



Securing Manifest Destiny

Mexico's War on Drugs, Crisis of Legitimacy, and Global Capitalism

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Abstract

This article argues Mexico's war on drugs was a tactic by elites in both the United States and Mexico to legitimate the Mexican neoliberal state's political, economic, and ideological governance over Mexican society. Through tough on crime legislation and maintenance of free market policies, the war on drugs is a "morbid symptom" that obfuscates the crisis of global capitalism in the region. It is a way of managing a crisis of legitimacy of Mexico's neoliberal state. Through arguments of Mexico as a potential "failed state" and a "narco-state," the United States has played a leading role by investing in militarized policing in the drug war and securitization of Mexico's borders to expand and maintain capitalist globalization. In the twenty-first century, the ideology of manifest destiny persists, but instead of westward expansion of the U.S. state, it serves as the maintenance and expansion of global capitalism.

Keywords: Global Capitalism, Neoliberalism, War on Drugs, Manifest Destiny



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My main objective is not to do away with drugs or eliminate their consumption. That is impossible. My objective is to strengthen Mexican law. I want to make Mexico a country where the law is respected, because that is the first step to development. - Felipe Calderon (2010)

In July 2019, proponents of the drug war in Mexico claimed a victory at the U.S. District Court in the Eastern District of New York. After a 12-week trial, jurors had agreed on a resounding sentence to Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzmán, the wealthiest drug trafficker in Mexico and leader of the Sinaloa Cartel: life in prison. Following his arrest in Mexico, Guzmán was extradited to the United States—the primary investor of Mexico’s drug war. According to former Acting Attorney General Matthew Whittaker, “this case demonstrated the extraordinary reach of the U.S. government, our tenacity and commitment to pursuing kingpins like Guzmán.” He added confidently, “[the] DEA will continue to pursue justice worldwide and protect Americans” (ICE 2019).

While waiting for his sentencing, Guzmán was allowed to read a prepared statement: “What happened here leaves very clear that the United States is not better than any other corrupt country of those that you do not respect” (Vice 2019). Guzmán’s last words before being removed from the courthouse by U.S. Marshals are instructive. Although primarily focused on his treatment during the trial, Guzmán also alluded to the conceits of U.S. exceptionalism and called into question its legitimacy. Despite the long list of confirmed crimes committed by the Sinaloa Cartel, the U.S. government’s domestic and foreign policy are not far behind, but rather predated and set the terrain of their existence.

Guzmán’s arrest came about through the Mexican government’s all-out war to combat organized crime and violence perpetrated by drug trafficking organizations, known as drug cartels, throughout the country. The production and trafficking of illicit drugs in Mexico has been prevalent for many decades. In December 2006, however, the government of President Felipe Calderón of the National Action Party (PAN) made the eradication and interdiction of drugs and drug cartels a centerpiece of his domestic policy agenda (Seelke 2009). In December 2012, the government of President Enrique Peña Nieto of the Institutional Action Party (PRI) continued with this war on drugs, explicitly vowing to reduce the violence and criminality in the country. Despite claims of an end to the drug war by current President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of the National Regeneration Movement (MORENA) Party, he created an 80,000 member National Guard to enforce public security.

As a supporter of the prohibition and criminalization of drug use and trafficking, the U.S. state has been a major ally of Mexico’s drug war. In October 2007, the U.S. and Mexican governments announced the Mérida Initiative, a security cooperation that provides U.S. financial assistance for Mexico and Central America. The United States has funded Mexico’s counter-narcotic efforts since the late 1970s (Craig 1980). Nevertheless, the Merida Initiative has been the costliest security agreement thus far. As of FY2020, the United States provided \$3.1 billion in military hardware, training, and border enhancements (Beittel 2020). Since the start of the drug war, there has been an upsurge in homicides, femicides, disappearances, kidnapping and extortion, and the displacement of communities (Shirk and Wallman 2015; Human Rights Watch 2016;

Council on Foreign Affairs 2017). According to the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, in 2006 victims of intentional homicide rates were 9.1 per 100,000, which by 2018 increased to 29.1 (UN Office of Drugs and Crime). In 2019 alone, Mexico's national public security system reported more than 34,500 homicides (Beittel 2020).

In this article I argue the U.S. involvement in the Mexican drug war builds on the logics of the 19th century ideology of manifest destiny, which saw the country as incapable of governance, developing a democracy, and in need of U.S. supervision (Gonzalez and Fernandez 2003). However, instead of U.S. westward expansion, this ideology now serves to legitimate U.S. financial support for capitalist militarization to prevent Mexico's fall into a "narco-state," a "failed state," and a national security threat to the U.S. population. Instead of westward expansion of the United States, manifest destiny in the 21st century is about securing global capitalism. The Mexican war on drugs is a tactic in this endeavor.

Critical scholarship and research informed by social movements, journalists, and victims of the drug war argue that these policies and U.S. financial assistance have done little to eliminate drug trafficking or violence between drug cartels (Gibler 2011; Watt and Zepeda 2013; Paley 2014; Paley 2020a). Instead, the drug war has militarized Mexican society and caused numerous extra-judicial killings, sexual violence, and human rights violations by Mexican forces while also repressing social movement opposition (Morton 2012; Estévez 2019). Scholars argue the drug war is a strategy of U.S. imperialism to further dominate Mexico (Delgado-Ramos and Romano 2011; Carlos 2013).

In this article, I build on this scholarship. I argue beyond U.S. imperialism and its expansion in Mexico, the war on drugs is a strategy by elites in both the United States and Mexico to legitimate the Mexican neoliberal state's political, economic, and ideological governance over Mexican society. Through tough-on-crime legislation and maintenance of free market policies, the war on drugs is what Gramsci (1973) calls a "morbid symptom" that obfuscates the contradictions of global capitalism in the region. It is a way to manage a crisis of legitimacy of Mexico's neoliberal economic model, that has exacerbated impoverishment, economic inequality, and mass migration through what Paley (2020) calls "neoliberal war."

