

# THE BATTLES AFTER THE BATTLE

## INTERPRETING VIOLENCE AND MEMORY IN CULIACÁN



Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies



**MEXICO  
VIOLENCE**  
RESOURCE PROJECT

**NORIA**

**ESPEJO**  
LAS COSAS COMO SON

THE BATTLES AFTER THE BATTLE:  
INTERPRETING VIOLENCE AND MEMORY IN CULIACÁN

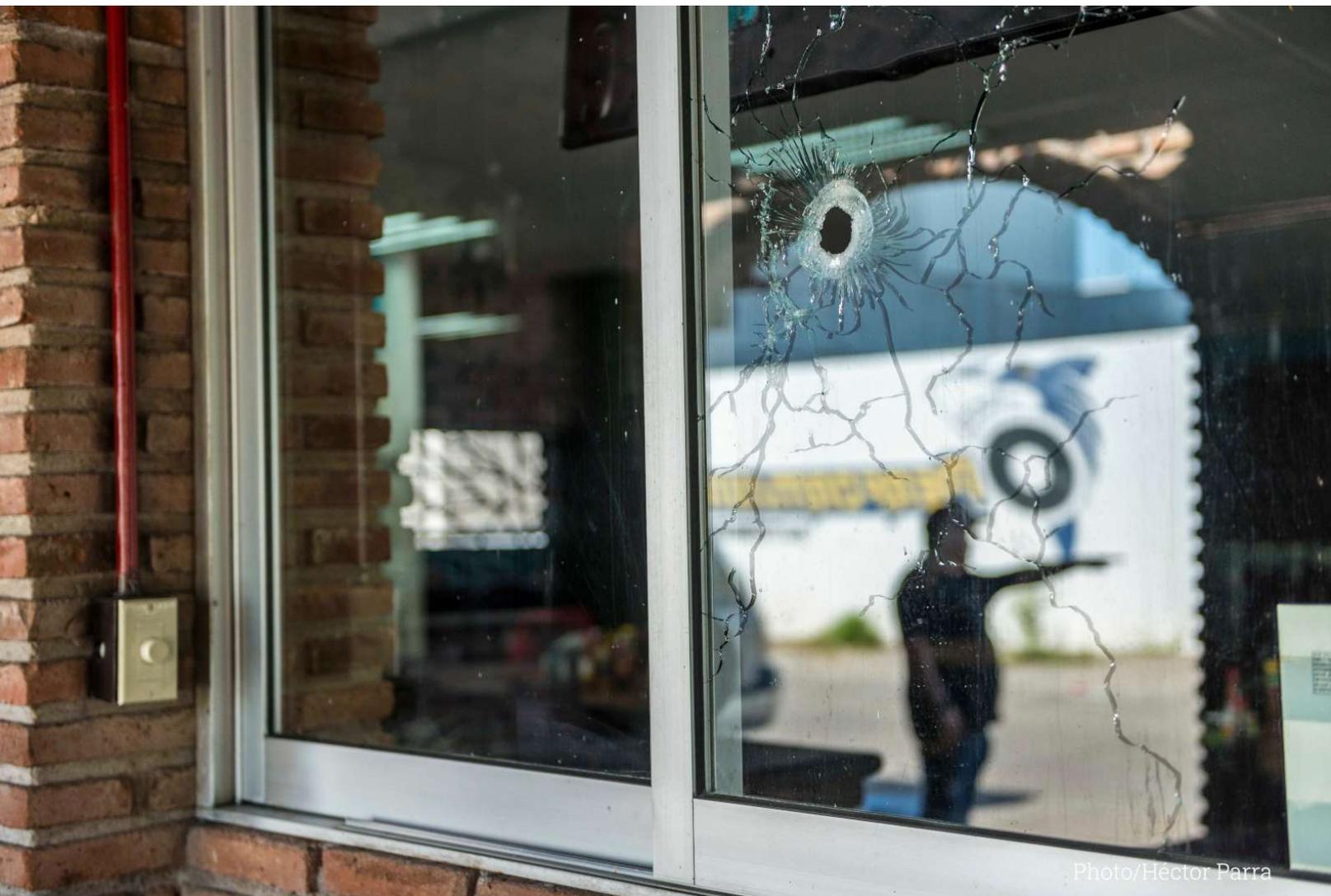
Dr. Michael Lettieri, Dr. Cecilia Farfán-Méndez, Philip Johnson, eds.

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## **EDITORS' NOTE**

On October 17, a confrontation between heavily armed criminals and Mexican security forces led to terror, chaos, and death in the city of Culiacán, Sinaloa. Even before the smoke had cleared, observers rushed to pronounce the significance of the events. It marked, many proclaimed, a catastrophic defeat for the government and a momentous change in the country's security dynamics. This project began with the desire to reexamine those analyses, even as the day began to fade from memory. A year after the events, the editors hoped to reconsider their significance, not only for Sinaloa but national narratives of violence.

To do so, we invited collaborations from a range of perspectives, and deliberately chose to emphasize local voices over outside analysts. We sought to question the initial claims that the confrontation, and the government's resulting decision to release Ovidio Guzmán, represented "precedent-setting" events. Perhaps more importantly, we also hoped to emphasize perspectives that explored how residents of Culiacán experienced and interpreted the violence.

