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The State-Crime Complex: Transnational Organised Crime and
the State in Twentieth-Century Mexico

verfasst von | submitted by
Aron Lenny Teuscher

angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Contents

Abstract	i
List of Abbreviations	ii
1 Introduction	1
2 From <i>State-Crime Binary</i> to <i>State-Crime Complex</i>	9
2.1 What is Crime?	9
2.2 What is the State?	17
2.3 On the Relation of Crime and State	28
2.3.1 <i>State-Crime Binary</i> – the Example of the <i>State Capacity</i> Concept	28
2.3.2 Theories of State and Crime Convergence	31
2.3.3 The System of Protection Rackets	37
2.3.4 The <i>State-Crime Complex</i> – A Short Summary	40
3 The <i>State-Crime Complex</i> in PRI Mexico	42
3.1 An Actor-Centred History of Protection Rackets in Mexico	42
3.1.1 <i>Caciques</i> and the Governors’ Rise – From Local to State-Level Rackets	44
3.1.2 Arturo “El Negro” Durazo Moreno – The System Goes Federal	57
3.1.3 From Special Forces Unit to TCO Leader – Militarised Privatisation	72
3.2 Entangled in Antagonism – Reflecting the <i>State-Crime Complex</i>	83
4 Conclusion	88
5 Bibliography	iii

Abstract

This thesis examines the enduring binary of *state* versus *crime* in accounts of transnational organised crime (TOC) in twentieth-century Mexico and develops the concept of the *state-crime complex* as an alternative perspective. Drawing on state theory and critical criminology, the thesis argues that state and crime are co-produced and interdependent rather than oppositional. It identifies protection rackets as the key shared mechanism through which power was exercised and illicit economies were governed under the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) regime. Methodologically, the thesis combines this framework with an actor-centred historical analysis to trace how local, state, and federal authorities constructed, managed, and expanded protection rackets – from municipal and gubernatorial arrangements to the federal centralisation of the *plaza* system, and later to the militarised, partly privatised model associated with *Los Zetas*. The analysis shows that the studied individuals often defy rigid classification as either “state” or “criminal” actors, instead occupying shifting positions across a continuum within the *complex*. By emphasising shared mechanisms rather than a normative state/crime divide, the study moves beyond *state capacity*, *state crime*, and *Pax priista* explanations and offers a historically grounded account of how protection rackets ordered TOC, regulated violence, and stabilised power in PRI-era Mexico.

Keywords: Mexico, transnational organised crime, protection rackets, critical criminology, political history

Die vorliegende Arbeit hinterfragt die in der Forschung vorherrschende Dichotomie von *Staatlichkeit* und *Kriminalität* bei der Untersuchung der transnationalen organisierten Kriminalität im Mexiko des 20. Jahrhunderts. Als alternative Perspektive entwickelt sie das Konzept des *Staat-Kriminalitäts-Komplexes* (*state-crime complex*). Aufbauend auf Staatstheorie und kritischer Kriminologie argumentiert die Arbeit, dass Staat und Kriminalität einander nicht als Gegensätze gegenüberstehen, sondern koproduziert und voneinander abhängig sind. Als zentralen gemeinsamen Mechanismus, über den Macht ausgeübt und illegale Ökonomien unter dem Regime der *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) gesteuert wurden, identifiziert die Arbeit das Schutzgelderpressungssystem. Methodisch verbindet sie diesen Rahmen mit einer akteurszentrierten historischen Analyse. Dabei wird nachgezeichnet, wie lokale, bundesstaatliche und föderale Behörden Schutzsysteme aufbauten, verwalteten und ausweiteten – von kommunalen und bundesstaatlichen Arrangements über die föderale Zentralisierung des *Plaza*-Systems bis hin zur militarisierten Teilprivatisierung, angestoßen durch den Aufstieg der Gruppe *Los Zetas*. Die Analyse zeigt, dass sich die untersuchten Personen einer klaren Einordnung als „staatliche“ oder „kriminelle“ Akteure häufig entziehen und stattdessen wechselnde Positionen entlang eines Kontinuums von Staatlichkeit und Kriminalität einnehmen. Durch die Betonung gemeinsamer Mechanismen anstelle einer normativen Grenze zwischen Staat und Kriminalität geht die Studie über Erklärungsansätze von *state capacity*, *state crime* und *Pax priista* hinaus. Sie bietet eine historisch fundierte Darstellung davon, wie Schutzgelderpressungssysteme transnationale organisierte Kriminalität strukturierten, Gewalt regulierten und Herrschaft im Mexiko der PRI-Ära stabilisierten.

Schlagworte: Mexiko, transnationale organisierte Kriminalität, Schutzgelderpressungssysteme, kritische Kriminologie

List of Abbreviations

AGN	<i>Archivo General de la Nación (Mexico)</i>
C-047	<i>Grupo (de Investigaciones) Especial C-047 (Mexico)</i>
CDG	<i>Cartel del Golfo</i>
CISEN	<i>Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional (Mexico)</i>
DEA	Drug Enforcement Agency (USA)
DFS	<i>Dirección Federal de Seguridad (Mexico)</i>
DGPYT	<i>Dirección General de Policía y Tránsito del Distrito Federal (Mexico)</i>
DIPD	<i>División de Investigaciones para la Prevención de la Delincuencia (Mexico)</i>
DTO	Drug trafficking organisation
EZLN	<i>Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional</i>
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA)
FEADS	<i>Fiscalía Especializada para la Atención a Delitos contra la Salud (Mexico)</i>
FGR	<i>Fiscalía General de la República (Mexico)</i>
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
GAFE	<i>Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales (Mexico)</i>
LC23S	<i>La Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre</i>
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PGR	<i>Procuraduría General de la República (Mexico)</i>
PJF	<i>Policía Judicial Federal (Mexico)</i>
PNR	<i>Partido Nacional Revolucionario (Mexico)</i>
PRI	<i>Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Mexico)</i>
SOA	School of the Americas
TCO	Transnational criminal organisation
TOC	Transnational organised crime

1 Introduction

Between 1920 and 1954, Melesio Cuén Cázares was the municipal president of Badiraguato in Sinaloa five times. During this period, the *cacique* of this small town was many things: mayor, member of Mexico's Chamber of Deputies, paternal protector, trafficking broker, pharmacist, and pioneer of poppy cultivation. The same hand that signed municipal decrees guided farmers into poppy cultivation and ensured the transit of processed opium gum. This simultaneity and entanglement of the official and unofficial, the legal and illegal – the *state-crime complex* – was not an anomaly; it was an arrangement within a realm of the in-between. This study explores what happens when we take this entanglement as the starting point rather than the scandal.

So, what exactly are we discussing – corruption, state crime, or criminal infiltration? Much of the literature on transnational organised crime (TOC) in twentieth-century Mexico proceeds from those frames, presuming a binary between state and crime. This thesis asks whether this presumption is necessary or even justified. In other words, is it useful to retain this binary in a historical study of TOC in Mexico during the period of unchallenged rule by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI)? The preliminary hypothesis of this thesis and the core of the concept developed is that state and crime are inextricably interwoven in the geographical and temporal space analysed. They are not merely connected by terminological essence – as each other's opposites – or habitually through what is called corruption and bribery. *State* and *crime* are conceptually inseparable; without each other, neither would exist. What they are is one *complex*.

The present thesis takes a two-pronged approach. First, it offers a theoretical exploration of the relationship between state and crime from a broader perspective. Second, it provides an empirical, actor-centred analysis of three specific cases. The former ultimately culminates in a conceptual framework which provides the methodological basis for the latter. At the core of this framework lies the *protection-racket system*: a territorially bounded arrangement in which a dominant actor extracts tribute from a subordinate actor in return for safeguarding them against internal or external threats, which are often created by the very entity offering protection in the first place.¹ This system exists at the intersection of state and criminal activity, providing an ideal analytical field of inquiry into their entanglement.

¹ This concept is employed in this thesis, drawing on scholarly debates from, among others, Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime (1982)," *CRSO Working Paper* 256 (1982); Benjamin T. Smith, *The Dope: The Real History of the Mexican Drug Trade* (London: Ebury Press, 2021); Alejandro Lerch, "Police

This approach moves away from previous scholarship but is based on actively engaging with it. In particular, there are five explanatory lenses which the *state-crime complex* is situated against and which are analysed in-depth with regard to their strengths and weaknesses: *State capacity*, a concept widespread in development studies that places strong emphasis on security;² *state crime*, an area of critical criminology that shifts the focus onto the state as a criminal perpetrator;³ the *Pax priista* model, primarily based on the works of Mexican scholar Luis Astorga;⁴ and the two concepts of *grey zone*⁵ and *Hybris*,⁶ both of which challenge the binary of state and crime in the Mexican context, albeit with different emphases and depth. Despite their considerable differences, all of these theories rely on the question of how the state-crime dynamic is viewed, demonstrating the necessity of thorough reflection on this issue. It is against this backdrop that the concept of the *state-crime complex* is developed, alongside the primary analytical tool for the empirical analysis: the protection racket system.

The Historical Context

Since Mexican President Felipe Calderón launched the *guerra contra el narco* in 2006, Mexico has experienced an unprecedented level of violence that seems to defy all attempts to

Protection Rackets and Political Modernity in Mexico,” *Politics & Society* 52, no. 1 (2024), doi:10.1177/00323292221129756; Richard Snyder and Angélica Durán-Martínez, “Drugs, Violence, and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets in Mexico and Colombia,” *Colombia Internacional*, no. 70 (2009), doi:10.7440/colombiaint70.2009.03.

² See, among others, Francis Fukuyama, *State Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century* (London: Profile Books, 2005); Paula Miraglia, Rolando Ochoa, and Ivan Briscoe, “Transnational Organised Crime and Fragile States,” *OECD Development Co-operation Working Papers* 5 (2012), doi:10.1787/5k49dfg88s40-en; Seung-hun Lee, “Organized Crime, Local Politicians, and State Capacity,” *SSRN Working Paper*, 2025, doi:10.2139/ssrn.5367420.

³ A field of research that was particularly driven by William J. Chambliss, “State-Organized Crime: The American Society of Criminology, 1988 Presidential Address,” *Criminology* 27, no. 2 (1989), doi:10.1111/j.1745-9125.1989.tb01028.x. It has since become firmly established in the field; see, e.g., William J. Chambliss, Raymond J. Michalowski and Ronald C. Kramer, eds., *State Crime in the Global Age*, eBook (London: Willan Publishing, 2013); Alan Doig, *State Crime*, Crime and Society Series (London: Willan Publishing, 2010). doi:10.4324/9780203832967; Dawn Rothe and Christopher Mullins, eds., *State Crime: Current Perspectives*, Critical issues in crime and society (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2010); Dawn Rothe, *State Criminality: The Crime of All Crimes*, Issues in Crime and Justice (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2009).

⁴ In his work: Luis Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (1996), Colección Espasa hoy (Mexico City: Espasa Calpe Mexicana, 1996). See also Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, “Mexico: Politics, Cartels and Violence,” in *Handbook of Organised Crime and Politics*, ed. Felia Allum and Stan Gilmour, Elgar handbooks in political science (Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019); Paul Kenny and Mónica Serrano, eds., *Mexico's Security Failure: Collapse into Criminal Violence* (New York, Oxon: Routledge, 2012); Snyder and Durán-Martínez, “Drugs, Violence, and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets in Mexico and Colombia”

⁵ Developed by Benjamin T. Smith, “Public Drug Policy and Grey Zone Pacts in Mexico, 1920–1980,” in *Drug Policies and the Politics of Drugs in the Americas*, ed. Beatriz C. Labate, Clancy Cavnar and Thiago Rodrigues (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016). Their concept draws on Javier Auyero, *Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). doi:10.1017/CBO9780511814815.

⁶ Introduced by Timo Dorsch, *Nekropolitik: Neoliberalismus, Staat und organisiertes Verbrechen in Mexiko*, kritik & utopie (Wien, Berlin: Mandelbaum, 2020).

contain it. In 2023, Mexico ranked seventh in the world in terms of conflict-related deaths per 100,000 people, ahead of Yemen, Syria, and Myanmar; in absolute terms, Mexico ranked third.⁷ Various theories have been put forward to explain why this conflict has escalated so dramatically. Some blame the war on drugs itself,⁸ while others link it to Mexico's democratic transition in the 2000s.⁹ Still others see the root causes more in "state failure" and the "siege" of Mexican territory by transnational criminal organisations (TCOs).¹⁰ However, all these explanatory models are based on a similar logic about the organisation of the conflict, namely along the divide between criminal (paramilitary) organisations on the one hand and governmental actors on the other – i.e., *crime vs. state*.

This image of a conflict between two supposedly opposing entities has accompanied the history of TOC in Mexico from the beginning of the twentieth century. To make sense of what is happening today, it is necessary to understand the dynamic between state and crime in Mexico within the context of its historical development. This thesis seeks to do precisely that, focusing on the era of unchallenged rule by the PRI.

The PRI held the presidency in Mexico for seventy-one years (1929–2000), although its grip in the states varied. In a 1990 televised forum, the writer and politician Mario Vargas Llosa called Mexico under the party "*la dictadura perfecta*."¹¹ Although elections were held, no other party was ever able to truly challenge the PRI. Presidents usually chose their successors, thus influencing decisions and the political status quo far beyond their actual tenures. Further down the chain, clientelist ties and *amiguismo* determined the allocations of posts and contracts. Within this system, clear distinctions between "legal" and "illegal" were often much less important. As Benjamin T. Smith, a researcher of TOC in Mexico, has put it, "did not so much combat official corruption, but rather embraced this corruption [...] to bring

⁷ Bastian Herre et al., "War and Peace," OurWorldInData, accessed September 12, 2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/war-and-peace>.

⁸ See, e.g., Ioan Grillo, *El Narco (2013): The Bloody Rise of Mexican Drug Cartels* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Valeria Espinosa and Donald B. Rubin, "Did the Military Interventions in the Mexican Drug War Increase Violence?," *The American Statistician* 69, no. 1 (2015), doi:10.1080/00031305.2014.965796.

⁹ E.g., Angélica Durán-Martínez, *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, "Why Cartels Went to War: Subnational Party Alternation, the Breakdown of Criminal Protection, and the Onset of Inter-Cartel Wars," in *Votes, Drugs, and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico*, ed. Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹⁰ E.g., John P. Sullivan, "From Drug Wars to Criminal Insurgency: Mexican Cartels, Criminal Enclaves and Criminal Insurgency in Mexico and Central America. Implications for Global Security," *FMSH-WP-2012-09*, 2012; David Teiner, "Cartel-Related Violence in Mexico as Narco-Terrorism or Criminal Insurgency: A Literature Review," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 4 (2020), accessed August 28, 2025, https://pt.icct.nl/sites/default/files/2023-04/Article%206_6.pdf; Ioan Grillo, *El Narco (2012): Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012).

¹¹ As, for example, reported in El País, "Vargas Llosa: 'México es la dictadura perfecta'," *El País*, September 1, 1990, accessed September 4, 2025, https://elpais.com/diario/1990/09/01/cultura/652140001_850215.html.

stability, security, and financial reward to certain groups.”¹² The beginning of the PRI’s period of dominance is thus an ideal starting point for this thesis’s investigation into the relationship between state and crime in the context of TOC in Mexico.¹³

Transnational Organised Crime – A Note on Terminology

Committing to specific terminology always has its drawbacks. Once a choice is made, it shapes the perspective and might limit the viewer’s understanding of other points of view. To a degree, it influences and, in the worst case, predetermines results. Therefore, the least a researcher can do is be transparent about the choices made and the reasons behind them. This thesis adopts the terminology of TOC and TCO to analyse the phenomenon that is the subject of this study, along with the agents involved. There are several reasons for this choice. In both public and academic discourse, this phenomenon is predominantly described as drug trafficking or the drug trade – “*narcotráfico*” or “*tráfico de drogas*” in Mexico. The networks involved are, in turn, mainly referred to as “drug trafficking organisations” (DTOs),¹⁴ “drug cartels,” or, in the Mexican colloquial collective singular, “*el narco*.” Indeed, in the twentieth century, organised crime in Mexico often meant drug trafficking, and this remains the primary area of activity for many TCOs today. However, their activities have always encompassed more than this, including gambling, alcohol smuggling, and procuring prostitution.¹⁵ Today, the operational scope of TCOs is even broader, encompassing human trafficking, counterfeiting, oil theft, extortion rackets, and increasing infiltration of legitimate industries such as mining and avocado production.¹⁶ Therefore, terms that exclusively emphasise drug trafficking are inadequate even on an operational level.

¹² Smith, “Public Drug Policy and Grey Zone Pacts in Mexico, 1920–1980,” 33.

¹³ See on the PRI, its political system and the period of its dominance, e.g., Joy K. Langston, *Democratization and Authoritarian Party Survival: Mexico's PRI* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017); Beatriz Magaloni Kerpel, *Voting for Autocracy: Hegemonic Party Survival and Its Demise in Mexico*, Cambridge studies in comparative politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). doi:10.1017/CBO9780511510274.

¹⁴ The term “DTO” has been part of the standard vocabulary of US agencies and UN bodies since the 1980s; see, e.g., US General Accounting Office, “Investigations of Major Drug Trafficking Organizations: Report No. GGD-84-36” (1984), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/ggd-84-36.pdf>; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Commerce in Drugs and Chemicals and the Detection of Clandestine Laboratories.” *Bulletin on Narcotics* 36, no. 1 (1984), accessed August 30, 2025, https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/bulletin/bulletin_1984-01-01_1_page006.html.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Gabriela Recio, “Drugs and Alcohol: US Prohibition and the Origins of the Drug Trade in Mexico, 1910-1930,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, no. 1 (2002), doi:10.1017/S0022216X01006289. For the case of Chihuahua, see Mark Wasserman, *Persistent Oligarchs: Elites and Politics in Chihuahua, Mexico 1910–1940* (Duke University Press, 1993). doi:10.1515/9780822397489, which provides an intriguing study of the diversity of illicit enterprises in northern Mexico.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Kate Gillespie and J. B. McBride, “Counterfeit Smuggling: Rethinking Paradigms of Diaspora Investment and Trade Facilitation,” *Journal of International Management* 19, no. 1 (2013), doi:10.1016/j.intman.2012.08.001; Benjamin Locks, “Extortion in Mexico: Why Mexico’s Pain Won’t End with

The term “cartel” does not have such an exclusive emphasis, but it is problematic, nonetheless. It has been criticised on various levels. The primary argument is that the term is misapplied, as it originally referred to economic actors engaging in price-fixing or market-sharing agreements – i.e., an economic cartel. In contrast, Mexican TCOs, if they do cooperate, do so unstably and do not usually engage in price fixing.¹⁷ A more far-reaching criticism was put forward by the US-Mexican scholar Oswaldo Zavala. In his work *Drug Cartels Do Not Exist* (2022), Zavala characterises the term “cartel” as a myth propagated by Mexican and US state and media narratives.¹⁸ He asserts that these organisations are not as monolithic or hierarchical as the term “cartel” suggests. Rather, they are conglomerates of individual actors within a complex network of dependency and interaction.¹⁹ This thesis generally agrees with the preceding critiques. Thus, it avoids using terms such as “drug trafficking”, “DTOs”, or “cartels”, except in cases of self-designation. Instead, it refers to the realm of illicit economies and the protection rackets that govern them as “transnational organised crime” (TOC) and the groups operating inside that realm as “transnational criminal organisations” (TCOs). The concept of TOC has largely established itself over the past few decades in the field,²⁰ and it has several benefits. For one, it makes use of the term “organised crime”, bringing it back into the realm of scientific (criminological) discourse while leaving behind politically derived and colloquial vocabulary. This is of significance to this work because the protection racket system, often described as the central feature of organised

the War on Drugs,” *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 2014, accessed August 30, 2025, <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/extortion-in-mexico-why-mexicos-pain-wont-end-with-the-war-on-drugs>; Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, “Trafficking in Persons Along Mexico’s Eastern Migration Routes: The Role of Transnational Criminal Organizations,” 2017, accessed August 30, 2025, https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=pass_fac; Giacomo Battiston et al., “Fueling Organized Crime: The Mexican War on Drugs and Oil Thefts,” *CESifo Working Paper*, no. 9521 (2022), accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/252038>; Joel S. Herrera and Cesar B. Martinez-Alvarez, “Diversifying Violence: Mining, Export-Agriculture, and Criminal Governance in Mexico,” *World Development* 151 (2022), doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105769.

¹⁷ Cf., e.g., Melissa Dell, “Trafficking Networks and the Mexican Drug War,” *American Economic Review* 105, no. 6 (2015): 1745, doi:10.1257/aer.20121637.

¹⁸ Cf. Oswaldo Zavala, *Drug Cartels Do Not Exist: Narcotrafficking in US and Mexican Culture* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2022), 3–4.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.* See also the critique of predominant labels by Jorge A. Vázquez Valdez, “RTC, Más Que Crimen Organizado, Cáteles O Narcotráfico,” *Secuencia*, no. 111 (2021), doi:10.18234/secuencia.v0i111.1799. However, he not only rejects the terms “cartels,” and “drug trafficking,” but also “organised crime,” arguing for the use of “Transnational Criminal Networks” (*Redes Transnacionales de Criminalidad*). His proposal is based on the assumption of a dynamic and evolving division of labour among criminal actors and state institutions and the impossibility of separating them entirely.

²⁰ See for an overview, e.g., Kimberly A. McCabe, *Transnational Organized Crime: Yesterday and Today* (San Diego: cognella academic Publishing, 2022); Felia Allum and Stan Gilmour, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime*, 2nd edition, Routledge handbooks (Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY: Routledge, 2022).

crime,²¹ is crucial to the analysis. Furthermore, “TOC” acknowledges that groups involved in organised crime have never been confined to national borders; they have always been transnational in nature. This will become evident at several points in the empirical section of the present thesis.

Sources and literature

Before beginning the inquiry, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the main sources and central literature consulted. For the theoretical section, a variety of sources on statehood and crime over long periods of time are considered. These include writings from political theory, philosophy, sociology and jurisprudence, as well as legal codes.²² For the empirical section, a combination of journalistic and archival sources, state files, biographical accounts, and investigative journalism was used. Particularly the latter is of critical importance for the analysis. Despite their extraordinarily difficult and often life-threatening work, investigative journalists in Mexico produce an extremely important source of knowledge that is indispensable for scholarly analysis. A very prominent example of this is the investigative journalist and author Anabel Hernández. She has worked extensively on the intertwining of criminal and state actors and has produced a large number of articles and books.²³ Some Anglophone journalists have also done extremely insightful work, and both must be considered when researching these topics.²⁴

This thesis has been influenced by a wide range of scholarly literature. Among the scholars who have guided this work in particular are Benjamin T. Smith, Luis Astorga, Timo Dorsch,

²¹ Cf., e.g., Federico Varese, “General Introduction: What Is Organized Crime?,” in *Organized Crime: Critical Concepts in Criminology, Vol. 1: Definitions and Theories*, ed. Federico Varese (London: Routledge, 2010), 14; Cyrille Fijnaut, “Organised Crime in Europe and Beyond: Some General Considerations,” in *Organised Crime: Dark Sides of Globalization*, ed. Caroline Y. Robertson-von Trotha, 1st ed., Kulturwissenschaft interdisziplinär 8 (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2012), 14; Charles Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime (1985),” in Evans; Rueschemeyer; Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back in*, 169.

²² Where possible, original or early editions of sources are referred to in cases of older sources, e.g., the works of Jean Bodin, Thomas Hobbes, Cesare Beccaria and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. First editions and contemporary reprints are accessed via the *Internet Archive*, *Wikisource*, and the digital collections of the *Münchener DigitalisierungsZentrum*, which offer high-quality digital, OCR-readable scans of many historical texts. In these quotations, the original orthography is preserved.

²³ Among her more well-known works are, e.g., Anabel Hernández, *Los señores del narco*, Novena reimpresión, Grijalbo actualidad (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2011); Anabel Hernández, *La verdadera noche de Iguala: La historia que el gobierno quiso ocultar* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2016); Anabel Hernández, *El traidor: El diario secreto del hijo del Mayo* (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 2019); Anabel Hernández, *La historia secreta: AMLO y el Cártel de Sinaloa*, Primera edición (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2024).

²⁴ See, e.g., British investigative journalist Ioan Grillo: Grillo, *El Narco (2013)*; Ioan Grillo, *Gangster Warlords: Drug Dollars, Killing Fields, and the New Politics of Latin America*, First Edition (London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Circus, 2016); Ioan Grillo, *Blood Gun Money: How America Arms Gangs and Cartels*, Paperback edition (New York, London, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

Juan Antonio Fernández Velázquez, Paul Kenny, Mónica Serrano, Alejandro Lerch, Wil G. Pansters, and Angélica Durán Martínez.²⁵

Thesis structure

As already indicated, the thesis is divided into two sections. The theoretical section develops the conceptual framework in three steps: Competing ontologies of crime are reconstructed (Chapter 2.1), and different understandings of the state are discussed (Chapter 2.2). The third theoretical chapter (Chapter 2.3) then aims to synthesise these threads and move beyond a binary view of “state versus crime”. In a first step, it engages with the aforementioned concepts of *state capacity*, *state crime*, *Pax priista*, *grey zone*, and *Hybris* (Chapters 2.3.1 & 2.3.2). Then it sets out the analytical tool – the protection racket system – as well as the overall conceptual framework of the thesis – the *state-crime complex* (Chapters 2.3.3 & 2.3.4).

The empirical section then applies this lens through an actor-centred history of protection rackets in the context of TOC in PRI-era Mexico. In three subchapters (Chapter 3.1.1–3.1.3), a number of historical figures are traced. Beginning in the first half of the twentieth century, the lives of Melesio Cuén Cázares, a local strongman in rural Sinaloa, and Chihuahua’s governor, Rodrigo M. Quevedo, are examined, illustrating their role in the creation and

²⁵ Smith, *The Dope*; Smith, “Public Drug Policy and Grey Zone Pacts in Mexico, 1920–1980” Tom Long and Benjamin T. Smith, “State, Crime, and Violence in Mexico, 1920–2000: Arbiters of Impunity, Agents of Coercion,” *Past & Present* 266, no. 1 (2025), doi:10.1093/pastj/gtad032; Luis Astorga, *Drogas sin fronteras: Los expedientes de una guerra permanente* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2003); Luis Astorga, “Traficantes de drogas, políticos y policías en el siglo XX mexicano,” in *Vicios públicos, virtudes privadas: La corrupción en México*, ed. Claudio Lomnitz-Adler (Mexico City: CIESAS, 2000); Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (1996); Dorsch, *Nekropolitik*; Timo Dorsch, “Para-Staatlichkeit: Über die Funktionsweise der Gewalt unter der Hybriden Souveränität,” in *Postkoloniale Staatsverständnisse*, ed. Martin Oppelt, Christina Pauls and Nicki K. Weber, 1. Auflage, Staatsverständnisse Band 170 (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2022); Juan A. Fernández Velázquez and Benjamin T. Smith, “A History of Opium Commodity Chains in Mexico: 1900–1950,” *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development* 4, no. 2 (2022), doi:10.31389/jied.113; Juan A. Fernández Velázquez, “El narcotráfico en los altos de Sinaloa: 1940–1977” (Doctoral thesis, Instituto de Investigaciones Histórico Sociales, Universidad Veracruzana, 2016); Kenny and Serrano, *Mexico's Security Failure*; Mónica Serrano, “Narcotráfico y gobernabilidad en México,” *Pensamiento iberoamericano*, no. 1 (2007), accessed August 14, 2025, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=2873255>; Alejandro Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking: Criminal Rackets and State-Making in Modern Mexico” (Doctoral thesis, St. Catharine's College, University of Cambridge, 2020); Lerch, “Police Protection Rackets and Political Modernity in Mexico” Alejandro Lerch, “State-Crime Relations: Notes on a Necessary Literature,” *Critical Criminology* 32, no. 4 (2024), doi:10.1007/s10612-024-09769-1; Wil G. Pansters, ed., *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2012); Wil G. Pansters, “Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order, and Caciques: Reflections on the Crime-Governance Nexus in Mexico,” *Global Crime* 19, 3–4 (2018), doi:10.1080/17440572.2018.1471993; Wil G. Pansters and Benjamin T. Smith, eds., *Histories of Drug Trafficking in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2022) Benjamin T. Smith; Durán-Martínez, *The Politics of Drug Violence*; Richard Snyder and Angélica Durán-Martínez, “Does Illegality Breed Violence? Drug Trafficking and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets,” *Crime, Law and Social Change* 52, no. 3 (2009), doi:10.1007/s10611-009-9195-z; Snyder and Durán-Martínez, “Drugs, Violence, and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets in Mexico and Colombia”.

maintenance of local and state-level protection rackets. The following subchapter moves to the federal level during the 1960s to 1980s. It centres on Arturo “El Negro” Durazo and the centralisation of the widely dispersed rackets under federal control. Several other actors and institutions also appear here as co-producers of this development. The third subchapter examines the partial privatisation of the protection racket system by the armed wings of TCOs. It focuses on Arturo Guzmán Decena and the role of the paramilitary group *Los Zetas* in transforming the inner workings of the state-crime complex in Mexico. A closing empirical chapter then takes a step back. It compares the three trajectories, tests the state–crime complex against the evidence and identifies its limitations.

This work takes a challenging approach, but I believe it is worthwhile. It takes a methodologically balancing act between the empirical and the theoretical, approaching its subject matter, as Hannah Arendt once so aptly put it, “with the backward-directed glance of the historian and the analytical zeal of the political scientist.”²⁶

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism: New Edition with Added Prefaces* (San Diego, New York, London: Harvest Books, 1973), xxiii.

2 From *State-Crime Binary* to *State-Crime Complex*

The first section of the thesis challenges the binary concept of *state vs. crime* and develops an alternative framework: the *state-crime complex*. Instead of treating state and crime as two separate and opposing domains, it argues that they are structurally co-produced and operate through shared mechanisms, that is, the system of protection rackets. Although the framework is developed for the analysis of a specific historical context, it is based on broader theoretical considerations.

The section is divided into three chapters. First, it reconstructs competing ontologies of crime (Chapter 2.1). Second, it reviews key theories of the state and illustrates how differently it has been conceptualised (Chapter 2.2). In a third step, it brings these two strands together by reviewing different understandings of the relationship between crime and state, ultimately arriving at the formulation of the *state-crime complex* (Chapter 2.3). Particularly the chapters on the state (Chapter 2.1) and on crime (Chapter 2.2) comprise detailed theoretical and philosophical discussion. While these may sometimes seemingly stray from the topic, they are essential for demonstrating how I arrive at the perspective and starting point that shape the methodology of this thesis.

