



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

## Criminal Insurgency: Narcocultura, Social Banditry, and Information Operations

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*Drug cartels and gangs are challenging state authority in Mexico and Central America. This power-counterpower struggle erodes state legitimacy and solvency and confers both economic and political power on the cartels and gangs. As part of this contest, the criminal enterprises seek to remove themselves from state control and act in the manner of "primitive rebels" to sustain a struggle that is essentially a "criminal insurgency." As part of this contest, the cartels provide utilitarian social goods, form narratives of power and rebellion and act as "post-modern social bandits" to gain support and legitimacy within their own organizations and the geographic areas they control. Their message is delivered through the use of instrumental and symbolic violence and information operations (including influencing the press, forging a social narrative--narcocultura--where the gangsters are seen as powerful challengers to the corrupt state).*

*Narcocorridos (folk songs), narcomantas (banners), narcobloqueos (blockades), narcomensajes (messages in many forms including "corpse-messages"), and alternative systems of veneration (narco-saints including Jesus Malverde and Santa Muerte) are used to craft these narratives of (counter) power. This essay will examine these dynamics as they are currently unfolding in Latin America and place them in theoretical perspective.*

Narco-conflict is an enduring feature of community life in Mexico and Central America (indeed throughout large segments of Latin America). In Mexico about 99,667 persons have been killed in the struggle for control within the 'drug war zone.'<sup>[1]</sup> The 'drug war zone' (Campbell, 2009) is a contested space where narcos (short for *narcotraficantes*) and the state battle for power, legitimacy and social/cultural supremacy. The resulting Mexican drug war is an internal conflict punctuated by hyper-violence, corruption and impunity as the cartels fight for control of the *plazas* (lucrative transshipment nodes and routes). Narratives of violence and power are key elements of this struggle to secure control of the 'narcoscape'—the political and social landscape of the 'drug war zone.'

### The Drug War Zone

The 'drug war zone' is the cultural world of drug traffickers ('narco-culture' or *narcocultura*) and security officials who combat drug trafficking. It is a transnational, cultural space where competing forces (states, gangsters, civil society) wage a physical and information war for control of territory, markets, and influence. Thus the drug war zone or 'narcoscape' is a physical and cultural construct where competing actors vie for power. The battle has kinetic (violent acts) and informational (propaganda and information operations) dimensions. Both intersect in physical and virtual space (*i.e.*, traditional and new media) where all sides seek to frame political, economic and cultural discourse about the value and control of drugs.

The wars for control of the 'narcoscape' are increasingly brutal, with hyper-violence and barbarization shaping discourse within the public sphere. Characteristics of the conflict (Sullivan, 2012) include:

- New weaponry (*narcotanques* or improvised infantry fighting vehicles);
- Grenade attacks, mass shootings, dismemberments and beheadings;
- Cartel information operations (including *narcomensajes* [narcomessages] in the form of *narcomantas* [narcobanners], *narcopintas* [narcograffiti], *narcobloqueos* [narcoblockades], 'corpse-messaging'--or leaving a message on a mutilated corpse--to shape the operational space);
- Kidnappings (*levantons*), mass graves (*narcofosas*) and social cleansing (mass targeted murders within cartel zones of influence);
- Attacks on journalists, mayors, police, and civil society in general;
- *Narcocultura* in the form of alternate belief systems such as the cult of *La Santa Muerte* and *Jesus Malverde* and reinforced by *narcocorridos* support the narco worldview.

### **Counterpower and New Media**

The onslaught from organized crime (cartels and gangs) challenges and erodes state capacity to govern, negates the rule of law through endemic impunity, and drives humanitarian crises through high-intensity violence and barbarization. New media is central to this quest for power where the interactive impact of violence, corruption and information operations fuels concerted assaults on state solvency (the net result of capacity and legitimacy). These assaults essentially culminate in 'criminal insurgency,' a contemporary form of conflict where crime and politics merge (Sullivan and Bunker, 2012). As such, cartel information operations and *narcocultura* are an expression of power-counterpower dynamics (Castells, 2009). New media helps shape the narcosphere (including drug war and criminal insurgency) by providing narcos and the state/civil society:

- The ability to communicate in real and/or chosen time, by all parties in the conflict;
- A means of providing warnings and signaling intent;
- A means of overcoming narco-censorship;
- A means of enabling traditional media reportage, as well as an alternative to traditional media;
- A mechanism to enable civil society and/or *narcocultura*.