As part of this effort, we have eschewed the usage of one popular term for October 17: the *culiacanazo*. After conversations with collaborators in Sinaloa it was clear the derogatory connotation of the term and the incorrect implication that these types of events can only occur in a place like Sinaloa. Furthermore, we consider the term distorts our understanding of what happened that day, and by rolling the events into a larger narrative about violence in the city, it hinders engaging in clear-sighted analysis.

The essays are not intended, nor do they represent consensus by the authors on the meaning and aftermath of the events of October 17, 2019. The significance and value of this collection, therefore, comes from both the authors' individual insights and from the complicated and sometimes conflicting picture they create when read together.

The project opens with an illustrated timeline produced by the team at *Revista Espejo*, marking the day's crucial moments. A series of essays then provide analysis of those events, revealing several key conclusions. In his introduction, Philip Johnson shows the three dominant threads of early analysis all failed to further our understanding, and often proved inaccurate. Romain Le Cour argues that analysis of events in Mexico is shaped by the phenomenon of 'narco-spectacle'. Patricia Figueroa describes how the reality of the day was transmitted and transformed through social media, in ways that created a "post-truth."

Discussing the experience of October 17, Alvaro Sandoval narrates how surviving the violence affected residents of Culiacán. Iliana Padilla demonstrates that violence in the city operates by a set of codes, and yet on two different Thursdays, the rules changed. Juan Carlos Ayala suggests that to understand the events, we must look at the culture that shaped those who fought to free Guzmán. Cecilia Farfán argues that what October 17 revealed, paradoxically, was the selectiveness with which the criminal organization uses violence. Hector Parra's photo essay documents how on October 17, secrets that the city sought to suppress, became painfully visible.

Moving past October 17, Josué David Piña and Marcos Vizcarra describe how the trauma of the day's violence continues to mark life in the city. Finally, Michael Lettieri's conclusion steps back to examine the notion of precedent and memory, and why the complex meaning of violent events demands nuanced analysis.

**Michael Lettieri, Philip Johnson, Cecilia Farfán-Méndez**

**October 14, 2020**

**San Diego, California**

**A QUIET AFTERNOON**

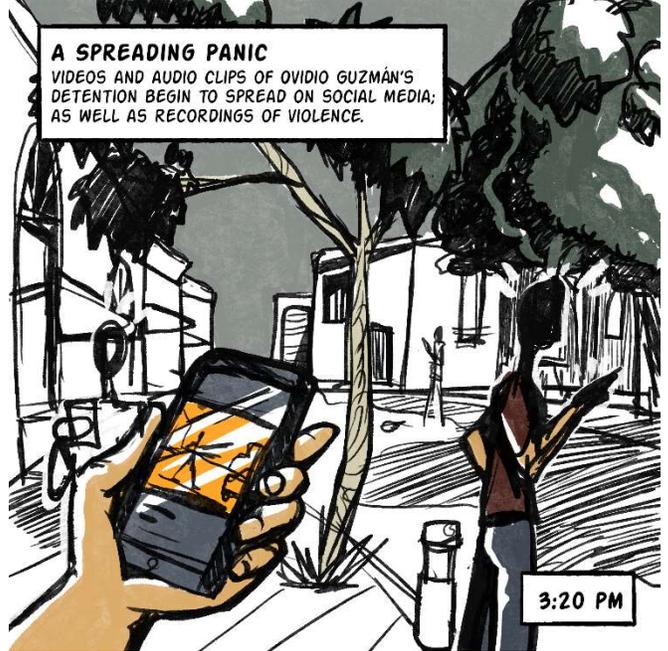
ARMED GROUPS BEGIN TO MOBILIZE ACROSS THE CITY; RESIDENTS ARE UNSURE HOW TO REACT TO THE FIRST SHOOTOUTS.



3:00 PM

**A SPREADING PANIC**

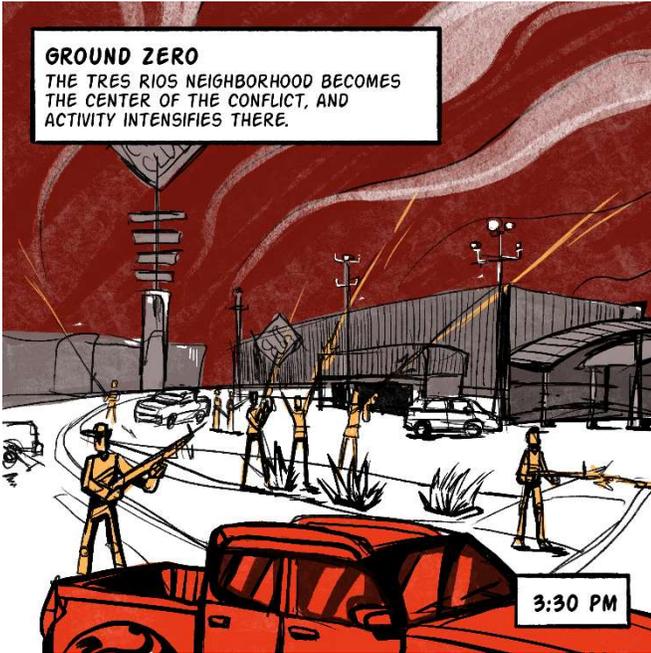
VIDEOS AND AUDIO CLIPS OF OVIDIO GUZMÁN'S DETENTION BEGIN TO SPREAD ON SOCIAL MEDIA; AS WELL AS RECORDINGS OF VIOLENCE.