While these securitization initiatives between the United States and Mexico created a partnership between social forces within the region to purportedly combat drug trafficking and narco-violence, the underlying rationalities of these policies are to secure the free flow of transnational capital, commodities, the management and policing of labor and surplus populations, and counter grassroots organization and resistance. This article links the current war on drugs within the material conditions of the last forty years of the Mexican and global political economy, as well as the *longue durée* of U.S. imperialism in Mexico. Collectively, the structural adjustment programs in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, NAFTA in the 1990s, the Plan Puebla-Panamá and subsequent Mesoamerica Project in the 2000s, and now the USMCA agreement have created an upward redistribution of wealth for capital in Mexico and abroad while producing the immiseration of working classes. Neoliberalism and securitization in Mexico have produced the very conditions that they purport to prevent and control. While these contemporary political and

economic policies produce a distinct social formation, they must be linked to the historical development of Mexico and U.S. capitalist expansion in the nineteenth century. The discussion of Mexico's drug war as a case study will illuminate these processes.

Drug War as a Morbid Symptom

Building on Gramsci's analysis of a crisis of authority, I conceptualize the drug war in Mexico as a morbid symptom that obscures the crisis of neoliberalism and global capitalism in the region. In the *Prison Notebooks* (1973), Gramsci provides a generative analysis to interpret Mexico's drug war. When ruling classes lose their consensus to govern over the "great masses," they begin to exercise coercive force alone. A "wave of materialism," or a rise of political struggles from the masses, leads to a crisis of authority. "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old way is dying and the new cannot be born," Gramsci argues; "in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (Gramsci 1973: 275-276). The crisis of authority by ruling classes, Gramsci describes, leads to political, economic, and ideological repression to solve its legitimacy crisis. This is what he calls a struggle over hegemony.

In Mexico, like the United States, agents of the state have deployed counterinsurgency as a tactic to challenge the "waves of materialism" (Illades and Santiago 2014; Aviña 2016; Schrader 2019). This counterinsurgency has taken distinct forms to eliminate grassroots mobilization, insurrection, and revolution. Since the late 1960s, counterinsurgency in the United States is illustrated through what Gilmore (1999: 176) calls "domestic war-making;" the deployment of racialized law and order campaigns. In Mexico, a crisis of legitimacy emerging from the fraudulent 2006 presidential elections and the polarization of wealth throughout Mexico at the time led Calderón to wage his own domestic war. Four days after his inauguration, he publicly announced:

Rest assured that my government is working hard to win the war on crime, to ensure that the rights of all are protected and respected, with the right to property and investment; and fighting relentlessly against corruption and to safeguard the right to life, liberty, and heritage. (quoted in Hernández 2013: 237)

Calderón was blessed by the Bush administration in the United States, and Mexican business leaders affiliated with COPARMEX and CONCAMIN, two powerful business and industrial organizations in Mexico. In an earlier meeting with an organization named Mexico United Against Delinquency (MUCD), Calderón noted, "not only do citizens suffer from the threats of delinquency of organized crime, this delinquency is also a threat to the state, it is a threat to peace and stability" (quoted in Torre 2013: 31).

According to Paley, the drug war deployed by Calderón can be described as a "neoliberal war" (Paley 2020). Contrasting the Cold War that politicized counterinsurgency in Mexico and throughout Latin America, the neoliberal war consists of "the confusion and depoliticization of violence, state militarization and an expanded form of counterinsurgency against everything that opposes (or intervenes with) the expanded cycles of capital accumulation and its related processes

of concentration of material wealth” (Paley 2020: 22). Rather than communists or subversives as the national and transnational security threat, criminality and drug trafficking is the substitute that justifies the deployment of state forces, paramilitary groups, and U.S. intervention (Bourgeois 2015). This substitution enshrines the legitimacy of the neoliberal state.

As a neoliberal war, the drug war must be conceptualized as a tactic by capitalists and their political counterparts in Mexico and the United States to muddle the crisis of legitimacy (authority) of the Mexican state. It is a morbid symptom that obfuscates the class struggle through its counterinsurgency. As I will describe below, the history of Mexico’s political economy and its development of a neoliberal state has exhausted the ability for the “great masses” of Mexico to reproduce itself in a dignified way. The upward redistribution of wealth, a common ideal type of neoliberal states, has relied on the iron fist of a drug war to continue its realization in Mexico.

U.S. Manifest Destiny to the Manifest Destiny of Global Capital

The concrete conditions of Mexico’s drug war are best understood through its unfortunate front row seat of the makings of U.S. imperialism. In 1848, through a manufactured war, Mexico lost half of its national territory, natural resources, and was left economically bankrupt. The U.S. war with Mexico allowed the United States to expand westward, but more so, it allowed U.S. capital to gain more land and labor for capital accumulation. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, in 1848, determined the Rio Bravo as the U.S.-Mexico border and occupied a large portion of Mexico’s northwest territory. Negotiation of this treaty was in the best interests of Mexican and U.S. elites and white workers at the cost of the majority of Mexicans workers and indigenous people. This era began the construction of the U.S. Southwest, the Mexican north, and a legacy that ushered a racial regime incorporating Mexicans into a U.S. racial hierarchy.

The legitimation of this expansion and occupation was the ideology of manifest destiny. According to Barrera (1979: 13), “Manifest destiny was essentially a manipulated appeal and an attempt to secure broad popular support for an expansionist policy of particular benefit to certain political and economic interests.” These interests were concealed by appeals to race and religion. Mexicans and the state of Mexico were placed in subordinate position to whites and the U.S. state. As a right-wing, nationalist ideology promoted by politicians, journalists, and filibusters, manifest destiny created a common-sense notion of Mexicans and indigenous peoples as biologically unfit to live and govern the land (Isenberg and Richards 2017).