### **Criminal Insurgency: Violence, Corruption and Information Operations (Info Ops)**

It is no surprise that organized crime groups (gangs and cartels) use violence as a tool in the course of business. Threats, coercion, and instrumental violence punctuate their activities. That said, these enterprises usually seek to elude detection and prefer co-opting (corrupting) the instruments of state rather than engaging in direct confrontation. Organized crime usually operates in a state of what Sabet (2009) calls 'collusive corruption'. Yet as the current crime wars illustrate, these actors can directly confront the state when their interests are challenged (Bailey & Talyor, 2009). Criminal insurgency is the mechanism of the confrontation with the state that results when relationships between organized crime and the state fall into disequilibrium.

Criminal insurgency presents a challenge to states and communities. Criminal insurgency is different from conventional terrorism and insurgency because the criminal insurgents' sole political motive is to gain autonomy and economic control over territory. They do so by hollowing out the state and creating criminal enclaves to secure freedom to maneuver.

The capture, control or disruption of strategic nodes in the global system and the intersections between them by criminal actors can have cascade effects. The result is a state of flux resulting in a structural

"hollowing" of many state functions while bolstering the state's executive branch and its emphasis on internal security. This hollowing out of state function is accompanied by an extra-national stratification of state function with a variety of structures or *fora* for allocating territory, authority, and rights (TAR) (Sassen, 2006). These *fora* —including border zones —are increasingly contested, with states and criminal enterprises seeking their own 'market' share. As a result, global insurgents, terrorists and networked criminal enterprises can create 'lawless zones,' 'feral cities,' and 'parallel states' characterized by 'dual sovereignty.' Criminal insurgencies can exist at several levels (Sullivan, 2012):

- *Local Insurgencies* (gangs dominate local turf and political, economic and social life in criminal enclaves or other governed zones);
- *Battle for the Parallel State* (battles for control of the 'parallel state.' These occur within the parallel state's governance space, but also spill over to affect the public at large and the police and military forces that seek to contain the violence and curb the erosion of governmental legitimacy and solvency);
- *Combating the State* (criminal enterprise directly engages the state itself to secure or sustain its independent range of action; cartels are active belligerents against the state);
- *The State Implodes* (high intensity criminal violence spirals out of control; the cumulative effect of sustained, unchecked criminal violence and criminal subversion of state legitimacy through endemic corruption and co-option. Here the state simply loses the capacity to respond).

As noted in "Attacks on Journalists and "New Media" in Mexico's Drug War: A Power and Counter Power Assessment" (Sullivan, 2011), an increasingly significant component of this violence has been directed against journalists and media outlets in an effort to silence the media so the cartels can operate with impunity. Media outlets have been attacked with grenades, and journalists assassinated, kidnapped or disappeared. Notably, on 18 September 2010, Ciudad Juárez's newspaper *El Diario* (currently edited across the international frontier in El Paso) printed an unprecedented editorial *¿Qué quieren de nosotros?* In English, simply "What do you want from us?" Published the day after one of its photographers was murdered, the editorial provides a stark illustration of the intense assault against Mexico's free press by cartel gangsterism. The *El Diario* editorial (translation at *Los Angeles Times, La Plaza*) read in part:

Gentlemen of the different organizations that are fighting for the Ciudad Juarez plaza, the loss of two reporters of this news organization represents an irreparable breakdown for all of us who work here, and in particular, for our families.

We'd like you to know that we're communicators, not psychics. As such, as information workers, we ask that you explain what it is you want from us, what you'd intend for us to publish or to not publish, so that we know what is expected of us.

You are at this time the de facto authorities in this city because the legal authorities have not been able to stop our colleagues from falling, despite the fact that we've repeatedly demanded it from them. Because of this, before this undeniable reality, we direct ourselves to you with these questions, because the last thing we want is that another one of our colleagues falls victim to your bullets.