3:20 PM

**GROUND ZERO**

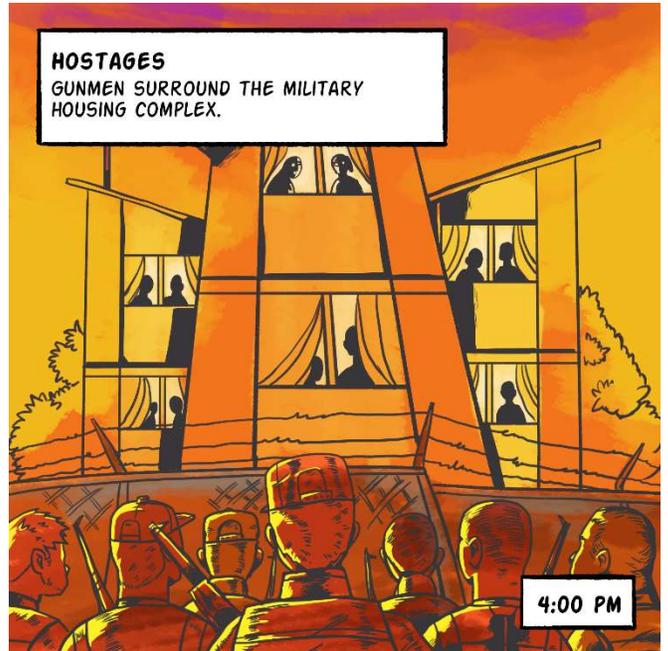
THE TRES RIOS NEIGHBORHOOD BECOMES THE CENTER OF THE CONFLICT, AND ACTIVITY INTENSIFIES THERE.



