyday life, creating what Howard Campbell refers to as a "complex blend of order and chaos, structure and antistructure" (17).

The linkages attending drug trafficking are many; their impacts hauntingly far reaching. The illicit trade in drugs has become an integral part of Mexico's economy. Operating through vast networks of street and prison gangs, police, customs officials, front companies, banks, and many others, Mexican cartels employ an estimated 450,000 people; have operations throughout the United States and in parts of Central and South America, as well as Europe; and take in between $25 billion and $30 billion a year. Robert J. Bunker and John P. Sullivan estimate that the livelihood of some 3.2 million people in Mexico depends on the illicit trade in narcotics, a figure that does not include the thousands of people and billions of dollars involved in combating it (Bunker, 41). Indeed, DTOs provide financial opportunities where few others exist and pump needed funds into local economies. Drug traffickers pay for "schools and hospitals, pour[ing] money into churches and homes" (Beith, 87). They provide "gifts to children, assist victims of natural disasters, [and] generate employment in poor areas" (Grayson, 122). Overall, Charles Bowden estimates that between 30 percent and 60 percent of the Juárez economy runs on laundered drug money (45).

The contrasting forces of corruption and coercion in turn link the drug trade to the state. Considered the sine qua non of the drug trade, corruption is a major focus of all the works under review. They all address how governors, mayors, high-ranking officials in federal law enforcement, and military officers provide DTOs with access to the transportation routes needed to move their merchandise; how cartels buy the loyalty and protection of district commanders of the federal police and military; how police at all levels of government affiliated with drug cartels intimidate, kidnap, and murder their opponents, provide inside information to cartel leaders, and warn them via *pitazos* (tips) of antidrug operations; how seized drugs often seem to disappear; how bribes to customs officials at airports facilitate the transportation of merchandise; and how bribes to prison officials allow capos either to continue to run their operations from behind bars or to escape, as in the case of "El Chapo" Guzmán.

The degree of integration of drug traffickers and state officials is extensive institutionally and geographically, as well as long-standing. Bowden notes: "In over a half century of fighting drugs, Mexico has never created a police unit that did not join the traffickers. Or die" (109). Bunker and Sullivan estimate that 1,500 cities have been infiltrated by cartels (Bunker, 41). Malcolm Beith summarizes the situation quite simply: "Anyone could be bought" (68). Some see infiltration to extend beyond merely buying protection to actually challenging the state itself. According to the municipal president of Durango, from the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), as summarized by George W. Grayson, DTOs have begun to erect a "parallel state" and to carry out "traditional government functions such as collecting taxes (in the form of extortion) and providing security (in return for payments)" (124). This political danger is perhaps the major concern behind the collection of essays edited by Bunker.

Efforts to confront and defeat drug trafficking and organized crime in Mexico are severely handicapped not only by corruption but also by the state's inability

to enforce the rule of law, by society's lack of trust in government and the law itself, and by the fear spread by high-profile violence and insecurity. Nevertheless, the state has unleashed a massive crackdown marked by the militarization of vast portions of the country, daily raids, and a record number of arrests. This campaign has resulted in more than forty-five thousand violent deaths since 2006: police and military officers have killed those engaged in criminal activities; criminals (including corrupt police and military officers, and civilians disguised as them) have killed government officials and criminal rivals; and state officials and criminals alike have threatened, terrorized, and killed journalists, political activists, and citizens. Contesting the government's claim that drug cartels are simply fighting and killing one another, Bowden contends that the "only certain thing is that various groups—gangs, the army, the city police, the state police, the federal police—are killing people in Juárez as a part of a war for drug profits" (23). Indeed, it is whispered in the city that the army is doing the killing (114). This view is partially reinforced by reports by human rights organizations and citizen complaints.

Going beyond often dry and abstract academic analysis, some of the works under review seek to evoke what it is like to live (and die) in such horrid conditions, particularly in the border region or, as Campbell labels it, the "Drug War Zone." At its core, this environment is fueled by deep-seated poverty and neglect, widespread lawlessness, impunity, and a lack of state authority. Where abstract laws are viewed as minor obstacles, and in practical terms no one is in charge, it seems, as Beith notes, that "[d]rugs are the only way to get ahead" (87). In a generalized consumerist culture that glorifies material success, the illegal drug trade is a "caricatured celebration of consumerism and wealth" (Campbell, 9). Citizens "treat minor cross-border smuggling of food, clothing, medicine, and other items as a regular part of life rather than a moral crime" (Campbell, 31), and a "culture of illegality . . . seems to have won out over any other options" (Beith, 88). So, beyond a potential parallel state run by DTOs, Bunker sees a challenge to traditional values, an antivalue system. Similarly, Campbell notes the emergence of a powerful and complex social identity, replete with *narcomansiones, narcoarte, narcointeligencia, narcoabogados,* and *narcocorridos,* and involving cultlike religions and blood and ritual sacrifice.