Here we see the raw response to cartel info ops and narco-censorship:

An increasingly significant component of this violence has been directed against journalists and media outlets in an effort to silence the media so the cartels can operate with impunity. Television stations (such as Televisa in Tamaulipas and Nuevo León) have been attacked with grenades, and journalists assassinated, kidnapped or disappeared. One of the most visceral artifacts of the cartel counter-power struggle is brutal attacks on journalists. According to Article 19, in 2011 there were 172 attacks on journalists in Mexico. These figures include 9 murders of journalists, 2 murders of media workers, 2 disappearances of journalists, and 8 assaults with firearms or explosives against media facilities or installations (Article 19, 2012). Since 2000, 66 journalists have been killed, 13 journalists have disappeared, and 33 media buildings or facilities have been targets of explosive or firearm attacks (Article 19, 2012).

The cartels don't seek simple silence and impunity, they notably seek to influence perception, using a type of "narco-propaganda." This strategy employs a range of tools. These include violent means—beheadings, *levantóns* (kidnappings), assassinations, bombings and grenade attacks—and informational means—*narcomantas* (banners), *narcobloqueos* (blockades), *manifestacións* (orchestrated demonstrations), and *narcocorridos* (or folk songs extolling cartel virtues). Simple physical methods such as graffiti and roadside signs are now amplified with digital media.

### ***Narcocultura* and Social Banditry**

Bandits are a longstanding element of Mexican politics (Vanderwood, 1992). Indeed, bandits form an essential narrative in the power-counterpower discourse of Mexican struggles with the drug lords and narcos. Hobsbawm characterized this struggle of one of 'primitive rebels' challenging the state through 'social banditry' (Hobsbawm, 1959, 1969/2000). Essentially, this discourse stimulates not only political turmoil and insecurity, but also radical social change via 'criminal insurgency.' This is 'social/environmental modification.' The concept of social/environmental modification is based on research into cartels and '*narcocultura*' by Robert J. Bunker (Bunker, 1997, Bunker & Bunker, 2010a, 2010b) and reportage on the "Santa Muerte" and "Jesús Malverde" cults by Guillermprieto (2009) and La Familia Michoacana cartels with its own theological practice by Logan and Sullivan (2009).

Guillermprieto (2009) defines *narcocultura* in a broad sense as a "twisted relationship with power" often exemplified by corruption. In a social or cultural context—the one we are examining here—she defines *narcocultura* in a narrower sense: the production of symbols, rituals and artifacts - slang, religious cults, music, consumer goods - that allow people involved in the drug trade to recognize themselves as part of a community, to establish a hierarchy in which the acts they are required to perform acquire positive value and to absorb the terror inherent in their line of work.

Bunker & Bunker (2010b) define 'social environmental modification' as an element of non-state warfare; specifically: "This warfare—manifesting itself in 'criminal insurgencies' derived from groups of gang, cartel, and mercenary networks—promotes new forms of state organization drawn from criminally based social and political norms and behaviors."

Key elements of social/environmental modification include alternative worship or veneration of "narco-saints," symbolic violence (including beheadings and corpse messaging—*i.e.*, attaching a message to a corpse), the use of *narcocorridos* (epic folk songs) and social media to spread messages and confer legitimacy on a cartel.<sup>[2]</sup> Wormer and Bunker (2010) mention the importance of social media in social environmental modification in the context of gangs and Mexican cartels. A notable example of a band crafting *narcocorridos* extolling the virtues of cartels is Los Tigres del Norte. Other forms of messaging

conferring potential legitimacy or shaping public perception include *narcomensajes* (essentially comunicués), *narcomantas* (placards and banners) and *manifestacions* (demonstrations).

Together these means can be combined to cast legitimacy on the cartel or gang in a form of post-modern ‘social banditry’ as described by Hobsbawn (2000).

*Narcocultura* and social banditry are mechanisms for securing cartel and gang legitimacy in the areas they seek to dominate. They join raw violence and barbarization as tools of social domination and a means of accumulating and solidifying political power (Sullivan & Elkus, 2011).

This nexus of criminal political economy and criminal insurgency can be viewed as follows (Sullivan & Elkus, 2010):

Relying on a barbarization of conflict that includes beheadings, attacks on police and journalists, and corruption of elected officials and the police. Increasingly, the cartels have expanded their reach into the state to include the provision of social goods and cast themselves in the mantle of “social bandits” to secure support and legitimacy from the communities and businesses—including Petróleos Mexicanos/PEMEX—from which they extort ‘street taxes.’ The role of police in these conflicts requires an expanded form of policing able to operate in a COIN [counterinsurgency]-like fashion to exert state control over these alternative hierarchies. Conditions similar to those in Mexico are found elsewhere in Latin America—notably in Guatemala—as well as West Africa. Transnational gangs are altering sovereignty by forging zones of “dual sovereignty” sustained by transnational illicit economic circuits. The result is a reciprocal criminalization of politics and politicization of crime.