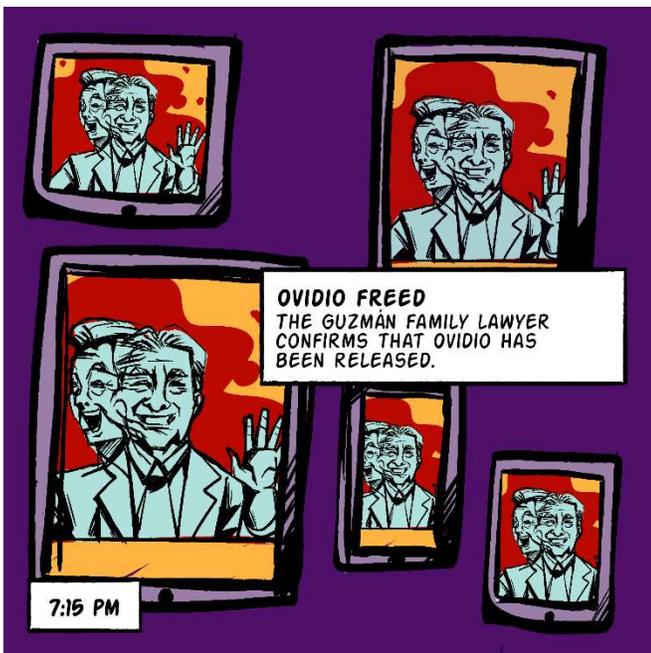
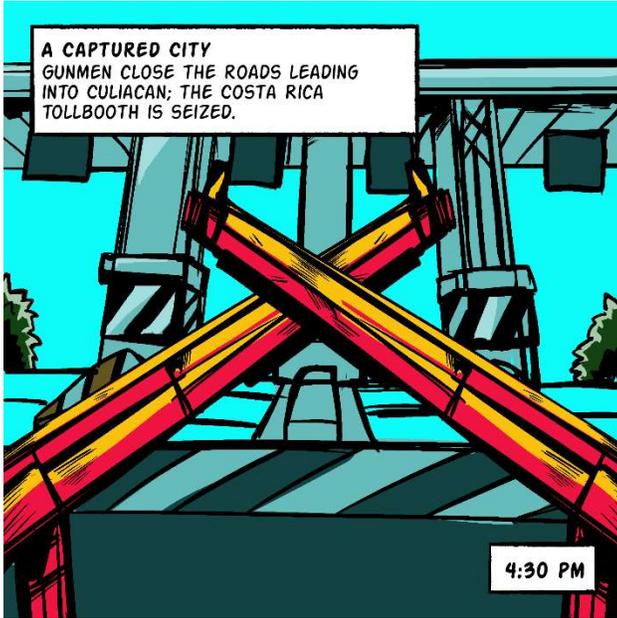
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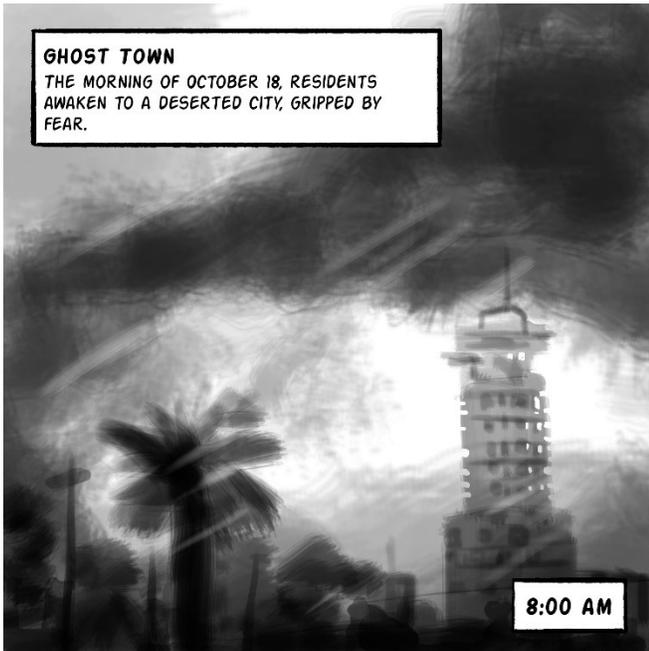
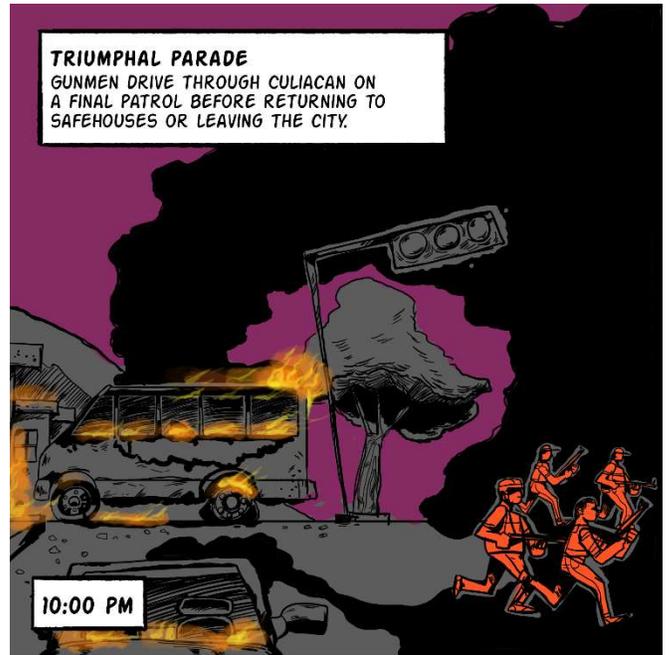
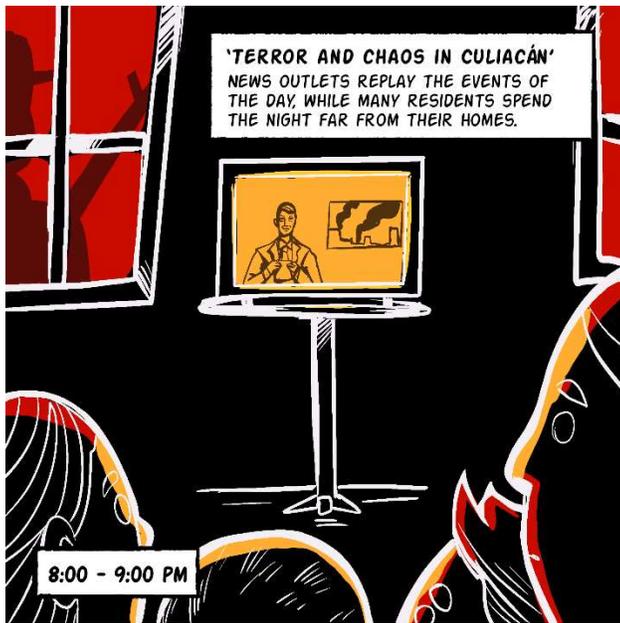
**HOSTAGES**

GUNMEN SURROUND THE MILITARY HOUSING COMPLEX.



4:00 PM







## **INTRODUCTION: REVISITING THE INTERPRETIVE FRENZY**

*Philip Johnson*

One year ago, the city of Culiacán, capital of the Mexican state of Sinaloa, became the setting for violent confrontations between criminals and security forces. The events made national and international headlines and provoked a frenzy of commentary and analysis.

To mark the anniversary, this collaboration between Noria Research Mexico and Central America Program, the Mexico Violence Resource Project, and Revista Espejo returns to and re-examines the events of October 17, and their interpretations. In the analyses that follow, researchers, journalists, and locals reflect on what happened in Culiacán, and why.

## **What Happened on October 17?**

In the early afternoon of Thursday, October 17, security forces surrounded a large house in the Tres Ríos neighborhood of Culiacán. The forces detained Ovidio Guzmán, one of the sons of Joaquin “Chapo” Guzmán, the imprisoned leader of the Sinaloa Cartel. In immediate response, gunmen working for the cartel took to the streets, engaging in running battles with security forces in Tres Ríos and other areas.