Democratic politician and publicist John L. O’Sullivan first used the term in the early 1840s to legitimate the use of force against Mexico (Horsman 1981). He argued that nations should not interfere in what he saw as a “natural” process of U.S. westward expansion, and should not thwart “our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking their fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development” of U.S. capital (quoted in Horsman 1981: 219). Another writer and promoter of manifest destiny, Thomas Jefferson Farnham, focusing on those who lived in California argued, “in a word, the Californians are an imbecile, pusillanimous, race of men, and unfit to control the destinies of that

beautiful country” (quoted in Pitti 2004: 26). Manifest destiny legitimated a U.S. foreign policy based on Thomas Jefferson’s notion of an empire for liberty—unlike European empires, the United States was to lead the Western Hemisphere through its values and interests (Grandon 2006). These values and interest molding U.S. foreign policy were guided by the interests of national capital. As Grandon (2006) argues, this conception of empire still plays a role in U.S. foreign policy today.

The era following the U.S.-Mexico war, economic liberalism dominated Mexico. During the mid-1870s, Porfirio Díaz began his period of modernization by selling railroad concessions to large U.S. corporations. Within Díaz’s first three years in power, the United States constructed some twenty-five hundred miles of railroad that went from the southern tip of Mexico to the north. Eighty percent of all investment on the railroad system came from the United States. Along with investing in Mexican railroads, U.S. capitalists also invested in mining, agricultural production, and oil production. By the early 1900s, U.S. capital controlled most, if not all, of the Mexican economy. Many notable names in the twenty-first century such as J.P. Morgan, Daniel Guggenheim, and J.D. Rockefeller dominated the Mexican economy. The Southern Pacific, Union Pacific, and Santa Fe also had large control of the oil, mining, railroads, and agricultural industry (Gonzalez 2006).

During the Porfiriato, capital used the newly created rural police forces to break up communal lands and expand their holdings, leading to the highest concentration of land ownership in Mexican history (Gibler 2011). By 1911, U.S. capitalists owned most of Mexico’s oil industry, which became the third largest oil supplier in the world (Grandin 2006). The economic inequality and hoarding of land would soon result in revolution.

After the Mexican revolution of 1910, the country experienced a stage of national development with the emergence of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR), which would eventually become the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Mexico’s economic development between the 1940s and 1970s centered on import-substitution industrialization (ISI) and industry and trade protectionism. The growth of Mexico’s economy during this period has been popularly known as the “Mexican Miracle.” This miracle was based on a policy framework that was committed to state regulation over a major part of the economy, the protection and promotion of industry, and extremely low levels of taxation (Babb 2001). These policies lowered real wages for agricultural and nonagricultural sectors. U.S. capital once again invested in the country but through Mexico’s public finance and development institution, Nacional Financiera. U.S. banks such as Bank of America and Chase Manhattan were major lenders to Nacional Financiera. Between 1942 and 1959, more than \$900 million, mostly U.S. origin, was invested in major works of infrastructure in Mexico (Gonzalez and Fernandez 2003). This infrastructure focused on Mexico’s northern border states.

During the “Mexican Miracle,” the United States and Mexico institutionalized labor migration through the Bracero Program (1942-1964) and developed export-processing zones (EPZ) through the Border Industrial Program (BIP), or better known as the Maquiladora program in 1964. This program transformed the entire Mexican side of the border into a giant assembly plant. It made the northern border of Mexico into a stronger appendage of U.S. manufacturing and

would later open it to the global economy. This new economic arrangement did not solve the unemployment problem in Mexico, nor allow it to become economically self-sufficient. The BIP changed Mexico from a political economy organized around ISI to one consumed by maquiladoras. In 1965, Mexico had fifty maquiladoras, but by 2004, the number had spiked close to three thousand. Furthermore, the maquiladora industry has exploited Mexican women and created the conditions for femicide to emerge around the border cities, with Juarez being the epicenter of this gendered violence. The Mesoamerican Women Human Rights Defenders Initiative highlights that in 2007, 53 femicides were reported in Juarez. By 2010, which was the height of the military presence in the city, the number had increased to 584 (MAWG 2014).

Crises are moments of change. In 1974, an economic crisis occurred in Mexico that encompassed the devaluation of the peso, inflation, and capital flight; and ultimately this was resolved by neoliberal-oriented elites. Trying to find its way out of the crisis, Mexican elites sought loan negotiations with the IMF and the World Bank. The foreign debt rose from \$6.8 billion in 1972 to \$58 billion by 1982 (Harvey 2007). It was at this conjunctural period that world capitalism went through a major crisis that would see its demise and an epochal shift. According to Robinson (2008: 15), globalized capitalism allowed “capital to shake off the constraints that nation-state capitalism (or corporate capitalism) had placed on accumulation and to break free from class compromises and concessions that had been imposed by working and popular classes and by national governments in the preceding epoch.” This transition in Mexico in which business interests strengthened their independent position and linked with transnational capital shifted the relations of class forces. The Mexican state was in crisis with an external debt it could no longer cover.

Neoliberal Mexico

In the mid-nineteenth century, the U.S. government occupied Mexican territory to advance its capitalist enterprise. In the late twentieth century, the United States played a leading role in intensifying capitalist expansion beyond the level of the nation-state. Babb (2001) explains how economic restructuring in Mexico emerged through the relationship between three historical processes: 1) transnational financial pressures, 2) the rise of foreign-trained technocrats in government, and 3) the implementation of neoliberal reforms. Rather than neoliberalism imposed on Mexican society, transnational-oriented elites led the way in the dismantling of the developmentalist state toward a neoliberal state. These historical processes began in 1982 with Mexico declaring bankruptcy. According to an IMF report on Mexico, the problems of the country emerged from the “expansive policy of public spending.” Its only way out of its debt crisis was to pay less attention to “the objectives of production and employment” (quoted in Ortega 201: 39).

