

Societal Attitudes and Organized Crime in Mexico: The Case of Michoacan, Mexico

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyze a qualitative study which reviewed a community's perception about the organized crime group the Templar Knights in Michoacan, considering three analytical categories: cultural factors, the focus of institutional decay, and the theory of institutional legitimacy. The results of this study supported the cultural tendency to explain organized crime in the region of "Tierra Caliente" in Michoacan. However, an integral explanation for the emergence of organized criminal groups with a social base would have to come from a dual focus that considers a structural connotation, referring to the economic levels and welfare of the people, as well as a cultural explanation which considers a complexity of social factors which in turn create a appropriate environment for organized crime. The study's results seem to confirm that organized criminal groups in Michoacan have an important social presence. Therefore, the strategy of fighting crime in Mexico should be oriented towards the problem's social and structural causes and not only follow a police and military-oriented focus.

Key Words: Mexico, organized crime, Knights Templar

Introduction

A social institution is an organization with a particular purpose whose goal is to persuade the members of a community to participate and help in the support of the organization (Limbaugh, 2010). In Mexico, drug cartels are social organizations with criminal purposes whose study poses certain difficulties given the nature and peculiarities of being criminal. Concrete aspects such as their interaction with society and communities have been seldom studied and this lack has contributed to the spreading of false information and negative results observed upon watching the Mexican government's strategy to fight these criminal groups.

In Mexico, not all drug cartels are equal. Among them is the case of the group named "*La Familia Michoacana*." This group, created in 2006, made up the principal group of organized crime in Michoacan, Mexico (Finnegan, 2010). After suffering a division which developed into the creation of the group the *Knights Templar*, organized crime in Mexico changed. This group stands out from the others through its support of an important social base and its interest in conserving its presence within society and the social tapestry. These characteristics has distinguished it from other drug trafficking groups which focus their activity on making their money through drug trafficking and other illicit activities, without worrying about justifying its presence in society.

Drug trafficking is not a fundamental activity of the *Knights Templar*. This criminal group concerns itself with commercial functions, judicial matters and social gatherings; all functions which should be regulated by state institutions.

Price regulation of agricultural products, the establishment of harvest periods, the payment of commercial debts among private parties, negotiation of disagreements among different community groups, fining and sanctioning of wife-beating husbands, punishment of thieves, granting of licenses for the right to gather in parties and religious events, permits for forestry exploitation and the right to charge businesses of all sizes for protection are just some of the activities this group undertakes.

Since its beginning, this group has tried to build a social legitimacy of its criminal activities using such arguments as the necessity to protect the state's inhabitants from the criminal activities of other criminal groups and from the actions of the government itself. With these activities, the *Knights Templar* has filled the vacuums of authority which have existed in the three levels of government in Mexico as a consequence of the inconclusive democratic transformation. In the last 20 years, Mexico passed from a stage of non-democracy which was characterized by the existence of a hegemonic single party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), a president with constitutional and meta-constitutional powers with the authority to command social, union, and business organizations having the legislative and judicial powers subordinate to his authority. With the political transition at the end of the 1990s, new institutional developments came about which was based on free elections, citizen-based electoral institutions, and a greater independence of the legislative and judicial powers.

These new developments have not finalized their consolidation in a system which had been articulated on a basis of social and institutional relationships and power which had the law as its basic instrument of social positioning. The democratic reforms in Mexico in the last years have not yet been translated into betterment of the quality of government in the states and municipalities, nor in the legitimacy of their institutions. The state and municipal governments have continued to operate with traditional rules of centralism and opacity which had existed during the years of power of the PRI as a hegemonic political party. According to Cejudo, (2009), the greatest competency in the form of a political experiment of political transition has not meant the existence of transparent and efficient state governments. Instead, local structures have consolidated their immediate political interests and established client relationships with its citizens. For the most part, in state government, a mutual system of vigilance and division does not exist among the legislative, the executive, and the judicial, which would serve to fortify democratic structures which might permit the design of short and medium-term policies which could transcend the limits which are imposed by the six year state government term.