Impunity reigns as a key element of this cultural mix. In *Impunidad,* Julio Scherer Ibarra, founder of the newsweekly *Proceso,* defines impunity as a circumstance in which the law does not apply to the powerful but only to the weak. Citing its exploitation by both the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and PAN to conserve power, Scherer briefly lays out the political justification for impunity in Mexico, describes its legal and cultural dimensions, and examines four recent and prominent examples in detail: Arturo Montiel, the uninvestigated and unprosecuted former governor of the state of Mexico (1999–2005), whose wealth reportedly climbed from 2 million to 111 million pesos while in office; Juan Camilo Mouriño, the former *secretario de gobernación* (government minister) under Felipe Calderón, who served as president of the energy committee in the Chamber of Deputies, and later in the Department of Energy, while also acting as legal representative of private companies holding contracts with Pemex, the state-

owned petroleum company; Zheli Ye Gon, a businessman convicted and jailed for drug trafficking, whose links to customs and other government officials have gone uninvestigated; and César Nava Vázquez, former legal director of Pemex, accused of conflicts of interest.

But despite Scherer's characterization, impunity is arguably more than a strategy to protect the powerful. It also involves a state unable to provide security, or to apprehend and prosecute violators, because of its own incompetence and institutional weakness. Perhaps the two sorts or levels of impunity are related. Consistent with Scherer's hypothesis, Mexican prisons are full of mainly poor prisoners; yet, paradoxically, an exceedingly large number of crimes go unreported because of a lack of trust in the authorities, and fewer than 3 percent of reported crimes ever result in successful prosecution. Such impunity has a tremendous impact on society and culture. Bowden bluntly asks: "Imagine living in a place where you can kill anyone you wish and nothing happens except that they fall dead" (xiii).

Bowden presents a highly readable, haunting, and depressing look at the nature of life and death in Ciudad Juárez and the toll that often gruesome killings and quotidian threats have on citizens sense of themselves and others.[1] Weaving together descriptions of the operations of DTOs and law enforcement agencies with recurring segments about the psychological aftereffects of the gang rape of a Sinaloan beauty queen and the pursuit and killing of a journalist, *Murder City* strives to depict what it is like to live in an area where no one is in charge and where lawlessness and violence reign. The answer, according to Bowden, is that people become desensitized to murder and come to see forgetfulness as the only way to stay safe and sane. Reports of "death houses" disappear after a day or so and, in the words of one of Bowden's informants, people "learn to pretend that what is happening is not really happening. Or we learn to pretend that what is happening is merely some kind of high range of normal experience" (193). Another informant states: "Some blame the violence on the war between cartels, some blame poverty, some blame the army, some blame the army's fighting the cartels, some blame local street gangs, some blame drugs, some blame slave wages, some blame corrupt government. But regardless of the blame, no one can figure out who controls the violence, and no one can imagine how the violence will be stopped. But everyone grows numb. Murders slip off the front page and become part of the ordinary noise of life" (234).

Though employing a different style and approach, Campbell uses a similar lens to understand the nature of border culture. In a nicely crafted theoretical section, he begins by defining the "Drug War Zone" as a symbolic, transnational, and fluid cultural domain where contending forces battle over the meaning, value, and control of drugs (7). The rest of the book is composed of the oral histories of drug traffickers, antidrug officials, and others affected by the drug trade. This ethnographic study grapples with the complex reasons for which some people become users of drugs and others traffickers or law enforcement officers; it explores

1. Bowden is also the author of *Down by the River: Drugs, Money, Murder, and Family* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002) and coeditor, with Molly Molloy, of *El Sicario: The Autobiography of a Mexican Assassin* (New York: Nation Books, 2011).

the themes of uncertainty, anxiety, fear, and treachery; and it brilliantly captures the tension among antidrug work, corruption, and individual lives. In contrast to Bowden, Campbell gives historical and theoretical depth to the complex situation on the border.

