Grua O'Connell Research Award Application

Location: Zacatecas, Mexico
Title: Testimonies and Journalism, a Reconstruction of Zacatecas's Historical Consciousness and Collective Memory Mid a War Against Narcotics.
By Edwin Sanchez Huizar
Faculty Sponsor: Professor Nadía Celis and Germán Cárdenas Alaminos

I was born on a small ranch in the municipality of Fresnillo, Zacatecas, Mexico. At the age of seven in 2008, my world changed radically, when I returned from school and saw my parents packing our belongings in the kitchen of the house. I didn't know where we were going or why, but I decided not to ask and jumped in the car. Eleven years later, I entered college with the same questions in mind: What happened to us? and Why did we never talk about it as family?

In December of 2021, I spent 4 weeks in Zacatecas collecting oral histories among my family and friends and observing the social dynamics around the presence of drug trafficking in my hometown. That following semester, in an Independent Study, I with Professor Germán Cárdenas Alaminos to interpret that material to understand how drug trafficking has come to transform the production, identification, and reproduction of culture and identity in rural Mexico. In December of 2022, the Grua O'Connell Award allowed me to return to Zacatecas to consult photographic and press archives to ground my familial and communal experience in the context of society-wide trends that local newspapers have documented. In Mexico, newspapers, photographs, and local journalism serve as critical agents of public memory and the broader societal needs for shared identity. In the case of Zacatecas, local newspapers create a social understanding of history that is communicated among Zacatecanos, who are not only united by identity and place, but also by a collective lived experience. Through this grant, I began to reflect on my own life and found the pieces that would lead me to investigate the war on drugs, how it

came to Mexico, and understand the relationship between my experience as an immigrant and the social problems that expelled me from my country.

In the early 20th century, Americans were the world's largest consumers and promoters of coca grass and cocaine, widely used in various products, including medicines, beverages, and even candy (Gootenberg 2008). However, in 1910, American policies began to shift toward prohibition due to concerns about harmful and addictive effects, and its use became associated with various social problems such as crime and violence. After World War II, the United States emerged as a global superpower and American hegemony created a consensus against hallucinogens, particularly coca, which restricted the commercial prospects of the coca and cocaine industry (Gootenberg 2008). United Nations drug agencies, inspired by the United States, further reinforced this trend. Consequently, the mercantile chain that had existed for almost a century before, came to an end in 1950. Despite this, however, Andean cocaine continued to thrive, escaping state regulation and creating its own niches and clandestine chains, involving series of criminalized actors.

Once cocaine became illegal, illicit cocaine production circuits returned to their original geographic spaces, to be distributed in long ties in the United States. Colombia, with its experienced entrepreneurs and weak state, became the best-placed intermediary in this trade, refining and passing Peruvian and Bolivian products to the U.S. market (Gootenberg 2008). Thus, an illicit cocaine market emerged between 1950 and 1970 in the United States. Consequently, in 1971, Richard Nixon declared a "war on drugs" in response to growing public concern about drug addiction, overdose deaths, and the perceived negative effects of drug use on society.

In an attempt to root out the problem, the United States took a tougher stance against Colombian cartels during the 90s and early 2000s under Plan Colombia. This included efforts to disrupt drug production and trafficking, as well as the modernization of Colombia's armed and police forces. However, following the collapse of major Colombian organizations that previously dominated the cocaine trade in the Western Hemisphere, traffickers turned to Mexicans to transport their product to the United States (Rojas-Sotelo 2014). Mexican criminal groups had been the Colombians' junior partners, but the geo-economic realignment of illicit drug flows altered this balance of power. Consequently, Mexican traffickers expanded exponentially, filling the void left by the dismantled Colombian cartels. As a result, South American criminal groups now operate as suppliers to dominant Mexican cartels. As the drug business flourished in Mexico, billions of dollars of cocaine poured into the country, making the drug trade more visible in Mexico and leading to violent conflicts between the groups and the government (Duncan 2014). Seeing increased violence between drug trafficking organizations in Mexico in December 2006, incoming President Felipe Calderón launched an aggressive military campaign to combat organized crime and drug trafficking. However, this "war" challenged organized crime on its own turf and led to even greater levels of violence. In particular, this "war" disrupted public order and exposed corruption in government, justice institutions, the police, and the military, with widespread gravity and impact. Both war and organized crime have become everyday topics of conversation and study, present in newspapers, academic publications and cultural products such as literature, cinema, music, telenovelas, blogs, online videos, performances and popular art in Mexico.