La Familia Michoacana, now called the *Knights Templar*, understood the institutional vacuum of authority in Mexico, especially in Michoacan. They knew they would have acceptance as an authority figure to impose clear rules for coexistence in society even though the group acted outside of the law and established institutions. The inhabitants of Michoacan, Mexico currently coexist with criminal groups; members are known and tolerated as members of the communities and of existing social organizations. Recently, these groups asked society to stop political persecution and asked for governmental acceptance for their activities. The discourse of these criminal groups acquires more of a social tone of revindication which is not observed in other criminal groups as can be noted in one of their comunicués:

"To the Society of Michoacan:

In these moments of reflection and in light of the social situation of Michoacan, the brotherhood of the Knights Templar would like to express our gratitude for recognizing our social actions and those of public defense. At the same time, we would like to reiterate that as a part of the population, the Knights Templar is not made of drug dealers or traffickers and we are not a criminal group. The Knights Templar is a brotherhood integrated by civilians who respect our constitution; but we are being denied our rights which we respect among ourselves, putting above all the universal principles and values in the framework of our liberties, as a demonstration of our good will for society. During the past days, our brotherhood invited butchers and tortilla distributors to lower the price of their products. The accepted invitation by our business friends and which action was recognized by our most needy members of society clearly understood that such action was not based on pressure not blackmail and even less by charging fines, but is indicative of our social actions. The Knights Templar invite the public in general to maintain unity and peace; we invite the people of Michoacan to get to know our leaders and members. Together, we can achieve public defense uphold our constitutional rights. Together we will make Michoacan a prosperous state. Together until victory."

Differing from other cartels or criminal groups, in this criminal ‘brotherhood’ exists a belief of written behavior which tries to regulate its internal behavior and its relationship with society. In appearances before the means of communication, these group leaders have manifested their interest in protecting their communities from other criminal organizations and for the welfare of society. They have also made emphasis in their sense of identity and belonging to society. The *Knights Templar* have created rites and ceremonies to initiate their members in the activities of the group emulating the values and symbolisms of distinct religious groups which are tied to Christianity. The characteristics of the *Knights Templar*, previously of the *Familia Michoacana*, share many similarities to the Sicilian Mafia (Pezinno, 1995) mainly in the functioning of the social code of conduct. The continuity in the presence and activities of this criminal group in Michoacan in spite of the police offensive of the past three years suggests the existence of a certain level of popular support for the *Knights Templar*. This group seems to be consolidating itself as a mixed cocktail of guerrilla group, drug cartel, and belligerent religious sect.

Theoretical Framework

The objective of this article is to present a qualitative study about the perceptions that the community holds of the *Knights Templar*. The study considered three theoretical categories of analysis: cultural factors, focused points of institutional decomposition, and institutional legitimacy. In general, the sociological analysis of crime can be debated considering cultural or structural determinants or explanations. Cultural focus points center on cultural and civic-cultural dimensions which explain universal values and beliefs why individuals work toward the common good and collective interest (Lederman, 2002; Messner, 2004) and the concept of intolerance toward crime (Huff-Corzine y Moore 1986; Baron y Strauss, 1988). Among the so called structural explanations of crime inequality (Pratt & Godsey, 2003) and heterogeneity (LeFree & Kick, 1986) stand out as contemplative factors.

The concept of civic culture can be measured by confidence and civic commitment as factors which explain a reduction in violence. On the other hand, intolerance of crime can be defined in terms of individual variations over the approval or disapproval of violent behaviors and conducts. Gastil (1971) showed at the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s in the south of the United States how higher levels of homicide are tolerated due to the cultural approval of violence, and not due to structural factors.

In addition to cultural and civic cultural factors is the third theoretical element of interest: the decomposition of institutional legitimacy. Specifically, the model of LaFree (1998) supports the idea that legitimacy is the central function of institutions as a provider of a minimum of norms for social coexistence. According to LaFree, three institutions are fundamental: the political institution, the economic institution and the family institution; each one which establishes over time mechanisms to regulate crime. In LaFree’s model, an institution is legitimate when its established patterns are recognized as the rules to follow by the individuals in society. Criminal acts which are committed become acts which turn against the political institution’s legitimacy and are patterns of behavior which are not shared by the rest of the community but made against the legitimacy of the institution. If the norms and rules of behavior and social coexistence which the institutions establish do not have the necessary acceptance among society’s members to impose measures, which many times are based on force, vacuums of power and authority are replaced by actions which are outside the law.