2.1 What is Crime?

The question that is the title of this chapter has the potential to evoke irritation. It may seem obvious, a question with a self-evident answer: crime is that which is forbidden by law. Yet the answers that have been given to this question have varied greatly, and they are numerous. To begin with, the distinction between a purely historiographical and an ontological perspective on the origins of crime must be emphasised. The historical development of criminal law, punishment and societal attitudes towards it is not of interest here. Instead, this chapter focuses on the question of what crime is, what it represents, and what it is inferred from. However, this should not be taken too literally. *What is crime* is a matter of perspective. Therefore, it may be more appropriate to talk about the different ontologies of crime, or the different ways in which crime is *understood*.

In general, there are two ideal-typical ontological understandings of where *crime* as a concept derives from: The first view is that it derives from the state itself, in that crime is understood as acts directed against forces that maintain order, be they divine or earthly. In this sense, crime is a negation of the Gods, the Ruler, or the Right itself. This perspective is common in

antique legal codes but also in early modern state theory. The second view sees crime as actions against society, thus inferring it from the people as a whole. It is closely linked to the political thinking of the Enlightenment but is now primarily associated with French sociologist Émile Durkheim.²⁷

Both views have a genuine core. What is defined as a crime within a society may, at times, indeed correlate with public sentiment and be considered as a wrongdoing against the people as a whole. This is particularly evident for serious crimes such as murder and rape. However, the fact that such acts are widely considered wrong and deserving of punishment does not tell us anything about the origin of their criminalisation. This work adopts the following perspective: The decision of what constitutes a crime is ultimately made by the state.

Therefore, *the primary origin of crime is the state itself*.

This is not intended to represent a (legal) positivist stance, especially not a normative one. Rather, it is an analytical and methodological argument that views crime as a construct and not an inherent or natural phenomenon, enabling state and crime to be examined through a shared lens.

Sourced in God and the State: Crime as Offence against a Higher Order

The earliest written source that can give us insight into early perspectives on crime is the over 3700-years-old *Code Hammurabi*.²⁸ It is a collection of 282 laws, supplemented by a prologue and an epilogue, written on a diorite stele on behalf of the Babylonian king

²⁷ This is one way of comparing different criminological perspectives ontologically. Another, perhaps more common, approach is to compare the two legal traditions of legal positivism and natural law, which had an enormous influence on European jurisprudence. The jurisprudential theory of legal positivism has been around since at least Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), in which he wrote that law is valid and just because it is given by an authority, not because it represents a higher truth: "*Authoritas non Veritas facit Legem*," (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Sive, de materia, forma, & potestate civitatis ecclesiasticae et civilis* (Amsterdam: Joan Blaeu, 1668), accessed July 30, 2025, <https://archive.org/details/leviathansivedem00hobb>, chapter 26, 133, italicisation not in the original). The second great tradition in the philosophy of law is that of natural law, and one of its most eminent figures is undoubtedly Immanuel Kant. For him, positive law cannot be founded in itself without ending in tautology. It needs a general principle – "*das allgemeine Kriterium*" (Immanuel Kant, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten: Erster Theil. Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Rechtslehre* (Königsberg: Friedrich Nicolovius, 1797), accessed July 30, 2025, <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/details/bsb10927036>, xxxii; italicisation not in the original) – by which right and wrong can be recognised, and for Kant, this is to be found in mere reason – "*in der bloßen Vernunft*" (Kant, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, xxxii; italicisation not in the original). From a natural law perspective, one could therefore argue that a crime is not only forbidden because an authority says so but forbidden because it is bad, reprehensible, or simply wrong.

²⁸ It is in fact the oldest preserved legal text altogether; cf. Danijela Kovačević, "A Historical-Legal Review of Hammurabi's Code," *Pravo - teorija i praksa* 39, no. 1 (2022): 71, doi:10.5937/ptp2201071K; Gerd Becher and Elmar Treptow, eds., *Die gerechte Ordnung der Gesellschaft: Texte vom Altertum bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus-Verl., 2000), 25.

Hammurabi in the 1750s BCE.²⁹ The code addresses a wide range of legal issues, including property rights, family law, and criminal law. Indeed, many of the stipulations concern outlawed actions, each followed by the prescribed punishment. The first paragraph, for example, states that “If a man bring an accusation against a man, and charge him with a (capital) crime, but cannot prove it, he, the accuser, shall be put to death.”³⁰

These laws mostly concern everyday social life. However, collectively, they explicitly represent a divine order brought to the people by the king. At the beginning of the prologue, it states that the gods created the Kingdom of Babylon and, in order to protect it and its people, handed down the laws to King Hammurabi: “[The gods] called me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, the worshipper of the gods, to establish justice in the land.”³¹ This receiving of the laws by the gods is also depicted figuratively on the stele, which shows Hammurabi being presented with the law code by the hand of a god.³² The epilogue then states accordingly: “By the command of Shamas [god of the sun; also, god of justice], the great judge of heaven and earth, may I make righteousness to shine forth on the land. By the order of Marduk [patron god of Babylon], my lord, may no one efface my statues.”³³

This demonstrates two things. First, the law – including the provisions that define what constitutes a crime – is derived from divine will. Secondly, it represents a higher cosmic order, the protection of which necessitates the protection of the law.³⁴

This idea is also found in the Old Testament, most prominently in the Ten Commandments, with the law being given to the people of Israel by God through Moses:

These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain [...]; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. [...] And the LORD said to me, ‘[...] Oh that they had such a heart as this always, to fear me and to keep all my commandments, [...].’³⁵

²⁹ Cf. Beny Saputra, Olivér Bene, and David A. Putra, “Analyzing the Code of Hammurabi: Exploring Ancient Legal Principles and Their Relevance in Modern Law,” *NEGREI: Academic Journal of Law and Governance* 4, no. 1 (2024): 1–6, doi:10.29240/negrei.v4i1.9965.

³⁰ Robert Francis Harper, *The Code of Hammurabi King of Babylon: About 2250 B.C.*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, Ill., London: University of Chicago Press; Callaghan & Company; Luzac & Company, 1904), 10.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³² Cf. Saputra, Bene and Putra, “Analyzing the Code of Hammurabi,” 15; Kovačević, “A historical-legal review of Hammurabi’s Code,” 74.

³³ Harper, *The Code of Hammurabi King of Babylon*, 101.

³⁴ See further on the Code of Hammurabi, e.g., Horst Klengel, *König Hammurapi und der Alltag Babylons*, new edition (Düsseldorf: Artemis & Winkler, 1999); Raymond Westbrook, “Old Babylonian Period,” in *A History of Ancient Near Eastern Law*, ed. Raymond Westbrook, 2 vols. (Leiden, Boston, MA: Brill, 2003); Martha T. Roth, “Mesopotamian Legal Traditions and the Laws of Hammurabi,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 71, no. 1 (1995), accessed August 20, 2025, <https://scholarship.kentlaw.iit.edu/cklawreview/vol71/iss1/3>

³⁵ Deut. 5:22, 28–29 (ESV).

The law and the acts stipulated within as crimes thus derive directly from a divine source. Coupling the directive to fear God with the directive to obey the law once again suggests that the law embodies a divine order, implying that a violation of the law is an act against God. This is even more explicit in Islamic jurisprudential theory. A central concept here is *al-Hisbah* – the duty of a Muslim to ordain good and forbid evil. In his work *al-Hisba fi'l-Islām*, the Sunni Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328 CE) wrote on this principle that Allah has “made every wholesome thing lawful and made unlawful everything bad.”³⁶ Accordingly, all law derives directly from the divine order, such that an act is deemed a crime precisely because it contravenes this order. The belief that law was the earthly manifestation of divine order was also an important part of Christian legal tradition throughout the Middle Ages.³⁷

Similar reasoning on the origin and purpose of crime can be found in early modern political thought. However, here, the divine order is increasingly replaced by the order of the state. This is maybe best exemplified by the writings of Thomas Hobbes and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

The British philosopher Thomas Hobbes offers a highly positivist view of the source of law, most aptly expressed in his famous remark: “*Autoritas non Veritas facit Legem*,”³⁸ i.e., the law is founded in the highest political order and is *made* by the sovereign – the entity holding authority in a commonwealth.³⁹ Consequently, crime arises from “the Committing (by Deed, or Word) of that which the Law forbiddeth,”⁴⁰ and is thus an act that directly goes against the order of the state, “the Peace of the Common-wealth.”⁴¹ Here, we once again encounter the twofold foundation of *crime* in a higher order: firstly, that the law, and with it also the notion of crime, is derived from this higher order (*auctoritas facit legem*), and thus, secondly, that a breach of the law (a criminal act) also constitutes an offence of this order.

³⁶ al-Shaykh al-Imām Ibn-Taimīya, *Public Duties in Islam: The Institution of the Hisba*, Islamic Economics Series 3 (London: Islamic Foundation, 1982), translated from the Arabic by Muhtar Holland, 73. This is based on Qur’ān 7:157.

³⁷ As expressed, e.g., in the *Codex Justinianus* (6th century CE) or the *Decretum Gratiani* (12th century CE).

³⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 26, 133. Italicisation not in the original. See also Otfried Höffe, “‘Sed autoritas, non veritas, facit legem’: Zum Kapitel 26 des Leviathan,” in *Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan: oder Stoff, Form und Gewalt eines kirchlichen und bürgerlichen Staates*, ed. Wolfgang Kersting, 2nd ed., Klassiker Auslegen 5 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011).

³⁹ Cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 26, see also chapter 17.

⁴⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or, the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill* (London: Andrew Crooke, 1651), accessed July 30, 2025, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Leviathan_\(1651\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Leviathan_(1651)), chapter 27, 151.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, chapter 27, 153.

For Hegel, crime is not merely an injury to another person but a violation of Right (*Recht*) itself (“*Unrecht ist die Verletzung des Rechts an sich*”).⁴² This holds true both in the particular and in the universal sense, as Hegel notes, “*das Verbrechen, wo weder das Recht an sich noch [das Recht], wie es mir scheint, respektiert wird, wo also beide Seiten, die objektive und subjektive, verletzt sind.*”⁴³ Thus, crime not only harms those immediately affected but also constitutes a negation of Right itself, violating both the subjective will and recognition of Right, and the objective existence of Right.⁴⁴

All of these different approaches are based on the idea that crime ultimately derives from a higher form of order; namely, that it is a negation of that order, or an act against it. For the Babylonians, the Bible and the Qur’an, this order is divine; for Hobbes, it is the order of the state; and for Hegel, it is *Right* itself.

Sourced in the People: Crime as Offence against Society/Collective Conscience

The second ontology of crime, which connects it to *the people* rather than to a higher order, has its roots in Roman political thought. One such example can be found in the *Digesta*, a corpus of legal texts compiled under Byzantine emperor Justinian in the sixth century CE. In book 48 of the *Digesta*, citing writings of second-century Roman jurist Ulpian (170–230 CE),⁴⁵ it is said that the “crime of lese majesty is committed against the Roman people [*adversus populum romanum*], or against their safety.”⁴⁶ Although this passage refers to one particular crime, and not crime in general, it is still quite remarkable. What is described here is the crime of insulting the majesty (“lese majesty”). At the time of writing, this was not the

⁴² Georg W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des Rechts: Berlin 1819/1820*, ed. Emil Angehrn, Martin Bondeli, and Hoo N. Seelmann, Vorlesungen 14 (Hamburg: Meiner, 2000); Nachgeschrieben von Johann Rudolf Ringier, 41. Elsewhere, he writes: “*Das Recht, dessen Verletzung das Verbrechen ist,*” Georg W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, ed. Georg Lasson, Philosophische Bibliothek 124 (Berlin: Nicolai’sche Buchhandlung, 1821); Mit den von Gans reedigierten Zusätzen aus Hegels Vorlesungen, §95, 86.

⁴³ Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, addition to §90, 308.

⁴⁴ See also Sabina Tortorella, “The Necessity for Punishment in Hegel as a Right of Freedom,” *The Italian Law Journal* 7, no. 1 (2021). In Hegel’s dialectic, crime as the negation of *Right* itself can be overcome solely by punishment. Punishment appears as the cancellation (*Aufhebung*) of crime, carrying the restoration of Right; cf. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, §97, 87; §99, 88.

⁴⁵ One third of the *Digesta* is actually supplied by writings of Ulpian; cf. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Ulpian,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed August 22, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ulpian>.

⁴⁶ Dig. 48,4,1,1; translation by Samuel P. Scott, *The Civil Law: Including the Twelve Tables, the Institutes of Gaius, the Rules of Ulpian, the Opinions of Paulus, the Enactments of Justinian, and the Constitutions of Leo*, 17 vols. (Cincinnati: The Central Trust Company, 1932), vol. 11, online version, accessed August 22, 2025, <https://constitution.org/2-Authors/sps/sps11.htm>. In the original Latin: “*Maiestatis autem crimen illud est, quod adversus populum romanum vel adversus securitatem eius committitur;*” online in *The Latin Library* accessed August 22, 2025, <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/justinian/digest48.shtml>.

Roman Republic or its people, but the Roman Emperor above all else.⁴⁷ It is therefore all the more notable that, in this instance, the violation is considered primarily an offence against society.

The idea that a criminal offence constitutes an offence against society as a whole is particularly rooted in the notion that the law itself stems from the will of the people. Although this idea is primarily associated with Enlightenment philosophy, it can already be found in earlier texts, such as Marsilius of Padua's *Defensor Pacis* from 1325. Marsilius writes that the first and primary source of law is the people, the citizen body or its strongest part: "*causam legis effectivam primam & propriam esse populum seu sive civium universitatem, aut eius valentior partem*."⁴⁸ From the assumption that the law itself ultimately derives from the people, it is not far to the idea that a violation of the law constitutes an offence against the people or society as a whole. This idea arrives most evidently with Enlightenment thought. For the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), the sovereign is inalienably and indivisibly the people.⁴⁹ Law is the expression of this sovereignty, the general will: "[les] lois [...] sont des actes de la volonté générale".⁵⁰ Therefore, the people must be the authors of the law to which they are subject – "*Le Peuple soumis aux lois en doit être l'auteur*."⁵¹ An act against the law is thus literally an act against the will of the people. This understanding goes further than the previous ones. Rousseau does not regard law, and thus what stipulates crime, merely as derivative of or conceptually sourced in the people's will; rather, law is nothing other than the *volonté générale* of the people.

The relationship between crime and society was made most immediate by the philosopher and early criminologist Cesare Beccaria (1738–1794). In his work *Dei delitti e delle pene* (1764),

⁴⁷ During his most productive phase as a writer, these were the emperors of the Severan dynasty, which lasted from 193 to 211 CE.

⁴⁸ Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor pacis: Sive adversus usurpatam Rom. Pontificis iurisdictionem ... Apologia* (Frankfurt a. M.: Ioannes Wechel, in officina Vigoniana, 1592), Edited with Notes and Arguments by Franciscus Gomarus Brugensis, digitized facsimile, accessed August 22, 2025, https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_Oxg8AAAaAAJ/pars_I/chapter_12, 48. See on this passage also Alessandro Mulieri, "Marsilius of Padua on Representation," *History of Political Thought* 38, no. 4 (2017): 626–31.

⁴⁹ "*la souveraineté est inaliénable*," Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social: Ou principes du droit politique* (Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey, 1762), accessed July 30, 2025, <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb10860507>, book II, chapter 1, 31; "*la souveraineté est indivisible*," Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, book II, chapter 2, 33. More on this below.

⁵⁰ Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, book II, chapter 6, 50. Italicisation not in the original. In English: "the laws [...] are acts of the general will," Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy and the Social Contract, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Christopher Betts*, Oxford world's classics (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 74.

⁵¹ Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, book II, chapter 6, 51. Italicisation not in the original. In English: "The people, being subject to the laws, must create them," Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy and The Social Contract*, 75.

he writes that the true measure of crime is “*the harm done to society*.”⁵² In fact, Beccaria argues, “[e]very crime, however private it may be, offends society.”⁵³ This statement entails the most straightforward derivation of crime from the people: fundamentally, crime is an offence against society. Ultimately, the person best known for this idea and its biggest theoretical proponent was the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who is credited with being one of the most influential figures in the institutionalisation of sociology as a scientific discipline.⁵⁴ In his 1893 work *De la division du travail social*, he wrote that “an act is criminal when it offends strong and defined states of the collective conscience.”⁵⁵ In other words, crime is an offence against beliefs and sentiments shared by the typical people of a given society.⁵⁶ This is the ontological inversion of the theories of Hobbes or Hegel. For Durkheim, crime is not an offence against a higher, universal order of the state or the Right; it is an offence against the collective conscience of society itself.

Crime between Society and the State

The two ontologies of crime differ essentially in their answer to two questions: what is the origin of *crime* conceptually, and against what are criminal actions ultimately directed? Although the authors’ positional clarity varies, these two ideal types can be distinguished. Nevertheless, there is much to be gained from a perspective that does not adhere to such rigid differentiation between the two ontologies. For example, it could be argued that crime is generally rooted in statehood – practically created by legislators – but legitimised with societal beliefs and sentiments (whether perceived or projected). However, the way in which crime is perceived – as an offence against society as a whole or against the state – does not necessarily indicate its conceptual origins. What is undeniable is that it is ultimately the state that *makes* the law and decides what is legal and illegal, allowed

⁵² Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments: Translated from the Italian in the Author's Original Order, with Notes and Introduction by David Young* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), chapter VIII, 17. Italicisation in the original. In the original Italian: “*il danno della società*,” Cesare Beccaria, *Dei delitti e delle pene*, 6th, newly corrected and augmented edition (Paris: Molini, Libraire, Quai des Augustins, 1766), chapter VIII, 39, edition accessed via the online database PHAIDRA, access provided by the University of Vienna.

⁵³ Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishments*, VIII, 18. In the original Italian: “*Ogni delitto, benchè privato, offende la società*,” Beccaria, *Dei delitti e delle pene*, chapter VIII, 41.

⁵⁴ Cf. Craig J. Calhoun et al., eds., *Classical Sociological Theory*, 3rd ed. (Chichester, West Sussex, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell a John Wiley & Sons Ltd. publication, 2012), 15.

⁵⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 4th ed. (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960), Translated by George Simpson, 80. In the original French: “*un acte est criminel quand il offense les états forts et définis de la conscience collective*,” Émile Durkheim, *De la division du travail social*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Quadrige, 1991), 47.

⁵⁶ Cf. Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 79, where Durkheim defines *conscience collective* as the “totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society.”

and forbidden. Although societal consent does affect the sentiment of legitimacy, it does not change the decision-making process. As the US sociologist and criminologist William J. Chambliss has aptly put it: “That most people might agree today that murder, rape, vagrancy, and theft constitute socially abhorrent behaviour does *not* mean that the law making them crimes arose out of shared values [...]; it did not.”⁵⁷ Ultimately, crime is a construct that exists in a conceptual realm subject to change, whose form is determined by the creative power of actual legislation. In other words, *the primary origin of crime is the state itself*.

⁵⁷ William J. Chambliss, “The Creation of Criminal Law and Crime Control in Britain and America,” in *Making Law: The State, the Law, and Structural Contradictions*, ed. William J. Chambliss and Marjorie S. Zatz, A Midland Book 834 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 37.

2.2 What is the State?

As with the previous chapter, this one also begins with a question – a question that has already been hovering in the background of the previous pages: What is it that we call the state?

As before, this question takes us far back into the history of thought, to the first millennium BCE and the theories of the state of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers such as Aristotle and Cicero. Other theorists who will be discussed in more detail include Jean Bodin, Thomas Hobbes, Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Carl Schmitt.

Preliminary Notes

In order to demonstrate what is meant by the term *state* in this thesis, it is important to first address such terms that are often used synonymously with *state*, but which have different terminological implications. Most notable here is the term *sovereign*. In the following, it is shown that *sovereign*, although implying state authority, does not necessarily imply state power. Conversely, the state possesses state power by definition, but not necessarily state authority. The state is partly defined by its ability to exercise power, but state authority (understood as the legitimate source of political power) can arise outside of the state, e.g., founded in the people as the actual sovereign. This is, in fact, not necessarily the case, neither theoretically nor practically. Therefore, a thorough differentiation is necessary, which is why the historical development and different understandings of the terms are discussed below.

Other terms that are sometimes used synonymously with *state* are less problematic.

Government, for example, does – just like the state – possess state power while not necessarily holding state authority. Since early modern times, however, the government has been less identified with all-encompassing (or absolute) state power than with that of the executive branch. Furthermore, the term *government* more typically points to the *particular*, whereas the *state* indicates the *general*.

In the following pages, some core elements of the concept of the *state* are outlined. As early understandings of the *state* were often closely linked to those of the *sovereign*, the development of the terms is examined alongside each other. This ultimately leads to a clarification of what is meant by *the state* in this work, i.e., an entity characterised by the elements of *state power*, *its manifestation through actors and institutions*, and the *ability to transgress its own laws, both overtly and covertly*. This outline does not claim to be a definition of statehood, nor does it purport to include all, or even most, of its constitutional

elements. Rather, as with the previous chapter on crime, it is intended to illustrate the perspective from which the state is viewed in this work.

The State and the Sovereign

State theory has a long tradition. Over two thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle understood the state to be essentially formed by its constitution – its *politeia* (πολιτεία).⁵⁸ What he had in mind were not the formalised written constitutions of modern-day nation states, but more generally “the ordering of a state in respect of its various magistracies, and especially the magistracy that is supreme over all matters,”⁵⁹ as he put it in his work *Politics* (4th century BCE). For Aristotle, the central distinguishing question is who holds that supreme political power, which he identifies as the sovereign (whereas I use “sovereign” for authority/legitimacy and “state” for power).⁶⁰ He therefore identified three types of state constitution: the rule of one, the rule of a few, and the rule of many.⁶¹ These three constitutions, in turn, could manifest in their positive forms as monarchy, aristocracy, and polity, aimed at the common good, or in their negative forms as tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy, aimed at the ruler(s) themselves.⁶²

This understanding of sovereignty as the central constituting feature of the state has influenced many other thinkers in Western state theory. In his work *De Re Publica* (54-51 BCE), the Roman philosopher and state theoretician Marcus Tullius Cicero also discussed the three Aristotelian forms of the state, not without concluding that the Roman Republic excelled in combining the positive elements of all three forms.⁶³

During the early modern Renaissance period, when thinkers began to revisit ancient thought with renewed intensity, the centrality of the sovereign and his legitimisation was once again emphasised in state theory. In his work *Leviathan* (1651), for example, the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes deduced the legitimacy of the sovereign from a natural process wherein the people “conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one

⁵⁸ Curtis N. Johnson, *Aristotle's Theory of the State* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 2.

⁵⁹ Aristot. *Pol.* 3.1278b. Translation in Aristotle, *Politics: Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 21, with an English Translation by H. Rackham.*, Reprinted, The Loeb classical library 264 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1944) Classical texts are cited in the standard academic style, using abbreviations in accordance with the Oxford Classical Dictionary.

⁶⁰ This differs from my usage of the term. As mentioned in the preliminary notes, in this thesis “sovereign” denotes political authority (legitimacy), while “state” denotes political power. By contrast, Aristotle’s “sovereign” refers to the office(s) holding supreme functions.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.1279a.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.1279a-1279b. What Aristotle understood as democracy he describes as a “government in the interest of the poor” (*ibid.*), which would not govern with regard to the whole community. While this definition certainly carries classist overtones, it must be distinguished from modern understandings of democracy.

⁶³ Cf. Cic. *Rep.* 1.41-45.

Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will.”⁶⁴ For Hobbes, this power bestowed on the sovereign appears as absolute.

A similar view was expressed by French political theorist Jean Bodin over seventy years earlier. In *Les Six Livres de la République* (1576), Bodin starts his chapter on sovereignty with the following statement: “Maieltie [majesty] or Soveraigntie is the most high, absolute, and perpetuall power over the citisens and subiects in a Commonweale.”⁶⁵ Once again, the sovereign is described primarily by virtue of his power and its absoluteness. This power is constituted by the right of the legislative and the executive – “a souveraine [is the one], which giveth lawes unto his subiects, which maketh peace and warre, which appointeth all the officers and magistrats, which imposeth tributes.”⁶⁶ However, Bodin goes even further, stating that the sovereign is not subject to their own laws and may therefore act contrary to them if they wish so; the only laws they must not break are those of God and nature.⁶⁷

This understanding of the state – as standing above the boundaries of positive law – is highly evaluative and normative. But it is also observational and, at the time of writing, a political reality. For Bodin, the fact that the sovereign is considered to be above the ordinary citizen is natural and of the utmost importance to his ontological deduction of the sovereign’s absolute and perpetual power. He makes this clear by comparing the sovereign to a ruler with limited powers, such as a *dictator* in the Roman Republic prior to the Caesares – an office in which a magistrate was granted extensive power to resolve a specific crisis or issue.⁶⁸ Although Roman dictators possessed enormous authority, their power was nonetheless constrained in both scope and duration. In contrast, Bodin’s sovereign is “not limited either in power, charge, or time certaine.”⁶⁹ The sovereign is absolute and perpetual, and thus the personification of the state itself.

⁶⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, book I, chapter 17, 87.

⁶⁵ Jean Bodin, *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale: Out of the French and Latine Copies, Done into English*, by Richard Knolles (London: Impensis G. Bishop, 1606), accessed July 31, 2025, https://archive.org/details/sixbookesofcommo00bodi/book_I/chapter_8/84. In the original French: “La souveraineté est la puissance absoluë & perpetuelle d’une République;” Jean Bodin, *Les six livres de la République* (Paris: Jacques du Puys, Libraire Juré à la Samaritaine, 1577), accessed 30.07.2025, https://archive.org/details/lessixliuresdela00bodi/book_I/chapter_8/89. Italicisation not in the original.

⁶⁶ Bodin, *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale*, 154. In the original French: “souverains, celui qui donne loy à tous ses sugets: qui fait la paix & la guerre: qui pourvoit tous les officiers & Magistrats de son pays: qui leve les tailles;” Bodin, *Les six livres de la République*, book I, chapter 10, 156. Italicisation not in the original.

⁶⁷ Cf. Bodin, *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale*, 104–5.

⁶⁸ See on the office of ‘dictator’ and its history, Mark Wilson, *Dictator: The Evolution of the Roman Dictatorship* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021). doi:10.3998/mpub.10150936.

⁶⁹ Bodin, *Les six livres de la République*, chapter 8, 85. In the French original: “Or la souveraineté n’est pas limitée, ny en puissance, ny en charge, ny à certain temps;” Bodin, *Les six livres de la République*, 90. Italicisation not in the original.

Bodin viewed this power as just and as part of the world's natural and divine order. And although he clearly sympathised most with the Christian monarch, he noted that a sovereign could manifest in all three of Aristotle's state constitutions, or, in his words, "the three states of Commonweales"⁷⁰ – monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. And since the sovereign's power is absolute, it cannot be limited by worldly laws – "he himself is not by that law bound, although his subjects be"⁷¹ – but only by the "lawes of God and nature."⁷²

Although this idea that the sovereign is not strictly bound by the law (or at least by their own laws) is particularly characteristic of the Middle Ages and the early modern period, it has also influenced some modern political theorists. A very prominent example of this is the German legal scholar and political theorist Carl Schmitt, to whom we will return shortly.

The Popular Sovereign and the Separation of (State) Powers

In general, modern state theory has largely steered clear of this absolutist understanding of sovereignty. This shift began to emerge in particular in the works of Enlightenment philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Montesquieu.⁷³ In his central work on state theory, *Du contrat social* (1762), Rousseau systematically developed the idea of popular sovereignty (*souveraineté populaire*).⁷⁴ Unlike Bodin and Hobbes, he argues that the sovereign is not necessarily the one who actually exercises the power; rather, the sovereign is inalienably ("That Sovereignty Cannot Be Transferred")⁷⁵ and indivisibly ("That Sovereignty Cannot Be Divided")⁷⁶ the people. The governing body is therefore supposed to solely articulate the people's will (*volonté générale*) and is not a self-willed and deliberative entity itself. What is delegated to the governing body is not the *will* itself, but the *power* to materialise it ("*le pouvoir peut bien se transmettre, mais non pas la volonté*")⁷⁷. For

⁷⁰ Bodin, *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale*, book II, chapter 1, 193 See on his discussion on whether there are more than three kinds of states, chapter 1 in book II.

⁷¹ Ibid., book I, chapter 8, 105.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Although generally known simply as Montesquieu, his full name was Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu.

⁷⁴ Particularly in book I, chapters 1 & 2 of Rousseau, *Du contrat social*. He had first discussed some of these ideas in his earlier work, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Amsterdam: Marc-Michel Rey, 1755), accessed July 30, 2025, <https://archive.org/details/discourssu00rous>.

⁷⁵ "*Que la souveraineté est inaliénable*," translated in Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy and The Social Contract*, 63.

⁷⁶ "*Que la souveraineté est indivisible*," translated in *ibid.*, 64.

⁷⁷ Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, 32. Italicisation not in the original.

Rousseau, therefore, the sovereign is not the body that holds the power but the entirety of the people who *delegate* the power to that specific body.⁷⁸

This idea of the people as sovereign had a profound influence on modern Western state theory and is widely considered one of the constituent features of liberal democracy.⁷⁹ Another equally important feature of liberal democratic theory is the separation of powers, a principle that is particularly associated with the French philosopher and political theorist Montesquieu. As early as the second century BCE, the ancient Greek historian Polybius – much like Cicero over a hundred years later – wrote that the Roman constitution had three ruling bodies (“*τρία μέρη τὰ κρατοῦντα τῆς πολιτείας*”)⁸⁰. The consulate, the highest office of state, represented the monarchical element; the Senate, an advisory body consisting of former high officials, represented the aristocratic element; and the various popular assemblies represented the democratic element.⁸¹ Polybius expressively advocated this mixed constitution because he believed that the interdependencies would contribute to internal strength and prevent abusive behaviour.⁸²

Two millennia later, the French political theorist Montesquieu came to the same conclusion about the constitution of the Roman Republic.⁸³ In 1734, he wrote that Rome’s tripartite constitution was admirable, as an abuse of power could always be corrected by another branch of state power.⁸⁴ Montesquieu further developed this theory in his work *De l’esprit des lois* (1748). There, he distinguishes between three kinds of power that would exist in every

⁷⁸ The idea that the people should be the only source of legitimacy for political authority was already a central component of the thinking of the fourteenth-century Italian scholar Marsilius of Padua, although it was not systematically developed until the eighteenth century; cf., Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor pacis* from 1325. See also Ephraim Emerton, *The Defensor Pacis of Marsiglio of Padua: A Critical Study*, Harvard Theological Studies 8 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1920).