While President José López Portillo nationalized the banks as an emergency procedure to avoid further capital flight, the Miguel de la Madrid administration, who took office shortly after, made agreements with the IMF, World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury to bail Mexico out of its economic crisis and begin its first wave of structural adjustment programs (SAPs). These were the

first SAPs proposed to Mexico. “In 1984 the World Bank, for the first time in its history,” Harvey argues, “granted a loan to a country in return for structural neoliberal reforms” (Harvey 2007: 100). These neoliberal reforms proceeded in two stages (Babb 2001). The first were SAPs. The government budget was slashed, subsidies were either eliminated or reduced, and the real wages of government workers were also reduced. President de la Madrid also further opened Mexico to the global economy by joining the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), now known as the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The second stage of neoliberal reforms came at the end of de la Madrid’s presidency and during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The reforms implemented under Salinas were institutional reforms that would further dismantle the developmentalist state. Major para-state owned industries such as the telecommunications company (Telmex), television stations, the national steel company, and two airlines were privatized. The banking system that had been nationalized in 1982 was reprivatized and the financial system further liberalized. According to Babb (2001: 172), “Policy toward foreign investors was liberalized such that foreign firms could acquire up to 100% ownership in publicly traded Mexican firms.” Under Salinas the central bank was granted formal independence from the government.

These changes in the political economy of Mexico produced a concentration of wealth never before seen in the country. Mexico’s economic restructuring produced twenty-four billionaires, some of the wealthiest people in the world at the time. Two examples are Roberto Ramírez Hernández who became the chairman and CEO of Banamex, the national bank of Mexico that was privatized in 1991, and Carlos Slim, owner of Telmex. Both became some of the wealthiest men in Mexico and advocates for the neoliberalization of Mexican society (Watt and Zepeda 2013). By 2005 Mexico ranked ninth in the world for its number of billionaires. Wealth distribution under structural adjustment went upward towards capitalist classes while the rest of Mexican society was left in the dark. As Watt and Zepeda (2013: 104) argue, “under neoliberalism, the costs were social, the profits private.”

Under these conditions, informal employment almost doubled between 1980 and 1987 while social expenditure fell to half its 1980 level (Davis 2006). “Following adoption of a second SAP in 1986” Davis notes, “the percentage of births attended by medical personnel fell from 94 percent in 1983 to 45 percent in 1988, while maternal mortality soared from 82 per 100,000 in 1980 to 150 in 1988” (Davis 2006: 148). The value of real wages for workers fell between forty and fifty percent. The structural adjustments in Mexico led many to flee the country. Unlike the previous migration in which the majority of Mexicans were from the countryside and with little formal education, the structural adjustments in Mexico pushed a significant amount of the middle strata of society to migrate. Between 1988 and 1994 state employment was cut by half.

Migration would pursue with a major policy shift under President Salinas: the revision of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution. The amendment of Article 27 in 1992 would end the revolutionary agreement of land reform that emerged during the Mexican Revolution. The amendment allowed for the opening of *ejidos* for purchase by private investors, foreign and domestic. This set the stage for the destruction of the *ejido* system and the negotiations for

Salinas's North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (Babb 2001). While the negotiations for NAFTA were occurring, forty percent of the Mexican population was living on less than \$2 per day. In the early 1990s Mexico City had an estimated 6.6 million low-income people living contiguously in 348 square kilometers of informal housing (Davis 2007). According to the Salinas administration, a free trade policy between Mexico, the United States, and Canada would alleviate these conditions. He argued that an open border for trade was a horizon of progress for Mexico. Privatization was synonymous with modernization while state, public, or collective ownership of property represented backwardness and an obstacle to this progress (Ortega 2013).

The signing and implementation of NAFTA in 1994 would be costly for working classes in Mexico while profitable for its elites. NAFTA was a political and economic policy supported and encouraged by capitalist classes on both sides of the border, and globally. It was an accumulation strategy for transnational corporations that focused on the Mexican agricultural system. Its transformation went from a small-scale production system for the domestic market to a globally integrated system based on large-scale export-oriented capitalist agriculture (Robinson 2014). With these changes, more than two million people were forced off their lands in the six years following the signing of NAFTA. While small-scale farmers suffered by these changes, transnational conglomerates such as GIMSA and MINISA controlled ninety-seven percent of the market in corn and flour for tortillas. Before structural adjustment, the National Company of Popular Subsistence (CONASUPO) controlled prices and imports on basic crops such as beans and corn. Under trade liberalization, CONASUPO was gradually dismantled and raised the prices of basic foodstuff and necessities. Watt and Zepeda (2013: 125) note, "The price of milk, tortillas, petrol, electricity, and public transport shot up at the same time that wages were being slashed. The government-subsidized CONASUPO stores, which had made daily necessities available to poor communities, were simultaneously close down." Between 1992 and 1999, extreme poverty increased from 16 percent to 28 percent (Davis 2007).

The maquiladora industry also increased its export driven production. In 2000, exports from Mexico were monopolized by thirty transnational corporations, which accounted for 40 percent of the total exports. From those 40 percent of exports, General Motors, Daimler-Chrysler, Delphi Co., Volkswagen, and Samsung controlled 47.7 percent (Ortega 2013). Under NAFTA, maquiladoras became the main sector of the economy producing employment. However, they provided fewer jobs than the ones lost when state-owned industry and agriculture were privatized. The "maquiladorization" of Mexican society created a state in which 54 percent of the population lived in poverty (Soederberg 2001). It has also produced the "longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history" (Gaspar de Alba 2010: 1). In 2003 Amnesty International found that the disappearances and murders of women increased after the signing of NAFTA. Most of these women were maquiladora workers (Amnesty International 2003).