Another valid theoretical reference for Mexico is the theory of social disorganization which was developed originally to explain the differences in the levels of crime among neighbors in the city of Chicago (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Shaw & McKay, 1969). According to Shaw and McKay, social organization levels depend on the strength and grade of organization of the local institutions and their ability to make residents act for the common good by exercising informal control. Shaw and McKay (1942) suggest that in areas with criminal presence, semi-autonomous systems are created with their own culture and social structure. Connected with Shaw and the theory of social disorganization of McKay, is a systemic focus which considers the local community with its friendships, parentage and family ties, networking, and other rooted formal associations with the processes of socialization pertinent to communities (Bursik, y Grasmick, 1993).

The previously mentioned theoretical references demonstrate the complexity of the processes of interaction between society and criminal groups. In the case of Michoacan and of Mexico in its context, these processes have not been studied very much. This paper puts forth the theory that the organization of societal-criminal interaction has generated semi-autonomous “subcultures” and criminal systems which have taken over commercial and civil regulatory functions.

This fact is supported not only by the aforementioned theories, but also by hypotheses about cultural detouring and theories of detoured subcultures (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1985) which demonstrate that a determined behavior is the result of cultural or sub-cultural norms, values, beliefs, or central ideas. Criminal acts take place within groups and societies in which criminal behavior is culturally consistent with these factors.

In Mexico, the government has not been able to guarantee conditions of legitimacy. There exists a marked culture of tolerance and acceptance of corruption (Coronado, 2008; Escobar, 2004). Society perceives tolerance in the punishment of crime and in general, in the whole justice system. Corruption is a form of violence which has existed in Mexico ever since its inception as a nation. Mexican corruption has become institutionalized as a mechanism of resolution of conflicts, taking over the functions of the law. According to the “Second National Poll of Constitutional Culture: Law, Legitimacy of Institutions, and Governmental Design” (2011), the Mexican people consider that “justice does not function well due to corruption, impunity, and the presence of extra-legal interests. The great majority of the population feels unprotected against the abuse of authority. At the same time, the violation of human rights is associated with power and the authorities.” According to the same source, the police forces are found in the very last place of confidence in institutions.

In this institutional vacuum, a hold on culture of corruption and the relative order which criminal groups established has been consolidated through societal acceptance of criminal activity, especially of drug trafficking. Actually, many times criminal behavior is glorified (Meares, 2004). The subculture of crime in Mexico can be understood through this complex mix of values, codes of conduct, behaviors, and symbolisms which identify the environment of crime and its actions.

Besides these cultural factors, economical determinants play a part in the mix. According to Warren (1973), criminal organizations develop in geographical zones which accept the services which organized crime group offer. The *Knights Templar* offer certain commercial and judicial security which established institutions cannot offer. As a result, communities value the economic benefits from the activities of organized crime, such as having liquid assets for the buying and selling of land and buildings, access to luxury , and diverse financial and productive activities.

Methodology

Very few qualitative investigations have been undertaken about organized crime in Mexico. Criminal groups in Mexico have continued to terrorize the population with diverse methods such as mutilation and torture. This has made the collecting of data about their activities very difficult to obtain. In this context, 50 in-depth interviews were realized in the area of the state of Michoacan called *Tierra Caliente*, which includes the municipalities of Apatzingan, Nueva Italia, and the Huacana. The interviews took place during the first semester of 2012 and were divided into cohorts of groups according to age: 20-30, 30-50, and older than 50.

