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The 2019 and 2023 Narco “Culiacanazos”¹ Dual Power

It happened suddenly, on September 15, 2023, a national holiday when we Mexicans were relaxed. Ovidio Guzmán López, known as “El Ratón” or “The Mouse”, was extradited to the United States from the Highland Prison in Mexico. He will be tried initially in the Northern District Court of Illinois for possession of drugs with the intent to distribute; conspiracy to import, manufacture, and distribute drugs; conspiracy to launder money; illegal weapons possession; and being a member of a criminal enterprise.

This son of Joaquín Guzmán Loera, known as “El Chapo” or “Shorty,” is hated in the United States for being consid-

ered together with his brothers one of the main purveyors of fentanyl into the country. The Department of Justice also has charges pending against him in the New York Southern District and the District of Columbia.

His lawyers argue that his extradition was illegal because he was not allowed the regulatory mandated time to appeal it. It had to be the president of Mexico himself, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024), who would cancel the discussion about the action’s legality, and both the public and Guzmán’s own lawyers know that that is irreversible.

Ovidio’s capture left terror in its wake, since it happened between two episodes of civil war in Culiacán, Sinaloa, the state capital, October 17, 2019, and January 5, 2023, both known as the “Culiacanazos.” It is noteworthy that the

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two clashes took place on a Thursday and in the same city. The first was mere chance, the second was not. Our aim in this article is to explain this and, based on that, reflect about the huge challenge that confronting the industry of organized crime poses for Mexico.

The first Culiacanazo began right in the city's downtown area and then spread to the entire Culiacán region. It included clashes between Mexico's National Guard and the drug kingpin's army,² who blocked fourteen strategic points in the city including the military zone itself, carjacking some vehicles and lighting them on fire, with shoot-outs that caused the death of eight people and injured sixteen, among them five members of the National Guard. Nevertheless, to avoid further escalation and more innocent victims, after Ovidio was captured in his home, he was freed by presidential order. Government forces did not continue to pursue the criminals after that.

Four years later, Thursday, January 5, 2023, in Jesús María, a town north of Culiacán, during a Ministry of the Navy operation to recapture Ovidio, a new clash with armed groups that were protecting him in his home took place. Heavy weapons were used—the drug traffickers used 50-caliber machine guns and the armed forces deployed planes—, causing the death of nineteen persons on Guzmán's side and ten soldiers, as well as dozens of injured. However, this time the objective was captured.

Why did there have to be two episodes of war to arrest a drug trafficker in the middle of a city when that did not happen when other leaders of the Sinaloa cartel were captured, even when "Chapo" Guzmán was detained in Mazatlán (2014) and in Los Mochis (2016), or when Alfredo Beltrán Leyva was arrested in Culiacán's Burócrata Neighborhood in 2008?

The so-called Culiacanazos can be explained by the kind of social processes Sinaloa, and particularly Culiacán, have undergone in recent decades. Those processes have marked the creation of dual power and the possibility for the drug traffickers to confront the Mexican state when the bridges of understanding between the two break.

What happened in Sinaloa, and specifically Culiacán, the territorial heartland of that cartel, has followed a particular trajectory over the last three decades. Over that period, society has incorporated and intermeshed with its secular traditions, patterns of de-civilizing behavior in the sense that German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897-1990) described, breaking down the institutional mechanisms of state pacification and those of collective psychology that include violence. This has coincided with a process that has turned Culiacán into a global city-region with hybrid governance.³ This has not been a marginal process, but an ongoing historic transformation.

When testifying before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee in March 2021, the head of U.S. Northern Command, General Glen VanHerck, said that organized crime cartels control one-third of Mexico's territory. In each place, that presence has its own specific characteristics. In Colombia, for example, guerrilla groups completely control part of its territory, as though they were an invading force in their own country. In the case of Sinaloa, the social dynamic is different: civilizing and de-civilizing dynamics are mixed together, which, in the view of Norbert Elias,⁴ implies tension between pacification processes and the breakdown of the legal order and subjective views of violence. This situation in Sinaloa contrasts with the territorial control exercised by the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), characterized by being directly brutal.

In the last four decades, according to Culiacán-born sociologist Ronaldo González Valdez,⁵ a "de-mediated society" has been forged, with social controls split between the state and criminal groups. Sociologist James Creechan explains this same phenomenon as "covert netherworlds,"⁶ a kind of republic of crime that coexists with the civil republic, where agents of the state, delinquents, citizens, drug traffickers, and businesspersons make up both a legal and illegal world. This constitutes a series of institutional arrangements between the civilized, normal sphere of public life, but also the advance of the narco logic, with spaces for informal negotiation. It is a social order that operates to avoid moving to the extremes, that is, that the state end up by totally subjecting non-state criminal power groups or that the criminal groups colonize the state. Reality moves in permanent equilibria, in a continuum where impunity and corruption play an important role. In that relationship between the two worlds (the underground and the formal), violent explosions occur.

The 2019 and 2023 Culiacanazos were that: moments of crisis of those covert netherworlds, when their counterposed logics overflow because the mechanisms of informal negotiation between the two republics momentarily stop functioning.

The capture of Ovidio was caused by external factors, that is, U.S. pressure that forced the Mexican government to unilaterally break the pacts that keep the coexistence between the two republics peaceful. For that reason, relative peace reigned between the first and second Culiacanazo. It is no coincidence that three weeks before the armed forces operation in Jesús María, Culiacán, Governor Rubén Rocha Moya organized a huge pre-Christmas party without mishap.