⁷⁹ Particularly in German-language political theory under ‘*Volkssouveränität*’, the concept is seen as centrally constitutive for democracy; see, e.g., Ingeborg Maus, *Über Volkssouveränität: Elemente einer Demokratietheorie*, suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 2007 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019); Peter von Kienle, *Volkssouveränität: Eine Untersuchung der Bedingungen demokratischer Legitimität* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1977).

⁸⁰ Plb. 6.11.11. Printed in: Polybius, *The Histories in Six Volumes, Vol. 3*, Reprinted, The Loeb classical library 138 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 294. Italicisation not in the original.

⁸¹ Cf. Nikolaus Krausler, “Polybios im Denken Montesquieus: Mischverfassungstheorie und Gewaltenteilungslehre,” *Teoria e storia del diritto privato*, no. 12 (2019): 7, accessed July 30, 2025, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7236838>.

⁸² Cf. Plb. 6.18.

⁸³ See Nikolaus Krausler, “Polybios im Denken Montesquieus” for more on Polybius’s influence on Montesquieu’s thinking.

⁸⁴ “*Le gouvernement de Rome fut admirable, [...], sa constitution se trouva telle, fait par l’esprit du Peuple, la force du Senat ou l’autorité de certains Magistrats, que tout abus du pouvoir y put toujours être corrigé,*” Montesquieu (Baron de La Brède et de), Charles-Louis de Secondat, *Considerations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains, et de leur decadence*, Revised, corrected & expanded edition (Lausanne: Marc-Michel Bousquet & Compagnie, 1749), accessed July 30, 2025, https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_W9fzIsNgtiQC/mode/2up, chapter 8, 99-100.

state: legislative power,⁸⁵ executive power relating to law between states,⁸⁶ and executive power relating to civil law.⁸⁷ The latter is most similar to what today would be referred to as the judiciary, as Montesquieu himself later specifies as one of its capacities the power to judge.⁸⁸ Montesquieu links this separation of powers to his central concept of political liberty (*liberté politique*), a condition that cannot be achieved without the three branches of power being separate.⁸⁹

The descriptions of the state by Montesquieu, Polybius and even Cicero, in reference to Aristotle, all share a common claim: the state is the product of the entire configuration of powers. The advantage of this definition for state theory in general is that it can be applied to any form of statehood: whether democratic or despotic, national or confederal, recognised or not, what defines statehood is this assembly of powers and their interrelation – lawmaking, enforcement, arbitration, and the arrangements that bind them – rather than any single element taken in isolation.

So far, we have seen that in European political thought, central themes of state theory concerned, on the one hand, the question of sovereignty and, on the other hand, the question of the power of the state and its different elements. The key point to make here is that the concept of sovereignty refers to the idea that a political entity holds political authority, whereas the state is the entity that holds political power. Notably, depending on their stance, different authors do not always use these two concepts distinctly. They can overlap or appear interchangeably. In the case of Carl Schmitt, for example, who will be discussed later, the sovereign clearly appears as the possessor of political power. For the sake of linguistic clarity, however, his thesis treats the state as the holder of that power, regardless of whether political authority (legitimacy) is also attributed to it.

How Does the State Manifest Itself?

After a first theoretical answer to the question “What is the state?”, the more practical question arises: “Who is the state?” or “How does the state manifest itself?” To explore possible answers, we now turn to some more recent theorists, namely Philip Abrams and Joel S. Migdal.

⁸⁵ “*la puissance législative*,” Montesquieu (Baron de La Brède et de), Charles-Louis de Secondat, *De l'esprit des lois: Tome I*, Revised, corrected & expanded edition (London, 1777), book XI, chapter 6, 311.

⁸⁶ “*la puissance exécutrice de choses qui dependent du droit des gens*,” *ibid.*

⁸⁷ “*la puissance exécutrice de celles qui dependent du droit civil*,” *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 312.

⁸⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, book XI, chapter 6, 312-313.

Up to this point, the focus of this chapter has lain, so to speak, more on the *idea* of the state. In *Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State* (1977), the British sociologist Philip Abrams differentiates the state-idea, i.e., the ideological and symbolic projection of a cohesive, independent and self-evident entity, and the state-system, i.e., its actual manifestation, “a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in government.”⁹⁰ Indeed, the way the state presents itself and interacts with society is certainly more concrete and palpable than the notions of state power and sovereignty can grasp. From a sociological point of view, Abrams urges that we examine the state system rather than projecting the abstraction of *the state* onto our research. And this remark certainly has merit. But what exactly, then, ought to be the focus? Which practices and institutional structures should we observe?

US political scientist Joel S. Migdal also distinguishes between the *image* of the state and the *practices* of its constituent parts. For him, the practical side of the state is “the routine performance of state actors and agencies,”⁹¹ thus focusing on concrete actions and behaviour. This approach addresses the question of manifestation by locating it in the state-society relation, that is, “where people actually encounter the state.”⁹² Such interactions occur at all levels – state actors and institutions span executive, legislative, and judicial branches, from the highest echelons to provincial bureaucracies.

This concretisation has two consequences: one conceptual and one operational. Conceptually, it expands the understanding of the state developed here to include a more tangible component, i.e. the *manifestation of the state in the actions and behaviour of its actors and institutions*. Practically, it has contributed to the fact that the empirical part of this thesis is an actor-centred analysis.

The Sovereign and the Exception

As we have seen above, for Jean Bodin, the sovereign’s power – in this thesis’s terms, the state power – is absolute and perpetual, that is, without boundaries in extent or duration. Moreover, even the laws of the state do not constrain their action, neither the laws of the previous sovereign nor those enacted by themselves: “If then the sovereign prince be exempted from the lawes of his predecessors, much lesse should he be bound unto the lawes

⁹⁰ Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977),” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (1988): 82, doi:10.1111/j.1467-6443.1988.tb00004.x.

⁹¹ Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*, Reprinted., Cambridge studies in comparative politics (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), 18.

⁹² Benjamin B. Smith, “Conclusion,” in *The Everyday Life of the State: A State-in-Society Approach*, ed. Adam White (Seattle, WA: University of Washington, 2013), 206.

and ordinances he maketh himself.”⁹³ In fact, Bodin argues that the sovereign cannot be subject to his own laws for purely logical reasons. To this end, he invokes the Latin legal maxim “*Nulla obligatio consistere potest, que a voluntate promittentis statum capit.*”⁹⁴ This essentially means that one cannot truly impose an obligation on oneself. With regard to the sovereign, this implies that, since the sovereign enacts (positive) laws, these laws cannot impose legal obligations on the sovereign itself. As mentioned above, Bodin is referring to positive law here and explicitly excludes natural and divine law from the legal exemption he ascribes to the sovereign. Nevertheless, his reasoning points to a more general and non-normative observation: that the state, through the power it possesses, has the ability to transgress its own laws, both overtly and covertly.

This ability of legal transgression, a point that will prove important throughout the following chapters, was perhaps best, or at least most famously, articulated and described by Carl Schmitt. The recourse to Carl Schmitt’s thinking requires at least a brief discussion. The German legal scholar is considered both one of the most influential and controversial constitutional and law experts of the twentieth century.⁹⁵ During the Weimar Republic, Schmitt became a renowned writer and public intellectual who was known for his strongly anti-democratic and anti-parliamentary views.⁹⁶ However, it was as the leading political theorist and legal scholar of Nazi Germany that Schmitt achieved true infamy.⁹⁷

Schmitt actively contributed to the (pseudo-)legalisation of Adolf Hitler’s dictatorial power and thus the progressive erosion of democracy in Germany. For example, after the murder of Ernst Röhm, the leader of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), and many others on Hitler’s orders between 30 June and 2 July 1934, he wrote: “*Der Führer schützt das Recht vor dem schlimmsten Mißbrauch, wenn er im Augenblick der Gefahr kraft seines Führertums als*

⁹³ Bodin, *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale*, 91.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 92. Italicisation not in the original. This quote appears to be a modified version of a passage from the 1234 Decretals of Gregory IX, *Decretales Gregorii IX*, lib I, tit 6, chapter 20. Cf. Merio Scattola, *Prinzip und Prinzipienfrage in der Entwicklung des modernen Naturrechts: The Question of Principles and the Development of Modern Natural Law*, ed. Andreas Wagner, Politische Philosophie und Rechtstheorie des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit Reihe 2, Untersuchungen Band 8 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2017), 157-158, fn. 58.

⁹⁵ See, e.g., Jean-François Kervégan, *Que faire de Carl Schmitt?*, Tel 387 (Paris: Gallimard, 2011); Reinhard Mehring, *Vom Umgang mit Carl Schmitt: Die Forschungsdynamik der letzten Epoche im Rezensionsspiegel*, 1. Auflage (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2018); Jan-Werner Müller, *A Dangerous Mind: Carl Schmitt in Post-War European Thought* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁹⁶ On this topic, see, e.g., Kurt Sontheimer, *Antidemokratisches Denken in der Weimarer Republik: Die politischen Ideen des deutschen Nationalismus zwischen 1918 und 1933*, 3rd ed., dtv wissenschaft (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992), 78-84, 152-155.

⁹⁷ See, e.g., Bernd Rüthers, *Carl Schmitt im Dritten Reich: Wissenschaft als Zeitgeist-Verstärkung?*, 2nd ed. (München: Beck, 1990).

oberster Gerichtsherr unmittelbar Recht schafft.”⁹⁸ With these words, he not only justified the extrajudicial murder of alleged political enemies but also provided a rationale for the transfer of legislative and judicial powers to the executive branch under Hitler. With statements like this, among other things, Carl Schmitt earned himself the title of Crown Jurist of the Third Reich (*Kronjurist des Dritten Reiches*)⁹⁹. It is therefore undisputed that Carl Schmitt supported and took part in enabling the system during the Nazi rule, even though he apparently was rather opposed to the Nazis before they came to power.¹⁰⁰

Nevertheless, Carl Schmitt’s ideas have recently experienced a resurgence of interest, particularly from neo-Realist commentators as geopolitics has returned to the forefront of public attention.¹⁰¹ But even in critical political science, Carl Schmitt’s thinking has been gaining ground, partly despite and partly precisely because of his radical criticism of liberal democracy.¹⁰² For example, Finnish legal scholar and researcher Martti Koskeniemi turns to Carl Schmitt’s friend-enemy theory to criticise liberal internationalism and Western interventionism in light of US foreign policy in the so-called *war on terror*.¹⁰³ The use of Schmitt’s ideas has been criticised, both because of his background and because the referencing often appears rather superficial or rhetorical.¹⁰⁴

While the latter point is undeniably valid, there is some value in considering perspectives such as that of Carl Schmitt. This is particularly evident in his endorsing views on radical and absolute state power, which reveal inherent dangers in statehood more generally. One particularly noteworthy aspect is Schmitt’s understanding of the *state of exception*.

⁹⁸ Carl Schmitt, “Der Führer schützt das Recht: Zur Reichstagsrede Adolf Hitlers vom 13. Juli 1934,” *Deutsche Juristen-Zeitung* 39, no. 15 (1934): 946. Italicisation not in the original.

⁹⁹ This term appears to have been coined by the German-American political scientist Waldemar Gurian in 1934, cf. Susanne Heil, *‘Gefährliche Beziehungen’: Walter Benjamin und Carl Schmitt* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1996). doi:10.1007/978-3-476-03600-1, 1, fn. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Cf., e.g., Peter C. Caldwell, “Controversies over Carl Schmitt: A Review of Recent Literature,” *The Journal of Modern History* 77, no. 2 (2005), doi:10.1086/431819.

¹⁰¹ See, e.g., William E. Scheuerman, “Carl Schmitt in the 21st Century: A Response to Critics,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47, no. 2 (2021), doi:10.1177/0191453720974720; Bernardo Calheiros, “Carl Schmitt and International Relations: Actuality and Theoretical Position,” *JANUS NET e-journal of International Relation* 1, no. 12 (2021), doi:10.26619/1647-7251.12.1.10; Attila Gyulai, “The Lesson of Carl Schmitt’s Realism: The Autonomy and the Primacy of the Political,” *Theoria* 65, no. 155 (2018), doi:10.3167/th.2018.6515502.

¹⁰² See, e.g., Can M. Kökerer, “The Sine Qua Non of Carl Schmitt’s Political Thinking: The Issue of Interstate Relations,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47, no. 10 (2021), doi:10.1177/0191453720974726.

¹⁰³ Martti Koskeniemi, “International Law as Political Theology: How to Read Nomos Der Erde?,” *Constellations* 11, no. 4 (2004), doi:10.1111/j.1351-0487.2004.00391.x. Similarly also Louiza Odysseos, ed., *The International Political Thought of Carl Schmitt: Terror, Liberal War and the Crisis of Global Order*, Routledge innovations in political theory 24 (London, New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007).

¹⁰⁴ E.g., David Chandler, “The Revival of Carl Schmitt in International Relations: The Last Refuge of Critical Theorists?,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 1 (2008), doi:10.1177/0305829808093729.

In the opening sentence of his book *Political Theology*, Carl Schmitt famously defined the sovereign as “he who decides on the exception.”¹⁰⁵ Schmitt is not merely referring to any state of emergency, but to a more general concept – a state of the extreme, a borderline case.¹⁰⁶ The meaning of the *exception* is twofold: the sovereign decides that an exceptional situation exists and determines what is affected by the exception.¹⁰⁷ In this situation, the state decides what to exempt, up to – and including – the total suspension of the law (“[der Souverän] ist zuständig für die Entscheidung, ob die Verfassung in toto suspendiert werden kann”).¹⁰⁸ Carl Schmitt does not specify when this occurs, stating that such a description is impossible at the level of theory.¹⁰⁹ Instead, he defines the fundamental ability that marks the holder of state power as sovereign: the ability to declare a state of exception and to decide what is affected by it. What is important here is that Schmitt is not primarily describing what the sovereign (who, for him, is the holder of state power) should do; rather, he argues that the *exception* lies within the sovereign’s decision-making capacity. It is this descriptive element of Schmitt’s analysis, more than the normative weight he attaches to it, that is the crux of the matter. In a state of exception, which only the sovereign can declare, the state has the ability to sidestep the law – and even act against it – and thus to exempt someone or something from the law.¹¹⁰ This is the central point of what has been referred to above as the state’s capacity for *legal transgression*, at least in its overt form. “Overt” means that a legal transgression can appear openly and candidly. However, it can also take hidden and concealed forms. Yet, these two forms are not extremes; they are two ends of a shared spectrum. The state has at its disposal the means to act against the law, whether overtly or covertly. In research, situations in which this is the case have often been regarded as breaches of boundaries, as acts that are unethical, wrong, illegal, or out of the norm. Underlying this notion, to its detriment, is the assumption of a *normal* state of statehood and the

¹⁰⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago, London, Bristol: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5. In the original German: “wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet;” Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, 9th ed. (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2009), 13. Italicisation not in the original.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5–7.

¹⁰⁷ “Er [der Souverän] entscheidet sowohl darüber, ob der extreme Notfall vorliegt, als auch darüber, was geschehen soll, um ihn zu beseitigen,” Schmitt, *Politische Theologie*, 16.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. Italicisation not in the original.

¹⁰⁹ He writes early on in his work, “Der Fall [der Ausnahme] kann höchstens als Fall äußerster Not, Gefährdung der Existenz des Staates oder dergleichen bezeichnet, nicht aber tatbestandsmäßig umschrieben werden. [...] Es kann weder mit subsumierbarer Klarheit angegeben werden, wann ein Notfall vorliegt, noch kann inhaltlich aufgezählt werden, was in einem solchen Fall geschehen darf;” *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ See further on Carl Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty and the exception, Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2005), particularly chapter 4, 52–64; Hasso Hofmann, *Legitimität gegen Legalität: Der Weg der politischen Philosophie Carl Schmitts*, 2nd edition, supplemented by a preliminary remark (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1992), 62–69.

exceptionalism of legal transgression. But Carl Schmitt, as I believe rightly, argues that this exception is not exceptional at all but rather creates the rule (of state power) in the first place: there can be no rule of law without an exception to it.

To conclude briefly, for the purposes of this study, the state will be approached as both an idea and a set of practices, as an entity constituted by the entire configuration of powers and their interrelations, defined by the ways it manifests through actors and institutions, and by its inherent ability to overstep the very norms it proclaims.

2.3 On the Relation of Crime and State

Having laid an analytical foundation through examining the different theoretical concepts of crime on the one hand and the state on the other, this chapter will attempt to find a synthesis that goes beyond the idea of two sides altogether. The essential claim of this chapter, and the principal theoretical underpinning of this thesis, is that in order to understand the main dynamics and workings of transnational organised crime (TOC) in twentieth-century Mexico, a more symbiotic understanding of state and crime is necessary. To examine this assertion, this chapter first reviews scholarship that fundamentally relies on this binary conception. This is illustrated by the example of the widely used and prominent concept of *state capacity*. In a second step, this chapter examines some of the alternative explanatory models that have been introduced by scholars and that, to a greater or lesser extent, challenge the state-crime binary. It discusses the concepts of *state crime*, *Pax priista*, *grey zone*, and the *hybridity* of state and crime and discusses their respective strengths and weaknesses. These models are strong counterpoints to the usual binary scholarly perspective, but they lack two things: systematicity and consequentiality.

The third subchapter will therefore focus on what I believe to be a crucial point in the systematic conceptualisation of a non-binary understanding of the state and crime: their similar inner workings. To this end, the subchapter discusses Charles Tilly's interpretation of *state-building as organised crime*,¹¹¹ focusing on the central institution of protection rackets. The final section then outlines the theoretical conceptualisation of this thesis, aiming at an understanding of the dynamics of state and crime in twentieth-century Mexico that neither postulates a complete fusion nor falls into the trap of absolute binarity. Rather, it is a *complex* of state and crime, i.e., a realm in which the two entities act as one, while outside this realm they effectively play and display their separateness. This theory and its development are the focus of the final part of this chapter, completing the laying of a theoretical foundation for the empirical part of this thesis.

2.3.1 *State-Crime Binary* – the Example of the *State Capacity* Concept

As we have discussed in the chapter “What is Crime?”, whatever its moral justifications, *crime* originates not in society's beliefs or sentiments, but in the *state's* power to create it. This puts these two entities in a peculiar position of both co-construction and performative

¹¹¹ Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime (1985)”.

antagonism. On the one hand, crime would not exist without the state creating it; the state, in turn, relies on the act of outlawing (and thus on the existence of crime) to delineate what is and is not within its legitimate remit. On the other hand, this co-construction is necessarily rooted in antagonism, as the very existence of crime simultaneously affirms and challenges the state's legitimacy.

The latter aspect is more commonly focused on in scholarship. In particular, in research operating with the paradigm of *state capacity*, the state-crime antagonism is an important epistemological basis and generally taken to be more than mere performativity. Less focus has been given to the former argument regarding the co-dependency of state and crime, and even less to examining how deep this co-dependency goes in practice.

The labels “strong state,” “weak state,” and “fragile state” are part of the vocabulary of the debate around *state capacity* that arose around 1990.¹¹² It has since become a widely used category in policymaking, development theory and political science.¹¹³ Among the early proponents of this debate were renowned scholars such as Michael Mann,¹¹⁴ Joel S. Migdal,¹¹⁵ and Francis Fukuyama.¹¹⁶ *State capacity* is generally understood as a measure of a state's ability to implement official policies or goals and provide core functions for the general public.¹¹⁷ In this frame, “fragile” or “weak state” would denote a lack in this ability to some extent.

From a security standpoint, crime, and particularly (transnational) organised crime, is often seen as a central threat to this capacity: the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) argues that “organised crime erodes the state's long term capacity to provide for the common good;”¹¹⁸ the *World Bank* warns that “unprecedented progression of

¹¹² Cf. Sonja Grimm, Nicolas Lemay-Hébert, and Olivier Nay, “‘Fragile States’: Introducing a Political Concept,” *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2014): 199, doi:10.1080/01436597.2013.878127.

¹¹³ Cf. Shahar Hameiri, “Failed States or a Failed Paradigm? State Capacity and the Limits of Institutionalism,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 10, no. 2 (2007): 122–23, doi:10.1057/palgrave.jird.1800120.

¹¹⁴ Michael Mann, “The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results,” *European Journal of Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1984), doi:10.1017/S0003975600004239.

¹¹⁵ Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). doi:10.1515/9780691212852.

¹¹⁶ Fukuyama, *State Building*.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Timothy Besley and Torsten Persson, “State Capacity, Conflict and Development,” *EOPP Discussion Paper* 10 (2008): 2; Suntory and Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines (STICERD), London School of Economics and Political Science., accessed August 24, 2025, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/25426/2/State_Capacity%2C_Conflict_and_Development.pdf; Theda Skocpol, “Bringing the State Back in: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research,” in Evans; Rueschemeyer; Skocpol, *Bringing the State Back in*, 9; Department for International Development, “Why We Need to Work More Effectively in Fragile States” (Policy paper, ukaid; DFID, 2005), https://inec.org/sites/default/files/resources/doc_1_Why_we_need_to_work_more_effectively_in_fragile_states.pdf, 7.

¹¹⁸ Miraglia, Ochoa and Briscoe, “Transnational organised crime and fragile states,” 4.

organized crime could spell the collapse of many weak states;”¹¹⁹ and the *International Peace Institute* asserts that “[t]ransnational organized crime can undermine governments in a variety of ways, from fueling corruption to the criminal infiltration of state structures.”¹²⁰

The concept of *state capacity* has also been applied to the context of TOC in Mexico, both as an explanatory model – namely, that a lack in state capacity has enabled transnational criminal organisations (TCOs) to increase their presence¹²¹ – and as a warning call – namely, that TOC threatens state capacity in Mexico.¹²² Some commentators have gone so far as to suspect a state of “criminal insurgency” in Mexico.¹²³ However, there is reason to doubt whether Mexico actually lacks state capacity and whether this kind of securitisation debate is helpful. For instance, the Dutch researcher Wil G. Pansters points out that

Mexico is widely considered as an example of consolidated statehood: its economy is part of one [sic] the world’s most prominent free trade agreements, it has a flourishing tourist industry (more than 30 million international visitors in 2015), a reputed foreign service, and an internationally respected, though hugely expensive, electoral system, to mention a few indicators.¹²⁴

But the debate over *state capacity* has also been criticised at a more fundamental level. The French scholar Olivier Nay, for example, has argued that the category mainly serves strategic and financial goals of Western states and has failed to foster improvement for populations suffering from conflict or bad governance.¹²⁵ Furthermore, he criticises the concept for being overloaded with different meanings, for its Western-centricity, analytical reductionism and lack of empirical evidence.¹²⁶

However, with regard to TOC, particularly in Mexico, another argument against the *state capacity* perspective may be even more decisive: the security narrative is unable to explain

¹¹⁹ World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development*. (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011). doi:10.1596/978-0-8213-8439-8, 10.

¹²⁰ Rachel Locke, “Organized Crime, Conflict, and Fragility: A New Approach” (International Peace Institute, New York, 2012), 2.

¹²¹ E.g., Jerjes Aguirre and Hugo A. Herrera, “Institutional Weakness and Organized Crime in Mexico: The Case of Michoacán,” *Trends in Organized Crime* 16, no. 2 (2013), doi:10.1007/s12117-013-9197-1.

¹²² E.g., Lee, “Organized Crime, Local Politicians, and State Capacity”.

¹²³ E.g., Sullivan, “From Drug Wars to Criminal Insurgency” Roxana Gutiérrez-Romero, “From Drug Trafficking to State Capture: The Dynamics of Criminal Governance, Political Violence, and Crime Diversification,” *WIDER Working Paper Series* 19/2025 (2025), doi:10.35188/UNU-WIDER/2025/576-9. See, for an overview on that debate, Teiner, “Cartel-Related Violence in Mexico as Narco-Terrorism or Criminal Insurgency”.

¹²⁴ Pansters, “Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order, and Caciques,” 316. Similarly also David A. Shirk, “The Drug War in Mexico: Confronting a Shared Threat,” Council Special Report 60 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2011), https://www.cfr.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2011/03/Mexico_CSR60.pdf, 3: “Despite the most dismal assessments, the Mexican state has not failed, nor has it confronted a growing insurgent movement.”

¹²⁵ Olivier Nay, “Fragile and Failed States: Critical Perspectives on Conceptual Hybrids,” *International Political Science Review* 34, no. 3 (2013): 330, doi:10.1177/0192512113480054.

¹²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 329–35.

the phenomenon of state-crime entanglements other than by shifting the definitional frontier. If a state institution or actor is intertwined with crime, it can no longer be considered part of the state. The *state-capacity* approach thus mis-specifies the problem: it treats implicated agencies as outside the state rather than examining the functions that such entanglements serve.

Some researchers have therefore moved away from security-centric perspectives, such as the concept of *state capacity*, and started focusing more on the links between statehood and crime as a key factor in understanding TOC in Mexico. These include, among others, Wil G. Pansters, Richard Snyder, Angélica Durán-Martínez, Timo Dorsch, Benjamin T. Smith, Alan Knight, and Monica Serrano.¹²⁷ Their work will be discussed in more detail in the following subchapters.

2.3.2 Theories of State and Crime Convergence

This subchapter examines two theories that directly address the convergence of state and crime: *grey zones* and *hybris*. First, however, we will discuss two theories that initially appear to be of this kind but ultimately cannot escape a binary conception of state and crime due to their conceptual limitations: the theories of *state crime* and *Pax priista*. Based on this analysis, the subchapter also builds, piece by piece, the foundations of the concept of the *state-crime complex* advanced here.

The Theory of *State Crime* and its Blind Spots

In a 1988 presidential address to the *American Society of Criminology*, US sociologist and criminologist William J. Chambliss described what he termed “state-organized crime”¹²⁸ as acts “defined by law as criminal and committed by state officials in the pursuit of their job as representatives of the state.”¹²⁹ For Chambliss, the two central requisites of state-organised crime were that the acts violate existing law and that they are official policy.¹³⁰ Consequently, individual, non-institutionalised misconduct and formally lawful acts would fall outside the sphere of state-organised criminal behaviour. This speech is widely regarded as one of the

¹²⁷ See Pansters, “Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order, and Caciques”; Snyder and Durán-Martínez, “Does Illegality Breed Violence?”; Dorsch, *Nekropolitik*; Smith, “Public Drug Policy and Grey Zone Pacts in Mexico, 1920–1980”; Alan Knight, “Narco-Violence and the State in Modern Mexico,” in Pansters, *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico*; Mónica Serrano, “States of Violence: State-Crime Relations in Mexico,” in Pansters, *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico*.

¹²⁸ Chambliss, “State-Organized Crime”.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

starting points for serious scholarly discussion and research into what is now known as the phenomenon of *state crime*.¹³¹

Since the late 1980s, the theory of state crime has received increasing attention and has become a widely recognised research approach. There are numerous monographs,¹³² edited volumes,¹³³ dictionary entries,¹³⁴ a scholarly society,¹³⁵ and even a dedicated journal;¹³⁶ one could say the concept has become firmly established. Particularly in the field of critical criminology, it has had a profound impact on scholarly debates.¹³⁷ But there are definitional disagreements. In the debate on what the term actually means, at least three different understandings have emerged: first, the *juridical* definition, in which state crime is seen as an act of the state that violates the law; second, the *deviance* definition, which includes acts that violate established norms of conduct; and third, the *social injury* definition, which focuses on state actions that cause harm.¹³⁸

The definitional variance that this discussion has brought about is part of a recent development in criminology. In orthodox criminology, the idea of the definitory primacy of the state – “taking state definitions of what is crime and who are its criminals as the starting points for criminological inquiry”¹³⁹ – had remained unquestioned for a long time. However, more recent scholarship, particularly from the field of *critical criminology*, has moved away from this premise. As Raymond J. Michalowski, one of the most productive scholars of that field, has pointed out, one reason for this shift is that such state-centred approaches tend to

¹³¹ Cf., e.g., Thomas MacManus, “State Crime,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 17.12.2020, accessed August 6, 2025, doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.013.362; Rothe, *State Criminality*, 2.

¹³² See, e.g., Doig, *State Crime*; Rothe, *State Criminality*; Penny Green and Tony Ward, *State Crime: Governments, Violence and Corruption* (London, Sterling, Va: Pluto Press, 2004).

¹³³ See, e.g., Chambliss, Michalowski and Kramer, *State Crime in the Global Age*; Rothe and Mullins, *State Crime*.

¹³⁴ For example, MacManus, “State Crime”.

¹³⁵ The *International State Crime Initiative*, see their website, accessed August 2, 2025, <https://statecrime.org/>.

¹³⁶ *State Crime: Journal of the International State Crime Initiative* (ISSN Print: 2046-6056 / ISSN Online: 2046-6064).

¹³⁷ See, e.g., David Kauzlarich and David O. Friedrichs, “Crimes of the State,” in *Controversies in Critical Criminology*, ed. Martin Schwartz and Suzanne E. Hatty, First published 2003 by Anderson Publishing, *Controversies in Crime and Justice* (London, New York: Routledge, 2014); Chambliss, Michalowski and Kramer, *State Crime in the Global Age*; David Kauzlarich, Rick A. Matthews, and William J. Miller, “Toward a Victimology of State Crime,” *Critical Criminology* 10, no. 3 (2001), doi:10.1023/A:1015744304749.

¹³⁸ Cf. Raymond J. Michalowski, “In Search of ‘State and Crime’ in State Crime Studies,” in *State Crime in the Global Age*, ed. William J. Chambliss, Raymond J. Michalowski and Ronald C. Kramer, eBook (London: Willan Publishing, 2013), 17. See on the concept and the definitional and theoretical debate also Jeffrey I. Ross, ed., *Controlling State Crime*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000); Green and Ward, *State Crime*; Rick A. Matthews and David Kauzlarich, “State Crimes and State Harms: A Tale of Two Definitional Frameworks,” *Crime, Law and Social Change* 48, 1-2 (2007), doi:10.1007/s10611-007-9081-5; Rothe, *State Criminality*; Rothe and Mullins, *State Crime*.

¹³⁹ Raymond J. Michalowski, “What Is Crime?,” *Critical Criminology* 24, no. 2 (2016): 181, doi:10.1007/s10612-015-9303-6.

overlook harmful actions carried out by powerful entities, such as corporations or the state itself.¹⁴⁰

This criticism does indeed highlight a number of weaknesses in traditional criminological research. For example, in the age of hyper-globalisation,¹⁴¹ the role of transnational corporations and big data presents a significant challenge to this field of study.¹⁴² Most significantly for this thesis, however, it raises the question of what happens when the state itself becomes the perpetrator.