The interviews were conducted following the snowball technique, avoiding bias in the election of those interviewed and choosing informants who initially showed variation among them. They took place without mentioning the reason for them, only mentioning an interest in conversing about generalities of community development. These interviews permitted the researchers to identify particular points of investigation not by focusing on specific points but by maintaining a broad prospect. The interviews took place in public places, houses, restaurants, or businesses of those interviewed, assuring the confidentiality and academic use of the represented points of view. Each interview took about 90 minutes. Interviewees were engaged in conversation without knowing the objectives of the investigation, trying to keep a natural flow during the conversations. The conversations were recorded, transcribed and processed with the program Atlas ti.

The interviews emphasized three theoretical elements which were described in the paragraphs above: cultural factors (civic culture, cultural approval of violence); the decomposition of institutions; and the legitimacy of institutions. The results of the interviews were coded into three categories of thematic analysis which were civic culture, cultural approval of crime, and institutional legitimacy. The data analysis took place with the perspective of fundamental theory of discourse analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and at the same time as the overall analysis to permit and focus on future interviewing with more theoretical and analytical elements. Accordingly, the investigation used a phenomenological focus (Creswell, 1998) taking its cue from the actual experiences of the authors who have had the opportunity of interacting with members of the community such as professors, public functionaries, and politicians.

Results

Related themes of crime and insecurity are carefully treated in the interviews. Once fluidity in the interview was gained and the interviewees felt less uncomfortable, they began to express comments and opinions about organized criminal groups and the environment of public insecurity. In 80% of the interviews, comments or experiences related with organized crime were mentioned. In 20% of the interviews, the people mentioned knowing a family member or close friend who was involved in some related incident with organized crime. Even more illuminating was that 40% of the people interviewed mentioned that they knew or had some acquaintance with someone who interacts or has interacted directly or indirectly with criminal groups.

There existed a certain element of regional pride in the presence of the *Knights Templar*. The people interviewed expressed that the inhabitants of *Tierra Caliente* have always been people who have stood up for their rights and were not accustomed to oppression nor authority. The presence and fame of a local criminal group is a factor that lends itself to a certain regional prestige and reaffirms the vision the inhabitants of this region have of themselves as courageous men and women.

In the first category of civic culture, those interviewed expressed having heard that the criminal groups have realized diverse actions to benefit the community, such as admonishing young people from making noise or drinking in the streets, avoiding that husbands beat their wives, or punishing common criminals, such as thieves, animal rustlers, and fraud scammers, and even punishing more violent criminals such as rapists. Surprisingly, 60% of those interviewed showed conformity with the fact that groups which exist outside the law and formal authority could establish certain conditions of order in the community with the fear that criminal activities could be penalized by organized crime.

In the second category of analysis, the cultural approval of crime, the majority of the interviews demonstrated the novelty of the presence of organized crime groups in the state and in their own daily lives. Those interviewed manifested that the police have always been corrupt, as well as the majority of the local governmental authorities, but that the wave of crime in the state has only been recent. The majority of the deaths and victims which the means of communication have reported were of people involved with organized crime and that people who are not involved with organized crime have nothing to worry about. This affirmation was repeated in 80% of the interviews and demonstrates that most people believed that those who coexist without involvement in the activities of these groups risk no problems.

Legitimacy of authority is tied to the acceptance of criminal groups as a source of authority. The interviews conceded that criminal groups make up the ultimate source of authority to settle conflicts which could otherwise represent great losses over a great amount of time in the lengthy legal environment established in legitimate institutions in the process of resolving these conflicts. Specifically 70% of those interviewed showed that if there existed a serious situation in which they could not recur to the law, they would consider seeking out criminal groups to find alternatives for solving their problems.

The majority of those interviewed (90%) expressed desire that the insecure climate which Michoacan actually lives could be overcome so the inhabitants of the state could count on their governmental institutions having enough strength to impose legal conditions of coexistence. Corruption is shown as the key element to overcome to gain a more harmonic coexistence with peace for its communities. None of those interviewed manifested clearly a preference for the continuance of criminal groups as mediating elements in the community's relationships. Family, specifically, the children, appeared to play a fundamental role in the construction of a safer future, with many people saying, "I don't want my children to live a situation of violence and beheading like that we are living today."