When Vicente Fox became president in 2000 a mainstream position was that a transition toward democracy was occurring in Mexico. The seventy years of the PRI had ended. However, Fox and the PAN did not represent democracy, but rather further neoliberalization. In 2001 a year after he entered his presidency, Fox introduced the Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP). The PPP was a \$10

billion regional integration project that would create and interconnect transportation routes, industrial corridors, and a variety of infrastructure projects throughout Mesoamerica (Southern Mexico and Central America). This project would firmly root neoliberalism in the region. The PPP officially, like NAFTA, purported to promote sustainable and human development, while actually focusing on tourism, facilitation of commerce, transportation, interconnection of electricity, and integration of telecommunication services. By 2004 more than 90 percent of the \$5 billion budgeted thus far had focused on transportation and electrification initiatives; making sure that commodities and transnational capital accumulation freely crossed borders.

The Mesoamerica Project (MP) superseded the PPP in 2008. According to the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), its main supporter, the MP would boost free trade and economic growth in the region but “for these investments to be made and pay off, however, the region must be integrated into the global economy” (Inter-American Development Bank 2011). The MP extended the neoliberal project that was created in Mexico in 1982. It further exacerbated the immiseration in the region while further integrating Mexico into global capitalism. Mexico became a space of free trade, migration, and transnational capital accumulation. Between 2000 and 2012, foreign direct investment (FDI) from the United States totaled \$291.7 billion, 43% of this investment was in manufacturing while 20% was in the financial sectors. In 2012 alone, FDI in Mexico totaled \$12.66 billion, with 55.7% channeled to manufacturing. This FDI mostly came from the United States (58.5 %), but also included Japan (13.1%), Canada (8.2%), Germany (5.9%), Netherlands (5.7%), and France (2.6%) (U.S. Embassy 2014).

The neoliberal restructuring of Mexico devastated the masses in Mexico. Its emergence in the early 1980s brought a wave of foreign investment and privatization that alienated the working class. Within this alienation, there has been resistance, opposition, and the development of alternative ways of living, which I discuss here, but in general, it has produced an unstable situation. The year 2006 was a tipping point; a general crisis of the neoliberal state had been emerging. However, this crisis was displaced to a manufactured crisis of drug trafficking, delinquency, and crime. All three have existed in Mexican society, but at this historical conjuncture, it consolidated into a legitimacy crisis that lent itself to political and economic interests.

The Mexican Drug War

Since the early twentieth century, the trafficking of illicit substances, like corruption, have been part of Mexico’s folklore and popular imaginary. The construction of the border between the United States and Mexico and the prohibition of alcohol in the early twentieth century were described by popular ballads, also known as *corridos*. These *corridos* told stories of bootleggers and drug traffickers as anti-heroes against Mexican and U.S. law and order. Drug trafficking was a solution to impoverishment. Despite portrayals of anti-heroes who oppose and evade U.S. and Mexican law-enforcement, drug traffickers are neither revolutionary nor anti-capitalist. Rather they form part of the global political economy. “Thus,” Campbell argues, “we should not

romanticize counter systemic forces such as drug cartels; instead, we must understand how drug traffickers and the social circumstances they create are complex and contradictory or how they can be resistant on one level and not resistant on another” (Campbell 2009: 9).

Common-sense notions of drug cartels produce essentialist assumptions that these organizations are unified, enormous, tightly organized, and removed from the larger social formation. However, cartels, are shifting, contingent, and temporal alliances between trafficking networks (Campbell 2009). And like all capitalist enterprises, cartels are businesses whose bottom line is capital accumulation. They have been a major capitalist enterprise in Mexican society that are managed and regulated by the Mexican state.

During the mid-twentieth century, the Mexican government began anti-narcotic campaigns through its National Security Directorate (DFS) but as Watt and Zepeda (2013) show, the Mexican government used the DFS and its anti-narcotics operations as a device to justify repression and social control of political opposition, leftist organizations, and weaken the labor movement. In the 1970s, Operation Condor emerged to eradicate marijuana and opium cultivation in the northern states of Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua. Described as a program that would terminate the cultivation of narcotics drugs in Mexican soil, Operation Condor did not go after high-level growers or traffickers, rather it focused on the rural poor. The economic crisis of the 1970s led many peasants to depend on the production of illicit crops for their livelihood. The agrarian sector was in decline with average farmer’s income falling and cultivation being reduced by 20 percent (Watt and Zepeda 2013). Craig (1980) describes Operation Condor as a celebrated and successful program for eradicating illegal crops. However, what it really did was control and repress the actions of the peasant bases of Mexico. “Unable to survive off the land, desperate campesinos are flooding the cities, abandoning the ejido and private plots, seizing haciendas, executing local caciques, streaming across the border as [undocumented] immigrants, and becoming drug entrepreneurs” (Craig 1980: 355). He further adds, “This has led some writers to conclude that Mexico’s war against the poppy may be accurately termed a war against the peasant and the real or imagined guerillas of the sierras” (Craig 180: 355).

In both the DFS and Operation Condor, the United States contributed millions of dollars in military training and armament. The DFS worked in conjunction with the CIA in sharing information of social movements throughout Mexico, while Operation Condor set the conditions for a formalized and permanent presence of U.S. agents in the country. According to journalist Anabel Hernández (2013), the Mexican state with support from the United States has been the true “godfathers” of the informal drug economy. If not for the “collusion of businessmen, politicians, and policemen, and all those who exercise everyday power behind a false halo of illegality” the emergence of what is commonly now known as drug cartels would not exist (Hernandez 2013: 6). In other words, the capitalist state has managed the trafficking of illicit substances and created the conditions for its spread throughout Mexico. Drug money is part of Mexico’s economy, it is in the vaults of the banks and “with traffickers’ annual profits estimated between \$30 billion and \$60 billion a year, rival oil as the largest single source of cash revenue in the country” (Gibler 2011:

25). Despite this link between the capitalist state and drug trafficking, the Mexican political elites argue that drug cartels, or narcos, are producing the disorder in the country, not neoliberalism.