The concept of *state crime* thus considerably expands the conceptual framework of the field by, firstly, focusing not only on (state-)criminalised actors but also on actors within the state and the state as such, and secondly, expanding the definitional scope of crime to also include non-legal aspects like social harm or human rights. This approach is, again, an important development for the field of criminology. Nonetheless, with regard to the phenomenon of state-crime entanglement, it faces two structural limits. First, from a constructivist perspective, “crime” is a state-produced category; what constitutes a crime depends on state processes of criminalisation. Second, the state thus also holds the power to decide on the *exception* and, in particular, has the ability to exempt itself from the rule. Therefore, even non-legal variants of *state crime* hinge on a binary between a criminalising state and criminalised acts and actors, rather than recognising deep entanglements and the co-constructive nature of state and crime.

Pax Priista

For the Mexican context, the *Pax priista* theory has been very influential over the course of the past thirty years. By examining this theory, we will also delve deeper into the empirical topic of the thesis, albeit in a superficial manner for the time being.

There are different names this idea has been given, but its core was developed by Luis Astorga in his 1996 work *El siglo de las drogas*,¹⁴³ and continues to influence scholars to this

¹⁴⁰ Michalowski, “What is Crime?”.

¹⁴¹ This term has been advanced to mark the phase of globalisation spanning the 1970s–2010s, as distinct from earlier waves of globalisation; for discussion, see Dani Rodrik, “Globalization's Wrong Turn: And How It Hurt America,” *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 4 (2019), accessed April 7, 2025, https://drodrik.scholar.harvard.edu/files/dani-rodrik/files/globalizations_wrong_turn.pdf; Arvind Subramanian and Martin Kessler, “The Hyperglobalization of Trade and Its Future,” *Peterson Institute for International Economics, Working Paper Series*, 13-6 (2013), accessed April 6, 2025, <https://www.piie.com/sites/default/files/publications/wp/wp13-6.pdf>.

¹⁴² On this topic, see, e.g., Chambliss, Michalowski and Kramer, *State Crime in the Global Age*.

¹⁴³ Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (1996). Cf. Le Cour Grandmaison, “Mexico,” 209–11.

day.¹⁴⁴ The core idea of the theory is that between 1929 and 2000, during the period of almost absolute dominance by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), the consistent pattern of the crime-state relationship was a kind of pact, with the state essentially pulling the strings. Astorga writes that “[d]esde los inicios de la formación del campo del tráfico de drogas en México, éste adquirió características particulares, pues nació a la sombra de intereses del campo político y supeditado a él.”¹⁴⁵

This interpretation has several strong points. For one thing, it sheds light on the long history of collaboration between state and crime in Mexico. It also rejects the reductionist idea of simple criminal infiltration of the state. At the same time, it does not simply reverse this narrative but traces a history of interactions subject to changing circumstances – even though this theory fundamentally posits a clear dependence of crime on the state. Astorga himself calls this dynamic an adaptive “*mediación entre el campo político y el del tráfico de drogas*.”¹⁴⁶

In the empirical section, this thesis greatly benefits from the in-depth analyses that Astorga has produced over the course of the last thirty years. He is a highly regarded scholar in the field and has written several classic works on the history of TOC in Mexico, including the two monographs *El siglo de las drogas* (1996) and *Drogas sin fronteras* (2003),¹⁴⁷ and his writing on the *Pax priista* has had a lasting impact.¹⁴⁸

Yet, with regard to the conceptual framework of this thesis, the *Pax priista* model ultimately reaches its limits. Although Astorga has often written about actors in Mexico’s history of TOC who travelled both the “criminal” and the “state” realms, he maintains the differentiation between the two entities. This is most evident in his main argument of state domination in the state-crime dynamic in twentieth-century Mexico; for if the state dominates crime, the two must be ontologically separate. Furthermore, as the French researcher Romain Le Cour Grandmaison has noted, the *Pax priista* relies on “non-participation of criminal actors in direct political activities.”¹⁴⁹

However, this thesis has set out to gain a deeper understanding of exactly that: overlaps between state and crime that go beyond a dynamic of interaction and connection. To achieve

¹⁴⁴ See, e.g., Kenny and Serrano, *Mexico's Security Failure*; Le Cour Grandmaison, “Mexico” Snyder and Durán-Martínez, “Does Illegality Breed Violence?” Snyder and Durán-Martínez, “Drugs, Violence, and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets in Mexico and Colombia”. The concept has also been discussed under the term *Pax Mafiosa*, e.g., by Dorsch, *Nekropolitik*, 84.

¹⁴⁵ Luis Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (2005): *El narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio* (Mexico City: Plaza y Janés, 2005), 161.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (1996); Astorga, *Drogas sin fronteras*.

¹⁴⁸ Although he himself does not use this particular term.

¹⁴⁹ Le Cour Grandmaison, “Mexico,” 210.

this, a different approach is required; one that treats the performative antagonism between state and crime as seriously as their co-constructive nature.

Grey Zone and Hybris

The concept of the *grey zone* was proposed and applied to the Mexican example by Benjamin T. Smith in an article published in 2016.¹⁵⁰ In developing his theory, Smith draws on the work of the sociologist Javier Auyero. For Auyero, the *grey zone* refers to “a set of clandestine connections”¹⁵¹ between different actors, particularly in situations that appear paradoxical, “where the activities of those perpetrating the violence and those who presumably seek to control them coalesce.”¹⁵² Smith further expanded on this concept by broadening its focus beyond the realm of violence to include “covert agreements between institutions and private entrepreneurs” more generally, while taking the example of TOC in Mexico in the twentieth century.

Smith asserts that alongside *public* drug policy, the Mexican state, together with private actors, has always engaged in *grey zone* “clandestine, off-the-books policies,”¹⁵³ which were often jointly developed and implemented. He rejects the term “corruption” as too broad and imprecise for what were deliberate policies rather than aberrant individual behaviour.¹⁵⁴ From this perspective, TOC in Mexico is not a phenomenon that occurs outside the state’s remit, but one that involves its explicit participation and management. This interpretation suggests a dual relationship between state and crime in Mexico, involving both public sanctioning and covert cooperation.

The concept of a *grey zone* calls into question the ability to draw a clear distinction between statehood and crime. It highlights the existence of a realm in which policy is jointly set and actors and actions are not viewed as black or white: there is a space in between. However, the *grey zone* perspective remains largely superficial, not delving into what this space might look like up close. Nevertheless, it shares a central underlying assumption with this thesis’s approach: that a strict state-crime binary analytical framework will eventually encounter explanatory limitations.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁰ Smith, “Public Drug Policy and Grey Zone Pacts in Mexico, 1920–1980”.

¹⁵¹ Auyero, *Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina*, 49.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵³ Smith, “Public Drug Policy and Grey Zone Pacts in Mexico, 1920–1980,” 34.

¹⁵⁴ *Cf. ibid.*, 33.

¹⁵⁵ A similar concept, called the *crime-government nexus*, has been introduced by Pansters, “Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order, and Caciques”. This *nexus* refers to a state-crime relationship enabled by pervasive informal orders (similar to Smith’s covert *grey zone* policies). These informal orders are based on the central elements of reciprocity and *confianza*. Pansters also understands the relationship between the state and crime as an

Perhaps even more decisive than Smith in his critique of the state-crime binary was the German scholar Timo Dorsch with his concept of the *Hybris*. Looking at contemporary Mexico, Dorsch asserts that even the term “war” is misleading,

*setzt er doch zwei klar voneinander trennbare bewaffnete Akteure voraus, die einander in einem klar abgrenzbaren Raum und Verhältnis bekriegen. Vielmehr existiert in Mexico eine Parallelität chaotischer Abläufe, eine Unübersichtlichkeit, die sich in Widersprüchen verliert.*¹⁵⁶

Dorsch argues that a “*Hybris*” has emerged in Mexico, a merging of seemingly opposing parts, actors, and structures, leading to confusion, opacity, and simultaneity.¹⁵⁷ Consequently, he says, it is no longer possible to operate with “either-or” concepts such as “*legal vs. illegal, Rechtsstaat vs. Gesetzlosigkeit, staatliches Gewaltmonopol vs. organisiertes Verbrechen, Normalzustand vs. Ausnahmezustand, Zentrum vs. Peripherie.*”¹⁵⁸ He urges looking at the functionality of the relationship between state and crime rather than desperately searching for a dividing line.¹⁵⁹ At the same time, however, he warns against generalisation by equating them completely.¹⁶⁰ Instead, he advocates a third way: recognising a hybrid realm in which state and criminal actors operate jointly.¹⁶¹ *Hybris* challenges perspectives prevailing in much research on Mexico and TOC. Dorsch rejects the notion of collapsing statehood or loss of control, while demonstrating that the coexistence of extreme violence, membership in the OECD and G20, and booming tourism is not as contradictory as it seems and in fact has a function.

The main focus of the book *Nekropolitik* (2020), in which Dorsch introduces the concept of *Hybris*, is an analysis of the function of violence in contemporary Mexico.¹⁶² In contrast, this thesis examines twentieth-century PRI Mexico, focusing not only on violence but on the relationship between state and crime itself. Therefore, although Dorsch’s concept of *Hybris* heads in a similar direction, it ultimately does not fully align with the purpose of this thesis. However, it does raise one important issue not yet addressed: functionality.

entanglement rather than an antagonistic dichotomy. See also their joint work, Pansters and Smith, *Histories of Drug Trafficking in Twentieth-Century Mexico*.

¹⁵⁶ Dorsch, *Nekropolitik*, 13.

¹⁵⁷ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 157.

¹⁶¹ See also Dorsch, “Para-Staatlichkeit” where he further elaborates the concept.

¹⁶² Dorsch uses the term in reference to the postcolonial philosopher Achille Mbembe, who introduced it first in the article Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003), doi:10.1215/08992363-15-1-11.

2.3.3 The System of Protection Rackets

What purpose does state-crime interaction serve in twentieth-century Mexico? Much past research has focused on individual and structural systems of corruption. Yet, calling such arrangements corruption does not do justice to their dynamics and their functionality. The term “corruption” and its counterpart “bribery” imply a two-sided exchange, in which interaction only occurs when individual actors temporarily cross to the other side, usually for personal gain (state actors) or a strategic advantage over adversaries (criminal actors). But this understanding obscures the structural function of the *state-crime complex*. The adhesive that binds state and crime together in a joint complex is a system of protection rackets.

Protection Rackets and Transnational Organised Crime

At its core, a protection racket is a territorially confined system in which a dominant actor extracts tribute from a subordinate actor in return for protection from internal and external threats.¹⁶³ Often, the threat comes from the very actor offering protection in the first place. What is usually meant by the emphasis on “racket,” is that the system takes place outside the sanctuary of legality, i.e., outside the state.

Indeed, many definitions of organised crime draw attention to the system of protection rackets. TOC researcher Frederico Varese has conducted a meta-study of 115 definitions of organised crime originating from official documents and scientific works between 1915 and 2009.¹⁶⁴ This analysis concludes with a two-level definition: at a more general level, organised crime groups “attempt to regulate and control the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully,”¹⁶⁵ while the “mafia group” subtype specifically “attempts to control the supply of protection.”¹⁶⁶ Cyrille Fijnaut makes a similar distinction between what he calls *black marketeering*, i.e., “the delivery of goods, services, persons, and capital on black markets or, sometimes, white (decriminalised) markets,”¹⁶⁷ on the one hand, and illegal control of legitimate markets, i.e., the “control of social and economic life in certain territories”¹⁶⁸ through protection racketeering and monopolising (licit) markets on the other.

¹⁶³ Cf., e.g., Eduardo Moncada, “Resisting Protection: Rackets, Resistance, and State Building,” *Comparative Politics* 51, no. 3 (2019): 322.

¹⁶⁴ Varese, “General Introduction,” 2.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁶⁷ Fijnaut, “Organised Crime in Europe and Beyond,” 14.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

A great deal of scholarship has been dedicated to investigating the protection racket systems of specific TCOs in various geographical regions, with a wealth of literature on Italy, Russia, and Latin America.¹⁶⁹ However, in the study of TOC in Mexico, there has been a remarkable shift in this regard in recent years. An increasing number of researchers have started to examine the operation of protection rackets by the state or state actors. Some notable such works have been produced by Benjamin T. Smith,¹⁷⁰ Alejandro Lerch,¹⁷¹ Richard Snyder, and Angélica Durán-Martínez.¹⁷² But why is that? Given that research on protection rackets originated in the study of organised crime, why the new focus on the state?

Protection Rackets and the State

The idea that the state could be viewed as an agent of protection racketeering rather than its adversary was first discussed by the US sociologist and historian Charles Tilly in his 1982 paper, *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*.¹⁷³ He begins this text with the main argument: “If protection rackets represent organized crime at its smoothest, then war making and state making – quintessential protection rackets with the advantage of legitimacy – qualify as our largest examples of organized crime.”¹⁷⁴

Tilly defines a racketeer as someone who “produces both the danger and, at a price, the shield against it [...], who creates a threat and then charges for its reduction.”¹⁷⁵ This is contrasted

¹⁶⁹ See on Italy e.g., Adam Asmundo and Maurizio Liscianra, “The Cost of Protection Racket in Sicily,” *Global Crime* 9, no. 3 (2008), doi:10.1080/17440570802254338; Luis G. Nardin et al., “Simulating Protection Rackets: A Case Study of the Sicilian Mafia,” *Autonomous Agents and Multi-Agent Systems* 30, no. 6 (2016), doi:10.1007/s10458-016-9330-z; Diego Gambetta, *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). In the case of Russia, particular focus is often given to the final years of the USSR and the early Russian Republic; see, e.g., Vadim Volkov, “The Political Economy of Protection Rackets in the Past and the Present,” *Social Research* 67, no. 3 (2000); Federico Varese, *The Russian Mafia: Private Protection in a New Market Economy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001). doi:10.1093/019829736X.001.0001. With regard to Latin America, many studies have focused rather on South and Central America, but also included Mexico; see, e.g., José Miguel Cruz, “Central American Maras: From Youth Street Gangs to Transnational Protection Rackets,” *Global Crime* 11, no. 4 (2010), doi:10.1080/17440572.2010.519518; Moncada, “Resisting Protection”.

¹⁷⁰ In particular, Smith, *The Dope*. See also Long and Smith, “State, Crime, and Violence in Mexico, 1920–2000” Wil G. Pansters and Benjamin T. Smith, “Writing Twentieth-Century Mexico's Drug Histories,” in *Histories of Drug Trafficking in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, ed. Wil G. Pansters and Benjamin T. Smith (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2022).

¹⁷¹ Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking” Lerch, “Police Protection Rackets and Political Modernity in Mexico”.

¹⁷² Snyder and Durán-Martínez, “Does Illegality Breed Violence?”; Snyder and Durán-Martínez, “Drugs, Violence, and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets in Mexico and Colombia”.

¹⁷³ Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime (1982)”. This article has been frequently reprinted and republished. In the following, the 1985 version of the text is used which was published in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back in* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169–91.

¹⁷⁴ Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime (1985),” 169.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 171.

with a “legitimate protector” who “provides a needed shield but has little control over the danger’s appearance,”¹⁷⁶ a service that is, in most places of the world, offered by the state. However, if we consider Tilly’s definition of a racketeer, the state often not only qualifies as a legitimate protector, but also as a racketeer. Take agriculture, for instance: A farmer who owns and cultivates land to grow crops must pay tribute – taxes and levies – to the state. In return, they are offered protection from prosecution, a threat posed by the state itself that is ultimately enforced by violent means. The main difference is, of course, that the state operates under the sanction of law, or a conferred sense of legitimacy.

Tilly’s considerations concentrate particularly on phases of state formation and wartime. Furthermore, his reasoning is explicitly based on the European experience in modern history. Nevertheless, the core of his argument is instructive on a general level: where legitimacy is contested or not yet established, the (future) state essentially runs protection. Additionally, the basic functions of the *made* state mirror racketeering systems in that threat and protection derive from the same entity (as illustrated by the example of the farmer). Consequently, the state possesses all the means to run protection rackets: to pose the threat, to provide protection against it, and to enforce and maintain the system. It should come as no surprise, then, that throughout the history of TOC, state actors and institutions have often played exactly this role.

As noted above, scholars have recently begun to examine precisely this phenomenon in relation to TOC in Mexico. For the Mexican historian Alejandro Lerch, for instance, the system of state-operated protection rackets was a decisive factor in regime stabilisation and capital accumulation for the state in the early decades after the Mexican Revolution:

By providing protection and assimilating criminal markets into the political economy of state security, the regime emerging from the revolution – broken, fragmented, crippled by corruption – was able to lay down nevertheless a centralized security apparatus able to roll back the revolutionary process, centralize the means of violence under the executive, and secure the beginning of an era of reinvigorated capitalist development.¹⁷⁷

Richard Snyder and Angélica Durán Martínez focus more on the effects of the system, highlighting that “state-sponsored protection rackets”¹⁷⁸ in Mexico have historically contributed to a containment of violence in TOC. Benjamin T. Smith also highlights the

¹⁷⁶ Tilly, “War Making and State Making as Organized Crime (1985),” 171.

¹⁷⁷ Lerch, “Police Protection Rackets and Political Modernity in Mexico,” 12.

¹⁷⁸ Snyder and Durán-Martínez, “Drugs, Violence, and State-Sponsored Protection Rackets in Mexico and Colombia”.

aspect of violence, asserting that struggles over the control of protection rackets, whether between state actors, criminal actors, or state and criminal actors, tend to increase the violence connected to illicit economies.¹⁷⁹ Yet, he also illustrates how the protection racket system has developed, showing how the rackets have been increasingly contested by private actors in Mexico since the 1990s, with TCOs ultimately taking over in many places. All of the above scholars agree that, for most of the twentieth century, protection rackets connected to TOC in Mexico were primarily run by state agents.

The concept of a *state-crime complex* that this thesis proposes builds heavily on this scholarship. First, it asserts that to understand TOC in Mexico, it is necessary to understand this system of protection rackets. However, it challenges the idea that it is either possible or necessary to attribute its functionality and historical development solely to the state or to crime. Instead, this thesis argues that the actors and institutions involved in protection rackets in twentieth-century Mexico should be understood as agents of a *state-crime complex*, existing in an institutional and structural realm between the two.

2.3.4 The *State-Crime Complex* – A Short Summary

As noted above, the understanding of the relationship between state and crime that this work develops and the theoretical foundation discussed is not an essentialist claim. Rather, it is a perspective – a certain point of view – that I hope may help to improve our understanding of this relationship. The aim is to strike a balance between suggesting a complete fusion of state and crime and viewing them as strictly binary opposites.

To draw out the central elements of the *state-crime complex*, a brief synthesis of the preceding chapters is needed. In analysing the nature of “crime”, we have noted that, for the purposes of this study, it is treated as a contingent construct whose boundaries shift with the state’s power to define and enforce (Chapter 2.3.1). The state is understood as both an idea and a set of practices. It is an entity defined by its exercise of power, the ways in which it manifests itself through actors and institutions, and its innate capacity to transgress the limits it establishes (Chapter 2.3.2).

In turn, the relationship between the two is analysed from a perspective with three linked claims: (1) State and crime are co-produced even as they stage a public, performative antagonism. (2) Any framework that treats them as strictly separate will therefore hit explanatory limits. (3) In the field of TOC, this is most evident in the system of protection

¹⁷⁹ He thus says that the system of protection rackets both “introduced violence to the trade” (Smith, *The Dope*, 43) in the first place and served to regulate it at the same time.

rackets – a central mechanism of the state-crime dynamic that serves multiple purposes and is contingent and constantly renegotiated (Chapter 2.3.3). Thus, the *state-crime complex* serves as an analytical framework rather than a predetermined conclusion, laying the foundation for the empirical analysis of TOC in PRI-era Mexico.

3 The *State-Crime Complex* in PRI Mexico

In the second section of this work, the framework of the *state-crime complex* will be applied to an actor-centred historical analysis of transnational organised crime (TOC) in PRI-era Mexico to test its explanatory value. By analysing a series of actor-centred cases across the decades, this section pursues two objectives: First, it evaluates the actors' positioning along the state-crime spectrum, thereby assessing the usefulness of the concept of the *state-crime complex*. Second, actors' affiliations with different organisational entities are taken as a starting point to explore entanglements between *state* and *crime* institutions.

The first chapter offers a historical analysis of a number of figures from twentieth-century Mexico whose lives and careers reveal a close relationship between criminal and state activity. Spanning a period from the 1930s to the turn of the century, this analysis follows the trajectories of both prominent and more obscure individuals in the history of TOC in PRI-era Mexico. It operates within the framework of the *state-crime complex*, focusing on the key mechanism of TOC: protection rackets.

This analysis is reflected in the second chapter. Building on the preceding accounts, it examines how the conceptual framework contributed to a better understanding of the analysed actors and the relationship between state and crime in twentieth-century Mexico.

Furthermore, it assesses the potential shortcomings and challenges of the framework and their implications.

3.1 An Actor-Centred History of Protection Rackets in Mexico

The purpose of this chapter is to empirically examine what has already been presented theoretically: the *state-crime complex*, exemplified by the system of protection rackets. As will be demonstrated below, this system was of paramount importance to the functioning of TOC in twentieth-century Mexico. The chapter looks at the system of protection rackets through an actor-centred and broadly chronological analysis.

The phenomenon of the *state-crime complex* has existed in Mexico throughout the twentieth century. Connections to small-time officials, upper-level state institutions, and the security apparatus were not only opportunistic; they provided the breeding ground on which TOC could develop. Illicit economic enterprises, such as drug trafficking, bootlegging, prostitution, or human smuggling, could only thrive when coupled with adequate protection from the law.

And this protection, as in rackets more generally, often came from the very entity posing the threat: the state. Yet, the actors who built, operated, and maintained these protection rackets found themselves at different points on the state-crime continuum throughout their lives. While these rackets generally required the resources and legitimacy of state entities, their agents often traversed the continuum fluidly, assuming changing roles within the *state-crime complex*.

Given the actor-centred focus on protection rackets, it is unsurprising that many of the individuals examined had formal affiliations with state organs. At first glance, most appear to have primarily been agents of the state, as they were performatively situated as such. However, when considered in the context of their involvement in protection rackets, these individuals could equally be regarded as criminal actors. Ultimately, neither interpretation fully captures nor adequately explains their stories. They existed in a liminal space, operating as agents of and within a *complex of state and crime*.

This chapter is organised into three subchapters, arranged in roughly chronological order: The first is set in the 1930s and 1940s but also draws on developments from earlier decades. It primarily focuses on Melesio Cuén Cáarez, also known as *El cacique de Badiraguato* (1883–1967), and Rodrigo M. Quevedo (1889–1967), the governor of Chihuahua from 1932 to 1936, and his family.

Subchapter two examines the life and career of Arturo “El Negro” Durazo Moreno (1922 or 1924–2000), the chief of Mexico City’s police from 1976 to 1982, who played a key role in centralising the country’s dispersed regional protection rackets. Along the way, other figures and a myriad of obscure agents, from secret service to transnational heroin trafficking operations, will be encountered.

The third and final subchapter recounts the story of Arturo Guzmán Decena (1976–2002), an elite soldier in a special forces unit who went on to found the Zetas – Mexico’s first paramilitary armed wing of a transnational criminal organisation (TCO). This marked a momentous transformation of TOC in Mexico as TCOs took managerial control of regional protection rackets for the first time.

This analysis draws on a variety of sources and academic research. The main sources consulted are contemporary news reports, openly accessible archival data and state-produced data, including declassified documents from US intelligence agencies. The analysis also builds on the extensive research conducted by scholars such as Benjamin T. Smith, Luis

Astorga, Alejandro Lerch, Will G. Pansters, David F. Marley, Paul Kenny, Mónica Serrano, Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, and many others.¹⁸⁰

Another key tool in this analysis is investigative journalism, which sits on the cusp between primary sources and academic literature. This source is particularly valuable for the study of Mexican history. Its producers, such as the remarkable Anabel Hernández, are undertaking a dangerous task with potentially fatal consequences. However, the intelligence they provide would be very difficult to access without them.¹⁸¹ These sources are therefore indispensable in tracing the entanglements between state and crime in twentieth-century Mexico.

3.1.1 *Caciques* and the Governors' Rise – From Local to State-Level Rackets

On 25 July 2024, Héctor Melesio Cuén Ojeda (Héctor Cuén),¹⁸² a politician from Sinaloa and an elected member of the Mexican Chamber of Deputies, was due to meet Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada García, a leading figure in the so-called *Cartel de Sinaloa*, at a ranch in Culiacán, where Héctor Cuén had served as mayor. But the meeting did not go as planned. Allegedly orchestrated by a rival faction, *El Mayo* was abducted and taken to the United States, where he was arrested. Meanwhile, in Culiacán, Héctor Cuén was shot four times, suffering wounds from which he later died. While the Sinaloa state prosecutor initially described the death as occurring during an attempted robbery at a petrol station, the *Fiscalía General de la*

¹⁸⁰ Smith, *The Dope*; Smith, “Public Drug Policy and Grey Zone Pacts in Mexico, 1920–1980” Long and Smith, “State, Crime, and Violence in Mexico, 1920–2000” Fernández Velázquez and Smith, “A History of Opium Commodity Chains in Mexico” Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (1996); Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (2005); Luis Astorga, *Drug Trafficking in Mexico: A First General Assessment*, Management of Social Transformations - MOST, Discussion Paper 36 (UNESCO, 1999), accessed August 28, 2024, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000117644>; Astorga, “Traficantes de drogas, políticos y policías en el siglo XX mexicano” Astorga, *Drogas sin fronteras*; Luis Astorga and David A. Shirk, “Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies in the U.S.–Mexican Context,” *USMEX Working Paper* 10-01 (2010), accessed August 14, 2025, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8j647429#main>; Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking” Lerch, “Police Protection Rackets and Political Modernity in Mexico” Lerch, “State-Crime Relations: Notes on a Necessary Literature” Pansters, *Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico*; Pansters, “Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order, and Caciques” Pansters and Smith, *Histories of Drug Trafficking in Twentieth-Century Mexico*; Pansters and Smith, “Writing Twentieth-Century Mexico's Drug Histories” David F. Marley, *Mexican Cartels: An Encyclopedia of Mexico's Crime and Drug Wars* (Santa Barbara, California, Denver, Colorado: ABC-CLIO, 2019); Kenny and Serrano, *Mexico's Security Failure*; Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, “Violence on the 'Forgotten' Border: Mexico's Drug War, the State, and the Paramilitarization of Organized Crime in Tamaulipas in a 'New Democratic Era',” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 29, no. 4 (2014), doi:10.1080/08865655.2014.982888; Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Correa-Cabrera, “Trafficking in Persons Along Mexico's Eastern Migration Routes.”

¹⁸¹ Among others, Hernández, *Los señores del narco*; Hernández, *La verdadera noche de Iguala*; Hernández, *El traidor*; Hernández, *La historia secreta*. See also the investigative journalist Ioan Grillo whose work has also guided this work: Grillo, *El Narco* (2012); Grillo, *El Narco* (2013); Grillo, *Gangster Warlords*; Grillo, *Blood Gun Money*.

¹⁸² To avoid confusion between Héctor Melesio Cuén Ojeda and his grandfather, Melesio Cuén Cázarez, this thesis refers to them as Héctor Cuén and Melesio Cuén, respectively.

República (FGR) later confirmed that blood matching Cuén was found at the ranch, where he was expected to meet El Mayo.¹⁸³ *El Mayo* later claimed that he was meeting Héctor Cuén that day to discuss an issue related to the *Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa*, where Héctor Cuén had once served as rector.¹⁸⁴ The drug trafficker further stated that the politician “*era amigo mío desde hacía mucho tiempo.*”¹⁸⁵

While the events attracted some attention, leading to debates about Héctor Cuén’s apparent ties to organised crime, such revelations no longer cause much of a stir – particularly not in Sinaloa. What is most remarkable about Héctor Cuén’s story is not the apparent collusion or his violent death, but how eerily it mirrors the life of one of his ancestors nearly a century earlier: his grandfather, Melesio Cuén Cázarez (Melesio Cuén), whom Héctor, in a 2020 interview with *El Debate*, described as his role model.¹⁸⁶

Local Patronage and Early Drug Trade: Melesio Cuén, *El cacique de Badiraguato*

Héctor’s grandfather, Melesio Cuén, was born on 9 February 1883 in Badiraguato, Sinaloa. In contrast to his grandson, he died of old age in 1967.¹⁸⁷ In a flattering entry of a city chronicle co-published by the municipality in 2011,¹⁸⁸ he is described as having embodied nearly every profession, duty, and vocation imaginable. In addition to serving as mayor¹⁸⁹ of Badiraguato five times (1920, 1924, 1931-32, 1936-37, and 1952)¹⁹⁰ and at least once as a member of the Sinaloan Congress, he also allegedly worked as “*comerciante, médico, minero, agricultor, carpintero, delegado de minería, casateniente, dueño de funeraria, introductor del cine, de la*

¹⁸³ Joel Cano, “Héctor Melesio Cuén fue asesinado en rancho donde secuestraron a ‘El Mayo’ Zambada, determina FGR,” *Infobae*, October 20, 2024, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2024/10/20/fgr-encuentra-huellas-de-sangre-de-hector-melesio-cuen-en-rancho-donde-se-reunio-con-el-mayo-zambada/>; Elías Camhaji, “Escándalos, la sombra de El Mayo y la guerra contra el gobernador Rocha: La enredada vida y muerte de Héctor Cuén,” *El País*, August 18, 2024, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://elpais.com/mexico/2024-08-18/escandalos-la-sombra-de-el-mayo-y-la-guerra-contra-el-gobernador-rocha-la-enredada-vida-y-muerte-de-hector-cuen.html>; Anayeli Tapia Sandoval, “Asesinan a Héctor Melesio Cuén Ojeda, diputado federal electo y exrector de la Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa,” *Infobae*, July 26, 2024, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2024/07/26/asesinan-a-hector-melesio-cuen-ojeda-diputado-federal-electo-y-exrector-de-la-universidad-autonoma-de-sinaloa/>.

¹⁸⁴ Cano, “Héctor Melesio Cuén fue asesinado en rancho donde secuestraron a ‘El Mayo’ Zambada, determina FGR”.

¹⁸⁵ Camhaji, “Escándalos, la sombra de El Mayo y la guerra contra el gobernador Rocha”. Italicisation not in the original.

¹⁸⁶ Francisco Castro, “Pago por que me alquilen para ser candidato al Gobierno de Sinaloa: Cuen Ojeda,” *El Debate*, September 12, 2020, accessed July 12, 2025, <https://www.debate.com.mx/culiacan/Pago-por-que-me-alquilen-para-ser-candidato-al-Gobierno-de-Sinaloa-Cuen-Ojeda-20201209-0021.html>.