In general, those interviewed appeared to express contradictory attitudes regarding the presence of organized crime. On one hand, they demonstrated accepting attitudes toward criminal groups, and on the other hand, they wished for the end of the presence of these groups and that the law would serve as the norm of coexistence among citizens. These results are coincidental with the almost permanent situation of corruption and lack of confidence of Mexicans in their institutions, particularly those related to public security. The people appear to be accustomed to the violence which they are living and accommodate their daily lives to the situation.

Two elements stand out. The first has to do with the normalcy with which violent situations are considered and the presence of criminal groups in the daily routines of the communities. A certain sense of security exists among those who have nothing to do with criminal groups and major problems do not exist for them. They do not seem to conceive the victims of violence as close elements in their lives, but rather as people taking the consequences of transgressions of their own actions and of breaking the rules which criminal groups establish.

The second element is the knowledge that members of criminal groups pertain to and are known in the same communities. 40% of those interviewed knew members of criminal groups who live in their community or have lived in their locality. Moreover, some of the people interviewed showed the activities of these criminal groups as legitimate in the function of defending the inhabitants from other criminal groups, such as the *Zetas* or other criminal bands.

Conclusions

The results of this study tend to support the cultural slope in the explanation of crime in the region of *Tierra Caliente* in Michoacan. However, an integral explanation of the emergence of organized crime groups with a social base would have to be part of a dual focus to consider a structural connotation referring to economical levels and well being and a cultural explanation which considers a complexity of social factors which create an appropriate environment for organized crime. A third element would have to incorporate institutional factors related with the legitimacy of institutions and the vacuums of power which have grown as a consequence of the democratic transition of the state.

However, the results of the interviews seem to confirm that criminal groups in Michoacan have an important social presence. This constitutes part of the social contemporary reality of the state. The revealing results that 40% of those interviewed knew members of a criminal group and do not exhibit a will to turn them in speaks volumes. This situation reflects a deep rooted social weaving of the criminal groups through motives not only tied to fear of reprisal but also the tacit acceptance of relative order that these groups impose in many communities.

The phenomena of organized crime in Michoacan is the result of a complex social and historical process of construction of legitimacy of the institutions that have little to do with the official discourse that the governments of Mexico and the United States maintain about the fundamental drug problem. The demand for drugs in the United States and the accommodation of the cartel organizations in Mexico appear to have little to do with the case of Michoacan. The presence of criminal groups in Michoacan can be explained as a consequence of a deep-seated process of decomposition of institutions which have generated vacuums of legitimacy and a social culture which tolerates the presence of institutions outside of the law which establish order in activities which should be regulated by the government.

Taken together, these elements should be considered as part of an integral strategy in the fight against organized crime which should not rely only upon a police-military focus of a short term orientation but should also focus on the resolution of structural causes of crime which involves constructing solid institutions capable of carrying out the law and effectively managing societal relationships, bettering economic conditions and providing well being of the state's inhabitants.

The support that the Mexican government receives from the United States government should seek consolidation, transparency, and democratic participation of its citizens in state and municipal level politics, especially those related with the rendition of accounts and judicial administration. The support received through the Merida Initiative demonstrates a bellicose focus which only partially addresses the problem of insecurity by concentrating only on military and police aspects of the problem. Support and initiatives which stimulate transparency and the accountability at the state level could be beneficial and advantageous for the short term. The case of Mexico should be object of a deeper analysis by the United States to avoid repeating the errors of past interventions in other parts of the world. The outbreaks of violence have a profound social root that could be resolved without military intervention.

There exist great vacuums of information and investigation about criminal groups in Mexico. A greater emphasis is necessary in its analysis from a social point of view to consider these organizations as integrated groups in the social weave of communities and with functions that go beyond the trafficking of drugs.

They are but the tip of the iceberg in a series of social complexities which contemporary Mexico confronts as it is immersed in a process of democratic consolidation which has not created the necessary solid institutions to maintain an effective control of drug trafficking. A change in the police-military paradigm is necessary and urgent to attend the complex social causes of Mexico's problem.

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