While the structural adjustments, free trade, and market-led development took place, the majority of Mexico's people were further impoverished. Many migrated, joined the informal economy, and others found work through the drug trade. By 2008, drug trafficking was the fifth largest employer in the country (Rios 2008). It had surpassed Pemex, which is one of the largest employers in the world. In 2006, Mexico's population had enough, but so had its neoliberal state. Popular protests were culminating in a crisis of leadership for Mexico's ruling classes. The crisis of Mexico's neoliberal state sought to find its legitimacy through its drug war, a campaign promoted by capital to eliminate those it sees as a burden or no longer needed. In Mexico it is the poor and surplus labor populations of Mexico.

According to Campbell (2009) the use of the term "war on drugs" by both the Mexican and U.S. government is misleading and hypocritical. It gives the impression that there is an actual military campaign being waged by tightly organized armies. Paley (2014) argues the term is a misnomer that conceals policies of social control and terror in the United States, Mexico, and Central America aimed at aggrieved and racially oppressed communities, displaced peasants, and indigenous communities. Yet as a tactic; what is known as the war on drugs or drug war in Mexico has been argued to be necessary by the U.S. and Mexican governments. In 2007, the United States increased its military aid and supported the further militarization of Mexican society in response to the counter-hegemonic moment emerging.

Calderón's announcement of a drug war and its support by the United States through the Mérida Initiative had its antecedents in the joint trade and security talks between the United States, Canada, and Mexico in March 2005. Meeting in Waco, Texas, the presidents of Mexico, the United States, and the prime minister of Canada launched the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP). The SPP was not a signed agreement or treaty, but rather an endeavor between the three states to facilitate communication and cooperation in advancing free trade and security. The initial plan of the SSP established security and prosperity working groups. The U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff, chaired the security group while U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Carlos Miguel Gutiérrez, chaired the prosperity group. Both Chertoff and Gutiérrez had served as co-authors of the U.S. PATRIOT Act and strong proponents of DR-CAFTA.

The SSP's apparent focus was to "better protect citizens from terrorist threats and transnational crime while promoting the safe and efficient movement of legitimate people and goods" (Villareal and Lake 2009: 4). The SSP was an attempt to coalesce NAFTA and the "war on terror". It sought to deepen the flows of transnational capital by way of force through the repressive arm of the state. In 2007 Thomas Shannon, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, argued that SSP was a security initiative that would protect the economic region of North America. "To a certain extent," he argued, "we're armoring NAFTA." (quoted in Carlsen 2008). Through the armoring of NAFTA, the SSP would unite transnational corporations under the North American Competitive Council (NACC). The NACC consisted of transnational corporations including Chevron, Campbell Soup Company, ExxonMobil, Protector

and Gamble, and transnational elites from Mexico and Canada including Ismael Plascencia, president of CONCAMIN, Daniel Montull, CEO of Grupo Bimbo, José Luis Barraza, Chairman of Aeroméxico, Annette Verschuren, President of Home Depot Canada and Asia, and Gordon Nixon, President and CEO of the Royal Bank of Canada. Two neoliberal think tanks, the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness and the Council of the Americas, also participated in the NACC.

In their 2008 report *Meeting the Global Challenge*, the NACC (2008: 11) argued, “in a rapidly changing global economy we must continue to reduce unnecessary barriers to trade among the three countries. To this end, we must implement the NAFTA in full and build its strengths.” In order to implement NAFTA “in full” they recommended further advancing free market development projects such as facilitating easier entry for cargo across borders, efficient transportation networks, a trilateral Intellectual Property Action Strategy for “more rigorous” protection of intellectual property rights, and financial regulation to increase access to capital and cross-border collaboration on investment.

The armoring and expansion of NAFTA did not go through as expected. The SPP did not consolidate into an actual initiative but rather a series of meetings between working groups and government officials. By 2009 the SSP was no longer a security initiative on the table. Instead a much larger and stronger initiative was proposed. On October 22, 2007, The Mérida Initiative was announced by the United States and Mexico. It was a multi-year proposal for \$1.4 billion from the United States to support counterdrug and narcotics operations in Mexico and Central America. In June 2008, the 110th Congress appropriated \$400 million for Mexico and \$65 million for Central America (Seelke 2009). According to the U.S. State Department the Mérida Initiative was an “unprecedented partnership” between the United States and Mexico to “fight organized crime and associated violence while furthering respect for human rights and the rule of law” (U.S. State Department).

During the first three years, Mérida Initiative funding was primarily used for the purchase and provision of military equipment and training. The equipment included eight transport helicopters, two surveillance planes, inspection equipment such as x-rays scanners, and modernized communications, and information technology (Guzik 2013). Military manufacturers such as Sikorsky Company, headquartered in Connecticut, and Bell, headquartered in Texas, profited from these purchases. “Militarized accumulation” plays a major role in the militarization process and the control of surplus labor populations (Robinson 2020). The Mérida Initiative was fundamentally the expansion of what Paley (2014) calls “drug war capitalism.” While militarizing Mexican society, the Mérida Initiative also institutionalized reforms to sustain the rule of law and the creation of a twenty-first century border.

As soon as Calderón centered drug trafficking as a national crisis, U.S. politicians and security analysts followed his lead. The link between drug trafficking and terrorism, and Mexico as a failed state, helped to further develop the legitimacy behind the drug war. In 2008 Thomas Friedman’s STRAFOR published an article titled “Mexico: On the Road to a Failed State?” According to Friedman the drug trafficking organizations in the country posed a violent threat to the Mexican state and the region. The violence in Mexico had nothing to do with the more than twenty-five

years of neoliberal restructuring. It was the violent drug cartels and their attack and control over the government which was the cause of Mexico's social problems. This control over the government by the cartels was leading Mexico towards a failed state. "We are talking about a systematic breakdown of the state, in which government is not simply influenced by criminals but becomes an instrument of criminals—either an arena for battling among groups or under the control of a particular group," Friedman (2008) argued. Friedman continued: "The state no longer can carry out its primary function of imposing peace, and it becomes helpless or itself a direct perpetrator of crime."