¹⁸⁷ Miriam Faviola Soto Quintero, *Badiraguato*, Serie Municipio Libre 7 (Culiacán: COBAES, 2011), 196.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 195–96.

¹⁸⁹ In Mexico, this position is called *presidente municipal* but is essentially equivalent to that of a mayor.

¹⁹⁰ José M. Figueroa and Alanís G. López, eds., *18 encuentros con la historia: Badiraguato (tomo 1)*, Colección PRESAGIO (Culiacán: Gobierno del Estado de Sinaloa; Archivo Histórico General del Estado de Sinaloa; Academia Cultural “Roberto Hernández Rodríguez,” A.C., 2002), 22–23.

primera línea de transportes, de las vinaterías, prestamista, etc.”¹⁹¹ The chronicle remembers Melesio Cuén – this jack-of-all-trades – as the beloved local leader, “‘*el cacique querido de Badiraguato*’.”¹⁹² What the entry fails to mention, however, is that Melesio Cuén extended his protective and caring hand not only over the community of Badiraguato but also over the criminal activities that began to flourish there in the early twentieth century.¹⁹³

During the Mexican Revolution, Melesio Cuén tended to the wounds of rebels in Badiraguato.¹⁹⁴ This experience introduced him to the roles of healer and pharmacist and likely contributed to his respected position in the community. After the Revolution, he assumed the political leadership of the municipality and amassed a considerable degree of power and wealth. His political influence was such that he was able to select almost all of the municipality’s public officials, including judges, prosecutors, police officers, civil servants, and, when he did not hold the post himself, the mayor.¹⁹⁵ He also held shares in several mines and owned multiple properties and businesses.¹⁹⁶ As reported in another official history of the town, Melesio Cuén also ran a pharmacy and, fittingly, a funeral parlour.¹⁹⁷ Thus, he possessed all the qualities required of a *cacique*: power, wealth, and influence. Above all, however, Melesio Cuén had found a way to bring economic prosperity to his community by introducing a new commodity and the know-how of its cultivation to the poor rural region: opium.

To achieve this, Cuén joined forces with his neighbour, Lai Chang Wong, also known as José Amarillas, who was a Chinese immigrant and, like the *cacique*, well-versed in the world of pharmacy and medicine.¹⁹⁸ Drawing on academic accounts, journalistic works, and local historical sources, the basic workings of their joint venture can be reconstructed.

¹⁹¹ Soto Quintero, *Badiraguato*, 196. Italicisation not in the original.

¹⁹² Ibid., 195. Italicisation not in the original. The term *cacique* (Taíno: *kasike*) was a colonial title given to Indigenous leaders who were recognised by the Spanish authorities. In later Mexican usage, it denotes a local political boss (not necessarily indigenous) who acts as an intermediary between the state and the community by using patronage and coercive resources. This system is commonly known as *caciquismo*. See Romana Falcón, *Revolución y caciquismo: San Luis Potosí, 1910-1938* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1984).

¹⁹³ Which may be at least partly due to the fact that his grandson Héctor Melesio Cuén Ojeda helped provide background information for the book; Soto Quintero, *Badiraguato*, 9.

¹⁹⁴ Smith, *The Dope*, 98.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid; Fernández Velázquez, “El narcotráfico en los altos de Sinaloa,” 206.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Fernández Velázquez, “El narcotráfico en los altos de Sinaloa,” 206.

¹⁹⁷ Enrique Ruiz Alba, “Don Melesio Cuen o el cacique deseado,” in *18 encuentros con la historia: Badiraguato (tomo I)*, ed. José M. Figueroa and Alanís G. López, Colección PRESAGIO (Culiacán: Gobierno del Estado de Sinaloa; Archivo Histórico General del Estado de Sinaloa; Academia Cultural “Roberto Hernández Rodríguez,” A.C., 2002), 70.

¹⁹⁸ Smith, *The Dope*, 98.

Amarillas was presumably born in Hong Kong in 1869.¹⁹⁹ He travelled to California before crossing over to Mexico in 1911, where he joined the revolutionary forces in the country's northwest as a military doctor, just as Melesio Cuén had done.²⁰⁰ In 1927, he arrived in Badiraguato, where he worked as a healing practitioner, growing medicinal herbs and poppies in his garden and treating patients with opium gum.²⁰¹ Over the following years, the two men apparently became well acquainted and, at some point in the mid-1930s, started working together on a venture that was to become one of the first large-scale opium production and trafficking operations in Sinaloa.²⁰²

According to his son, Alonso, José Amarillas was the first person to bring the poppy plant to the Sierra Madre Occidental.²⁰³ He taught other local farmers how to grow, harvest and process the crop into opium gum.²⁰⁴ The farmers producing the gum (Spanish *gomo*) consequently became known as *gomeros*.²⁰⁵ They did, however, not have the social, economic, or political capital to sell their product; this required someone with contacts and money to front the costs – someone like the town's *cacique*, Melesio Cuén.

When a health inspector visited Badiraguato in 1938, he wrote that Cuén had gathered a group of investors to provide the *gomeros* with funding to sow and maintain their crops, process the raw opium, and pay them a set amount per kilogram.²⁰⁶ The *cacique* watched over the poppy fields, using his contacts to obtain information about upcoming anti-drug operations and instructing the officials involved on which fields they should turn a blind eye to.²⁰⁷ With the protection he secured through the municipal police and other friends in high places, the processed opium was transported to Culiacán, often by small plane.²⁰⁸

In effect, Cuén was in overall control of the first documented twentieth-century protection racket in the state of Sinaloa. He oversaw operations centrally from Badiraguato, the

¹⁹⁹ As almost all sources assert, with most of them referring to an article by the Sinaloan magazine *Presagio* from 1979: Enrique Ruiz Alba, "Lai Chang Wong o José Amarillas, enamoraba con musica, curaba con opio: Curandero y 'Don Juan' de polendas," *Presagio. Revista de Sinaloa* 26, no. 1 (1979): 32. Another variant, which, to the best of my knowledge, has solely been posited by Smith, *The Dope*, 97, 389, is that Lai/Amarillas was born in Guangzhou in the late 1880s. Smith also quotes the *Presagio* article for the relevant chapter. How he arrives at the alternative date and place of birth remains ambiguous.

²⁰⁰ Froylan Enciso, "El origen del narco, según la glosa popular sinaloense," *Arenas. Revista Sinaloense de Ciencias Sociales* 26 (2014): 14; Smith, *The Dope*, 97.

²⁰¹ Enciso, "El origen del narco, según la glosa popular sinaloense," 13.

²⁰² Smith, *The Dope*, 98.

²⁰³ Cited in Fernández Velázquez, "El narcotráfico en los altos de Sinaloa," 174.

²⁰⁴ Cited in *ibid.*

²⁰⁵ Smith, *The Dope*, 99.

²⁰⁶ The memorandum of the health investigator is stored at the *Archivo General de la Nación* (AGN) in Mexico and was recounted by Benjamin Smith; cf. *ibid.*, 98–100.

²⁰⁷ Cf. Pansters, "Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order, and Caciques," 321; Fernández Velázquez, "El narcotráfico en los altos de Sinaloa," 206.

²⁰⁸ Fernández Velázquez, "El narcotráfico en los altos de Sinaloa," 205–7.

birthplace of some of the most infamous drug traffickers in the history of TOC, including Rafael Caro Quintero (*1952), Ernesto “Don Neto” Fonseca Carrillo (*1930), Marcos Arturo “El Barbas” Beltrán-Leyva (1961–2009), and Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán Loera (*1957).²⁰⁹ Whether Melesio Cuén made any profit from the racket by taxing the *gomereros*, the intermediaries, wholesalers, or traffickers, and if so, how substantial it was, is not documented. However, he certainly provided protection and operational logistics, without which the system would not have survived for long. Through his formal and informal authority and power, substantial financial and social capital, and high-level political connections, he acted as the universally acknowledged leader and authoritative figure in the municipality, the local *cacique*. He did so in everyday life – as a politician, strongman, healer, and rural leader – and he did so as a protector of the licit and the illicit local economies. US scholar Wil G. Pansters aptly describes Cuén as a “narco-cacique,”²¹⁰ whose power and life exemplify the “crime-state nexus [that was] deeply integrated in governance systems in the Sinaloan highlands.”²¹¹ What Pansters calls a *nexus*, I would argue, amounts to more than a mere connection or an incidental overlap of two spheres. Cuén acted with paternal care and social recognition in the licit and illicit spheres. He also worked within the same network and with the same actors – Sinaloa’s upper political and economic echelons – to achieve economic prosperity for the municipality for which he appears to have felt such great responsibility. Protection rackets of this kind, overseen by local *caciques*, also existed elsewhere in Mexico, as Benjamin T. Smith and Juan Fernández Velázquez show for other parts of Sinaloa,²¹² and as Wil G. Pansters demonstrates for states such as Durango and Tamaulipas.²¹³ Cuén is an emblematic example of the *state-crime complex* in Mexico’s early local protection racket system. Crime and statehood were not solely deeply entangled but were bound together, existing within one structural *complex* that cannot be justly separated into two.

The Quevedos and the Governors of the North

The influence of Badiraguato’s *cacique* reportedly extended to the governor’s palace,²¹⁴ where state officials would have shared in the profits. This was a common practice in the northern states of Mexico at the time. Moreover, in the first half of the twentieth century,

²⁰⁹ Cf. Smith, *The Dope*, 96.

²¹⁰ Pansters, “Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order, and Caciques,” 321.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 321–22.

²¹² Fernández Velázquez and Smith, “A History of Opium Commodity Chains in Mexico,” 121. See also Pansters, “Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order, and Caciques”.

²¹³ Pansters, “Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order, and Caciques,” 321–22.

²¹⁴ Smith, *The Dope*, 98.

many northern governors began to participate more directly in controlling protection rackets within their sphere of influence. The following pages recount some of their stories.

Nevertheless, the main focus is on the paradigmatic case of Chihuahua's 1930s governor, Rodrigo M. Quevedo, whose control of the state's vice and narcotics industries was closely tied to his rise to power.

One of the first state-level protection rackets was established in 1915 by Baja California's governor, Esteban Cantú Jiménez (1880–1966).²¹⁵ The revolutionary colonel was appointed governor of Baja California Norte²¹⁶ that year, having been sent north in 1911 to protect the border from US interference.²¹⁷ However, with his army of over 1,800 soldiers,²¹⁸ Cantú not only patrolled over the border but also used his political and military power to institute a system of taxing the state's drug and border vice industries: various researchers report that Cantú controlled the production and sale of alcohol in the state, as well as the activities of brothels, casinos, and the opium trade.²¹⁹

But the illicit economy was already thriving before Cantú took over the political leadership of the region.²²⁰ When Cantú came into office, the state's fiscal and overall economic situation was dire, and with the revolution raging, Mexico City was about to send money to the northern outpost any time soon.²²¹ Therefore, instead of combating the vice industry and the opium trade, Cantú decided to regulate and license them.

After the federal government cracked down on the opium trade, Cantú ostensibly followed suit, but in reality, he extorted payments from illicit businesses or, if they would not play along, sold them on to others.²²² With the income from this protection racket, Cantú filled the state treasury, channelling much of the revenue into public spending,²²³ although he also siphoned off substantial sums into his own accounts and holdings.²²⁴

²¹⁵ See on Cantú's governorship, Smith, *The Dope*, 41–52.

²¹⁶ This equates to the state of Baja California today.

²¹⁷ Smith, *The Dope*, 46; Paul Kenny and Mónica Serrano, "The Mexican State and Organized Crime: An Unending Story," in Kenny; Serrano, *Mexico's Security Failure*, 30.

²¹⁸ Cf. Serrano, "Narcotráfico y gobernabilidad en México," 257.

²¹⁹ See Zinnia V. Capo Valdivia, "Clandestinidad, fiscalidad y tolerancia: El opio en el discurso oficial, Mexicali, México 1915-1916," *Culturales* 3, no. 2 (2015); Serrano, "Narcotráfico y gobernabilidad en México," 256–57; Smith, *The Dope*, 48–50; Kenny and Serrano, "The Mexican State and Organized Crime," 30.

²²⁰ Cf. Joseph Richard Werne, *Esteban Cantú: And the Mexican Revolution in Baja California Norte 1910-1920* (Fort Worth, Texas: TCU Press, 2020), 82.

²²¹ Ibid. Indeed, in 1914, the federal government had suspended its 150,000-peso monthly payment to Baja California Norte and did not reinstate it for the remainder of Cantú's governorship; cf. Werne, *Esteban Cantú*, 72.

²²² Werne, *Esteban Cantú*, 74.

²²³ Long and Smith, "State, Crime, and Violence in Mexico, 1920–2000," 251; Smith, *The Dope*, 50–51; Smith, "Public Drug Policy and Grey Zone Pacts in Mexico, 1920–1980," 39.

²²⁴ Cf. Werne, *Esteban Cantú*, 75.

While the trade was still in its infancy, the profits – and the resulting revenue from taxation – were already impressive. In 1916, a US customs agent wrote a report for Washington that gives an idea of the trade’s scale: A group of traffickers and Governor Cantú had negotiated an upfront payment of \$45,000 and a monthly fee of \$10,000 in return for being allowed to traffic undisturbed. In today’s terms, this translates to a purchasing power of around \$1.3 million and \$300,000, respectively.²²⁵ This historical report was later uncovered and discussed by Mexican scholar Luis Astorga.²²⁶

Given the revenue that could be generated, it is unsurprising that the system of protection rackets grew and was adopted by other Mexican states. In Baja California, following Cantú’s downfall in 1920, his successor, Abelardo L. Rodríguez (1889–1967), took over the rackets, later becoming the first millionaire president of Mexico in 1932.²²⁷ Similar operations existed throughout Mexico, particularly in regions in close proximity to the US–Mexican border, such as Sonora and Durango.²²⁸ However, perhaps the most emblematic case of these state-level protection rackets characterising this period took place in Mexico’s largest federative entity: the border state of Chihuahua.

During the 1920s, Chihuahua was politically marked by unrest and instability. Multiple groups of rebels roamed throughout the vast state, and the governor’s palace was shaken by coups and political infighting.²²⁹ The first post-revolutionary governor to complete his gubernatorial term was Rodrigo M. Quevedo Moreno (1889–1967), who became governor of Chihuahua in 1932 after a long line of interim governors.²³⁰ He maintained good relations with the federal government and the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR), the national party which later would become the PRI.²³¹ However, his rise to power was also rooted in his family’s wealth and their involvement in bootlegging, gambling, and drug trafficking. In the state of Chihuahua, gambling was a major source of state revenue – accounting for almost 70 percent of total receipts in 1931 – until it was criminalised by President Lázaro

²²⁵ According to US Consumer Price Index data, the purchasing power of \$45,000 in 1916 would be equivalent to \$1,327,149 today, while the purchasing power of \$10,000 would be equivalent to \$294,922 today (as of July 2025).

²²⁶ Cf. Astorga, *Drogas sin fronteras*, 17. See further Werne, *Esteban Cantú*, 75. Smith, *The Dope*, 50, also mentions this report but speaks of a monthly payment of approximately \$11,000.

²²⁷ Kenny and Serrano, “The Mexican State and Organized Crime,” 30.

²²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 30–31.

²²⁹ See on this period in Chihuahua, e.g., Wasserman, *Persistent Oligarchs*, 31–49.

²³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 34, 46; Nicole Mottier, “Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez: 1928-1936,” *Mexican studies = Estudios mexicanos* 25, no. 1 (2009): 21–22. From 1920 until Rodrigo M. Quevedo’s assumption of office in 1932, Chihuahua experienced almost sixty changes in the governorship; see “Gobernadores del Estado de Chihuahua,” Gobierno del Estado de Chihuahua, accessed August 14, 2025, <https://www.chihuahua.gob.mx/gobernadores>.

²³¹ Cf. Wasserman, *Persistent Oligarchs*, 56.

Cárdenas in 1934.²³² It is impossible to say what the already criminalised enterprises contributed to the state treasury, but – given the protection rackets discussed below – it was certainly substantial. Due to its fiscal importance, control over casino licences and gambling concessions, as well as over the illicit economy, was a source of considerable political power. At the turn of the 1920s to the 1930s, two groups in particular held such control in Chihuahua: the Fernández/La Nacha group and the Quevedos.

The first group was led by Enrique Fernández Puertas (1900–1934) and Ignacia “La Nacha” Jasso (1901–1982).²³³ Known as the “Al Capone de Juárez,”²³⁴ Fernández was involved in bootlegging, counterfeiting, and drug trafficking,²³⁵ and co-owned a famous nightclub, *The Café Mint Bar* in Ciudad Juárez – an establishment that, as Benjamin T. Smith puts it, “became a Prohibition institution.”²³⁶ La Nacha was certainly an uncommon figure in organised crime in 1930s Mexico as a woman; although she was only a minor operator then, she would rise to become one of the most prominent TOC figures in Chihuahua and remain involved for decades to come.²³⁷

In the 1920s and early 1930s, the group surrounding Fernández and La Nacha was among the principal drug wholesalers in the state. They received their product (mostly heroin and morphine) through a supply chain that spread across Mexico, starting in Veracruz, passing through Mexico City and Torreón, and reaching Juárez before crossing the border into the United States.²³⁸ Furthermore, the Fernández/La Nacha group held exclusive gambling licences and ran a casino in the city centre of Ciudad Juárez.²³⁹ To operate these businesses without interference, they needed official protection. As they themselves were not part of any political or policing institution, they relied on patronage from others, including “mayors,

²³² Wasserman, *Persistent Oligarchs*, 57.

²³³ Mottier, “Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez,” 25.

²³⁴ Cf. Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (2005), 41; Smith, *The Dope*, 53.

²³⁵ Cf. Astorga and Shirk, “Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies in the U.S.–Mexican Context,” 5.

²³⁶ Smith, *The Dope*, 54.

²³⁷ See on the life of *La Nacha*, one of the earliest women in drug trafficking and transnational organised crime in Mexico, J. C. Ramírez-Pimienta, “‘También La Nacha mentada’: Apuntes sobre la presencia de Ignacia Jasso en la corridística, la historia y la cultura popular de Ciudad Juárez,” *Tenso Diagonal*, no. 8 (2019), accessed July 21, 2025, <https://www.tensodiagonal.org/index.php/tensodiagonal/article/view/115>; Howard Campbell, ed., *Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches from the Streets of El Paso and Juarez*, The William & Bettye Nowlin Series in Art, History, and Culture of the Western Hemisphere (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 40–52; Smith, *The Dope*, 152–66.

²³⁸ This commodity chain was vividly traced by Fernández Velázquez and Smith, “A History of Opium Commodity Chains in Mexico”. See especially *ibid.*, 117–118, for an account of the role of the Fernández/La Nacha group in this system. The heroin and morphine, in fact, originated in Europe, primarily from the major pharmaceutical companies Merck and Bayer, entering Mexico through the port of Veracruz; cf. *ibid.*, 115.

²³⁹ Smith, *The Dope*, 54.

police officials, tax collectors, judges, and local military commanders.”²⁴⁰ Indeed, they appear to have held such patronage.

For example, in 1926, a man was arrested at the *Café Mint Bar* for possession of morphine. This prompted an investigation into Fernández.²⁴¹ The following year he was convicted of drug trafficking; however, he was not imprisoned because “he contacted an important politician who pulled a few strings.”²⁴² Simultaneous allegations made by the federal *Secretaría de Gobernación* that the mayor of Ciudad Juárez and the municipal police were protecting and benefiting from drug trafficking and vice activities suggest that this support might have come from the municipal administration.²⁴³ It has also been suggested that the protection came from future interim governor Luís León (1929-1930), who, at the time, served on the National Committee of the PNR.²⁴⁴ Yet, the protection had its limits: Fernández was unable to stop his brother, Antonio, from being imprisoned.²⁴⁵ Nonetheless, Fernández was still considered to wield enormous political influence and informal power.²⁴⁶ As Luis Astorga cites from a contemporary newspaper article, Fernández’s power was such that “*llegó a controlar el ayuntamiento y sirvió de escalón para enriquecer a muchos individuos que han vivido de la cosa pública de Chihuahua, entre ellos tres gobernadores.*”²⁴⁷

Alongside Fernández and La Nacha, there was another group traversing the same circles and involved in the same enterprises: the Quevedos. They were a large, very wealthy family that owned land and businesses, including the Ciudad Juárez power company and the municipal slaughterhouse.²⁴⁸ Unlike Fernández or La Nacha, however, they were not just businessmen and professional criminals; they were also career politicians. In the 1920s, three of the Quevedo brothers in particular entered the political arena: José, Jesús, and Rodrigo, and they all quickly rose through the ranks, serving as mayors, city councillors, tax collectors and state deputies.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁰ Smith, *The Dope*, 55.

²⁴¹ Rutilio García Pereyra, “Vicio y diversión en Ciudad Juárez: Tradición e imagen estigmatizada de una ciudad fronteriza, 1900–1930” (Doctoral thesis, Centro de Estudios de las Tradiciones, Colegio de Michoacán, 2007), accessed August 15, 2025, <https://colmich.repositorioinstitucional.mx/jspui/bitstream/1016/269/1/Garc%C3%ADaPereyraRutilio2007Tesis.pdf>, 143–44.

²⁴² Mottier, “Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez,” 30.

²⁴³ Cf. García Pereyra, “Vicio y diversión en Ciudad Juárez,” 144.

²⁴⁴ Cf. Astorga, *Drug Trafficking in Mexico*, 21; Mottier, “Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez,” 30.

²⁴⁵ Cf. García Pereyra, “Vicio y diversión en Ciudad Juárez,” 144.

²⁴⁶ Cf. also *ibid.*, 143–44.

²⁴⁷ Astorga, “Traficantes de drogas, políticos y policías en el siglo XX mexicano,” 174, citing *El Universal Gráfico*, various issues between November 1937 and January 1938.

²⁴⁸ Mottier, “Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez,” 27. There apparently were eleven brothers; cf. Mottier, “Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez,” 27, fn. 34.

²⁴⁹ Cf. Smith, *The Dope*, 57; Mottier, “Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez,” 27.

Initially, the Quevedo brothers collaborated with Fernández and La Nacha. At the start of the 1930s, the Quevedos allegedly received a loan of over 130,000 pesos (equivalent to about \$130,000 today)²⁵⁰ from Fernández to fund their political rise; in return, they offered political protection.²⁵¹ Furthermore, the two groups collaborated in the gambling industry, with Fernández co-managing the *Juárez Tivoli Casino* alongside a close associate of the Quevedos, Manuel Llantada.²⁵² But the collaboration between the two groups did not last. And the conflict arose precisely there, around the issue of gambling concessions and the monopoly over the state's vice industry.

On 4 October 1932, the Quevedo family reached the height of their political power with the appointment of Rodrigo M. Quevedo as the 99th Governor of Chihuahua.²⁵³ Earlier that year, relations between the co-managers of the *Tivoli*, Fernández and Llantada, started to deteriorate, quickly escalating into a fierce struggle over the Juárez gambling concession.²⁵⁴ Fernández opened a new casino and regained the concession with the help of the federal government, while the *Tivoli*, which was still being run by Llantada, was closed down.²⁵⁵ Although Fernández emerged from the conflict as the initial winner, he lost whatever goodwill he had enjoyed with the Quevedos.

On the day of Quevedo's inauguration, Fernández's gambling concession was revoked, and the new governor granted Llantada exclusive rights to all gambling activities in Ciudad Juárez.²⁵⁶ The next two years saw intense and violent conflict between the Quevedos and the Fernández gang. Yet the conflict was about more than casino licences or gambling concessions. La Nacha had been persuaded or coerced to switch allegiance, taking charge of narcotics distribution and trafficking for the Quevedos – a move intended to force the

²⁵⁰ The historical exchange rate between the Mexican peso and the U.S. dollar in 1931 is estimated at approximately \$0.05 per peso (cf. MXN historical rates, accessed August 15, 2025, <https://mxn.mconvert.net/usd/1931>). At this rate, 130,000 pesos in 1931 would be equivalent to approx. \$6,500 in 1931. Adjusting for US inflation from 1931 to 2025 using US Consumer Price Index data gives an equivalent value of around \$130,000 today (as of August 2025).

²⁵¹ Mottier, "Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez," 34. Smith, *The Dope*, 57, says it was at least 135,000 pesos.

²⁵² Cf. Edward L. Langston, "The Impact of Prohibition on the Mexican-United States Border: The El Paso-Ciudad Juárez Case" (Doctoral thesis, Texas Tech University, 1974), 163. Mottier, "Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez," 34, refers to Llantada as a former governor of the western state of Nayarit; however, I could not find any record of this.

²⁵³ Francisco R. Almada, *Diccionario de historia, geografía y biografía chihuahuenses*, 2nd ed. (Ciudad Juárez: Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua, 1968), 437.

²⁵⁴ Langston, "The Impact of Prohibition on the Mexican-United States Border," 163–67; Mottier, "Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez," 35.

²⁵⁵ Cf. Langston, "The Impact of Prohibition on the Mexican-United States Border," 166–67.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

Fernández gang out of the narcotics business as well.²⁵⁷ Ultimately, it was a struggle over who controlled the protection rackets in Juárez – and, by extension, across the state. On 5 December 1933, Fernández was shot twice in a drive-by shooting, allegedly at the behest of state police officer Raúl Mendiola Cerecero (1904²⁵⁸–2008).²⁵⁹ This young policeman would one day become the chief of Mexico’s federal police, the *Policía Judicial Federal* (PJF), as we will see in the next chapter. However, in the 1930s, Mendiola apparently helped the Quevedos take over the Fernández businesses and establish a firm grip on the state’s protection rackets. In 1933 alone, Mendiola and other hitmen hired by the Quevedos reportedly tortured and killed nearly twenty of Fernández’s men.²⁶⁰ Benjamin T. Smith has described this violence carried out against the Fernández group as Mexico’s “first massacre connected to the drug trade.”²⁶¹ Fernández survived his wounds but fled to Mexico City, where he still had some political support. Upon arriving in the capital, he managed to arrange a meeting with President Abelardo L. Rodríguez to seek protection from his enemies within the Chihuahuan government.²⁶² On 13 January, as he travelled to the meeting under police escort, Fernández was fatally shot by a former Juárez police officer.²⁶³ Contemporary news reports blamed the murder on “two high Chihuahua state officials,”²⁶⁴ hinting at the Quevedos. Yet no one other than the shooter was ever charged. It was reported that Fernández had gone to Mexico City to “reveal ‘secrets of international rum-running, drug-smuggling and gambling rackets.’”²⁶⁵ These were certainly the rackets of which he had been stripped, and the Quevedos would likely have been among those he intended to expose

²⁵⁷ Mottier, “Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez,” 28; Smith, *The Dope*, 58.

²⁵⁸ The Spanish Wikipedia states that Mendiola was born in 1924, but this information is not corroborated by any other sources. A 2004 article in *El Universal* states that Mendiola was born almost one hundred years ago, suggesting a birth date of around late 1904; Jorge Alejandro Medellín, “Ubican a jefe policiaco del 68; será interrogado,” *El Universal*, May 12, 2004, accessed August 9, 2025, <https://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/110778.html>. The date of death appears to be consistently dated to 2008; cf., e.g., López de la Parra, Manuel, “Personalidades fallecidas en 2008,” *El Informador*, December 28, 2008, accessed August 9, 2025, <https://www.informador.mx/Opinion/Personalidades-fallecidas-en-2008-20081229-0202.html>.

²⁵⁹ Cf. Langston, “The Impact of Prohibition on the Mexican-United States Border,” 173; Smith, *The Dope*, 58. Langston refers to him as “Raúl Mendiola.”

²⁶⁰ Cf. Smith, *The Dope*, 58.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁶² Langston, “The Impact of Prohibition on the Mexican-United States Border,” 174.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 175. The assailant’s name was José Barragán Sánchez. Besides Fernández, he also killed his bodyguard, the former chief of police in Chihuahua, General Francisco Díaz Hernández.

²⁶⁴ Wallace Perry, “Blame Killing of Fernandez on Officials,” *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 15, 1934, 13, 1, accessed August 17, 2025, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapth1768972/m1/1/?q=fernandez>. The same article reports that José Barragán Sánchez, the assailant, denied all allegations of Chihuahuan officials being involved.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

to the president. A week after Fernández's murder, the Quevedo brothers Jesús and José, publicly denied any involvement, stating that "[n]othing could be more absurd."²⁶⁶

There was, however, substantial evidence to suggest otherwise: Investigations revealed that Rodrigo Quevedo's aide-de-camp had been seen with the assassin shortly before the murder.²⁶⁷ Furthermore, two Quevedo brothers (José and Guillermo) had arrived in Mexico City with several Juárez policemen in the preceding days.²⁶⁸ One month after the assassination, the imprisoned perpetrator admitted that he had been paid to kill Fernández, though he never revealed by whom.²⁶⁹ Today, most researchers agree that the Quevedos were responsible for the killing.²⁷⁰

With Fernández out of the way, the Quevedos secured a monopoly on taxing and controlling the narcotics and vice industries, essentially running a protection racket statewide. They controlled the state's gambling operations until the new Mexican president, Lázaro Cárdenas, outlawed the business at the end of 1934.²⁷¹ Even so, they remained dominant in the state's drug protection rackets. Following Fernández's murder, a Juárez businessman told the US ambassador that the Quevedos were "now the masters of the field [of narcotics] and, certainly since the death of Fernández, the most powerful dealers along the whole northern boundary of the country."²⁷² However, this situation was not to last indefinitely.

Rodrigo's tenure as governor came to an end in October 1936. In the nearly three years since Fernández's death, the Quevedos had largely maintained control of the illicit economy.²⁷³ But the new state administration set out to oust the family and their deep-rooted influence in state politics, as well as in the gambling and narcotics industries, and succeeded within a short time.²⁷⁴

Rodrigo remained in powerful positions throughout the rest of his life. After leaving the governorship, he served as commander of several military zones and regions, and in 1958 he

²⁶⁶ Wallace Perry, "Quevedo Brothers to Charge Slander: Assert They Will Sue Mexico City Police Chief for Statement," *El Paso Herald-Post*, January 19, 1934, 17, 11, accessed August 18, 2025, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapht1768976/m1/11/?q=fernandez>.

²⁶⁷ Cf. Langston, "The Impact of Prohibition on the Mexican-United States Border," 176, fn. 85.

