Extreme Violence and Terrorism in Mexico:

A Dialogue between Howard Campbell and Tobin Hansen

Editor’s note: This dialogue between anthropologists Howard Campbell, author of “Drug War Zone Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez” and Tobin Hansen explores the relationship between violence, politics, and terrorism in Mexico’s narco-conflict. The dialogue (in form of an interview) took place 11 August 2012 in El Paso, Texas. It addresses the question: Is narco-violence terrorism? [JPS/El Centro]

Tobin Hansen: Violence related to drug trafficking in Mexico began to spike in the mid-2000s, so why start researching the violence vis-à-vis terrorism now?

Howard Campbell: I started working on the issue of narco-terrorism two years ago when the violence began to spike in Ciudad Juárez. It became very outrageous, it was a daily occurrence and it began to be a real threat to civil society and the good life in Mexico, not just in Juárez but all over the country. I think it’s a subject that deserves much more attention. There has been a reluctance to use the term terrorism when describing Mexican drug violence because of a fear of the implication of the word: that terrorist groups work against the United States, that they’re Islamic, or in the case of Mexico it would be activity that hasn’t been seen since perhaps the 1960s. But I think we need to discuss whether the violence in Mexico has reached the level where we can use a very loaded term like “terrorism” just because the number of deaths related to this drug-related violence from 2006 to 2012 alone is maybe between 60,000 and 100,000.

The number of victims is very large, but also the form in which some people are killed is extraordinarily dramatic, public, and macabre. So we need to understand why this is happening in Mexico now and how it can be stopped. Inevitably then we have to use language like “terrorism” because it is so extreme, it’s such a public spectacle, but I think it’s important to use this language with a great deal of caution because of the political implications. We don’t want the United States to use this as an excuse to intervene in Mexico or to tighten the screws even more on Mexico politically. We don’t want to use the word “terrorism” to encourage the more reactionary factions within Mexican politics, but we want to use this language in order to understand how Mexican civil society and the political system have broken down to such a degree that you have this dramatic and broad-ranging violence carried out on a regular basis with impunity.

TH: I’ll ask you for more specifics on the violence in a minute. But first, looking at what the literature of terrorism has discussed historically, to what extent does the current violence in Mexico fit the literature?

HC: The literature on terrorism is vast. The phenomenon of terrorism, as defined by western intellectuals and politicians and so on, goes back at least 100 years in the western world, and it has generated a vast
amount of academic literature and public policy, etc. The discussion in the United States is of course a result of 9/11. We need to understand what’s going on in Mexico in terms of trends that can be seen in other societies, such as in the United States, in Europe, in the Middle East, and to develop a sociological and anthropological explanation of why this extreme and public violence is occurring and why the Mexican government seems unable to stop it.

**TH:** What conclusions have you been able to draw regarding this violence? To what ends do the traffickers perform the violence? To what extent do they achieve their objectives?

**HC:** What I’ve tried to do in recent research is understand Mexican drug-related violence as not just a criminal matter but to understand it as a political phenomenon. In that sense, my work, and my work with you on these topics is perhaps a novel contribution to the study of drug trafficking in Mexico. I think there’s been a tendency to view drug related violence as strictly about control of markets, to make money through selling marihuana, cocaine, heroin and so on. People want to attribute it to out-of-control criminal groups or rare, depraved individuals. But there’s been a reluctance to discuss it as a political phenomenon for the reasons I mentioned, people don’t want to face up to how much the Mexican political system has decayed, people don’t want to address the extent to which politicians or elements of the Mexican government have been corrupted, coopted, or controlled by criminal groups. So I think it’s important to try this form of analysis that looks at violence as quasi-political or just political behavior.

In my opinion, and yours I know from discussions we’ve had, it’s about power, domination, control of regions, business, and the hearts and minds of people. In that sense it’s akin to what happens in official wars or what are called small wars or insurgencies. I personally believe the Zetas aren’t looking to control the Mexican State, but they are seeking to control large chunks of Mexican territory and territory in Central America and drug corridors in the United States. I don’t see why we can’t call this political because it involves the control of huge regions, of entire states, big cities. So I say let’s switch the focus from just the criminal side of drug trafficking and look at its consequences in the real world, including control of huge portions of Mexican territory, which has been admitted by the Mexican government, and has influenced gubernatorial elections and even perhaps presidential elections and entire towns from top to bottom. That’s politics. Whatever else that is, it’s also politics. So let’s understand the drug related violence as a political struggle involving the use of war tactics and techniques, propaganda, all the tools used historically by insurgent groups throughout the world, particularly cyber technologies, computers, and advanced weapons technologies and communication systems. So our argument is that Mexican drug related violence can be understood both as terrorism and as a political phenomenon, but these issues need to be dealt with extremely carefully and delicately.