Cartel info ops thus not only seek to silence adversaries and criticism, they become means of extending political reach and reconfiguring the state to a structure that furthers its objectives. Here cartels both use and are confronted by new media. As they seek to gain legitimacy—or submission—from the populace on the one hand (also providing utilitarian social goods in furtherance of this objective), civil society seeks to strike back and retain order and security on the other. Here we see cartels broadcasting their brutal attacks, wearing cartel uniforms, developing and deploying their own encrypted microwave communications networks, exploiting social media, modifying social/environmental space with alternative belief systems, and commissioning *narcocorridos* to spread or market their words and deeds.

### ***Santitos: Narco-saints and Spiritual Dimension of Narcocultura***

The ‘santitos’ or narco-saints are symbols of folk veneration that have become a component of narco culture and ‘primitive rebellion.’ Here narcocultura is directly shaping social belief systems. This process demonstrates the potentially powerful impact of cartel violence and criminal insurgency on society and its political, cultural, and social institutions (Bunker & Sullivan, 2012). The narco-saints (Jesús Malverde, Santa Muerte, and the quasi-evangelical constructs of *La Familia* and the Knights Templar in Michoacán) are part of this cultural/social shaping. Narco-imagery is used to provide justification (or offer solace for committing brutal acts). It is also used by gang capos to bond gangsters into cohesive bands, and secure legitimacy in the community at large. The power of this dimension of *narcocultura* cannot be understated. As Sullivan and Bunker (2012) noted, criminal and spiritual insurgency are interacting:

Three major threads of social/environmental modification merging with “spiritual insurgency”

potentials are found in the Mexican cartel war/criminal insurgency. These are the cults of Jesús Malverde and Santa Muerte, and the narco-evangelical cartels of Michoacán: *La Familia Michoacana* and its splinter-group/successor *Los Caballeros Templarios* (“The Knights Templar”). The narco-saints are a bottom-up phenomena, while the narco-evangelical cartels are a top-down phenomena. All engender aspects of social banditry.

*La Familia* is instructive in this regard. *La Familia* used symbolic violence as a social statement when it announced itself as an actor in Michoacán’s narco scene. On 6 September 2006 a group of *sicarios* (assassins) assaulted the *Sol y Sombra* nightclub in Uruapan, Michoacán to make a statement. They threw five human heads onto the dance floor and promulgated a *narcomensaje* (or communiqué); the message (Logan & Sullivan, 2009):

“The Family doesn’t kill for money; it doesn’t kill for women; it doesn’t kill innocent people; only those who deserve to die, die. Everyone should know...this is divine justice.”

*La Familia* still exists and seeks to maintain ‘dual sovereignty,’ but it is joined by a successor/competitor, the Knights Templar, who continue to use spiritual imagery to sustain their faction’s operations. These two groups draw their example from *La Familia*’s early leaders “El Chango” and “El Chayo” (respectively José de Jesús Méndez Vargas and Nazario Moreno Gonzáles). While both are out of action, they demonstrated the utility of exploiting spiritual imagery—including their own “bible”—to exert control over their followers. This imagery was supported by violence and graft. Other narcocults venerate the ‘santitos’ and use symbolic violence and ‘social banditry’ to secure control and influence. The result is the rise of Mexico’s new narco-religions—the *narcocultos*—joining the alternative political and economic space. The Sinaloa factions favor Jesús Malverde and the Zetas favor Santa Muerte. Indeed, narcocults, *narcocultura*, *narcocorridos*, and social banditry are linked (Sullivan & Bunker, 2012).

### ***Narcomúsica and Narcocorridos***

Music is a key element of transmitting alternative cultural values in the ‘narcoscape.’ *Narcomúsica* (narco-music) is an integral component of cartel influence operations (information operations) and is instrumental in defining (redefining) the persona of the outlaw (Simonett, 2006). The tradition of *narcocorridos* builds from the ranchera tradition of folk ballads (*corridos*) that extol heroic deeds. The *narcocorrido* variant of traditional corridos has extended its reach from the narco subculture to mainstream audiences throughout Mexico and the United States. *Narcocorridos* extol the virtues of the drug lord and describe, apotheosize, comment upon and lament the deeds of the narcos, projecting the image of ‘folk hero’ and often relating the narcos to Jesús Malverde, Sinaloa’s archetypal social bandit (Simonett, 2006).