²⁶⁸ Mottier, "Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez," 39.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ See, e.g., Wasserman, *Persistent Oligarchs*, 57–58; Smith, *The Dope*, 42; Langston, "The Impact of Prohibition on the Mexican-United States Border," 175–77; Mottier, "Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez," 39–40.

²⁷¹ Wasserman, *Persistent Oligarchs*, 58.

²⁷² Businessman José López to US Ambassador Josephus Daniels on 5 March 1934; cited in Mottier, "Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez," 40.

²⁷³ Cf. *ibid.*

²⁷⁴ See on the fall of the Quevedos, Wasserman, *Persistent Oligarchs*, 59–66; Mottier, "Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez," 42–45.

became a member of the *Senado de la República*, a position he held until his death in 1967.²⁷⁵ Still, the Quevedos would never again occupy such high-ranking political positions as they had in the 1930s.²⁷⁶

The Quevedos signalled a new era in Mexico's illicit economy, altering how protection rackets operated. While the *cacique* of Badiraguato had offered financial incentives and used his prestige and patronage to safeguard his rackets, the Quevedos operated far more ruthlessly, resorting to coercion, force, and ultimately murder. Moreover, under the Quevedos, protection rackets became state business, involving not only local politicians, businesspeople, and lower-tier municipal police, but also the highest echelons of government. They were now centrally controlled and exploited by state government elites.

The Quevedos' case illustrates how blurred the distinction between state authority and organised crime was even at the state level in early PRI Mexico. It demonstrates that protection rackets were firmly embedded in the state and, in some instances, were directly managed by governors who wielded the necessary political authority and coercive force to control the system. Rather than combating vice and narcotics, state power was used to exploit and profit from them. The Quevedos' example is a vivid illustration of the *state-crime complex*. They operated as both state representatives and criminal entrepreneurs, moving in a liminal space between crime and the state.

Yet, the opposition that the Quevedos faced from within their own organisation and from the central government in Mexico City was not incidental, but it foreshadowed a turning point in the organisation of protection rackets. Local leaders across the country – not just in Chihuahua – learned that they could not monopolise vice and narcotics revenues indefinitely without triggering intervention by competitors or higher levels of the state.

While conflict within states was the defining feature of the first decades of the twentieth century, tension between local control and federal oversight became the central fracture line within the *state-crime complex* in mid-twentieth-century Mexico. If governors were unable to maintain order around their protection rackets, central authorities would step in to reorganise them. Over time, rather than dismantling these rackets, the conflicts surrounding them were resolved by centralisation. By the 1970s, the system, which had previously been managed by *caciques*, municipal police officers or governors, was taken over by federally directed agencies.

²⁷⁵ Almada, *Diccionario de historia, geografía y biografía chihuahuenses*, 437.

²⁷⁶ Mottier, "Drug Gangs and Politics in Ciudad Juárez," 44.

The next chapter follows this trajectory. It traces how the system of protection rackets was re-engineered at the federal level, how *plazas* emerged as the institutional form of this new federal order, and how centralisation increased the value of profits and intensified associated violence.

3.1.2 Arturo “El Negro” Durazo Moreno – The System Goes Federal

...someone with Durazo’s personality and psychological type had two avenues open to him: a military or law enforcement career on the one hand and the risk of falling into illegal activities on the other. [...] law enforcement and illegal activities frequently intertwine, not only in Mexico.²⁷⁷ – *President-elect José López Portillo in 1976 about his friend Arturo Durazo Moreno*

Secret Service and French Heroin

Arturo Durazo Moreno, commonly known as “El Negro”, was born in the small village of Cumpas in the state of Sonora, either on 18 October 1922 (according to passport details provided by the Mexican Attorney General’s Office to the FBI)²⁷⁸ or sometime in 1924 (as most other publications state).²⁷⁹ He certainly did not come from Mexico’s privileged class. However, although his parents appear to have been quite poor, they managed to move to Mexico City when Durazo was a child.²⁸⁰ It was there, at the prestigious *Escuela Primaria Benito Juárez*, that he made two friends who were to play a decisive role in his future path – future Mexican presidents Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970–1976) and José López Portillo

²⁷⁷ Joseph John Jova, *Cable from US Ambassador in Mexico to US State Department, 25 August 1976: Declassified 2006*, accessed June 15, 2025, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976MEXICO10915_b.html.

²⁷⁸ Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), “Mexico City Legal Attaché to FBI Directorate, 3 February 1984,” in Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), *Compiled File*. This extensive file on Durazo compiled by the FBI and declassified under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) has been made accessible by Virginia Colwell, the daughter of one of the FBI agents involved in the Durazo case.

²⁷⁹ E.g., Juan de Dios Olivas, “El ‘Negro’ Durazo, el compadre del presidente que fue nombrado general de división,” *La Verdad. Periodismo de Investigación*, September 27, 2020, accessed June 15, 2025, <https://laverdadjuarez.com/2020/09/27/el-negro-durazo-el-compadre-del-presidente-que-fue-nombrado-general-de-division/>; John Winepresses, “Quién fue el Negro Durazo, el jefe de Policía mexicano que se jactaba de haber torturado al Che Guevara y a Fidel Castro,” *Clarín*, November 11, 2020, accessed June 16, 2025, https://www.clarin.com/internacional/negro-durazo--jefe-policia-mexicano-jactaba-torturado-che-guevara-fidel-castro_0_jb-RaFWUb.html.

²⁸⁰ José González G., *Lo negro del Negro Durazo: La biografía criminal de Durazo, escrita por su jefe de ayudantes*, 3rd ed., Colección duda grandes (Mexico City: Ed. Posada, 1983), 23–24. This work was published in 1983, one year after Durazo fled to the United States. González had been Durazo’s chief assistant during his tenure as director of the DGPYT. In his book, González denounces Durazo’s excesses and accuses him of drug trafficking, fraud, torture, murder, and others. His account should be viewed with sufficient caution, given that he was himself part of the DGPYT and was personally involved in some of the crimes. This could have incentivised him to shift as much blame as possible away from himself and onto Durazo. However, González is quite open about his own role. For example, in the first few pages, he admits to having killed over 50 people and acknowledges that he was part of the system he now seeks to expose.

(1976–1982).²⁸¹ While López Portillo helped Durazo prepare for exams, Durazo “often helped Lopez Portillo on the playground and in physical confrontations,”²⁸² as the future president himself recounted to a US ambassador over forty years later. As his childhood friends climbed the political ladder, they would drag Durazo along to reach the highest positions in Mexico’s security apparatus.

After working at the Banco de México and as a traffic inspector for the Federal District during the 1940s, in 1948, Durazo joined the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (DFS), then Mexico’s powerful secret service.²⁸³ Mexican researcher Sergio Aguayo Quezada has noted that “the DFS was never a proper ‘intelligence’ service [...]. It served as an instrument for controlling the population.”²⁸⁴ With a focus on political policing rather than gathering intelligence, it resembled “an internal CIA [more] than a branch of law enforcement, like the FBI.”²⁸⁵ After a decade in the field, during which he allegedly participated directly in the torture of Cuban émigrés such as Fidel Castro,²⁸⁶ Durazo was promoted to DFS commander in 1958.²⁸⁷ It was during this period that he also became involved with organised crime.

At some point in the 1950s, Durazo came into contact with the Izquierdo Ebrard family, marrying Graciela and befriending her brothers Arturo and Hugo, who, by the time they met Durazo, had already acquired some notoriety. In 1948, they were accused of assassinating a senator in Mexico City, and rumours circulated that they were responsible for the deaths of dozens of land reformers in Veracruz, their home state.²⁸⁸ In addition to being implicated in contract murder, they also ventured into the world of drug trafficking. In the late 1950s, Hugo travelled to Sinaloa to work as a bodyguard for the future state governor, Leopoldo Sánchez Celis (1916–1989). There, he met another of Celis’s bodyguards: Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo (*1946), a man who would go on to become one of Mexico’s most infamous drug

²⁸¹ Cf. Smith, *The Dope*, 181. José López Portillo said in 1976, he had been friends with Durazo for over forty years; Joseph John Jova, *Cable from US Ambassador in Mexico to US State Department, 25 August 1976: Declassified 2006*, accessed June 15, 2025, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976MEXICO10915_b.html, 1.

²⁸² Joseph John Jova, *Cable from US Ambassador in Mexico to US State Department, 25 August 1976: Declassified 2006*, accessed June 15, 2025, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976MEXICO10915_b.html, 1.

²⁸³ Smith, *The Dope*, 181–82; El Universal, “Arturo Durazo Moreno: Trayectoria - Vida de denuncias y controversias,” *El Universal*, August 6, 2000, accessed August 26, 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20110615051348/http://www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id_not=28961&tabla=nacion.

²⁸⁴ Sergio Aguayo Quezada, “Intelligence Services and the Transition to Democracy in Mexico,” in *Strategy and Security in U.S.-Mexican Relations Beyond the Cold War*, ed. John J. Bailey and Sergio Aguayo Quezada, US-Mexico contemporary perspectives series 9 (La Jolla, Calif.: University of California San Diego, 1996), 146.

²⁸⁵ Peter A. Lupsha, “Drug Lords and Narco-Corruption: The Players Change but the Game Continues,” *Crime, Law and Social Change* 16, no. 1 (1991): 44, doi:10.1007/BF00389737.

²⁸⁶ Cf. González G., *Lo negro del Negro Durazo*, 45–47; Winepresses, “Quién fue el Negro Durazo, el jefe de Policía mexicano que se jactaba de haber torturado al Che Guevara y a Fidel Castro”.

²⁸⁷ Phil Gunson, “Arturo Durazo: Obituary,” *The Guardian*, August 14, 2000, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/aug/14/guardianobituaries1>.

²⁸⁸ Smith, *The Dope*, 179–80.

lords.²⁸⁹ Arturo, at the same time, made the acquaintance of the drug trafficker Jorge Moreno Chauvet, who was one of the principal organisers of a heroin smuggling route from the Middle East and Western Europe through Canada and Mexico to the United States: the so-called French Connection.²⁹⁰ In subsequent years, both the Izquierdo Ebrard brothers and their brother-in-law, El Negro Durazo, would become closely involved in this trafficking network. The French Connection was a drug trafficking value chain that existed between about 1950 and 1972 and was pioneering in its global scope. The cultivation of opium poppies and the production of raw opium took place in Turkish provinces, while the product left the country from either Istanbul or Gaziantep, usually for Lebanon or Syria.²⁹¹ Once there, the opium was processed into morphine base before being sent to the French port city of Marseille,²⁹² where Corsicans converted it into heroin in clandestine chemical laboratories.²⁹³ Finally, the processed heroin was transported to the United States, with an estimated quarter of the product coming through Mexico by the 1960s.²⁹⁴

The Izquierdo Ebrard brothers provided this trafficking network with both a connection to security officials, who could offer police protection, as well as drug producers and smugglers in Sinaloa.²⁹⁵ And apparently, they brought along their brother-in-law. In 1986, investigative journalist James Mills described Durazo's role in the operation as "a longtime protector of French-heroin dealers."²⁹⁶ Over thirty years later, Benjamin T. Smith wrote that, "by the mid-1960s, Durazo ran the protection racket for the French Connection."²⁹⁷ Essentially, this seems to have been the case.

In 1964, Luis Echeverría became Mexico's new Minister of the Interior and subsequently appointed his childhood friend Durazo to oversee security at Mexico City's main airport.²⁹⁸ This location would go on to play a pivotal role in the French Connection, acting as the focal

²⁸⁹ Smith, *The Dope*, 180–81.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 175–83. See on Moreno Chauvet also Joel Cano, "Quién fue Jorge Moreno Chauvet, el primer traficante apodado como 'El Rey de la Heroína'," *Infobae*, December 15, 2023, accessed June 17, 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2023/12/25/quien-fue-jorge-moreno-chauvet-el-primer-trafficante-apodado-como-el-rey-de-la-heroina/>.

²⁹¹ Ryan Gingeras, "The French Connection: A Brief Critical History," in *Historical Perspectives on Organized Crime and Terrorism*, ed. James Windle et al., Routledge SOLON explorations in crime and criminal justice histories 11 (London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 58–59.

²⁹² Ryan Gingeras, *Heroin, Organized Crime, and the Making of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 105; Alexandre Marchant, "The French Connection as an Illicit Trade Network," in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Drug History*, ed. Paul Gootenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 499.

²⁹³ Marchant, "The French Connection as an Illicit Trade Network," 507–8.

²⁹⁴ Smith, *The Dope*, 170.

²⁹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 178–81.

²⁹⁶ James Mills, *The Underground Empire: Where Crime and Governments Embrace* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), 578.

²⁹⁷ Smith, *The Dope*, 182.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

point of Durazo's initial protection racket. Benjamin T. Smith cites several sources that describe its underlying system. Among these, a French informant claimed in 1966 that Durazo charged the aforementioned Jorge Moreno Chauvet – whom he would have known through Arturo Izquierdo Ebrard – approximately \$1,000 (equivalent to nearly \$10,000 today)²⁹⁹ for each kilogram of heroin passing through the Mexico City airport under his control.³⁰⁰ This may have been the first protection racket that Durazo was in principal logistical control of, but it would not be his last.

By the early 1960s, Durazo had acquired three key assets for his later role in centralising Mexico's dispersed protection rackets: a trusting relationship with high-ranking PRI officials aspiring to higher positions, a profile in Mexico's security and policing arena, and initial experience acting as a broker between TOC and the state.

Cocaine Trade and Counterinsurgency

In 1962, Durazo left the DFS to work for the federal police, the PJF, where he was conveniently assigned to the anti-drug unit.³⁰¹ Being in charge of security at Mexico City airport at the same time placed him in an ideal position to protect the French Connection's operation and himself from both the law and potential competition. Throughout the 1960s and up until the mid-1970s, this operation continued to be run under Durazo's leadership, witnessing changes in clientele and the market. When Mexico's main narcotics export changed from heroin to cocaine, those who controlled protection rackets in Mexico, such as Durazo, were not greatly affected – it did not matter what they were protecting, as long as revenues came in and the political administration remained knowingly ignorant or complicit. In 1972 alone, Durazo reportedly organised the transportation of 400 kg of cocaine to the United States.³⁰²

Durazo's position at the capital's airport had placed him in a strategically advantageous location, enabling him to control a central hub for transnational drug trafficking during the 1960s and 1970s. By then, he was already deeply embedded in the *state-crime complex*, closely associated with the DFS and PJF on the one hand, and now occupying a central position in the security apparatus of Mexico City's airport, while on the other hand maintaining close ties to key figures and groups within Mexico's TOC. However, Durazo

²⁹⁹ Based on US Consumer Price Index data, \$1,000 in 1966 has the equivalent purchasing power of approximately \$9,921 in July 2025.

³⁰⁰ Smith, *The Dope*, 182.

³⁰¹³⁰¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 181–82; Gunson, "Arturo Durazo"

³⁰² Smith, *The Dope*, 278.

would not have been able to centralise the system of protection rackets under federal control without engaging with another group of people who were crucial to the networks of the time: Mexico's counterinsurgency apparatus for the *Guerra Sucia*.³⁰³

The two key institutions here were the clandestine *Grupo (de Investigaciones) Especial C-047* (C-047) and the inter-agency *Brigada Especial*. The C-047 was a small and clandestine intelligence cell inside the DFS, set up by the intelligence officer Miguel Nazar Haro (1924–2012) in late 1965.³⁰⁴ The second group was also created by Nazar Haro, in 1976.³⁰⁵ It was called *Brigada Especial*³⁰⁶ – widely referred to as *Brigada Blanca* in anti-communist framing at the time.³⁰⁷ The *Brigada Especial* was set up as an inter-agency action unit, drawing personnel from the DFS, PJF, the *Procuraduría General de la República* (PGR),³⁰⁸ military liaisons, and the *Dirección General de Policía y Tránsito del Distrito Federal* (DGPYT).³⁰⁹ The two formations were complementary and worked intimately together. In short: C-047 infiltrated and built dossiers; the *Brigada* carried out arrests, enforced disappearances,³¹⁰ and

³⁰³ See on the *Guerra Sucia* the widely cited Laura Castellanos, *México armado: 1943-1981* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 2007) or the most recent publication of the truth commission Comisión para el Acceso a la Verdad de la Guerra Sucia, *Informe Final 2024: Resumen ejecutivo de los reportes de los cinco instrumentos de la Comisión* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Gobernación, 2024), accessed August 11, 2025, https://comisionverdadyjusticia.segob.gob.mx/work/models/ComisionVerdadyJusticia/Documentos/Informe2024/20240909_Informe_COVEH.pdf.

³⁰⁴ Cf. Camilo Vicente Ovalle, *(Tiempo suspendido): Una historia de la desaparición forzada en México, 1940-1980*, 1st ed., Pública memoria 10 (Mexico City: Bonilla Artigas Editores, 2019), 67; Jacinto Rodríguez Munguía and Susana Zavala, “El Grupo Especial C-047: Los espías consentidos de Nazar Haro,” *Quinto Elemento Lab*, October 17, 2023, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://quintoelab.org/project/espias-nazar-haro-c047-espionaje-mexico>; Sergio Aguayo, *La charola: Una historia de los servicios de inteligencia en México*, Raya en el agua (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2001), 125.

³⁰⁵ Archivo General de la Nación, “La Brigada Blanca: El oscuro legado de la Guerra sucia en México,” Blog post, accessed August 10, 2025, <https://www.gob.mx/agn/articulos/la-brigada-blanca-el-oscuro-legado-de-la-guerra-sucia-en-mexico?idiom=es>.

³⁰⁶ Some secondary works use the term *Brigada Especial Antiguerrillas* (BEA) to refer to it; e.g., Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking,” 122; Fernando López de la Torre, “Miguel Nazar Haro y la guerra sucia en México,” *Revista Grafía* 10, no. 1 (2013): 68. The official handle, however, seems to have been *Brigada Especial* (BE); cf. Archivo General de la Nación, “La Brigada Blanca”

³⁰⁷ Cf. Fernando López de la Torre, “Miguel Nazar Haro y la guerra sucia en México,” 68–69.

³⁰⁸ Mexico's Attorney General's Office.

³⁰⁹ Cf. Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de las Revoluciones de México, “La Brigada Blanca: Contrainsurgencia en México,” INEHRM, accessed August 11, 2025, https://inehrm.gob.mx/work/recursos/ExpedientesDigitales/DOCS_077/brigadablancainmexico.pdf, 3; Gustavo Castillo García, “Jefe de la Brigada Blanca, persiguió a la Liga Comunista,” *La Jornada*, April 22, 2012, accessed August 11, 2025, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2012/04/22/politica/004n1pol>.

³¹⁰ There have been debates around the terminology “enforced disappearance” versus “forced disappearance.” The former is the internationally recognised legal term used in documents such as the Rome Statute of the ICC and in the UN Convention on Enforced Disappearance, which defines enforced disappearance as an unacknowledged “arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State;” United Nations, “International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance,” G.A. Res. A/RES/61/177 (2716 U.N.T.S., United Nations General Assembly, New York, 2006), article 2 In Spanish-language discourse, the term “*desaparición forzada*” is generally preferred. However, this thesis uses the term “enforced disappearance,” as this highlights the involvement of state actors in the crime.

targeted killings.³¹¹ They were pioneering in what would become known in Mexico as the *Guerra Sucia*, employing methods of systematic torture, rape, and *desapariciones* against not only “guerrilla men and women but union leaders, social activists, relatives, supporters, etc.”³¹²

In December 1976, Durazo was appointed the head of the Mexico City’s police force, the DGPYT, by newly elected president, José López Portillo. From then on, he and his units participated in and supported *Brigada* operations in the capital. In 1977, he publicly endorsed the campaign against the guerrilla group *La Liga Comunista 23 de Septiembre* (LC23S), declaring, “*los seguiremos como perros hasta que no quede uno y así lograr su exterminio*.”³¹³ President López Portillo was also satisfied with the work of the *Brigada*, specifically thanking Durazo and his “people”: Regarding the fight against LC23S, the president noted that “[l]a brigade creada al efecto y la gente de Durazo están haciendo un buen trabajo.”³¹⁴

Above all, however, within the *Brigada*’s inter-agency framework, Durazo cemented ties with men who would become some of his closest allies. Together, they rose to the highest positions in Mexico’s security apparatus and, combining their power and connections within the state apparatus and the world of TOC, created a centrally run system for managing the country’s scattered protection rackets. Prominent among them were Mario Arturo Acosta Chaparro (1942–2012), Francisco Sahagún Baca (1942–1989?³¹⁵), Raúl Mendiola Cerecero (1904–2008), and Miguel Nazar Haro (1924–2012). Acosta Chaparro ran an early protection racket in Guerrero; Sahagún Baca, a PJF commander, did so in Sonora; Mendiola Cerecero, a Chihuahuan policeman, had helped Governor Quevedo seize the state’s rackets in the 1930s by killing rivals; and Nazar Haro, a powerful DFS officer, founded C-047 and the *Brigada*.³¹⁶ All of them were deeply entrenched in TOC in Mexico in the second half of the twentieth century, and all of them had promising careers ahead of them in the security apparatus.

³¹¹ Cf. Rodríguez Munguía and Zavala, “El Grupo Especial C-047” Archivo General de la Nación, “La Brigada Blanca”

³¹² Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking,” 122–23. See also Fernando López de la Torre, “Miguel Nazar Haro y la guerra sucia en México”

³¹³ Miguel Cabildo, “Durazo perseguirá como perros a los guerrilleros,” *Proceso*, April 23, 1977. Cited in: María G. de Sampedri Paredes, “Entre la vida y la desaparición, la Liga Comunista 23 de septiembre: 1973-1980” (Tesis de Maestría, Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2021), accessed June 17, 2025, <https://repositorioinstitucional.buap.mx/items/0fdeb79d-a566-48f6-93dd-e935e977667b>, 114. Italicisation not in the original.

³¹⁴ José López Portillo, *Mis tiempos: Biografía y testimonio político*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Mexico City: Fernández Editores, 1988), 594.

³¹⁵ Sahagun is believed to have been forcibly disappeared after his arrest in 1989; his body was never found; cf. Lupsha, “Drug Lords and Narco-Corruption,” 46.

³¹⁶ Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking,” 122–23.

General Acosta Chaparro, together with another former *Brigada* colleague, General Francisco Quirós Hermosillo (1935-2006), was arrested in Mexico in 2000 on drug trafficking and bribery charges relating to alleged collaboration with the so-called *Juárez cartel* in the 1990s.³¹⁷ In the decades prior to these events, the two were powerful officials in Mexico's security apparatus. Their careers took off during the early 1970s dirty-war campaigns. Acosta Chaparro was a career military officer who received counterinsurgency training at Fort Bragg in North Carolina before joining the *Brigada*.³¹⁸ Within the *Brigada*/C-047, Acosta Chaparro appears to have acted as a military liaison for the General Staff of the army. He was placed in charge of the anti-guerrilla operations in the state of Guerrero.³¹⁹ There, he was accused of being responsible for the deaths of 355 people and of pioneering the use of so-called death flights, whereby alleged guerrillas were thrown out of planes over the Pacific Ocean.³²⁰ During this time, however, he also became involved in organised crime in Guerrero, operating the state protection racket and coordinating "drug trafficking operations with local police in Guerrero."³²¹ According to declassified documents and first-hand testimony examined by Mexican scholar Alejandro Lerch, Acosta "established an aerial drug-trafficking corridor from Guerrero to the U.S. border. The operation made use of military planes employed, concurrently, for counter-insurgency operations."³²² His colleague Quirós Hermosillo took part in the Guerrero operations and seems to have worked closely with Acosta throughout their respective careers, with both reaching the military rank of generals.³²³ Their Guerrero model prefigured a federal takeover of local protection markets – first through army/DFS/PJF operations, and from 1976 through inter-agency mechanisms like the *Brigada Especial*.³²⁴ In the following years, Durazo and his allies would replicate the Guerrero model throughout Mexico, completely rearranging the landscape of regional and state-level protection rackets in

³¹⁷ Tim Weiner, "Mexico Imprisons Two Generals, Longtime Suspects in Drug Cases," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2000, accessed August 11, 2025, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/world/americas/090200mexico-generals.html#:~:text=EXICO%20CITY%2C%20Sept.,army%20in%20July%2C%20and%20Brig.,> accessed through NexisUni.

³¹⁸ Lerch, "Police Protection Rackets and Political Modernity in Mexico," 14; Lerch, "The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking," 126.

³¹⁹ Cf. Castillo García, "Jefe de la Brigada Blanca, persiguió a la Liga Comunista"

³²⁰ Lerch, "The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking," 126.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

³²² *Ibid.*, 229.

³²³ See on Quirós Hermosillo, e.g., Editors of Proceso, "Al servicio de la represión," *Proceso*, October 6, 2002, accessed August 11, 2025, <https://www.proceso.com.mx/nacional/2002/10/6/al-servicio-de-la-represion-21723.html>; Alfredo Mendez Ortiz, "Falleció de cáncer el general Francisco Quirós Hermosillo," *La Jornada*, November 20, 2006, accessed June 17, 2025,

<https://www.jornada.com.mx/2006/11/20/index.php?section=politica&article=019n1pol>.

³²⁴ See also Lerch, "Police Protection Rackets and Political Modernity in Mexico," 14–15.

order to centralise them under federal control, a system that today is known as the *plaza system*.

The President's Man and His Allies

In January 1976, a Miami grand jury indicted Durazo for cocaine smuggling, with the arrest warrant being passed to the Mexican administration.³²⁵ Nevertheless, in August, the designated new president, José López Portillo, made it known to the Americans that he intended to place his childhood friend Durazo in an important position, despite acknowledging that “he had succumbed to the temptation of intertwining his police career with illegal but lucrative activities.”³²⁶ In December 1976, López Portillo became the 58th president of Mexico, and Durazo was put in charge of the powerful police force of Mexico City, the DGPYT, and appointed Division General, without ever having completed a military career.³²⁷ In this capacity, he has been described as “arguably the country’s most powerful police chief”³²⁸ and, although he was certainly not the first to bring corruption to the Mexico City police force, “*he was able to escalate it to unprecedented levels, turning the force into a virtual criminal syndicate involved in drug trafficking, torture, extortion, and bank robbery.*”³²⁹

Durazo established a quota for policemen to channel revenues (taxes) from illegal activities up to the top.³³⁰ From there, he was able to distribute the money throughout the security and political ranks of the highest governmental levels. José González G. – Durazo’s former chief assistant in the DGPYT – has alleged that López Portillo’s backing allowed Durazo to take control of the entire national police budget.³³¹ On paper, he remained subordinate to the comptroller general, the treasurer and several secretaries. In practice, he exercised wide discretion over how the funds were allocated. Thus, he could channel illicit revenues into the budget and siphon funds from it. These were certainly helpful tools for the operation of a bribery- and extortion-based system, such as protection racketeering.³³²

³²⁵ Lupsha, “Drug Lords and Narco-Corruption,” 45; Smith, *The Dope*, 278.

³²⁶ Joseph John Jova, *Cable from US Ambassador in Mexico to US State Department, 25 August 1976: Declassified 2006*, accessed June 15, 2025, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976MEXICO10915_b.html, 2.

³²⁷ Winepresses, “Quién fue el Negro Durazo, el jefe de Policía mexicano que se jactaba de haber torturado al Che Guevara y a Fidel Castro”.

³²⁸ Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking,” 123.

³²⁹ José González G., “The Dark Deeds of ‘El Negro’ Durazo,” in *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Timothy J. Henderson and Gilbert M. Joseph, 2nd ed., The Latin America Readers 25 (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2022), 448. Italicisation in the original.

³³⁰ Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking,” 124–25.

³³¹ González G., *Lo negro del Negro Durazo*, 75; 85.

³³² Furthermore, he siphoned off considerable funds for his own personal gain. In 1984, two years after Durazo left office, the Deputy Mexican Federal Attorney General said that Durazo may have amassed a total of \$1

Moreover, with the help of allies in other key positions within the security and political apparatus, he was able to expand this system by taking over control of local and state-level protection rackets throughout the country. One of these was the aforementioned *Brigada* colleague Francisco Sahagún Baca. Sahagún Baca had taken refuge in Spain in the 1970s, after allegedly helping a group of drug traffickers evade an impending raid while he was heading the PJF in Hermosillo, Sonora.³³³ He had reportedly run drug protection rackets in northern Sonora and Guadalajara, Jalisco, during the 1960s and 1970s.³³⁴ However, after López Portillo took office, Durazo convinced him to grant Sahagún Baca immunity and allow him to return to Mexico without fear of prosecution.³³⁵ Far from facing any consequences, Sahagún Baca was promoted and put in charge of the newly created *División de Investigaciones para la Prevención de la Delincuencia* (DIPD).³³⁶

This unit acted as the police's own secret service³³⁷ and was notorious for its brutality, having been responsible for the Tula River massacre of 1982.³³⁸ According to the Mexican scholar Alejandro Lerch, the DIPD also functioned as one of the central institutions collecting the “monthly quotas [delivered] to the high ranks,”³³⁹ which police officers were expected to raise by taxing traffickers in their respective districts. The unit was principally in charge of financially controlling the dispersed protection rackets and enforcing their rule on everyone involved, or as the US scholar Peter A. Lupsha puts it, “[i]ts role was to facilitate, assist, and then rob and often murder bank robbers, drug traffickers and other criminals.”³⁴⁰

Moreover, the DIPD seems to have been important in sustaining contacts to TCOs across the border with the United States. As Durazo's former colleague González G. recounted:

*Posteriormente, en los viajes que como jefe de seguridad de Durazo llegué a efectuar a Estados Unidos, me percaté de que Sahagún Baca seguía manteniendo contactos con la mafia; en cuanto llegábamos a las principales ciudades de ese país, los primeros en reportarse eran los mafiosos.*³⁴¹

billion (equivalent to \$3 billion today); cf. Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), “Los Angeles to FBI Directorate, 1 March 1984,” in Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), *Compiled File*, 24.

³³³ José Sánchez López, “Francisco Sahagún Baca,” *SOL Yucatán*, August 9, 2025, accessed August 11, 2025, <https://solyucatan.mx/francisco-sahagun-baca/>.

³³⁴ Cf. Smith, *The Dope*, 243.

³³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 280.

³³⁶ Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (2005), 110; González G., *Lo negro del Negro Durazo*, 122; Lupsha, “Drug Lords and Narco-Corruption,” 46.

³³⁷ Cf. González G., *Lo negro del Negro Durazo*, 124.

³³⁸ Cf. Lupsha, “Drug Lords and Narco-Corruption,” 46. See also González G., *Lo negro del Negro Durazo*, 204–10 who has alleged that Durazo and Sahagún were the principal responsible for the murder of thirteen Colombian men near Atotonilco de Tula, Hidalgo.