Among everything I found in my research of the drug war, it struck me that the total number of homicides in Mexico increased by 90% over a three-year period, from 10,452 in 2006

to 27,213 in 2009 (Basu and Pearlman 2015). This had a significant impact on my understanding that my family had been affected by a broader and more complex process that unfolded throughout Mexico beginning in 2006, due to the war on drugs. According to an investigation by the newspaper La Jornada, published on February 18, 2018, at least 20 of the 58 municipalities of Zacatecas are being depopulated and another 20 have not experienced population growth since 2000, according to official figures from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) (La Jornada 2018). According to official INEGI figures – the 2000 Population Census and the 2015 Population Count – those municipalities of Zacatecas have lost inhabitants instead of seeing their population grow. They are localities where historically the phenomenon of emigration already occurred decades ago, due to underdevelopment, lack of jobs and their precarious rural economies. Over the past ten years, the migration of people from remote rural areas to major urban centers, such as Guadalupe, Fresnillo and Zacatecas, has accelerated due to violence and insecurity. In some communities, this migration could already be considered a forced displacement of people due to the presence and operation of criminal organizations in many demarcations. The most marginalized areas are those located in the mountainous areas of Valparaíso, Monte Escobedo, Jiménez del Teúl and Sombrerete, or in dispersed and isolated localities, without access to cellular telephony or internet, as occurs in a vast region of the northern municipalities of Fresnillo, Villa de Cos, Mazapil, Melchor Ocampo, Nieves, El Salvador, Sain Alto, or to the south, in Pinos, Villa García, Villa Hidalgo, Loreto, Ojocaliente and Luis Moya (Valadez Rodríguez 2012).

Experts from the Autonomous University of Zacatecas and officials from the entity's Secretariat for Migrants have warned that the problem of violence and insecurity in the municipalities of Zacatecas is much more worrisome because there is no government program to

eliminate, contain, or address this situation. According to the most recent count of INEGI for the entity, Zacatecas has a population of 1 million 579 thousand 209 inhabitants. However, the population should approach 4 and a half million inhabitants if it had had the same economic and industrial development as the states that surround it, such as Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí, Coahuila, Durango, Jalisco and Aguascalientes (Valadez Rodríguez 2012). Although Zacatecas is the eighth largest state in Mexico in terms of land area, Zacatecas has registered the highest percentage of emigrant population to the United States since 2010, at 4.8 percent, compared to the national average of 1.6 percent. The official figures of the INEGI, of the Population Census of the year 2000, compared to the figures of the Population Count of 2015, confirm the negative rate of growth in many localities over three decades, and despite the general birth rate of the country (Valadez Rodríguez 2012).

Even municipalities promoted since 2001 by the Ministry of Tourism at the federal level as "Magical Towns", with the aim of disseminating historical, architectural and cultural attributes, are losing population due to violence and insecurity in the region. In particular, two of these municipalities, Nochistlán and Teúl de González Ortega, which are promoted for tourism, have experienced a decrease in their population in the last 15 years, according to INEGI data. Likewise, while the average population growth in these towns should have been 21 percent, these municipalities did not grow at all, except for Guadalupe, a city near the capital of Zacatecas that has experienced rapid growth due to its proximity to several municipal and state corporations. However, even in Guadalupe, cases of violence, such as violent homicides, kidnappings, and extortion, are frequent (Valadez Rodríguez 2012).