The cartel reaction brought the city to a standstill. Armed men in trucks seized bridges and staked out major thoroughfares. They hijacked, emptied, and burned buses at intersections, sending columns of smoke into the air. People at restaurants, supermarkets, and gas stations threw themselves to the ground or ran for cover as the gunmen and soldiers fired at each other.

Guzmán remained in detention, his location unknown, as violence worsened across the city. Inmates at Aguaruto Prison in Culiacán overpowered and disarmed guards. 55 inmates escaped. With strategic points held by gunmen, military reinforcements could not enter the city. A convoy of gunmen seized an apartment complex for military families, claiming hostages of their own. With pressure mounting, the security forces released Ovidio Guzmán. 13 people died during the violence.

At the time, there was little clarity about what was happening in Culiacán. Images and videos circulated online, and rumors followed. There were conflicting reports about who had been arrested and why, and about who had initiated the violence. Only in the days that followed would the sequence and explanation of events become clear.

At his morning press conference on October 18, President López Obrador stated he had backed the decision to release Guzmán (and would subsequently acknowledge having personally ordered the release). He famously stated that capturing a criminal was not worth sacrificing the lives of ordinary people. Further details emerged later. Guzmán was wanted for extradition by the DEA, and in the days prior to the capture, Mexican and U.S. security officials toured Sinaloa. The military operation that detained Guzmán was small and seemingly ill-prepared for the action.

## **Interpretations of October 17**

The high drama of the day, which played out so intensely on social media, prompted a huge volume of analysis in the following days and weeks. Many security analysts and political commentators called it an exceptional event and predicted that serious consequences would follow. Reactions ranged from shock to outrage to incredulity, with one observer remarking that, “No one could imagine such a bad Netflix show... This combination of actually capturing the guy and then releasing him? That’s new.”

Not all agreed, however, on exactly why October 17 was exceptional, or on what the consequences would be. Three interpretations recurred across the commentary.

The first interpretation compared the events of October 17 to war or civil conflict and warned that this could escalate into a broader confrontation between organized crime and the state. This interpretation was reinforced through the frequent use of military language describing October 17 as a battle or a siege. A Time magazine analysis likened the violence in Culiacán to a “mass insurrection” and to “a scene in Syria,” while others wrote that Culiacán looked and felt like a war zone.

The second interpretation warned that the actions of the government set a dangerous example, which would encourage criminal actors to turn to violence to gain further concessions from the state. Many commentators noted that the president ordering the release of a wanted criminal was unprecedented. Some argued that releasing Guzmán set a new precedent, and that the “cartels will surely take notice.” Others claimed that Culiacán provided a template for other criminal groups to follow: “If it can happen in Sinaloa, it can happen in half a dozen other places, and now the cartels have a formula.”

The third interpretation viewed the release of Guzmán as a capitulation of the state’s authority, which could demoralize the public and weaken the fight against organized crime. Reporting and analysis often used terms like capitulation or surrender. The news magazine Proceso displayed a photo of burning vehicles on its front cover, along with the phrase “You are in charge.” An analyst interviewed by the New York Times made a similar allegation: “To the people of Culiacán, the president is sending a very tough message: The cartel is in charge here.” Others wrote that, “López Obrador has chosen to give up the legitimate power of the state,” and that, “this is a victory for the Sinaloa Cartel, and a defeat for everyone.”

Not all commentators were critical of the release of Guzmán -- although virtually no one supported the ill-prepared effort to capture him. Some applauded the decision to value civilian and military lives over another captured crime figure.

### **What Happened after October 17?**

The events of October 17 are still frequently invoked in analyses of security policy under López Obrador. Rather than a precedent, commentators raise the event as the premier example of the futility of López Obrador’s “abrazos, no balazos” approach to organized crime. Instead of inaugurating a new paradigm of urban violence, the event has become a byword for the inability of López Obrador to curtail familiar patterns of violence.

Levels of violence continue to rise under López Obrador, as they did under the previous two presidents. 2020 is on track to be the most violent year on record for Mexico. The rate of increase in violence may have slowed, but the increase continues, with more than 40,000 murders projected for 2020. Seemingly undeterred by the Culiacán example (and contrary to López Obrador's rhetoric about de-escalating security policy), security forces continue to arrest criminal leaders.

One year later, there is little sign of a Culiacán effect. There is no clear evidence of a new precedent or paradigm for violent action by criminal groups. Lethal and non-lethal forms of violence continue, but this does not look like some new type of war. Instead, it looks very much like the violence that preceded October 17, 2019. The release of Guzmán may have damaged the credibility of López Obrador's approach to security policy, but the president and his party march on with little indication of a complete surrender of state authority.

In short, it looks like little has changed in the last year. The stories and analyses that follow can help us understand why.



Photo/Héctor Parra

## **THE NARCO SPECTACLE CAN END**

*Romain Le Cour Grandmaison*

Culiacán, Sinaloa. Two mythological words in the lexicon of drug traffickers in Mexico and around the world. If we add in the last name “Guzmán”, then things start to look like a caricature.

Thursday, October 17, 2019, in the state capital. It is 3:00 p.m. Time for people to have lunch, move around the city, get out of school, work, stroll around. The Federal Government of Mexico decided that it was a good time to launch a military operation aimed at capturing Ovidio Guzmán, the son of “you-know-who,” in the middle of the city. The tactical and strategic results were disastrous.