Notable bands and *narcocantantes* (singers) include Los Tigres del Norte (whose first hit was “Contrabando y traición” or “Contraband and Betrayal”), Los Tucanes de Tijuana, and Banda El Recodo. These notable groups all hail from Sinaloa. Many of their hits have been subject to local bans making them *Corridos Prohibidos* (forbidden corridos, also the title of an album by Los Tigres). The bans haven’t stemmed the mystique and the genre continues to grow in popularity. Simonett (2006) asserts that the genre began to become popular after the narcos were tolerated and often protected by Mexican officials.

Simonett (2006) observed that *narcomúsica* is intertwined with images of power: “Beyond the lyrics,

narco-music provides the means by which the listeners and practitioners invent, construct, and assert their identities. This music thus cannot be understood properly outside the wider power relations in which it is embedded and that nourish its growth.”

Essentially, the projection of power through *narcocultura* is at work as *narcocorridos* frame the activities of the narcos. Narcos enjoy prestige and are viewed as powerful community figures despite their participation in smuggling and other criminal enterprises (including kidnapping and murder). Many residents view narcotrafficking as an economic activity rather than a criminal enterprise. Simonett reported that Oscar Loza, president of Sinaloa’s human rights commission, observed that drug-trafficking may be prohibited legally, but not socially. Indeed, the traffickers view themselves (and are frequently seen as) *gallos valientes* (brave roosters).

Here the tradition of social banditry comes into play. Bandits have a long history in Mexico. Indeed, Pancho Villa is often remembered as a ‘trickster’ (a term applied to many current narcos). Hobsbawm (1969/2000) noted that audacious men who challenged authority (highwaymen, brigands, desperados and other outlaws collectively known as bandits) are often viewed in a positive, romantic light by populations that are excluded from the political and economic mainstream. This mantle of ‘social bandit’ has been embraced and indeed nurtured by many cartel organizations in Mexico. The post-modern social bandit (the narco) is viewed as men who not so much right wrongs but serve as avengers who exert power, proving that even the poor and weak can be a terrible force to be reckoned with. Here the imagery and ethos of the ‘primitive rebel’ (Hobsbawm, 1959) find contemporary resonance.

Edberg (2001) also examines the narrative role of narcos as ‘social bandits’ where the narco persona is in part “constructed, disseminated, and connected with day-to-day practice” via *narcocorridos*. For Edberg, it is significant that the *corrido* form was chosen to transmit this persona. Edberg notes that a significant number of persons he interviewed understood *narcocorridos* as traditional *corridos*. Others (notably prisoners in the *cereso*, Juárez’s jail), including youths in the *barrios* and *colonias* of the US-Mexico border zone, considered *narcocorridos* as a reflection of the narcos’ status as ‘big men’ who provide wealth and jobs to the community. The imagery of the narco (*narcocultura*) thus is part of their day-to-day reality. Even the imagery of the AK-47—the *cuerno de chivo* (goat’s horn)—pervades the ‘atmospheric of the street.’ Edberg also noted that political undertones and overtones were present in many *narcocorridos* so that many can be viewed as political statements.

*Narcocorridos* can also be viewed as heroic tales or allegories (Edberg, 2001). This characterization was especially found in the Sierra where the narcos are viewed as ‘big men,’ political foils, and tricksters who evade US and Mexican authorities while providing (utilitarian) social goods. The image of ‘trickster’ is one shared by some narcos and *El Narcosanto* (Jesús Malverde), a *santito* or narco-saint venerated by many in Sinaloa (and hence tied culturally with the Sinaloa cartel). *Narcocorridos* can also be viewed as projecting an image of power—and are thus *canciones fuertes* or strong songs—that serves as an intoxicant of strength and helps forge group solidarity and identity.