**TH:** You mention tactics and techniques generally. What could you say specifically about the methods that cartels employ?

**HC:** There’s a lot of people that get killed in drug related incidents in Mexico in an isolated way, their bodies are dumped in the desert and nobody ever hears about them. Many people die, shot to the head, and that barely makes it into the newspaper. But when you talk about massacres involving more than 100 people or bodies that are carved up, disfigured, people tortured and it’s filmed and put on Youtube meant for public display, that is in fact a war-like tactic and a tactic of terror because it’s designed to terrorize enemies of a drug cartel, be they members of another cartel or enemies that are members of police or military forces. It’s also designed to terrorize members of the civilian population because they allow these drug cartels, as they are called, to control a region. That’s clearly a tactic of warfare that involves terrorism and propaganda. If these people were calling for a succession or the independence of Chihuahua or Tamaulipas or wherever, we would right away understand them to be terrorists or insurgents. But because their initial impetus was to make money and they don’t make openly partisan statements there has
been this tendency to not see them as political groups. They’ve posted thousands of messages on banners, on signs, on the internet, making statements that have para-political content. So to answer your question, I would say yes, the techniques of drug trafficking groups are mainstream tactics used by armies as well as insurgent groups throughout the world, so we need to understand the dimensions of drug trafficking groups. They’re not only about money, even though that’s their primary purpose. They’re also about creating a state within a state, or a regional or territorial empire and that to me is an insurgency, and the tactics involve terrorism and propaganda.

**TH:** You’ve talked about the taking of control by these groups and the decay of the Mexican political system. To what extent is Mexico a failed state today?

**HC:** I think it’s a misnomer to say that Mexico is a failed state. It does have functioning institutions, elections—that may be disputed—although there are means for political opponents to make claims against the government, a free press, although journalists are murdered by drug cartel members. There are institutions that function quite well in various parts of the country, such as for example branches of the federal bureaucracy in Mexico City; the census bureau; health departments at federal, state, and local levels. They have their flaws and their problems, but these are functioning institutions of modern states that you’d find in any country in the world that has attained a certain level of development. As an economy, Mexico has a huge GDP and is one of the top 20 biggest economies in the world. With a population of more than 110 million people, it’s a very modern state at many levels. Nonetheless, in certain parts of the economy or the political system, that one could call either backward or ultra-modern, cartels have decided to form their own society within a society and not obey the rules of the national state or regional or local authorities. They have become the authorities. That’s why I say the situation should be judged as a political phenomenon. So the failed state notion is easy to shoot down and even the American government doesn’t view Mexico as a failed state and most serious analysts don’t either but I think parts of the countryside are failed states with a small “s.” Tamaulipas surely and various other states are not controlled by the federal government in Mexico City, they’re controlled by drug cartels, especially in the Zetas dominated areas and areas controlled by the Sinaloa cartel.

**TH:** In light of the situation that you’re describing, as we look forward what are the policy options that we should explore both in Mexico and the United States?

**HC:** I think smart, informed, caring people in the United States who know something about Mexican history would realize that the United States needs to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. We have no business meddling in Mexican internal affairs. We are a big cause of the drug trafficking problem given our consumption and that we allow guns to be sold and spread so easily into Mexico. So the first thing is that we need to put our own house in order regarding consumption and sales of weaponry. Secondly, we need to support elements of the Mexican government that are working to create a less violent society and develop a society governed by the rule of law. Historically, the United States has backed groups in Mexico that support large American business interests, and the political and economic interests of the United States. Ultimately, the United States is more concerned about the security of Americans and the strength of the U.S. economy and they don’t worry a whole lot about the majority of Mexican people who are poor and victims of this kind of violence. However, if things get worse in Mexico it will start to affect the United States’ interests a lot.

So on humanitarian grounds the United States should play a more progressive role in Mexico. That would include to a large extent the United States backing off and allowing Mexicans to decide how they should run their own country. Also, we should use our power in ways that support the most progressive political and economic leaders in Mexico—something we have not done. I don’t expect a radical change in U.S. policy vis-à-vis Mexico, but I would hate to see a swing even farther to the right and a channeling of U.S.
hardware, manpower, and intelligence services and the like that we’ve used in Afghanistan and Iraq in
Mexico to “help” fight drug cartels in Mexico, as those wars wind down. The results would be disastrous
for the United States. They would create a quagmire that would be comparable to Iraq or Afghanistan.