It is not the aim of this essay to discuss the efficacy of this operation, but rather to analyze the form in which it was transformed into a massive “spectacle” (for those

people living outside of Culiacán), in the context of the “war on drugs.” The fact is that in Mexico, public stories of violence increasingly follow a pattern in which the spectacle is passively accepted, due to “its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance.”<sup>i</sup> [1] This essay asks questions about the spectacles of violence in Mexico, in particular, when they are created by non-state actors, setting aside the State’s role for a different essay.

First, a spectacle needs an adequate stage, both on a social and geographical level. It has been demonstrated, through several tragic events throughout 2020, that not all municipalities, or all the people who have died in Mexico, have the right to the same media-political coverage, and empathy varies a great deal according to the place, social standing, and ethnicity of the victims.

Second, the spectacle needs abundant, attractive material. It is not enough to convey the events in writing. The ideal thing is to be able to tell the story through a sizable number of videos produced by direct witnesses, locals, public safety forces, or security cameras, in addition to the protagonists themselves. Here is where smartphones and social media offer a continuous source of production and dissemination, which, by the way, is accepted and reproduced as a source for analysis or for informative purposes, with no critical distance, in most cases.

In the case of a city like Culiacán, on that Thursday at 3:00 p.m., we are dealing with a greater opportunity for spectacle. In fact, as soon as the news went live, social media took it upon themselves to broadcast, minute by minute, the gunfire, the deployment of armed men throughout the city, the testimonies of residents who were trapped inside, and the analysis of the situation by experts, most of whom were outside of Culiacán and of the State of Sinaloa entirely. Within a few hours, the date of October 17 was fetishized in the recent history of violence in Mexico.

This was amplified during the following days. Thus, the frenzied coverage did not stop until several days later, when the very last drops had been squeezed from the event. The important thing was for people to demonstrate that they “were in” Culiacán, in the heart of an event that, nonetheless, had already ended; providing “evidence” that these people were familiar with the city and its residents, primarily through “local sources” and, by extension, they were able to tell the story with all the legitimacy of Culiacán natives, without actually giving space to those voices. This is fundamental in the global information age.

Third, you need captivating actors, simple explanations, and definitive conclusions. A narco boss is the best. If you are in Culiacán with men whose last name is Guzmán, fantastic. This will make it possible to make use of the entire mythology of the narco, to do the “branding” for the event. In this case, it was branded as “The Battle of

Culiacán,” along with some of its best subtitles: “A Real Life Netflix Show”; “Scenes of Violence that Look Like Syria”; or “The Victory of the Narcos.” A thousand metaphors to reach the conclusion imposed by the spectacle, one that we will have to stick with: the Mexican State has been defeated by the narcos. Culiacán was going to define a watershed moment in the history of violence in Mexico, establishing the “before” and “after” for the entire nation. Nothing would be the same after this.

This is where the metanarrative comes into play—the grand explanation. In Mexico, it is simple: “The Narcos vs. the State.” This is how it all begins and ends. It’s a tired old argument, but an incredibly powerful one: it makes it possible to give a recurring explanation to any violent event, without making even minimum levels of analysis of the circumstances. Thus, the paradigm of a war between the government and the drug traffickers connects professional fields with almost no variation, including journalists, analysts, academics, and, obviously, the communication services of the governments to come.

The ingredients of this narrative are well-known. The State and the criminals are ontologically opposed to one another. In order to exist, one of them must annihilate the other, in a perfectly black-and-white world. The theory is a dominant one, and difficult to criticize. Even in academia, the political science and criminology emerging from the United States (or inspired by said country) continues to produce studies that exist in a Weberian caricature of the State as the guaranteed holder of a monopoly of violence in its territory.

Far from this perspective, in Mexico, the State never disappears. In addition, it manages to consolidate itself as the central political space, in spite of, by means of, and against violence, legitimate or otherwise. The important thing is to understand that the organization of violence and its rules of usage are a co-creation: they are permanently negotiated, in more or less violent ways, between various public and private protagonists.

Nonetheless, the cause of this theory—beyond academic disputes—is important. An official history of violence is imposed. A story, filled with myths of drug traffickers, a profoundly ideological one, which explains Mexican society based on a separation between one part which is “healthy” and another that is “infected.” Crime, then—and, in particular, the “organized” form of it—represents an internal threat to the body of society, an anomaly that causes weakness and failure, and which must, as a result, be annihilated.

In addition, the narco-narrative is particularly fruitful because it is simultaneously fed by stories of actors who are extremely deviant, socially speaking—the “others”—and who are, at the same time, fascinating. This paradox is one of the glues that hold

the narrative together, and is the key of its efficacy. It is based on an attraction to narcos, rifles, the aesthetic of war, and its masculine attributes: seductive violence, which participates in a form of voyeurism, and feeds into an endless supply of books, reports, documentaries, and fictional movies.