³³⁹ Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking,” 15.

³⁴⁰ Lupsha, “Drug Lords and Narco-Corruption,” 46.

³⁴¹ González G., *Lo negro del Negro Durazo*, 124. Italicisation not in the original.

This may have been an exaggeration. After all, it seems unlikely that the head of the country's main police investigative body would prioritise meeting organised crime figures over political dignitaries on all his trips. Nevertheless, it highlights two broader observations. First, it suggests that Sahagún Baca felt equally at ease in the company of drug traffickers and US mafia figures as with politicians and fellow security officials. Second, it suggests that his role in Durazo's network was not only that of a secret service man but also principally that of a coordinator within the *state-crime complex* they maintained.

Aside from Sahagún Baca's DIPD, another key institution in the emerging system was the PJP. From 1976 to 1982, this agency was put in the hands of Raúl Mendiola Cerecero, the Juárez policeman and assassin who had helped the governor of Chihuahua, Rodrigo M. Quevedo, take over the state protection racket decades earlier.³⁴² In the 1970s, however, Mendiola was better known for his role in the Tlatelolco massacre on 2 October 1968, when he was acting as the second-in-command of the capital's police force.³⁴³ Yet his career did not take an end there; eight years after the tragedy, he was appointed to head the country's federal police agency, the PJP. It seems that Mendiola's former association with the drug trade followed him into this position too. By the late 1970s, even the DFS was convinced that Mendiola was actively protecting drug traffickers.³⁴⁴ He had reportedly ordered his commanders not to detain drug traffickers without his explicit orders, a move that centralised counternarcotics enforcement while creating ample opportunity for TCOs to operate undisturbed.³⁴⁵

However, the fact that the DFS recorded such observations was probably more related to inter-agency rivalries than scruples.³⁴⁶ Throughout its existence (1947–1985), the DFS had institutional and personnel links to TOC.³⁴⁷ As early as the 1950s, the DFS appears to have sold credentials (*charolas*) to individuals involved in TOC, particularly drug traffickers.³⁴⁸ During the 1960s, the DFS was involved in operating large-scale drug trafficking protection rackets such as the aforementioned French Connection's Mexico operation, which was

³⁴² See chapter 3.1.2.

³⁴³ Cf. William C. Kelly, "Revolution and the Streets: The Mexican Student Movement and the Mexican Revolution," *The Latin Americanist* 55, no. 3 (2011): 26, doi:10.1111/j.1557-203X.2011.01083.x; Smith, *The Dope*, 58. See also Alejandro Medellín, "Ubican a jefe policiaco del 68; será interrogado"

³⁴⁴ AGN, DFS file, Versión Pública, Raúl Mendiola Cerecero. Referenced in: Carlos A. Flores Pérez, "Political Protection and the Origins of the Gulf Cartel," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 61, no. 5 (2014): 530, doi:10.1007/s10611-013-9499-x.

³⁴⁵ AGN, DFS file, Versión Pública, Raúl Mendiola Cerecero. Referenced in Smith, *The Dope*, 278; 402.

³⁴⁶ Later on, these rivalries should become more violent; *ibid.*, 308–9 records at least seven violent confrontations between the agencies between 1982 and 1985.

³⁴⁷ For an overview of the agency and its controversial history, see: Aguayo, *La charola*. See also the respective chapters in Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas* (1996); Smith, *The Dope*; Hernández, *Los señores del narco*.

³⁴⁸ Cf. Aguayo, *La charola*, 76–79, esp. 78.

centred at the capital's airport under the leadership of El Negro Durazo. Furthermore, as the Mexican scholar Sergio Aguayo Quezada notes, in the early 1970s, the DFS was an important contributor to the establishment of the so-called *Guadalajara Cartel*, or, as he puts it, “*la llegada del narco a Guadalajara*.”³⁴⁹ Some DFS members even went on to become prominent figures in some of Mexico's most notorious TCOs, including: Juan José Esparragoza Moreno (1949–2014?)³⁵⁰, an ex-DFS commander involved in the creation of the *Guadalajara Cartel*;³⁵¹ and Rafael Aguilar Guajardo (1950–1993) – also a former DFS commander who co-founded the so-called *Juárez Cartel* in the 1980s.³⁵²

A figure who stands out from the 1960s to the 1980s and who was of crucial importance to Durazo's network is Miguel Nazar Haro, a DFS agent we have now encountered several times. A senior DFS officer by this time, he set up the C-047 in 1965 and, from 1976 onwards, was the central coordinator of the inter-agency *Brigada Especial*.³⁵³ In 1978, two years after his colleague Durazo became head of DGPyT, he finally became director of the DFS.³⁵⁴ Under his leadership, the agency increased its efforts to combat urban unrest while also regulating – and, according to several reports, becoming deeply intertwined with – Mexico's vast TOC landscape.

Court testimonies from a 1989 trial alleged that, during the 1970s, Nazar Haro “protected drug-smuggling operations and profited from the sale of seized narcotics.”³⁵⁵ US scholars Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan Marshall assert that the DFS chief organised the protection of the cocaine wholesalers Alberto Sicilia Falcón (1945–?)³⁵⁶ and Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo

³⁴⁹ Aguayo, *La charola*, 216.

³⁵⁰ He is alleged to have died from a heart attack on 7 June 2014; however, there have been doubts surrounding this; cf. Anayeli Tapia Sandoval, “¿Qué pasó con Juan José Esparragoza, ‘El Azul’, y por qué EEUU lo sigue buscando aunque se dice que murió?,” *Infobae*, October 29, 2014, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2024/10/29/que-paso-con-juan-jose-esparragoza-el-azul-y-por-que-eeuu-lo-sigue-buscando-aunque-se-dice-que-murio/>.

³⁵¹ In the words of investigative journalist Anabel Hernández, he became “*uno de los padrinos más veteranos del narcotráfico*,” Hernández, *Los señores del narco*, 384.

³⁵² Cf. *ibid.*, 35; 41–42; Terrence E. Poppa, *Drug Lord: The Life and Death of a Mexican Kingpin* (New York: Cinco Puntos Press, 2010), <http://gbv.ebib.com/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=665726>, 306–7.

³⁵³ Cf. above; see Rodríguez Munguía and Zavala, “El Grupo Especial C-047” Archivo General de la Nación, “La Brigada Blanca”

³⁵⁴ Cf., e.g., his obituary in *La Jornada*, Gustavo Castillo García, “Artífice de la Guerra Sucia: Acusado de crímenes contra opositores, Nazar murió impune,” *La Jornada*, January 28, 2012, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2012/01/28/politica/002n1pol>.

³⁵⁵ Reported at the time by William Branigin, “U.S. Trial Implicates Mexican Officials in Drug Trafficking,” *The Washington Post*, February 5, 2025, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/02/06/us-trial-implicates-mexican-officials-in-drug-trafficking/7c7f72a2-1053-45ab-be04-5631265609af/>.

³⁵⁶ His faith since his release from prison in 1999 is unknown; cf. Waldo Acebo Meireles, “El cubano antecesor del 'Chapo': Sobre la vida delictiva de Alberto Sicilia Falcón,” *CubaEncuentro*, October 16, 2018, accessed August 12, 2025, <https://www.cubaencuentro.com/internacional/articulos/el-cubano-antecesor-del-chapo-333916>.

(*1946).³⁵⁷ Nazar Haro was also personally implicated in a luxury car theft racket that moved up to 4,000 stolen vehicles from the United States to Mexico.³⁵⁸ For his involvement in this racket, he was indicted by a US grand jury and arrested in California in 1982.³⁵⁹ Although he was released on \$200,000 bail shortly after his arrest and fled back to Mexico, the scandal forced him to resign.³⁶⁰ Nazar Haro exemplified how the DFS's political police mandate had become embroiled with organised crime, manifesting a profoundly entangled complex of state and crime that defied binary classification.

The Federal Centralisation of the Protection Rackets

El Negro Durazo had brought men to Mexico City who had all experienced and operated within the complex of state and crime first-hand and who now occupied almost all of the country's key prosecutorial and security positions. Together, they occupied the highest positions in the national and police security services (DFS, DIPD), the federal and the capital's police force (PJF/DGPYT), and the dirty war apparatus (C-047/*Brigada Especial*). They were in control of the security apparatus's budget, and, thanks to Durazo's friendship with López Portillo, had direct access to the presidential palace. And from this position, they gained the principal "control [of] the smuggling of cocaine through Mexico City and up to the United States."³⁶¹

The new arrangement they established is what is known today as the *plaza system*: Each *plaza* originally corresponded to a PJF commander's zone of influence, to whom traffickers paid tribute, with a percentage going to Durazo's crew in Mexico City. This system was first made known to a broader public by the journalist Terrence E. Poppa, years before it found its way into academic publications. In his book *Drug Lord* about the drug trafficker Pablo Acosta Villarreal (1937-1987), who operated from Ojinaga, Chihuahua, Poppa described how the system worked: "When someone in the drug trafficking world asks who has the plaza, it is interpreted to mean, 'Who has the concession to run the narcotics racket?'"³⁶² The word *plaza*, however, originally referred to a "police authority and a police commander's

³⁵⁷ Peter Dale Scott and Jonathan V. Marshall, *Cocaine Politics: Drugs, Armies and the CIA in Central America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991), 34; 83.

³⁵⁸ Cf., e.g., Elaine Shannon, *Desperados: Latin Drug Lords, U.S. Lawmen, and the War America Can't Win*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Viking, 1988), 181–83; Scott and Marshall, *Cocaine politics*, 36. According to Long and Smith, "State, Crime, and Violence in Mexico, 1920–2000," 256, Nazar Haro "Nazar Haro was funding his department by protecting a massive ring of car thieves who stole luxury cars in California and took them down to Mexico City."

³⁵⁹ Shannon, *Desperados*, 183–84.

³⁶⁰ Cf. Aguayo, *La charola*, 236.

³⁶¹ Pansters and Smith, "Writing Twentieth-Century Mexico's Drug Histories," 19.

³⁶² Poppa, *Drug Lord*, 42.

jurisdiction.”³⁶³ And still, after it had transferred to the jargon of TOC, it meant that the one who *ran the plaza* “was paying an authority or authorities with sufficient power to ensure that he would not be bothered by state or federal police or by the military.”³⁶⁴

Since then, this system has been examined in more detail by various scholars, including Mónica Serrano, Alejandro Lerch, Peter A. Lupsha, and Benjamin T. Smith, who have expanded upon it. All of them describe the relational dynamic as Poppa did: state actors would control the *plazas*, while illicit actors would pay to operate within them – i.e., a protection racket. For Serrano, the *plaza* emerges as a general tool for the state to regulate criminal enterprises.³⁶⁵ Lerch characterises it as a “rent-seeking enterprise”³⁶⁶ in which “PJF officials delegated the logistics of these activities [e.g., drug trafficking] to criminal organizations operating in their regions.”³⁶⁷ He describes the *plaza system* as “the mechanism through which the government established *protection rackets* over the growing flows of cocaine making use of Mexican territory.”³⁶⁸ Lupsha, on the other hand, understands the dynamic as also reflecting the *clientelism* and *amiguismo* characteristic of PRI-era Mexico:

[T]he key power elite figure or figures in the establishment [...] not only represented power money and the ‘personalismo’ that in Mexico goes with it, they also represented the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) [...]. Large scale corruption in Mexico is channeled, and often flows through the variegated [sic] familial and elite associational patterns to Mexico City via the PRI.³⁶⁹

Benjamin T. Smith attributes the rise of this system, which radically reshaped the workings of Mexico’s illicit economy, to the group surrounding El Negro Durazo, whom Smith memorably dubs the “Barbarians of the North.”³⁷⁰ According to Smith’s investigation, a part of each payment made by TOC actors to the respective PJF commanders – which, according to US intelligence sources he cites, could have totalled up to \$80,000 per year (the equivalent of over \$450,000 today)³⁷¹ – was channelled to the higher-ups around Durazo in Mexico City.³⁷² Although this system of state-controlled protection racketeering was not new,

[t]he barbarians’ federal-level protection racket changed Mexico’s drug trade forever. It robbed local governments of funds and funnelled payoffs to an increasingly distant and corrupt Mexican City administration. It shifted the trade away from homegrown drugs and

³⁶³ Poppa, *Drug Lord*, 42.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Cf. Serrano, “States of Violence,” 138–39.

³⁶⁶ Lerch, “Police Protection Rackets and Political Modernity in Mexico,” 19.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Cf. Lupsha, “Drug Lords and Narco-Corruption,” 43.

³⁷⁰ See Smith, *The Dope*, 273–92.

³⁷¹ According to the US Consumer Price Index, converted from 1972 to August 2025.

³⁷² Smith, *The Dope*, 280.

toward the transportation of imported narcotics. But most important, it increased the violence associated with the trade.³⁷³

Indeed, the federal takeover of the protection rackets did unleash an unprecedented wave of violence. The new men in control had to destroy the long-standing local and state protection rackets, subdue, arrest, or kill the old guard of traffickers and protectors, and keep journalists and distrustful officials in check.³⁷⁴ And they did not shy away from using vicious violence to do so. PJF agents routinely tortured smugglers to ensure regular payments and, if they failed to comply, killed them.³⁷⁵ The massive US-backed government crackdown on drug trafficking in the *Sierra Madre Occidental* in the 1970s also did little to shut down TOC, instead resulting in massive human rights violations and the devastation of the countryside.³⁷⁶ In fact, it accelerated the federal authorities' takeover of the protection rackets. Benjamin T. Smith writes about this campaign, known as "Operation Condor,"³⁷⁷ that it "disrupted Mexico's local protection rackets, clearing space for corrupt PJF cops to assert control over the country's remaining narcotics networks."³⁷⁸

But often enough violence came from within the system itself, from conflicts between different agencies competing over the control of the system. In the 1980s, there regularly were shootouts between the PJF, DFS, and state police forces.³⁷⁹ The new federal system of protection rackets was centralised but also volatile. It increased the number of factions and was highly vulnerable to administrative change. And when the PRI party patrons stepped down, the old guard of enforcers often suffered a much deeper fall.

When his patron, López Portillo, retired from the presidency in 1982, Durazo fled the country, seemingly realising that his successors were coming for him. Sure enough, the new administration of Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado had already begun investigating Durazo for alleged fraud.³⁸⁰ This prompted Durazo to leave Mexico, travelling to various destinations,

³⁷³ Smith, *The Dope*, 291.

³⁷⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 275.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 281–83.

³⁷⁶ Cf. Astorga, *Drug Trafficking in Mexico*, 18. For an overview, see, e.g., Adela Cedillo, "Operation Condor, the War on Drugs, and Counterinsurgency in the Golden Triangle (1977–1983)," *Kellogg Institute for International Studies Working Paper*, no. 443 (2021), accessed August 13, 2025, <https://kellogg.nd.edu/operation-condor-war-drugs-and-counterinsurgency-golden-triangle-1977-1983>.

³⁷⁷ Not to be confused with the intelligence and dirty war network of Latin American states created at the same time to carry out joint operations against extraterritorial political opponents. On this, see, e.g., J. Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).

³⁷⁸ Smith, *The Dope*, 258.

³⁷⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 308–9.

³⁸⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), "Los Angeles to FBI Directorate, 2 February 1984," in Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), *Compiled File*, 15.

primarily Puerto Rico and the United States, between 1983 and 1984.³⁸¹ In January 1984, a Mexican judge issued an arrest warrant on charges of tax evasion and possession of prohibited weapons and contraband.³⁸² Shortly afterwards, the FBI received information about an alleged imminent plan by Durazo and his co-conspirators to assassinate the Mexican president, de la Madrid.³⁸³ The plot failed, however, and Durazo was arrested by FBI agents and US Marshals in Puerto Rico in June 1984.³⁸⁴ Following nearly two years of extradition proceedings and legal disputes, Durazo was extradited to Mexico in 1986, where he was sentenced to over eleven years in prison for arms dealing and racketeering.³⁸⁵ He died as a free man in August 2000.

Some of his protégés, such as Sahagún Baca, apparently fared even worse. He initially escaped persecution and was not brought to account during Durazo's proceedings. But in 1989, Sahagún Baca was reported to have been arrested on a ranch in Michoacán and taken to a military base. After that, he has not been seen alive again and is now one of Mexico's many disappeared persons.³⁸⁶

Throughout his life, Arturo "El Negro" Durazo Moreno defied categorisation. He traversed the highest echelons of Mexico's political elite and held some of the country's most senior security posts, all the while organising the Mexican side of the French Connection's heroin supply chain and spearheading the centralisation of the widely dispersed protection rackets under federal oversight. However, it would be a mistake to view Durazo as either a corrupt state agent or a criminal infiltrator. Instead, he exercised state power to organise crime. Nor were the institutions from which Durazo operated dysfunctional. They did not merely tolerate the protection racket system that guided TOC in Mexico – they administrated them. In light of this analysis, during the period of centralisation in the second half of the twentieth century, state and crime do not appear as two distinct entities, but as one shared operational field – one

³⁸¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), "Los Angeles to FBI Directorate, 12 March 1984," in Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), *Compiled File*, 62–64.

³⁸² Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), "Los Angeles to FBI Directorate, 2 February 1984," 15.

³⁸³ Cf. *ibid.*, 17; Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), "Los Angeles to FBI Directorate, 1 March 1984," 23.

³⁸⁴ As reported by United Press International, "Former Mexico City Police Chief Arrested," *United Press International*, June 29, 1984, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1984/06/29/Former-Mexico-City-police-chief-arrested/4496220031759/>.

³⁸⁵ AFP and EFE, "EE UU entrega a México al ex jefe de la policía 'Negro' Durazo," *El País*, April 3, 1986, accessed August 13, 2025, https://elpais.com/diario/1986/04/03/internacional/512863218_850215.html; *Los Angeles Times*, "Arturo Durazo: Police Chief of Mexico City Amassed Illicit Fortune," August 7, 2000, accessed August 13, 2025, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-aug-07-me-184-story.html>.

³⁸⁶ Lupsha, "Drug Lords and Narco-Corruption," 46. Human Rights Watch also mentioned Sahagún Baca's disappearance in a 1990 report; cf. Human Rights Watch and Americas Watch, *Human Rights in Mexico: A Policy of Impunity* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1990), An Americas Watch Report, accessed May 28, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/Mexico906.pdf>, 37–38. However, it has also been claimed that Sahagún may have left the country in exchange for payment, rather than having been forcibly disappeared; see, e.g., Rodrigo Vera, "Un muerto que podría estar vivo (Francisco Sahagún Vaca)," *Proceso*, November 11, 2007.

complex within which actors were able to steer and guide the volatile system of protection rackets.

The new system of centralised federal rackets outlived its creators, experiencing militarisation and expansion before finally undergoing partial privatisation. Towards the end of the millennium, as the PRI's political supremacy over Mexico began to wane, there was a tremendous shift in the dynamic within the *state-crime complex*. For the first time since the 1930s, the institutions administering protection rackets would originate not from state, but in TCOs. This transformation is the focus of the following subchapter – the final empirical section of this thesis.

3.1.3 From Special Forces Unit to TCO Leader – Militarised Privatisation

Arturo Guzmán Decena was born into a poor family in a small village in the highlands of the central Mexican state of Puebla on 13 January 1976.³⁸⁷ In order to escape the economic hardship of his upbringing, he joined the Mexican Army as an infantry soldier on 12 May 1992, shortly after finishing secondary school.³⁸⁸ Despite his background, Guzmán Decena appears to have been an extraordinarily talented and ambitious cadet; his subsequent career would certainly suggest as much.

Following the 1994 uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in Chiapas, the Mexican Army greatly expanded its training programmes for units to be deployed against the Zapatistas. Ten new companies were formed within the army's special forces unit, the *Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales* (GAFE), and Guzmán Decena was among their first new recruits.³⁸⁹ He received training in counterinsurgency tactics and likely participated in operations in Chiapas in 1995, being promoted to corporal that August.³⁹⁰ In

³⁸⁷ George W. Grayson and Samuel Logan, *The Executioner's Men: Los Zetas, Rogue Soldiers, Criminal Entrepreneurs and the Shadow State They Created* (New Brunswick, London: Transaction Publishers, 2012), 5; Grillo, *El Narco* (2012), 95; Diego Enrique Osorno, *La guerra de los Zetas: Viaje por la frontera de la necropolítica* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2012), 323.

³⁸⁸ Cf. Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 146.

³⁸⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 147.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*. Many commentators have described Guzmán Decena as a former GAFE lieutenant; e.g., Paul Kenny and Mónica Serrano, "Transition to Dystopia: 1994-2008," in Kenny; Serrano, *Mexico's Security Failure*, 63; Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 5. However, his SEDENA (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*) file does not show this, only noting a promotion to *Cabo de Infantería* (corporal). Unfortunately, the file has been heavily redacted. Cf. Juan Alberto Cedillo, "Sedena encubrió exmilitares Zetas," *Rompeviento*, 2023, accessed August 30, 2025, <https://www.rompeviento.tv/sedena-encubrio-exmilitares-zetas/>; Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 147.

their fight against the Zapatistas, GAFE units have repeatedly been accused of abuse, torture, extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances.³⁹¹

In the mid-1990s, hundreds of GAFE soldiers had received specialised counter-narcotics military training from the US 7th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg in North Carolina and at the School of the Americas (SOA) at Fort Benning, Georgia.³⁹² The SOA gained notoriety in late 1996 when the Pentagon, under pressure, released Spanish-language training manuals the SOA had used and which included instructions on torture, blackmail and extrajudicial killings.³⁹³ Although the specific training received by the GAFE soldiers at US military bases is not detailed, it is known that it covered the use of advanced weaponry, intelligence gathering and surveillance techniques.³⁹⁴ In any case, the training undoubtedly equipped the GAFE units with advanced skills and techniques.³⁹⁵

It has been claimed that Guzmán Decena was among the GAFE personnel sent to the United States to attend these programmes,³⁹⁶ but appears unlikely. For one, he does not seem to have been among the 5,000 Mexican military personnel who, according to an extensive US embassy list, received training in the United States until 1996.³⁹⁷ And by early the following year, Guzmán Decena had already been reassigned to a new post on Mexico's Gulf Coast. In the spring of 1997, hundreds of GAFE soldiers – including Guzmán Decena – were temporarily seconded to the *Fiscalia Especializada para la Atención a Delitos contra la*

³⁹¹ E.g., International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, “U.S.-Trained Forces Linked to Human Rights Abuses” (ICIJ, 2012), <https://www.icij.org/investigations/us-aid-latin-america/us-trained-forces-linked-human-rights-abuses/>; *Misión Verdad*, “Fuerzas Especiales de EEUU entrenaron a cárteles de la droga mexicanos,” May 11, 2021, accessed August 28, 2025, <https://misionverdad.com/fuerzas-especiales-de-eeuu-entrenaron-carteles-de-la-droga-mexicanos>.

³⁹² International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, “U.S.-Trained Forces Linked to Human Rights Abuses”. In an intelligence brief in 2005, the FBI notes that “The GAFE received special training in tactics and weapons. The US military provided some of this instruction at Fort Benning, Georgia;” Federal Bureau of Investigation (USA), “(U) Los Zetas: An Emerging Threat to the United States,” Intelligence Assessment (2005), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB499/DOCUMENT02-20050715.pdf>, 2.

³⁹³ Dana Priest, “U.S. Instructed Latins on Executions, Torture: Manuals Used 1982-91, Pentagon Reveals,” *The Washington Post*, September 21, 1996, accessed September 1, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1996/09/21/us-instructed-latins-on-executions-torture/f7d86816-5ab3-4ef0-9df6-f430c209392f/>. See also the US DoD fact sheet on the incidence, US Department of Defense. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, “Fact Sheet Concerning Training Manuals Containing Materials Inconsistent with U.S. Policy,” National Security Archive (1996), <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nsa/archive/news/dodmans.htm>.

³⁹⁴ Laurie Freeman, “State of Siege: Drug-Related Violence and Corruption in Mexico” (Washington Office on Latin America., Washington, DC, 2006), https://www.wola.org/sites/default/files/downloadable/Mexico/past/state_of_siege_06.06.pdf, 3.

³⁹⁵ It has also been alleged that GAFE members had been trained by Israeli and French special forces, e.g., by Philip L. Johnson, “The Crime and State Terrorism Nexus: How Organized Crime Appropriates Counterinsurgency Violence,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 6 (2019): 19; Eduardo G. Gutiérrez, “El dominio del miedo,” *Nexos*, 2014, accessed September 15, 2024, <https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=21671>.

³⁹⁶ E.g., Alberto Cedillo, “Sedena encubrió exmilitares Zetas”.

³⁹⁷ Cf. Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 147.

Salud (FEADS), the PGR's³⁹⁸ anti-narcotics unit.³⁹⁹ Guzmán Decena was assigned to the 8th Military Zone in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, where he worked as an undercover field agent tasked with infiltrating drug-smuggling operations.⁴⁰⁰ In this role, he was given an operative code consisting of the letters "ZZ" followed by a number;⁴⁰¹ allegedly, Guzmán Decena used the code "ZZ-1" or "Z-1."⁴⁰²

In Reynosa, Guzmán Decena quickly established contact with influential figures from the region's most powerful TCO: the so-called *Cartel del Golfo* (CDG). However, contrary to his official mandate, these contacts appear to have been more amicable than adversarial. After a few months, he apparently concluded that working for the people he was supposed to be fighting was significantly more profitable than what GAFE and FEADS could offer him. In autumn 1997, approximately six months after being sent to Reynosa, Guzmán Decena defected from his post. His career officially ended on 30 September 1997, when he was charged with desertion by the Military Court.⁴⁰³

Guzmán Decena first started working as the personal bodyguard of Gilberto "El June" García Nena (*1954), the regional CDG boss ("*jefe de plaza*") in Miguel Alemán, Tamaulipas.⁴⁰⁴ A few of his former comrades soon joined him to work for El June, one of the first being Heriberto "El Verdugo" Lazcano Lazcano (1974–2012), who had also served in the GAFE and FEADS.⁴⁰⁵

At some point in 1998, Guzmán Decena was approached by Osiel Cárdenas Guillén (*1967), the leader of the CDG at the time and himself a former PJF operative.⁴⁰⁶ Reportedly "increasingly paranoid"⁴⁰⁷ due to internal power struggles, Cárdenas tasked Guzmán Decena with creating an elite protection and enforcement unit for him.⁴⁰⁸ This conversation has been

³⁹⁸ *Procuraduría General de la República*, Mexico's Attorney General's Office.

³⁹⁹ Cf. Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 147.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.* As was standard PGR practice; cf. *ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁰² E.g., Gabriel Ferreyra, *Drug Trafficking in Mexico and the United States* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020). doi:10.5040/9781666993547, 58; Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner's Men*, 7.

⁴⁰³ Cf. Alberto Cedillo, "Sedena encubrió exmilitares Zetas".

⁴⁰⁴ Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 148; Alberto Cedillo, "Sedena encubrió exmilitares Zetas" Víctor M. Sánchez Valdés and Pérez Aguirre, "El origen de los Zetas y su expansión en el norte de Coahuila," *working paper, Seminario sobre Violencia y Paz, El Colegio de México*, 2018, 8, accessed September 1, 2025.

⁴⁰⁵ Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 149.

⁴⁰⁶ Sánchez Valdés and Pérez Aguirre, "El origen de los Zetas y su expansión en el norte de Coahuila," 8; Kenny and Serrano, "Transition to Dystopia," 62.

⁴⁰⁷ Samuel Logan, "A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico's Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 2 (2012): 5, accessed September 1, 2025.

⁴⁰⁸ Cf., e.g., Sánchez Valdés and Pérez Aguirre, "El origen de los Zetas y su expansión en el norte de Coahuila," 9; Logan, "A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico's Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel," 5.

widely reported, with Cárdenas allegedly saying that he wanted the best men possible, to which Guzmán Decena replied that the best men “could only come from the Army.”⁴⁰⁹ Whatever the details, Guzmán Decena quickly started arranging meetings with soldiers he knew from his various postings, in order to recruit them. Starting in December 1998, he met with soldiers from the 15th and 70th Infantry Battalions, the 15th Motorised Cavalry Regiment, GAFE and FEADS.⁴¹⁰ In the first phase, he allegedly recruited thirty-one men.⁴¹¹ In accordance with Guzmán Decena’s previous FEADS shorthand, the group members were assigned code names consisting of the letter Z and ascending numbers, depending on the order in which they joined, with Guzmán Decena as Z-1.⁴¹² This small paramilitary enforcement group had no name at first – but they soon would. They would go on to become the notoriously violent and ruthless TCO known as *Los Zetas*, and their emergence would signal a tremendous structural transformation in the workings of TOC and the *state-crime complex* in Mexico.

Initially, the Zetas were responsible for both protecting Cárdenas and eliminating his competitors – some commentators have called them Cárdenas’ Praetorian Guard, in reference to the guards of Roman emperors.⁴¹³ In this respect, they were no different to the enforcers of other TCOs.⁴¹⁴ But their unique skill set, including intelligence, communication capacities, and specialised military combat training, made them perfectly suited to a task that had, until now, been almost exclusively the domain of state institutions: the operation of protection rackets. US political scientist and Latin American studies researcher Robert Evan Ellis notes that, unlike other TCOs,

Los Zetas have generally made money less from moving drugs and operating other illicit businesses, and more from controlling territory and extorting other criminal organizations, as

⁴⁰⁹ Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 150. Also reported by Logan, “A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico’s Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel,” 5; Grayson and Logan, *The Executioner’s Men*, 5.

⁴¹⁰ Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 150; George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (New Brunswick, N.J, London: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 180. The first recorded meetings, observed by Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agents, took place in Miguel Alemán in December 1998; cf. Sánchez Valdés and Pérez Aguirre, “El origen de los Zetas y su expansión en el norte de Coahuila,” 9–10.

⁴¹¹ Cf. Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 282; Logan, “A Profile of Los Zetas: Mexico’s Second Most Powerful Drug Cartel,” 5; George W. Grayson, “The Evolution of Los Zetas in Mexico and Central America: Sadism as an Instrument of Cartel Warfare,” Report No. ADA599872 (U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, PA, 2014), 2.

⁴¹² Cf. Sánchez Valdés and Pérez Aguirre, “El origen de los Zetas y su expansión en el norte de Coahuila,” 10.

⁴¹³ E.g., Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico en México: Apuntes para entender al crimen organizado y la violencia* (México, D.F: Aguilar, Agosto de 2013), <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy1506/2013491111-d.html>, 254; Grayson, “The Evolution of Los Zetas in Mexico and Central America,” vii.