The PRI historically was the architect of drug trafficking in Mexico through their corrupt patronage. The
United States needs to look at the history of Mexico and realize that the PRI in effect developed the
system that allowed drug cartels to prosper. Now that drug cartels are out of control, what is the PRI going
to do to put cartels back in the box, or at least to reduce the harm that they’ve done? The United States can
play a powerful role in pushing president elect Peña Nieto towards the least violent of the various options
on the table. What are those options? Well, one is to only fight drug trafficking to the extent that it’s a
violent activity, but to tolerate a certain amount of drug dealing and drug consumption as long as it
doesn’t entail violence. That’s a policy endorsed by presidents of Brazil and Guatemala for example, and
by leading Latin American intellectuals, and American intellectuals as well. We could also deal with the
fact that the Mexican political system is one that involves a lot of back room negotiating with groups that
are beyond the pale, such as drug traffickers and cartel leaders. That happens and will continue to happen,
perhaps even more so. If it leads to less violence in Mexico, we should accept that as the way things go.
That’s probably a good thing compared to the current situation of rampant violence and constant conflicts
between cartels and government forces. There needs to be a smart policy vis-à-vis drug cartels, not a
reactive policy like that of Calderón that created a quagmire that by almost anyone’s definition in Mexico
and the United States has been a failure. Clearly, there needs to be a shift in the course of how this is
handled. There needs to be an understanding of the damage done by narco-terrorism and the ways in
which these drug cartels have become political. That can help us craft smarter policies.

TH: Could you describe the various projects you’ve developed recently?

HC: You and I have a current project concerned with narco-violence in Mexico and whether that narco-
violence should be classified as terrorism. We’ve also completed an innovative research paper titled
“Getting out of the Game: Desistance from Drug Trafficking” that will be published in the *International
Journal for Drug Policy*. It’s about the challenges people face in drug cartels or drug dealing gangs in
Mexico or the United States and particularly on the U.S.-Mexico border. You have all these people
involved in this and some want to leave. They’re tired of trafficking, they’re tired of the dangers it
involves, tired of being around drugs and violence. It’s not as easy as it may seem. You can’t quit the way
you quit a job at K-Mart or Walmart. Often drug traffickers carry a lot of cultural baggage with them,
which causes it to be very difficult for them to quit the drug trafficking game. Their identity is wrapped up
in that of being a drug trafficker because their friends, family, neighborhoods, social acquaintances, etc.
are often caught up in trafficking networks, or see the person as a drug trafficker even if they’ve quit
trafficking. So much of their sense of who they were as young men—although women are involved as
well and face similar challenges, most of our informants were men—was as being studs, powerful, having
money, being the generators of things. This was something they could only do through drug trafficking
because most of these people were from poor neighborhoods in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico or El Paso, Texas.
So there are all these obstacles to getting out of the game.

We interviewed thirty people that did successfully get out of the drug trafficking game. I think our article
in many ways is optimistic. It shows ways in which people, despite all these structural obstacles, i.e.
personal, familial, societal, economic obstacles, left the game, although most of them had a sort of
hangover effect in which they still felt that part of their sense of who they were was tied up in drug
trafficking. Even though they had quit drug trafficking, people see them as drug traffickers still, and many
of them yearn to be back in the business. I think this is an important article because this hasn’t been
studied much before, but more importantly it shows that there is some light at the end of the tunnel. Under
the right circumstances, people will quit drug trafficking and all the troubles that it causes, in terms of health problems, criminal and legal problems, and violence. This maybe is a fresh way of looking at drug violence in Mexico. By understanding the lives of these drug traffickers we can propose policies other than just locking them up and throwing away the key, but by socially persuading people to get out of trafficking and live productive, non-criminal lives. We feel this is an important contribution to drug literature, both in terms of drug trafficking and also in terms of drug consumption because many of our informants were also drug users. It’s important to not get into a nihilist, negative state of mind when it comes to the situation of violence and drug trafficking in Mexico. Mexico for large periods of its history has been a society of peaceful, law-abiding people in which you had a normal life and not one in which bombs were blowing up in public plazas and dozens of bodies were found with their heads chopped off. So if we can develop policies that encourage people to leave drug trafficking, it seems to us a very useful contribution to public policy.

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About the Authors

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Howard Campbell is a professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). He is the author or editor of six academic volumes including a 2009 book from University of Texas Press called “*Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juárez*.” Additionally, he is the author of a bilingual children’s book titled “*A Dog Named Pavlov/Un Perro Llamado Pavlov*.” Dr. Campbell received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1990. He is a specialist in Latin American Studies with a primary focus on Mexico.
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Tobin Hansen earned his Master's degree in Spanish and Latin American Studies at Oregon State University. He worked as an adjunct instructor of Spanish at Corban University; for an international consultancy in Guadalajara, Jalisco; and is currently an instructor in the School of Language, Culture, and Society at Oregon State University. His research interests include drug trafficking, crime, “languages in contact,” Mexico and Latin America, and Latinos in the U.S.


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