As it turns out, war sells. And when there are drug traffickers involved, even more so. The depiction of violence is a domestic and international business that several professional sectors depend on. The problem is when the war becomes something routine. The dead pile up, and explanations cannot be reinvented. The public, now driven away, grows tired and stops paying attention. They get used to horrific details. They are no longer excited or scandalized by anything. The result of this is the need to produce spectacles several times a year. Key moments, which need to be sold as a total, definitive rupture, in order to capture the public's attention for days on end.

To this end, we need events that can pave the way to "wartime coverage." Daily, chronic violence, even massacres that take place far away from the large centers of public attention, are no longer going to cut it. In contrast, the events of October 17 in Culiacán, the attack on the Undersecretary of Public Safety in Mexico City in June 2020, or the series of videos which have apparently been produced by criminal groups to show the assistance they offer in the time of Covid—or to show the world their weapons and armored vehicles—are the shoehorn of the science of violentology.

I would like to conclude, here, with two ideas that I believe are related to each other, but seldom analyzed. First, a sociological change of the international media, accompanied by a disciplinary and thematic development within academia, and finally, the consolidation of the sector of consultancy and expertise related to violence in Mexico.

First, several of the international correspondents—primarily from the United States—who currently cover Mexico have previously worked in the context of civil wars in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. This entails workplace habits—for instance, the heavy use of "fixers" to establish the scene—as well as a vocabulary and analytical framework that has been imported from areas of armed conflict. Second, there are increasingly more experts, NGO members, and academics who have been trained in "War Studies" and "Conflict Studies" in the United States or the United Kingdom, which is reflected in the increasingly larger importance given to "security analysts" in Mexico, a position which did not exist up to ten years ago.

This entails the increasingly common use of vocabulary inspired by war—insurgency, armed groups, armed conflict, and other more or less refined labels—as

well as concepts such as a “weak” or “failed State.” This, as in the case of the media in relation to their respective public and the need to consolidate their audience, has a great deal to do with the struggle to convince donors that the situation in Mexico merits investing resources. If the violence is of a social nature, if it turns out to be the product of complex historical dynamics, if it is not the stuff of spectacle, is not a threat for healthy social order, then the donors will not be convinced of the sense of urgency. The strength of the drug war narrative cannot be understood outside of the need to feed threats in order to ensure financing.

This development has concrete effects on the social and political reality in Mexico. The paradox here, as we research in the Noria Program for Mexico and Central America, is that a broad sector that seeks to critique the war on drugs disregards the structural dynamics—be they social, economic, political, or cultural—in order to give increasing focus to a “positivist” view of the violence. As if violence existed in and of itself. As if it grew on trees. As if every violent event had to be an unprecedented spectacle in order to be interesting. This, as with the example of Culiacán, ends up paving the way for repressive security policies. In arguing that violence is the product of weakness, it is generally deduced that the solution lies in greater strength, which eventually translates into more policies of the iron fist and militarization.

It should be noted that the authorities play a crucial role in all this. Building stories of enemies and internal threats is a classic task in the formation of States, a topic that we will discuss in a later essay. It turns out, for several sectors that already make their living from violence, exactly the same thing occurs. Binary explanations, and capitalization on events of spectacle, make it possible to keep growing, and keep selling. If the spectacle ends, the business dries up as well.

That is why Culiacán was so perfect. And it does not matter whether the “watershed moment” that was predicted never came to pass, whether the State failed to disappear and the narcos, whoever they are, have not taken control of Mexico by now. Meanwhile, the daily nature of violence, whose analysis requires more time and attention, is being made increasingly more invisible.

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<sup>1</sup> DEBORD, Guy, *La sociedad del espectáculo* [The Society of the Spectacle], Ediciones Naufragio, 1995



Photo/Héctor Parra

## **WHO RULES IN SINALOA? ANSWERS, LIES, AND “POST-TRUTHS” ABOUT BLACK THURSDAY IN CULIACÁN**

*Patricia Figueroa*

“Who is in charge of Sinaloa?” Three years ago, I decided to ask this question, along with other questions about power relationships, exclusively addressing the young people of Los Mochis, Culiacán, and Mazatlán. Of the 350 participants, aged 15 to 25, 75% replied that they believe the drug traffickers are the ones in charge of Sinaloa, while just 18% referred to politicians, leaving business people, journalists, and the police very far down on the scale of power. Of those same young people, 98% were convinced that the most influential politicians of Sinaloa have made agreements with the drug traffickers, while 86% firmly believed that, in order for a drug trafficker to be successful, they must reach agreements with politicians. What is being referred to here is a brutal symbiosis, with degrees of mutual protection at high levels.

These perceptions are connected to our history. At least three generations of us Sinaloans have witnessed violent scenes involving drug trafficking that have been burned onto our collective consciousness. The question is worth asking: What was so new about the day known as Black Thursday? And what happened in Sinaloa on that Thursday that we had not seen before in Sinaloa?

On October 17, 2019, in Culiacán, shortly after lunchtime, the internet lit up in an intense way never before seen in the modern history of Sinaloa, as people exchanged the first images, videos, and audio recordings on social media—primarily Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter—showing a clash between soldiers, who had recently captured Ovidio Guzmán, and members of the Sinaloa Cartel, who were demanding the release of their leader.