## HOW MEXICO ARRIVED AT THIS STATE OF AFFAIRS AND HOW IT MIGHT EXIT IT

Virtually all the authors under review go to great lengths to remind us that in certain ways the situation in Mexico today is not new. Mexico sports a long history of contraband trade and smuggling, drug trafficking, crime and banditry, and corruption and impunity. Luz E. Nagle, for instance, calls corruption "a time-honored method by which successive groups of political and business elites amass influence and vast wealth on their rise to becoming Mexico's power brokers" (Bunker, 96). Campbell similarly profiles the lives and legends of Mexican smugglers from times past. Indeed, the stream of drugs crossing the U.S. border has remained steady over the years—even amid the crackdown and violence of recent days—as have the corruption that facilitates it and the culture that in some ways celebrates it. So how does the current situation differ? What ushered in a seemingly dramatic turn for the worse, particularly in the amount of violence? And, more important, perhaps, where can Mexico go from here?

All the works provide important insights into these questions. Three key changes frame the current era. The first centers on Mexico's political transformation, or, in a phrase, the PRI's loss of power in the 1990s and 2000s. According to some observers, such as Bowden, after the elections in 2000, "the drug industry ceased to be controlled by the central government, many independents entered the business, domestic drug use skyrocketed, and federal control of the nation grew ever more feeble" (25). Campbell makes a similar point: "During the PRI's seventy-one-year reign, Mexico suffered from endemic corruption and drug trafficking flourished, but at least there was a type of stability, since a small group of powerful traffickers and PRI government officials maintained relatively predictable relationships. The democratization of Mexico, coupled with the decentralization and expansion of drug cartels, has produced a more fluid and more volatile sociopolitical environment" (271).

Grayson, a longtime Mexicanist, focuses in particular on the evolution and operation of drug cartels, the upsurge in violence, corruption, and the ebb and flow of public policy as power shifted from PRI to PAN. Special attention is paid to President Calderón's approach to fighting cartels and the prospect that ongoing judicial reforms might turn the tide. In a perhaps more nuanced way, Grayson holds that, whereas PRI maintained order and stability before the 1980s, opportunities for vast fortunes grew in the 1980s and 1990s because of changing drug routes and the reorganization of law enforcement agencies by PAN governors and mayors. This gave local police and corrupt officials greater independence from the federal judiciary, thus increasing the prospect of violence (30).

A second development alluded to by Grayson regards changes within DTOs and the level of inter- and intracartel violence. Although DTOs once enjoyed a degree of stability, peacefully dividing up drug routes or *plazas,* and even abid-

ing by an unwritten code on the use of violence, the situation changed in the 1990s. Battles for plazas erupted, and cross-DTO violence exploded. By the 2000s, greater government pressure and the arrest and killing of drug traffickers created a vacuum that in turn brought disputes over territory, thus fostering a far more violent and brutal breed of criminal organization. Established cartels splintered or evolved in the face of new groups such as Los Zetas and La Familia Michoacana. This tendency to greater violence was unintentionally fed by the creation of new military units such as the Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales, which supplied the Zetas, and by the dismissal of thousands of police at all levels over the past fifteen years. Characterized as third-generation organizations by Bunker and Sullivan, these new DTOs strain the capacity of the nation-state, challenge its legitimacy through corruption, and eventually act as a surrogate or alternative to elected governments. As a "de facto criminal insurgency" (Bunker, 43), the cartels have made killing and torture a part of their business model, a shift from gangsterism by narco hit men to paramilitary terrorism with guerrilla tactics, as Graham H. Turbiville Jr. notes (Bunker, 124).

Bunker's *Narcos over the Border* offers a hard-hitting analysis of DTOs from the perspectives of law enforcement and national security. The essays in this collection are grouped into three sections: the organization of gangs and cartels and their use of technologies, including the Internet; the corruptive and coercive methods cartels employ, including violence and even decapitations; and strategies to halt the flow of narcotics into the United States, including an interesting comparison of Mexico and Colombia. Asserting that Mexico is on the verge of becoming "the antithesis of the modern nation-state" (9), with values at odds with those of traditional society, Bunker highlights the threat to Mexico and the United States.

From a totally different angle, Beith's *The Last Narco* also provides deep insight into the rise and operation of Mexican DTOs, with a specific focus on perhaps the most famous trafficker of all, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán Loera. Beith courageously and honestly pursues El Chapo's story from the inside, tracing his rise from poverty in Sinaloa to his controversial appearance on the *Forbes* list of the world's richest people. He compares the operations of the various cartels, identifies their distinctive strategies and styles, and describes in detail their impact on corruption and the state.