Finally, *narcocorridos* can be viewed as a marketing tool (much like *gangsta rap*) to project cartel and gang prowess and power. Indeed, a recent social trend in Mexico is the Pablo Escobar T-shirt glorifying narco excess and reinforcing the widespread fascination with the symbols of cartel culture among some Mexican youth.<sup>[3]</sup> Edberg (2001) noted that “Narco-traffickers themselves, seeing the power of their caricature as a marketing tool in the media, often commission *norteño* groups to write *corridos* about them as a kind of advertisement, as a creation of self through the commodified narco-trafficker persona.” This also includes projecting the image of ‘social bandit.’ As such, *narcocorridos* are a contemporary phenomena that pays homage to transcendent myth where ‘big men,’ reputation (of power and ruthlessness), social banditry and rebellion converge.

## Symbolic Violence: Statemaking and Warmaking

Diane E. Davis observed that: “[The] random and targeted violence increasingly perpetrated by ‘irregular’ armed forces pose a direct challenge to state legitimacy and national sovereignty.”<sup>[4]</sup> According to her analysis, cartels and gangs are “transnational non-state armed actors who use violence to accumulate capital and secure economic dominion, and whose activities reveal alternative networks of commitment, power, authority, and even self-governance.”<sup>[5]</sup>

Indeed, symbolic violence is an important element in the politics of narco-power.

The *sicario* (or assassin) is the foot soldier in the cartels’ brutal war against their adversaries—gangs and the state alike. Their brutal tactics, techniques and procedures include social cleansing, assassinations, kidnappings, torture, dismemberment, beheading, persons hung from bridges, rivals boiled in pots to become what is euphemistically called *posole* (or soup), and at least one recent crucifixion—on Friday, 07 September 2012 Eladio Martínez Cruz was found crucified on a traffic sign in Contepec, Michoacán. Allegedly the 24 year-old was arrested by municipal police for rape and subsequently lynched (taken from their custody) by cartel *sicarios*, then tortured, castrated, and crucified (other barbaric details scrubbed). The incident was transmitted via social media and the corpse was accompanied by a *narcomanta* (a case of corpse-messaging).<sup>[6]</sup>

The result of the interaction of social shaping, symbolic violence and confrontation with the state is the rise of ‘other governed spaces,’ ‘neo-feudal zones’ and ‘criminal enclaves.’ In a report entitled “Drug cartels taking over government roles in parts of Mexico,” journalist Alfredo Corchado explored this cartel intrusion into sovereignty. He found that:

The “police” for the Zetas paramilitary cartel are so numerous here — upward of 3,000, according to one estimate — that they far outnumber the official force, and their appearance further sets them apart. The omnipresent cartel spotters are one aspect of what experts describe as the emergence of virtual parallel governments in places like Nuevo Laredo and Ciudad Juárez — criminal groups that levy taxes, gather intelligence, muzzle the media, run businesses and impose a version of order that serves their criminal goals.<sup>[7]</sup>

As a consequence, “entire regions of Mexico are effectively controlled by non-state actors, *i.e.*, multipurpose criminal organizations,” according to Howard Campbell. “These criminal groups have morphed from being strictly drug cartels into a kind of alternative society and economy. They are the dominant forces of coercion, tax the population, steal from or control utilities such as gasoline, sell their own products and are the ultimate decision-makers in the territories they control.”<sup>[8]</sup> In a presentation given on 21 May 2010 at the “Conference on Illicit Trafficking Activities in the Western Hemisphere: Possible Strategies and Lessons Learned”, Vanda Felbab-Brown, of the Brookings Institution, raised the question:

“The drug trade and other illegal economies generate multiple threats to the United States and other states and societies. At the same time, large populations around the world in areas with minimal state presence, great poverty, and social and political marginalization are dependent on illicit economies, including the drug trade, for economic survival and the satisfaction of other socio-economic needs. It is thus important to stop thinking about crime solely as aberrant social activity



to be suppressed, but instead think of crime as a competition in state-making.”[\[9\]](#)

George W. Grayson addresses some of the factors underlying the potential for the formation of conditions conducive to rebellion, social banditry and primitive rebels (Hobsbawm, 1969/2000, 1959) potential.[\[10\]](#)

- [S]uccess in advancing security, democracy and the rule of law presupposes that the power structure of Mexico fully supports these goals. Although Calderón is a decent man, a large segment of the country’s establishment turns a blind eye to the roots of the turmoil afflicting the Federal District and most of Mexico’s 31 states: the lack of decent education, health care and employment opportunities for the 40 percent of their fellow citizens who eke out a living as rag pickers in fetid slums or subsist on barren postage stamp-sized plots of land.
- ‘Have-nots’: ignored by elites and exploited by narcos...Lacking other alternatives, these “have-nots” often take jobs as lookouts, couriers, drug growers and hit men for the syndicates. Capos like Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera have developed a cult following highlighted by popular *narcocorridos*—ballads that venerate the macho courage of the drug lords and the contributions they make to their communities.