We should note that the Culiacanazos were isolated incidents, that is, they did not continue or recur when other Sinaloa cartel leaders were arrested or after other operations. Things simply returned to a point of equilibrium once the misalignment caused by Ovidio Guzmán's capture was resolved, and the two republics went back to operating through negotiation. However, the de-civilizing dynamic has already been established in Culiacán and Sinaloa's historic process. So, as long as the government strategy regarding organized crime is not redesigned, we will have dual power in Culiacán and Sinaloa.

A recent study published in *Science*, by Rafael Prieto-Curiel, Gian María Campedelli, and Alejandro Hope,⁷ of-

fers clues about the complicated world in which the Mexican state has to create some kind of order: they have to know about the drug cartels, their corporate structure, operational networks, systems for competition, and recruiting, among many aspects. The authors estimate that in 2022 in Mexico, these organizations recruited more than 175,000 people, which turns them into the fifth largest employer nationwide after Femsa, Walmart, Manpower, and América Móvil, surpassing Oxxo, Bimbo, and Coppel. The Sinaloa cartel alone gave work to 14,875 people, and that is only the tip of the iceberg, since in addition to their economic and military power, drug traffickers reorganize societies wherever they set up shop.

Rocío Padilla and Nelson Arteaga demonstrated that "codes of violence" are established in commercial spaces as cultural forms in the social order imposed by the organized crime groups in which the rest of the population has normalized the agreements."⁸ The challenge, in their opinion, goes beyond writing war histories or studying corporate businesses; rather, it requires focusing on understanding the de-civilization that is overrunning us.

The lesson this analysis offers us is that Culiacanazos and other violent episodes are temporary fixes for the social structure in Culiacán since they incorporate the patterns of dual power governance into the collective psychology and institutional functioning.

If this pattern is not broken, society itself will be the loser, to the extent that the psychogenetic process of cities and social actors reinforce their tolerance for the drug dealers' actions; at the same time, the state itself functions with greater degrees of impunity and complicity vis-à-vis the drug industry.

This dynamic can only be stopped if the group that wins Mexico's presidential elections in 2024 commits itself to breaking this mechanism for coexistence in the covert world of the two republics and forges alliances with the U.S. government to restore the monopoly of power to the state, surpassing the fight against the production and consump-

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tion of narcotics. Evidence exists that the effectiveness of this hybrid order breaks down when pressure is exerted by the United States; however, once some spectacular event takes place, such as trapping a cartel leader, the logic of the political economy of crime reactivates. We have to move from episodic control to a new state order.


The de-civilization in Sinaloa corresponds to a macro-process on a national level. From our point of view, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador conceives of his government as an era of the authoritarian refoundation of state institutions to re-empower the presidency. His strategies are to combat decentralized public bodies with a certain amount of power *vis-à-vis* the executive branch and subject the judiciary and the legislative branch, not only through complex or diplomatic mechanisms, but through open confrontation with the opposition parties, the media, environmental groups, feminists, and universities. The armed forces have become the great ally in this political regression.

We believe that Lopezobradorism has oiled the de-civilizing processes that empower organized crime in different regions of Mexico, and the Culiacanazos were merely

momentary adjustments in the system of dual power that continues to exist in Sinaloa. ■■■

Notes

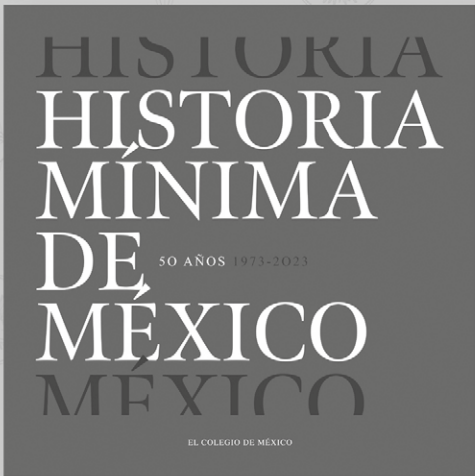
- 1 In Latin America, the use of the name of a city with the suffix “azo,” meaning violent augmentation, has come to refer to a civil uprising in that city; this is the case historically of the 1948 “Bogotazo,” the explosion of civil unrest after the assassination of a presidential candidate, or the May 1969 “Cordobazo,” an uprising against Argentina’s military dictatorship. [Translator’s Note.]
- 2 Mexico’s National Guard, in contrast with the U.S., where it is made up of reservists, is a national police force, created under the current administration. [Translator’s Note.]
- 3 Guillermo Ibarra and Tania Ceballos, “Culiacán, ciudad-región global,” *Internacionales, Revista de Ciencias Sociales del Pacífico Mexicano*, vol. 1, no. 2, July-December 2015, pp.182-243.
- 4 Norbert Elias, *El proceso de la civilización* (Mexico City: FCE, 2011).
- 5 Ronaldo González Valdez, *Sinaloa. Una sociedad demediada* (Mexico City: Juan Pablos, 2007).
- 6 James H. Creechan, *Drugs Wars and Covert Netherworlds* (Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 2023).
- 7 Rafael Prieto-Curiel, Gian Maria Campedelli, and Alejandro Hope, “Reducing Cartel Recruitment Is the Only Way to Lower Violence in Mexico,” *Science*, vol. 381, issue 6664, September 21, 2023, pp. 1312-1316.
- 8 Illiana del Rocío Padilla y Nelson Arteaga Botello, “Códigos de la violencia en espacios económicos en Culiacán, Sinaloa, México,” *Papers: Revista de Sociología*, vol. 104, no. 1, 2019, p. 25.



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