⁴¹⁴ Cf. Kenny and Serrano, “Transition to Dystopia,” 63; Smith, *The Dope*, 350.

well as legitimate businesses, for the money-generating activities that occurred on that territory.⁴¹⁵

This operational realignment marked a turning point for TOC in Mexico – or, as a former director of Mexico *Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional* (CISEN)⁴¹⁶ has put it, “*un punto de inflexión en la historia del narcotráfico en México*.”⁴¹⁷ The reasons behind this shift – away from the production and distribution sector to the management of protection rackets – were varied. For one, as previously mentioned, the Zetas were better suited for this task than most due to their military operational capabilities. Moreover, they were not local. The original Zetas were professional soldiers who, like Guzmán Decena, mostly came from the army’s traditional recruitment regions in southern and central Mexico.⁴¹⁸ Benjamin T. Smith highlights this fact, suggesting that, since “they had no ties or allegiances to the places they commanded,”⁴¹⁹ they saw them merely as “territory to exploit.”⁴²⁰

Epilogue: The Era of Private Protection Rackets?

As the new millennium dawned, Mexico was coming to the end of seventy years of one-party rule by the PRI with Vicente Fox, the first non-party president since the 1930s, taking office in 2000. This political shift was accompanied by a similarly momentous shift in the *state-crime complex*, heralded by the emergence of the first paramilitary TCO, the Zetas, to take over protection rackets from state institutions. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Zetas in particular considerably expanded the scope and scale of their operations, and many other TCOs would follow their example. Eventually, however, state institutions would strike back.

In early 2002, Cárdenas Guillén ordered the Zetas to launch an attack on the border town of Nuevo Laredo in Tamaulipas to take over control of the territory from a rival TCO led by Dionisio Román “El Chacho” García Sánchez (?–2002).⁴²¹ They did so with a relatively small group of 50–60 men, but they employed an extraordinary degree of violence, including widespread torture and mutilation, kidnappings in broad daylight, public displays of dead

⁴¹⁵ R. Evan Ellis, *Transnational Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean: From Evolving Threats and Responses to Integrated, Adaptive Solutions*, Security in the Americas in the Twenty-First Century (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2018), 58.

⁴¹⁶ CISEN was from 1989 to 2018 a Mexican intelligence agency.

⁴¹⁷ Valdés Castellanos, *Historia del narcotráfico en México*, 254. He was the head of CISEN from 2007 to 2011.

⁴¹⁸ Smith, *The Dope*, 350.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴²¹ Cf. Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 152; Eduardo Salcedo-Albarán and Luis J. Garay-Salamanca, *Macro-Criminalidad: Complejidad y Resiliencia de las Redes Criminales* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2016), 84–85.

bodies, and enforced disappearances, creating an atmosphere of fear and terror.⁴²² They roamed around in military-style vehicles bearing a white “Z”⁴²³ and wore “matching black uniforms complete with helmets, balaclavas, bulletproof vests, and combat boots,”⁴²⁴ mirroring the state institutions from which they originated and marking the territory as the city’s new protection force.

Within a few months, the Zetas had effectively taken control of Nuevo Laredo, having killed El Chacho and displayed his mutilated body in public.⁴²⁵ However, the organisation soon suffered its first setback. On 21 November 2002, Arturo Guzmán Decena was killed in a shootout with soldiers in Matamoros, where he was reportedly meeting his mistress.⁴²⁶ The Zetas’ founder, who had brought about a momentous TOC crime in Mexico, was just 26 years old when he died.

The death of their leader did not stop the Zetas from continuing to expand and increase their sphere of influence nor did the arrest of the CDG’s leader, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, shortly thereafter in March 2003. But it did signal a beginning detachment from the CDG.⁴²⁷

Moreover, it led to the group increasingly focusing on protection rackets, targeting “small-time drug vendors, illegal gambling establishments, houses of prostitution, and contraband sellers.”⁴²⁸ This model was expanded throughout the state of Tamaulipas and beyond.

According to Mexican historian Alejandro Lerch, “[l]acking the international connections that the Gulf Cartel enjoyed in the transnational cocaine business, Los Zetas turned Tamaulipas into a massive extortion racket enforced with military brutality to reproduce its own security.”⁴²⁹

However, they also started setting up protection rackets for legitimate businesses. In the mid-2000s, now under the leadership of Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano (also known as “Z-3” or “El Verdugo”), the Zetas expanded their operations into other states, including Michoacán. There, they began extorting payments from the agricultural sector – particularly the prominent local

⁴²² Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 152; Grayson, *Mexico*, 180.

⁴²³ Cf. Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 286.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 287.

⁴²⁶ Cf. Salcedo-Albarán and Garay-Salamanca, *Macro-Criminalidad*, 88–89. See also Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 153.

⁴²⁷ Cf. Pereda Aguado, “Processes of Violence in Mexico’s Organized Crime Groups: A Study of Los Zetas” (Doctoral thesis, Centre for Criminology & Sociolegal Studies, University of Toronto, 2021), accessed September 2, 2025, <https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/5f10a7d5-926f-43cc-9d3e-cf17a036a8d3/content>, 169.

⁴²⁸ Grayson, *Mexico*, 181.

⁴²⁹ Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking,” 209.

avocado industry – as well as from taxi drivers and street vendors.⁴³⁰ In other regions, the Zetas became involved in oil theft,⁴³¹ human trafficking,⁴³² and illegal mining,⁴³³ amongst other activities.⁴³⁴

US-Mexican researcher Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera has described the Zetas' expansion of operations as a “diversification,”⁴³⁵ by analogy of the financial tactic of reducing exposure to risk by allocating resources and capital. This argument is certainly persuasive. By diversifying their operations – in other words, not putting all their eggs in one basket – the Zetas reduced the likelihood that law enforcement crackdowns on one revenue stream would disrupt their overall enterprise. However, while this was likely an outcome of the Zetas' expansion, it may not have been the underlying reason. This development followed logically from the organisation's operational capabilities and comparative disadvantages: unlike long-established TCOs, the Zetas did not have deep-rooted contacts in local security structures and international trafficking networks; rather, they were a highly professional paramilitary organisation skilled in protection racketeering and enforcement policing. Therefore, it is not particularly surprising that the Zetas would specialise in these areas by creating and enforcing protection rackets for a variety of enterprises.

Other TCOs soon followed the CDG's lead in setting up paramilitary armed wings to serve as security forces, fight enemy groups, and operate protection rackets. This was often a direct response to the new status quo set by the Zetas. One such example was the armed group *Los Negros*, established in 2004 under the leadership of the US-born young trafficker Édgar “La Barbie” Valdez Villarreal (*1973) and financed by the Sinaloa Cartel.⁴³⁶ La Barbie first began trafficking narcotics across the border into the United States as an independent contractor for

⁴³⁰ Cf. Denisse Román-Burgos and Ricardo F. Macip-Ríos, “Export Quality: The Historical Bloc, State of Exception, and the Hegemonic Process in the Avocado Enclave of Michoacán,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 46, no. 2 (2022): 238, doi:10.1007/s10624-022-09662-9; Lerch, “The Political Economy of Transnational Drug Trafficking,” 209–10.

⁴³¹ See, e.g., Staff of the Latin America Data Base News & Educational Services, “Drug-Cartel Enforcers Zetas Branch Out into Other Operations, Including Smuggling Stolen Fuel Products into Texas” (SourceMex, University of New Mexico Digital Repository, 2010), <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6362&context=sourcemex>; Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc.*

⁴³² See, e.g., Victoria A. Greenfield et al., “Human Smuggling and Associated Revenues: What Do or Can We Know About Routes from Central America to the United States?” (RAND Corporation, 2019), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2800/RR2852/RAND_RR2852.pdf, 22; Pereda Aguado, “Processes of Violence in Mexico's Organized Crime Groups,” 21.

⁴³³ See, e.g., Luis Daniel Vázquez Valencia, *Captura de estado, macrocriminalidad y derechos humanos* (Mexico City: FLACSO México, 2019), 127–38.

⁴³⁴ See also Grayson, “The Evolution of Los Zetas in Mexico and Central America,” 79–82 who has put together an extensive list of activities the Zetas were allegedly involved in.

⁴³⁵ Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc.*, 67.

⁴³⁶ Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 127; 295.

El Chacho, the Nuevo Laredo TCO leader who, in 2002, was murdered by the Zetas.⁴³⁷ *Los Negros* was created for the purpose of fighting the Zetas in Nuevo Laredo in an attempt to take over control of the city's protection rackets.⁴³⁸ This group resembled the make-up of Zeta cells, being heavily armed, highly militarised in their appearance, and extremely violent – La Barbie alone is said to have been responsible for over 120 murders in just the year 2005.⁴³⁹ *Los Negros* was not an isolated case. The Zetas had established a new paradigm, a new norm or, as Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera has put it:

The Zetas brought with them the professionalization of the 'killing industry.' A side effect of this phenomenon 'has been the creation of a host of enforcer wings that cater to the needs of every single drug trafficking organization in the Mexican territory.' *Artistas Asesinos, Barrio Azteca, Gente Nueva, La Línea, MS-13, Los Negros, Los Pelones, and Kaibiles* (ex-Guatemalan special forces) are some of the many groups that have followed the trends pioneered by the Zetas, 'mainstreaming paramilitary tactics all throughout the country and enveloping their respective regions in...campaigns of violence and death'⁴⁴⁰

In addition to the unprecedented quality, quantity and visibility of the violence imitated by these new groups from the Zetas, they also followed suit in expanding their operational scope and deepening their involvement in protection rackets.

However, although TCOs now often exercised managerial control and enforcement through their armed wings, official state institutions remained important in operating protection rackets. This meant that the rival group's supporters in state security agencies became targets too, as one example from Ciudad Juárez shows.

On 26 January 2008, members of *La Gente Nueva*, the armed wing of the Sinaloa Cartel in Ciudad Juárez, hung a *narcomanta*⁴⁴¹ at the foot of the city's monument to fallen police officers.⁴⁴² The banner read, "*Para los que no creyeron,*" followed by the names of four policemen who had recently been killed. It then read, "*Para los que siguen sin creer,*" and below were the names of 17 further policemen, indicating that they would be next to be killed

⁴³⁷ Cf. Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 269–70. See above, where the Zeta's assault on Nuevo Laredo and the murder of El Chacho has been discussed.

⁴³⁸ Cf. Freeman, "State of Siege," 5; 10; Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc*, 29.

⁴³⁹ Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc*, 29.

⁴⁴⁰ Correa-Cabrera, "Violence on the 'Forgotten' Border," 422.

⁴⁴¹ A *narcomanta* or *narcomensaje* is a term used in Mexico for messages left by TCOs, usually written on a cloth banner and publicly displayed.

⁴⁴² Abraham Paniagua Vázquez, "Para los que no creyeron... Y para los que siguen sin creer...": el discurso como herramienta de poder entre la relación Estado-Sociedad-Crimen Organizado en Ciudad Juárez. Un análisis," *Prisma Social. Revista de Investigación Social*, no. 8 (2012): 191.

if they did not start to “believe,” which was apparently a demand to change their allegiance.⁴⁴³ Many seem to not to have done so and were executed shortly afterwards.⁴⁴⁴ This scene took place in the midst of a violent conflict in and around Ciudad Juárez between the Sinaloa Cartel and the Juárez Cartel, primarily fought out by their respective armed wings, *La Gente Nueva*, and *La Línea*.⁴⁴⁵ This armed conflict, which lasted from late 2007 until around 2012, was one of the deadliest in Mexican history, with the homicide rate rising from 136 per 100,000 in 2007 to 2,738 per 100,000 in 2010.⁴⁴⁶ The *narcomanta* of January 2008 was one of the first incidents of this conflict, and it is indicative that it was directed against police officers. Until now, the police had been, in the words of organised crime investigator Steven Dudley, “the guarantors of order in the city’s underworld. [...] Control them, and you controlled the underworld. Remove them, as began to happen from the very onset of the violence, and you had chaos.”⁴⁴⁷ He asserts that municipal and state police forces were generally acting in support of the Juárez Cartel and *La Línea*, the latter of which consisted almost exclusively of active and ex-police officers as well.⁴⁴⁸ Investigative journalist Anabel Hernández has convincingly argued that the Sinaloa Cartel, on the other hand, was supported by the army and federal police forces, which were sent to Juárez in 2008 and 2010, respectively.⁴⁴⁹ In her work *Los señores del narco*, she asserts that the favouring the Sinaloa Cartel by federal forces was a deliberate strategy by the state, explicitly referring to Mexico’s highest security official, Genaro García Luna, as “El garante”⁴⁵⁰ of that protection.

⁴⁴³ Paniagua Vázquez, “Para los que no creyeron... Y para los que siguen sin creer...” Steven Dudley, “De cómo la policía y los políticos escogieron al ganador de la guerra en Juárez,” *InSight Crime*, February 13, 2013, 3, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://insightcrime.org/es/investigaciones/de-como-la-policia-el-ejercito-politicos-y-fiscales-determinaron-quien-gano-la-plaza-de-juarez/>.

⁴⁴⁴ *El Informador*, “Figuraba Román García en Narco Lista de Policías Ejecutables: El Director de la Policía Municipal de Ciudad Juárez fue Sentenciado en Enero a Través de un Narcomensaje,” May 10, 2008, accessed September 2, 2024, <https://www.informador.mx/Mexico/Figuraba-Roman-Garcia-en-narco-lista-de-policias-ejecutables-20080510-0122.html>; *El Universo*, “Hijo de capo mexicano muere en tiroteo; asesinan a jefe policial,” May 10, 2008, accessed September 2, 2024, <https://www.eluniverso.com/2008/05/10/0001/14/D8DD003C6C9A43A7B5B061C79337A29C.html/>.

⁴⁴⁵ For an outline of the conflict, see Marley, *Mexican Cartels*, 196–201.

⁴⁴⁶ Carlos Vilalta and Robert Muggah, “Violent Disorder in Ciudad Juarez: A Spatial Analysis of Homicide,” Hasow Discussion Paper 1 (Humanitarian Action in Situations Other than War, 2012), <https://igarape.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Violent-Disorder-in-Ciudad-Juarez-1.pdf>, 7.

⁴⁴⁷ Steven Dudley, “Juarez: After the War” (InSightCrime, 2013), <https://insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/juarez-after-the-war.pdf>, 4.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁹ On the different stages of troop deployment, see Lucy Conger, “The Private Sector and Public Security: The Cases of Ciudad Juárez and Monterrey,” in *Building Resilient Communities in Mexico: Civic Responses to Crime and Violence*, ed. David A. Shirk, Eric L. Olson and Duncan Wood (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2014), 176.

⁴⁵⁰ Hernández, *Los señores del narco*, 16.

What the actors engaged in this conflict were ultimately fighting for was control: control over the trafficking routes linking from the main drug-production regions in the *Sierra Madre Occidental* to the north; control over the access to the United States drug market (with Juárez bordering El Paso); and, most importantly, control over the city's protection rackets, the central mechanism through which revenue was drawn from any illicit and licit operations. There is strong evidence for the latter, for example in the dramatic increase in extortion cases during the conflict, which reached its peak in 2008/2009.⁴⁵¹

The example from Ciudad Juárez illustrates several points: First, the introduction of armed wings of TCOs – brought about by the emergence of the Zetas – has escalated and complicated disputes over control of regional protection rackets. These groups have increasingly taken over the operation of such rackets themselves. Yet the involvement of state institutions has not disappeared. Instead, the dynamic between state institutions and TCOs has shifted toward more open collaboration, with TCOs arguably gaining greater autonomy. However, at the level of the actors actually engaged in the conflict, this institutional separateness between *state* and *crime* is often difficult to sustain. For instance, the armed group *La Línea*, usually classified as belonging to the “criminal side” of the conflict, was largely composed of former and active police officers. One commentator has even described them simultaneously as “the Juárez Cartel’s armed wing”⁴⁵² and as “the police’s way of guaranteeing that they would get their fair share.”⁴⁵³ And, returning to the central figure of this chapter and founder of the Zetas, Arturo Guzmán Decena: An elite soldier, he began to work with the former Tamaulipas policeman Osiel Cárdenas Guillen to build a paramilitary group that not only strikingly resembled a state institution, but whose main activity was one that state institutions had dominated for the last 70 years.

Ultimately, it is a matter of perspective: The same actors can be viewed simultaneously as criminal hitmen and as extensions of state institutions, as the example of *La Línea* demonstrates. However, much can be gained from resisting the temptation to draw rigid distinctions between state and crime, particularly when analysing actors. Viewing them as operating within a *state-crime complex* helps to understand the underlying mechanisms that enable TOC to function and thrive. Although this chapter on the Zetas has largely been a

⁴⁵¹ A thorough and extensive study on extortion in Ciudad Juárez has been conducted by México Evalúa, Centro de Análisis de Políticas Públicas, “Impuesto Criminal: La extorsión empresarial en Ciudad Juárez: Lecciones y Precauciones” (2021), <https://www.mexicoevalua.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/extorsion-cd-juarez-ok.pdf>. See in particular *ibid.*, 7, which illustrates the evolution of extortion investigations between 1997 and 2017. In 2009, the number of these investigations were ten times the average.

⁴⁵² Dudley, “Juarez,” 4.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

postscript – reaching outside this thesis’s temporal focus into the twenty-first century – it suggests that the concept of the *state-crime complex* and especially the analysis of TOC through the mechanisms of protection rackets, may extend well beyond the scope of this study.

3.2 Entangled in Antagonism – Reflecting the *State-Crime Complex*

This final chapter aims to bring together the empirical findings of the previous chapter with the theoretical considerations of the first half of the thesis. It will be reflected on whether the concept of the *state-crime complex* has proved analytically useful in understanding the workings of TOC in Mexico in the twentieth century. Returning to a more abstract level, the chapter addresses some underlying questions about the concept developed, its applicability, the positioning of actors and systems/institutions within TOC and the issues it raises. By reviewing the central findings of the actor-centred study of twentieth-century TOC in Mexico and identifying the main implications for the theoretical concept developed earlier, the chapter seeks to answer three central questions: how can we understand the positionality of the actors that have been focused on the crime-state spectrum? What do their stories tell us about the institutions and structures they are part of? Does the concept of the *state-crime complex* help navigate the system in which these actors and institutions are embedded, i.e., TOC?

Short Theoretical Recourse

As developed in the theoretical section, this work proposes the concept of the *state-crime complex* as its central analytical lens for examining TOC in twentieth-century Mexico. This concept rests upon several theoretical underpinnings: it holds that “crime” is a contingent, fluid construct whose boundaries are continually defined and redefined by the state; that the “state” is both an abstract idea and a set of practices manifested by its actors and institutions and enacted by its structural power and its innate capacity to overstep the boundaries it itself proclaims; and that the relation between state and crime is one of both performative opposition and co-production, rather than clear separation.

The *state-crime complex* was examined through the system of protection rackets. These are understood as territorially confined tribute systems, in which one actor extracts rents from another in return for protection against internal and external threats – often created by the very entity offering the protection. This system is considered a fundamental mechanism of TOC in general.

The Empirical Trajectory

The historical analysis has traced, largely in chronological order, the development of protection rackets within the context of TOC in Mexico from the 1930s to the early twenty-first century.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the case of Badiraguato showed the *cacique* Melesio Cuén Cázares, who leveraged his formal and informal power, social capital and influence over political elites and municipal policing powers to implement one of the first transnationally spanning opium production and distribution networks in the state of Sinaloa. He did so by managing public office and illicit enterprise through the same networks. At the same time on the state level, the gubernatorial regime of Rodrigo M. Quevedo in Chihuahua showed how governors could turn vice and narcotics into centrally taxed enterprises. This was achieved through the use of police violence and political leverage to create monopolies and eliminate competitors.

Protection rackets became standard government practice.

Between the 1960s and 1980s, Arturo “El Negro” Durazo spearheaded the centralisation of Mexico’s regionally dispersed protection rackets under federal oversight, bringing together a multitude of actors from various agencies, including the DFS, PJF, DGPyT, *Brigada Especial* and DIPD. They created what is now known as the *plaza* system, originating in operational zones of PJF commanders. The development transformed protection racketeering into an administrative technology of federal governance, accompanied by an escalation of violence. Finally, at the turn of the century, the emergence of Los Zetas signalled a dual transformation of protection rackets: militarisation and privatisation. They were the first “criminal” paramilitary force to specialise in extortion and rent-seeking, allowing TCOs to assume a managerial role in protection rackets. Although the Zetas were organised outside of the state’s sanctuary, their original members came from the special forces of the Mexican army. Many TCOs subsequently began adopting this model but largely continued to interact with state institutions.

Actors

Operating within a system which was formally criminalised yet actively maintained by the state – that is, protection rackets – placed the individuals involved in a borderline position. They were the materialised expression of what Carl Schmitt described as the “state of exception”, a point of transgression by the state of boundaries set by the state. The deeper the formal state affiliation, the more difficult the reckoning for those involved, and the harder it is for observers to avoid the urge to categorise. It may be relatively easy to comprehend the fact

that Badiraguato's *cacique* simultaneously held the municipal presidency and was involved in local opium production. After all – despite being illegal – was the scheme not to the benefit of the municipality and the local economy? But what if the individual in question is the chief of the capital's police and a childhood friend of the country's president, while also centrally managing a system of protection rackets throughout Mexico? There is an urge to either view him as a state agent but the state as criminal or view the state as unpolluted and him as malicious. But insisting on a binary categorisation here is futile and unnecessary. It is a symptom of the performative antagonism between state and crime, but it prevents us from seeing their co-productive nature.

Over the course of the analysis, the studied actors, and not only those at the centre, defy a categorisation as either state actors or criminal actors. They are situated somewhere in between or, rather, within the *complex* that cannot be rigidly divided into one or the other. Throughout their lives, they occupied different positions on the state-crime continuum; many were situated at multiple points simultaneously. However, if the continuum only had two points – crime and state – this simultaneity and entanglement could not truly be understood.

Institutions

The *state-crime complex* arguably has explanatory advantages over binary frameworks on the actor level. The institutional level is more complex and might be more difficult to sustain. In the history of TOC in twentieth-century Mexico, protection rackets have often functioned as an administrative technology of governance, not a deviation. Although scale and layer varied, the racket system generally required state legitimisation. Throughout the period of PRI-Mexico, the system of protection rackets was almost exclusively administered by state institutions. Many of these institutions were later closed down or criminalised, including the PJP, the DFS, and the *Brigada Especial*. Others were not, for rather apparent reasons – governorships being one example. Nevertheless, whether the institutions were ostracised later does not change the fact that, while they were at the centre of running a racket system, they operated under the protective umbrella and the financial, administrative and logistical support of the state. This shifted, at least to some degree, towards the end of the century, when the protection racket system experienced a partial privatisation through the arrival of paramilitary armed wings of TCOs following the emergence of the Zetas. Yet even then, involvement of state institutions in the rackets did not halt, although the dynamic within the *state-crime complex* certainly changed.

Potential Limitations of the Concept

The preceding synthesis argued that the system of protection rackets made the state–crime complex visible in practice. Both actors and institutions operated in ways that defied rigid categorisation as either state or crime, although the former did so more distinctly than the latter. However, this conceptualisation has its own limitations. Before turning to the conclusion, it is necessary to address at least a few of them.

One of the most consequential limitations is the analytical emphasis on protection rackets. Any perspective that focuses on one particular mechanism or explanatory model risks obscuring others, which could be complementary but also contradictory. Mechanisms that warrant deeper reflection and analysis include external impact factors on TOC, such as US demand for narcotics and foreign-policy pressures from other states (prominently the United States) and international organisations (e.g., the *World Bank*, *International Monetary Fund*, various UN bodies). Furthermore, the involvement of transnational corporations and foreign capital could both challenge and expand the concept of the *state-crime complex*.

A second potential constraint lies in the selection and accessibility of sources. Among the sources used in this thesis are news articles and documents from state institutions. While these sources, when considered alongside others, provide a diverse empirical foundation, they each have their weaknesses. Material produced by state agencies tends to be security-focused and is created under specific and difficult-to-unravel political imperatives. News articles, by their very nature, are situational and reactive and are often focused on visibility and outreach, which can result in distortion and biases. Furthermore, particularly in the study of TOC, information can be very difficult to obtain, and some perspectives are simply not documented. Often, we have little insight into the structures of and the people within TCOs. This creates an empirical imbalance that gives state institutions and actors greater interpretative power. Furthermore, the volatile security situation in certain parts of Mexico has severely restricted investigative research opportunities.

If empirical delineation has limitations, then so do temporal and geographical boundaries. Since this thesis covers Mexico during the PRI era, one might well ask whether the analysed mechanism – protection rackets – and the alleged *state-crime complex* might be specific to this particular political reality. This is a valid objection. But I believe there are two compelling counterarguments. Firstly, the concept was developed theoretically and then applied deductively, meaning it was not projected from the particular to the general. Secondly, there is ample reason to suspect that the *state-crime complex* may be observable elsewhere. After all, Mexico is not the first country in the world where transnational

organised crime (TOC) exists and interacts deeply with the state, and it surely will not be the last.

However, this framework also has clear advantages. First, it moves away from security-led debates on *state capacity*, viewing transnational organised crime not primarily as a threat to statehood, but as something the state itself helps to create, maintain, and profit from. Second, it goes beyond the *state crime* and *Pax priista* models. Rather than seeing the state-crime relation as a hierarchically fixed system, the *state-crime complex* focuses on shared mechanisms – the system of protection rackets – while acknowledging shifting power dynamics in a performative antagonism.

This study uses the *state-crime complex* as an analytical lens, offering an alternative perspective to the normative binary. The traced development of protection rackets in Mexico is not a teleological argument: the system evolved in response to internal and external conditions, decisions and path dependencies. From the very beginning, the aim of this study has been to offer an interpretation, not a claim to universal causality and truth.

4 Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer a seemingly simple question: in the context of transnational organised crime (TOC) in twentieth-century Mexico, is the presumption of a binary relationship between crime and the state really justified? To address this question, two avenues of enquiry were pursued. First, it provided a theoretical reassessment of the core categories of *state* and *crime* and their interrelation. Second, it traced an actor-centred history of protection rackets, identifying them as a key mechanism in the ordering of TOC in twentieth-century Mexico. Together, these analyses show the advantages of a non-binary perspective on state and crime, recognising not only their performative antagonism but also their structural co-production and their shared functioning within the *state-crime complex*. The theoretical section explored criminological and state theories of crime and state, as well as different concepts of state–crime interaction on a broader level. For the purposes of this study, *crime* is considered to be an adaptive and evolving construct, shaped by the creative power of the state, with its boundaries shifting according to state decisions to outlaw, legalise or overlook. The *state*, in turn, is conceived as an idea and a product of its practices, defined by power exercised and manifested through actors and institutions and by its ability to transgress the very norms it establishes, both overtly and covertly. Therefore, the relationship between state and crime is simultaneously performatively antagonistic and structurally co-produced.

However, not only are they co-produced, but they are also functionally similar due to their shared protection racket mechanism. This concept refers to a system of tribute extraction by a dominant from a subdominant one in return for protection assurances, often against threats made by the dominant actor. It is widely regarded as a central structural element of TOC. In the Mexican context, the protection racket system has historically served as a mechanism for regime stabilisation, revenue generation, market ordering, and violence regulation. Rather than a deviation, rackets are a mechanism through which power is exercised, and illicit economies are governed.

The empirical chapters demonstrate how this mechanism spread over time and across different scales in Mexico during the era of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). At a local level, the case of Badiraguato and *cacique* Melesio Cuén Cázares, ca. 1920s–late 1930s, exemplifies how municipal office, informal power and the cultivation and trafficking of opium became intertwined, with state functions and illicit enterprises operating through the same intermediaries and institutions. Moving up to the state level, the example of Rodrigo M.

Quevedo, the governor of Chihuahua between 1932 and 1936, shows how vice and narcotics became centrally taxed enterprises that benefited the state treasury and those involved. Between the 1960s and 1980s, such local or state-level protection racket networks that were dispersed across the country were gradually centralised. The career of Arturo “El Negro” Durazo Moreno, a key figure in this development, illustrates how, under federal auspices, the racket system transformed into an administrative order coordinated across a variety of agencies and actors. Ultimately, towards the end of the twentieth century, protection rackets came under the partial management of transnational criminal organisations (TCOs). With the emergence of the Zetas, armed wings of non-state institutions became specialised in the operational side of the system, although many of the individuals involved still came from state institutions such as the army.

This analysis yields two broader points. Firstly, the individuals examined cannot be clearly classified as either state or criminal actors. Often, they occupy multiple positions between the two simultaneously – mayor and overseer of opium production; governor and racketeer of gambling and drug operations; police chief and centraliser of Mexico’s protection rackets; elite soldier, anti-narcotics officer, and founder of a TCO’s armed wing. Secondly, however, the results are less definitive at the institutional level, though still revealing. For much of the PRI era in Mexico, protection rackets functioned as an administrative mechanism for state institutions. The state did not merely tolerate these rackets; it appropriated and steered them. Militarised privatisation at the turn of the century shifted the balance but did not end institutional involvement. The institutions that managed protection rackets often set the rules, but they could only operate within a co-produced realm – the *complex* – in which *state* and *crime* act as one.

In comparison with previous research, this concept offers two key advantages. Firstly, it avoids the security fixation of the *state capacity* discourse, which interprets organised crime as a threat to statehood, rather than considering the state's own role in its creation and maintenance. Secondly, it extends beyond the *state crime* and *Pax priista* models. While these concepts rightly broaden the perspective to include state involvement and long-standing interaction between state and crime, they remain confined to a binary ontology of the two. By contrast, the theory of the *state-crime complex* emphasises shared mechanisms and their consequences while recognising shifting power imbalances in the performative antagonism. However, focusing on a single mechanism – that of protection rackets – also carries potential risks. For example, it could obscure the demand side of the illicit economy, international policy pressure and the role of transnational corporate actors. Furthermore, the question arises

as to the extent to which the concept can be applied to other temporal and geographical contexts. Nevertheless, I believe there is sufficient reason to suggest that such future work would be worthwhile. In fact, further research could not only subject the concept to more scrutiny but also expand upon it. Particularly instructive could be research exploring the *state-crime complex* in other geographical and temporal contexts, as well as its connections to global governance, transnational corporations, and the effects of financialisation on systems of protection rackets.

Ultimately, the concept developed in this thesis does not claim that the state and crime are the same thing. It argues that in twentieth-century Mexico, the two often formed a complex in which protection rackets organised illicit economies and stabilised power. Recognising this helps to identify the institutional mechanisms that enable TOC. Treating the state and crime as a complex rather than opposing poles replaces exceptionalism with pattern, providing a clearer path to understanding.

5 Bibliography

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