Barbarization and *narcocultura* are complementary activities. Narcotrafficking is glorified and the “ninis” (youths without jobs or education) and disenfranchised poor seek the refuge of the caudillo or ‘big man’ and his organization.

### **Conclusion: Social Banditry and the Narcoscape**

Mexico’s cartels are evolving distinct political aims. *Narcocultura* and ‘social banditry’ are core elements of this evolution. *La Familia* (and *Los Caballeros Templarios*/the Knights Templar) is exemplary in this regard. Using social services and infrastructure protection as levers in rural areas and small towns, these non-state actors are building a social base. In *barrios*, *colonias*, towns and cities, they are funding political patron-client relationships to extend their reach. Reinforced by corruption, propaganda, political marches and demonstrations, as well as social media such as ‘*narcocorridos*,’ social banditry is a major element of Mexico’s narco-conflict (Logan & Sullivan, 2009 and Sullivan & Elkus, 2009). See for example the following quotation about a *narcocorrido* from Guillermoprieto (2009) about “El Chapo” Guzmán, head of the Sinaloa cartel:

“He’s a friend of those who are friends and an enemy of those who are enemies...” The song continues (as paraphrased by Guillermoprieto) “he controls a great deal of territory and it is an all-around good thing!”

Mexico’s new narco-religions—the *narcocultas*—are helping shape the narcoscape and Mexico’s criminal insurgency. The cult of Jesús Malverde has ties to elements of the Sinaloa Cartel (not a surprise since the cult originated in Sinaloa) and the Santa Muerte cult has strong influence with members of Los Zetas and the Cartel del Golfo. Guillermoprieto, for example, said the oldest narcocult is the “cult of Jesús Malverde, patron saint of Chapo Guzmán and other Sinaloa traffickers.” She added that the cult of “La Santa Muerte, the Holy Death, Mexico’s newest and fastest growing cult” is associated with the Gulf Coast trafficking group—the Zetas.” The resulting social/environmental modification is a key component of Mexico’s criminal insurgency. This is not an insurgency that seeks to overtly run the government, but

an insurgency that radically alters power structures, economic access, and cultural life.

Narco imagery from *narcocorridos* to *narcopintas* (graffiti) pervades Mexican life. The images can't be avoided on TV, in social media, on the airways, and in the streets on contested, *plazas*, *colonias*, cities and states. The result is narcopolitics. Certainly market forces are on the rise and marketing narco-imagery is a lucrative adjunct to the drug trade (and likely a viable means of laundering money and sustaining illicit financial flows), but the key impact is political and social. Cultural artifacts of violence and power (*poder*) permeate and shape the narcoscape.

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## Notes

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## About the Author



### **John P. Sullivan**

John P. Sullivan is a career police officer. He currently serves as a lieutenant with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. He is also an adjunct researcher at the Vortex Foundation in Bogotá, Colombia; a senior research fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies on Terrorism (CAST); and a senior fellow at *Small Wars Journal-El Centro*. He is co-editor of *Countering Terrorism and WMD: Creating a Global Counter-Terrorism Network* (Routledge, 2006) and *Global Biosecurity: Threats and Responses* (Routledge, 2010) and co-author of *Mexico's Criminal Insurgency: A Small Wars Journal-El Centro Anthology* (iUniverse, 2011) and *Studies in Gangs and Cartels* (Routledge, 2013). He completed the CREATE Executive Program in Counter-Terrorism at the University of Southern California and holds a Bachelor of Arts in Government from the College of William and Mary, a Master of Arts in Urban Affairs and Policy Analysis from the New School for Social Research, and a PhD, doctorate in Information and Knowledge Society, from the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3) at the Open University of Catalonia (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya) in Barcelona. His doctoral thesis was 'Mexico's Drug War: Cartels, Gangs, Sovereignty and the Network State.' His current research focus is the impact of transnational organized crime on sovereignty in Mexico and other countries.

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