Friedman asserted that Mexico's inability to control the violence in the country results from the power of the drug trafficking organizations. Just as Calderón argued that drug trafficking was not only harming citizens, but also the state itself, Friedman sensationalized the violence to argue that Mexico was at the brink of ungovernability. To further add fuel to the failed state argument, Friedman provided a revisionist history of Mexico:

It is important to remember that Mexico has a tradition of failed governments, particularly in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In those periods, Mexico City became an arena for struggle among army officers and regional groups straddling the line between criminal and political. The Mexican army became an instrument in this struggle and its control a prize. The one thing missing was the vast amounts of money at stake. So, there is a tradition of state failure in Mexico, and there are higher stakes today than before. (Friedman 2008)

According to Friedman, Mexico's "tradition" of failed governments was part of its history and so the threat of drug cartels monopolizing the violence will only lead to chaos. To Friedman, this important for three reasons:

First, Mexico is a huge country, with a population of more than 100 million. Second, it has a large economy—the 14th largest in the world. And third, it shares an extended border with the world's only global power, one that has assumed for most of the 20th century that its domination of North America and control of its borders is a foregone conclusion. If Mexico fails, there are serious geopolitical repercussions. This is not simply a criminal matter. (Friedman 2008)

Although his first point mentions the people of Mexico, the other two point to Mexico's importance in the global political economy and the U.S. regional security and dominance in its leading role in the expansion of global capital. The failed state argument by Friedman was his endorsement of providing aid to militarize Mexican society.

Like Friedman, the US Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM) published a 2008 report for the US Department of Defense that also pointed to Mexico as a failed state. According to the report, impediments for economic growth in Latin America were criminal gangs and drug cartels. "In particular," the report states, "the growing assault by the drug cartels and their thugs on the Mexican government over the past several years reminds one that an unstable Mexico could represent a homeland security problem of immense proportions to the United States" (USJFCOM

2008: 34). The assault on the government by “thugs” was not only a threat to Mexico, but also the US. This threat leads the USJFCOM to argue that Mexico was in danger of “rapid and sudden” collapse:

The Mexican possibility may seem less likely, but the government, its politicians, police, and judicial infrastructure are all under sustained assault and pressure by criminal gangs and drug cartels. How that internal conflict turns out over the next several years will have a major impact on the stability of the Mexican state. Any descent of Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone. (USJFCOM 2008: 36)

According to John P. Sullivan, a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies on Terrorism (CAST) and lieutenant in the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department, this instability described by USJFCOM was creating the conditions in which “the barbarians” were “dangerously close to breaching the castle walls” (Sullivan and Elkus 2008). Writing for Small Wars Journal in 2008, Sullivan and Elkus argue that Mexico was confronted with a criminal insurgency that are weakening the structures of governance and the rule of law. This criminal insurgency, according to Sullivan and Elkus, was linked with MS-13 in both the United States and Central America. A 2008 report by the Congressional Research Service also stated that Mexican cartels were increasing their relationship between prison and street gangs, also mentioning MS-13 (Collen 2008). “The only real long-term solution is a sustained intervention in Mexico’s drug war approaching the scale and resources of Plan Colombia,” Sullivan and Elkus state. “The Merida Initiative, a recently approved \$400 million aid package, is a step in the right direction” (Sullivan and Elkus 2008). To Sullivan and Elkus and security analysts more broadly, a transnational militarized response was the only solution to poverty-induced violence.

During a 2010 interview with the Council on Foreign Relations, former U.S. Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, argued that Mexico was being threatened by an insurgency akin to Colombia twenty years ago. “We face an increasing threat from a well-organized network, drug-trafficking threat that is,” she stated, “in some cases, morphing into or making common cause with what we would consider an insurgency, in Mexico and in Central America” (Council on Foreign Relations 2010). She praised Calderón for his “courage and commitment”: “It’s going to take a combination of improved institutional capacity and better law enforcement and, where appropriate, military support for that law enforcement, you know, married to political will, to be able to prevent this from spreading and to try to beat it back” (Council on Foreign Relations 2010).

Although both President Obama and President Calderón did not agree with comparing Mexico to Colombia or the cartels to an insurgency, as Delgado-Ramos and Romano (2011) argue, the policies of the Mérida Initiative—like Plan Colombia—produce a “stabilization-destabilization” process in Latin American countries. They ensure social control and criminalization of protest against the social formation and provide security for transnational capital. In other words, these security policies provide peace and quiet for the free market, but no peace and justice for the people. Although both presidents chose not to compare Mexico to Colombia, they share similar responses to poverty and the crises it produces.

U.S. policy analysts and government leaders have called Mexico a failed state that is confronting a narco-insurgency, a country that no longer can function without the support of the United States. In Mexico, politicians have called Mexico a narco-state. After the massacre of twenty-two people by the Mexican military in Tlatlaya in the state of Mexico and the disappearances of forty-three students in Ayotzinapa in the state of Guerrero, Silvano Blanco Deaquino, federal deputy and member of the PRD, stated:

It has to be recognized that there is a narco-state in Mexico. It has to be recognized that there is narco politics. It has to be recognized that from the Presidency of the Republic, to local governments and municipal governments, organized crime effectively provides financial resources for their campaigns. The country must recognize it. (Cervantes 2014)

By definition, a narco-state is corrupted and controlled by drug trafficking organizations, such as the case for Mexican state institutions, according to both Deaquino and scholars such as Valencia (2018). Like the terms failed state and narco-insurgency, however, the term narco-state conceals rather illuminates the contradictions that neoliberal capitalism has created in Mexico. A transnational response of combating drug trafficking and gangs, avoiding Mexico's slip into a failed state, or combating a narco-state are all ruses that cover up the upward distribution of wealth and downward distribution of repression and social control of popular masses. They conceal the way agents of the state and capital are managing the surplus labor population, the popular protests that emerge, and the counter mobilization of progressive, radical, and leftist movements in the region. Naming the Mexican state as a narco-state avoids revealing the development of the neoliberal state and its disinvestment in social reproduction. As Harvey (2007: 75) asserts, "Internally, the neoliberal state is necessarily hostile to all forms of social solidarity that put restraints on capital accumulation." The social solidarity that the neoliberal Mexican state responded to in 2006 was a response to the crisis it had produced. The war on drugs was a farce to militarize the country in response to it.