Thus, many inhabitants of these entities respond ironically to the name of the town because, due to the high rates of violence and insecurity, people are "magically disappearing".

According to the Political Constitution of the State of Zacatecas, which is also recognized as a World Heritage Site by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, to be recognized as a municipality, it must have a minimum population of 15 thousand inhabitants in its territory and 10 thousand in its municipal seat, But 33 of the 58 municipalities do not comply with this provision and are still recognized as municipalities by the state. In fact, in 26 of the 58 municipalities, the municipal preventive police is virtually non-existent due to its small size, according to a report by the Zacatecas State Human Rights Commission in 2018 (Valadez Rodríguez 2012).

According to the National Registry of Missing Persons, as of February 24, 2023, there were 3407 missing and unlocated persons in Zacatecas, plus 1855 people who had been reported missing and were subsequently located (Lomnitz 2021). However, it is impossible to estimate the actual number of disappearances in the state due to underreporting. According to social anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz, a member of El Colegio Nacional, the disappearance of people increased after the departure of the Zetas who had previously controlled all Zacatecan territory, and why my family fled the country. The takeover of Zacatecas began with direct attacks on the government and the murder of six federal police officers and a municipal official in Jerez in December 2007, and a year later, the assault on the Cieneguillas Social Rehabilitation Center to free 53 imprisoned Zetas members. During these early years, disappearances began to become increasingly frequent, with eight disappearances reported in 2007 and 31 in 2008 (Lomnitz 2021).

Initially, the Zetas were a military group with no drug trafficking networks of their own, but they were strengthened with the capture of José Alfredo Cárdenas from the Gulf Cartel in 1999 and the weakening of the same cartel. Likewise, in attempting to wrest control of Nuevo

Laredo from the Sinaloa Cartel, a war between the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel led the Zetas to develop a military strategy that had not been seen before in the history of Mexican drug trafficking. The Zetas took advantage of fractures between rival organizations to gain ground.[1] Crucially, the weakening of the Sinaloa Cartel, due to the fracturing of Chapo and the Beltran Leyva, gave the Zetas the opportunity to expand into Pacific ports. And so, Zacatecas became crucial for the Zetas because it allowed them to control alternative routes to the northern border and also separated them from the Sinaloa Cartel and its main allies, the Familia Michoacana in the south and the Gulf Cartel in the northeast. Since then, Zacatecas has become attractive to organized crime because it is key to controlling strategic highways and regulating the transfer of drugs from other regions (Lomnitz, Claudio).

The war on drugs launched by former Mexican President Felipe Calderón in 2006 had a profound and lasting impact throughout the country, and Zacatecas was no exception. In its attempt to combat the drug cartels, the Mexican government stepped up its efforts, but the results were disastrous. As violence and insecurity increased in the region, the economy and local communities were hit the hardest. Today, drug cartels are battling for control of drug trafficking routes that cross Zacatecas into the United States, which has turned the region into a battleground where rival groups pit each other against government forces in an attempt to maintain or take control. The result is a picture not only of my life, and that of my extended family, who still lives

[1] Although the Zetas were members of a recognized transnational criminal syndicate, their specialty was not drug trafficking, but organized violence, engaging in lucrative illicit activities such as fuel theft, extortion, human trafficking, piracy, arms trafficking, and kidnapping.

Unlike other organized crime groups in Mexico, the Zetas were less interested in winning the support of local populations. Instead, they have been linked to several massacres, such as the arson attack on a casino in Monterrey in 2011 that left 53 dead, and the torture and mass execution of 193 migrants traveling by bus through northern Mexico in the same year. The Zetas are known for killing those who can't pay extortion fees or who refuse to work for them, often targeting migrants. More aggressive than other groups, the Zetas maintained control of territory by publicly displaying mutilated bodies publicly and on social media to intimidate Mexican security forces, the local population, and rival organizations (Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2022).

on that ranch, but of a country where failure and negligence in the drug war have allowed organized crime to acquire economic, political, and cultural power.