The third key development affecting the illegal trade in drugs today relates to the policies of President Calderón. Although previous administrations attacked drug trafficking, none did so to the same extent. In *El narco: La guerra fallida,* Rubén Aguilar V. and Jorge G. Castañeda set out to explain the dramatic shift in policy but summarily reject the reasons given by Calderón himself: (1) that the consumption of drugs had become a major threat to the nation by the time he took office in December 2006; (2) that cartel violence and the infiltration of state and local governments by DTOs had skyrocketed, thus threatening the state and raising the possibility of its failure; and (3) that the demand for drugs and arms trafficking from the United States had both increased. Even if the absolute level of violence has not changed since 2000—in fact, the number of homicides was less in 2007 than in prior years—Aguilar and Castañeda argue that the increase in drug-

related violence is more a consequence of Calderón's crackdown than a reason for policy change. They similarly point out that the influence of drug traffickers via corruption has been a mainstay of Mexican history, and there have always been "vacíos de control territorial en México" (54), as shown by the administration of Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988). They even cite reports made by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in the 1980s that sound as though they were written yesterday. In the end, Aguilar and Castañeda attribute the recent crackdown on drug trafficking to Calderón's overriding need to establish legitimacy following the election debacle of 2006.

More critical perhaps than the causes of Calderón's policies are their consequences, a matter about which all of the works under review have something to say. Most agree that, rather than curtailing violence, the war on drug traffickers has increased it and at best has had a negligible effect on the drug trade. Grayson notes that "the capture of some cartel leaders was tantamount to kicking around hornets' nests without having the means to spray the rattled insects" (51). In addition to the violence of turf battles, there has been violence directed at the state. "In effect," as Paul Rexton Kan and Phil Williams note in a dissenting view in Bunker's collection, "violence is the cost the administrations of Fox and Calderón have had to pay for defecting from the tacit acquiescence which characterized the successive PRI governments" (224). Sullivan similarly highlights how countersupply strategies have historically led to "frustration, political and policy stalemates, and growing violence and instability," eroding political stability, enhancing state fragility, and producing a "policy conundrum" (Bunker, 179).

Most of the authors under review agree that current policies are not working, yet they differ as to the alternatives. Beith notes that some experts suggest a return to the old circumstance in which "the government effectively turned a blind eye towards certain major drug trafficking operations." He hypothesizes that this might be facilitated by the PRI's resumption of power (203). The latter is certainly possible (and may be a reality by the time this review appears in print), but a return to the status quo ante may not be. Although turning a blind eye may be troubling, most analysts propose at least retraining the eye. Based in part on the example of Colombia's President Álvaro Uribe—who did not eliminate guerrillas, organized crime, or drugs, but instead dealt with their collateral damage, thus decreasing the number of bombings and murder—Aguilar and Castañeda suggest that Mexico focus on the effects of drugs on the individual and society. Their approach encompasses pacts among DTOs, decriminalizing drugs in concert with the United States, reconstructing public agencies, including the national police, and sealing the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to make trafficking through Mexico more difficult. They contend that this approach is consistent with U.S. domestic policy, which has basically rejected punitive measures. Kan and Williams make similar comparisons to Colombia and Russia, emphasizing the need to view drug violence as an issue of law and order, not one of counterinsurgency or counterterrorism (Bunker, 218–231). Bunker and Matt Begert, in turn, suggest a three-pronged, differentiated approach: to treat drug use as a health issue, providing counseling and assistance to hard-core users; to soften federal narcotics policy in regard to marijuana use; and to strengthen the state to enhance its legitimacy (Bunker, 196–

217). Playing somewhat on the latter theme, Scherer suggests that Mexico needs a war on impunity, rather than a war on drugs, a war that requires the mobilization of society. Campbell similarly recognizes that the battle is not against DTOs per se, but rather against the underlying conditions of poverty and joblessness that sustain them.

It remains unclear how Mexico will overcome this trying period, yet it seems certain both that Calderón will not budge on his policies, despite growing social opposition, and that the next administration will explore a different approach. Indeed, the likelihood that DTOs and the flow of drugs can be stopped militarily is arguably less today than in 2006, when Calderón began his crackdown. Bowden sadly suggests that the current reality may be the country's future (117–118), yet Mexico also has a long history of weathering difficult storms. To tackle its problems, there must be a deeper understanding of the drug trade and its complex linkages to the state, the economy, society, and culture, as well as more imaginative policies. This is a task to which the seven books reviewed here contribute as part of a much larger body of literature on the topic.