The ideological abstractions used to justify the United States and Mexico's coordinated effort to control popular protests and organization ignores the structural processes of global capitalism. U.S. intellectuals such as George W. Grayson and his book *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (2010) or Sylvia Longmire and her book *Cartel: The Coming Invasion of Mexico's Drug Wars* (2011) legitimate these ideological abstractions in the name of regional security and expansion of the free market.¹ In other words, these arguments about Mexico's violence and inability to govern over its populace are hegemonic. However, as Morton (2012) asserts, these forms of studies of drug trafficking essentially ignore and refuse to engage the neoliberal restructuring that occurred in Mexico. "Overall," Morton argues, "it is the caricature of Mexico, based on the abstraction of the 'failed state' discourse removed from the historical development of particular forms of state, and isolated from the political economy and geopolitical dynamics

¹ Longmire's book was nominated for a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and Grayson is a regular lecturer at the U.S. Department of State.

structuring postcolonial state forms, that has to be rejected” (Morton 2012: 1636). U.S. dominant discourse on the drug war in Mexico builds on legacies of U.S. imperialism in Mexico (Alfredo 2013). However, in the current moment, the U.S. and Mexican state are collaborating to secure global capital. As Calderón argued, the first step in development is law and order; laws that upholds private property over humanity, and a form of order that guarantees capital accumulation, no matter the cost.

Securing the Manifest Destiny of Global Capital

Drug wars are class wars. They are deceitful campaigns waged by one class over another to legitimate the hateful solutions used to resolve class contradictions. Often racialized and gendered in their outcomes, drug wars are conceits within a political economy in crises. The drug war in Mexico, a neoliberal war, emerged while a legitimacy crisis of the neoliberal state was brewing. As a morbid symptom of capitalist contradictions, the drug war was organized by agents of the Mexican and U.S. state to defend global capitalism in the region. As a case study, the so-called drug war in Mexico highlights the tactics agents of the capitalist state use to regain their monopoly of legitimate violence over those it governs. As Poulantza (2000: 81) posits, “State-monopolized physical violence permanently underlies the techniques of power and mechanism of consent.” Notwithstanding the extra-legal violence emerging from drug cartels and drug trafficking, the violence of the capitalist state and the capitalist relations of exploitation it manages, in the first instance, determine its terrain.

In this article I have argued the U.S. involvement in the Mexican drug war pursued the logics of manifest destiny. Manifest destiny was a rightwing, nationalist illusion of strength that justified war, capital accumulation, and settler colonialism. Early capitalist expansion required brute force through accumulation by dispossession. Now, manifest destiny enshrines global capitalist expansion through accumulation by repression and salvation of the neoliberal state. Global capitalist expansion is thought of as “natural” just as U.S. expansion was thought of as “natural.” As Dunbar-Ortiz (2014) cautions, many remain captive of this ideology.

During Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration, from 2012-2018, the drug war and the privatization of public resources continued. The international press labeled Peña Nieto’s presidency the rise of the “Aztec tiger” for the changes he would bring to the country through energy reforms and the privatization of education and telecommunications (Thomson 2013). In September 2014, the disappearance of forty-three students from a teacher training school in the small village of Ayotzinapa in the state of Guerrero created a national and international outcry against his administration. The Mexican government blamed drug cartels for their disappearance and urged the families to move on with their lives. The families refused and exposed the façade of the drug war. ¡Fue el Estado (it was the state)! This statement was a demand from families and social movements to focus our attention to the atrocities being committed by capitalist states.

In July 2020, The USMCA, a revised NAFTA was signed into law. In his 2006 presidential campaign, Lopez Obrador’s platform focused on challenging NAFTA to protect the impoverished

Mexican corn and bean farmers. In 2019, he argued USMCA would be good for job creation, trade, and foreign investment. Despite the progressive appeals by Lopez Obrador, social movements have raised valid criticism against his heavy-handed approach in detaining and deporting Central American refugees and his proposed Tren Maya, an infrastructure project that will spur displacement in the Yucatan Peninsula (Paley 2020b). His “hugs not bullets” strategy to avoid armed confrontations with drugs cartels has been criticized by former President Calderón and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank (Sandin and McCormick 2019; El Financiero 2020). Trying to apply pressure on Lopez Obrador to continue the drug war, President Trump said his administration was statutorily ready to designate Mexican drug cartels foreign terrorist organizations.

In March 2020, during the Trump administration, U.S. Attorney General William Barr charged Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and other Venezuelan officials of narco-terrorism, drug-trafficking, and corruption with notable lack of evidence. Along its economic sanctions on Venezuela, these charges continued the U.S. proxy war on Venezuela and its Bolivarian revolution. As we enter the Biden presidency, we would be remiss to forget Biden, while in the U.S. Senate, was one of the architects of Plan Colombia, a dirty war waged against the Colombian Left (Biden 2015). Securing the manifest destiny of global capitalism necessitates toppling alternative political projects. By crafting and funding drug wars in Colombia, Mexico, the Philippines, and now Venezuela, should we reserve the concept of narco-state for the United States? Maybe we should consider Guzmán’s final words at his arraignment. He would know best.

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