The information flowed in an informal fashion, plagued with “fake news” and “post-truth” stories, as videos were shared, practically in real time, of the crossfire at various points of a city that had turned into a warzone. Not only did we Sinaloans experience real-life anguish, but we also experienced a virtual reality and, even moreso, an augmented reality.

Some of us experienced those “realities” on the street, in offices, in schools, in supermarkets and restaurants. In my own case, I witnessed it from the window of my home. I carefully peeked out to watch the smoke rising from the vehicles that were being burned in order to block the northern exit of the International Highway of Culiacán. In addition to this, eighteen other blockades of strategic points were reported that afternoon, in the city known as the epicenter of drug trafficking in Mexico.

Information and misinformation flowed with unprecedented intensity via social media, which contributed to generating fear, paralyzing the population and sowing chaos. In the beginning, it was believed that Iván Archivaldo Guzmán was the one who had been detained, and not his brother Ovidio. As the hours passed, it was also reported that Ovidio was dead. Another video showed a man dressed in a military coat with his face covered—supposedly, this was Ovidio in custody. Another one of the notable videos showed gumen entering the residential area where the families of the military personnel were located.

Videos taken from cell phones show people fleeing the bullets, men armed with rifles, and buses on fire. As a part of the “show” designed for social networks, a video was leaked of five young people in a car, bobbing to the beat of raucous music, armed with high-power rifles and wearing masks with LED lights. By 7:00 p.m., people still did not know what was actually happening, and the question on many people’s

minds was how the soldiers planned to get Ovidio out of Culiacán—if it was practically impossible to do so by land, the only alternative was to fly him out.

Some citizens automatically turned into “improvised reporters.” In addition to recording what was happening with their cell phones, they also “narrated” what they were sharing: “We are informing you at this time (...) they have just detained a big-rig truck, they stopped it and set fire to it... Honestly, things are getting ugly out here; the best thing for us to do is to protect ourselves, we should stay shut up in our homes (...) Thank you very much for your attention. Take care! We need to have a lot of faith.” As the night went on, others sent out short videos just to clarify that “nothing has calmed down yet.” From the balcony of my house, I still saw the smoke rising from the burned buses (I took at least one photo out of morbid curiosity), and I could see that most of my neighbors were doing the same thing.

The closure of the International Airport of Culiacán, and the suspension of services by Uber and public transportation, brought traffic to a standstill in the city. The closure of supermarkets, as well as the indefinite suspension of classes at all levels, were the news stories that flooded the internet immediately. Two videos without much context, shared on social networks, were the cause of various interpretations—some of them were innocent, others conspiratorial. One video showed a greeting between soldiers and civilians carrying high-power rifles—was this collusion or surrender? A second showed several men (51 prisoners) leaving the Culiacán prison—had they escaped, or were they released?

Among the gossip that spread across online platforms, and the images and videos—many of them without adequate context to explain them—the “fake news” and “post-truth” stories were taking shape. To this day, they have continued to obscure important elements of a reality that has still not been entirely processed by the collective consciousness of Culiacán—much less Mexico—and an international audience that was closely watching one of the most spectacular episodes, and the most broadly spread by the media, in the entire dark history of Mexico’s drug trafficking capital. Culiacán was subjected to two types of violence that day: the explicit violence (physical and real), represented by high-power firearms, blood and fire, and the symbolic (virtual) violence, expressed via social media, with images and words taken out of context and recontextualized, with which the city was immediately held under siege.

A “logical” kind of logic would guide one to handle a detainee of that magnitude—someone requested for extradition to the United States, and the son of no less than “El Chapo” Guzmán—with the utmost agility, caution, and strategic intelligence. And yet, this did not occur. The bursts of machine gun fire continued to ring out in various points of the city; nonetheless, if we consider the official number of people who were

shot that day (8 dead and 16 wounded), many of those shots were fired into the air, or were fired with the dual goal of intimidating the population and threatening the police and military forces.

On Friday, October 18, 2019, I went outside to explore, to “get a feel” for the social climate. The fact is, the city of Culiacán was in a desolate state.

On that day, Ovidio Guzmán’s attorneys spoke to the media and, practically framing it as a complaint, stated that the elements of the federal forces had shown up at the home of El Chapo’s son “without any detention warrant on hand,” and for this reason, the authorities themselves recognized that they did not have sufficient elements to detain him, much less to extradite him. It was then that the President “gave orders for him to be immediately released.”

Days later, as an epilogue to this media circus, a communiqué was shared on social media which was supposedly from the Sinaloa Cartel (CDS), in which they “publicly” apologized to the population for the events which “were the result of the federal forces’ irresponsibility, who underestimated the power of our organization.” In capital letters, the CDS sought to make it clear that they “DID NOT ATTACK THE PHYSICAL WELL-BEING OF ANY CITIZEN WHO WAS NOT INVOLVED WITH THE EVENTS,” which would imply that we citizens were not at risk of being directly targeted by the cartel.

This communiqué was a part of the large media spectacle that, in the end, would define the events of that day. The smoke and flames that were shared on those new electronic media were part of the creation of alternative realities, augmented and often distorted. From the bowels of social media, a “post-truth” story emerged regarding October 17.

While the news all over the world focused on the detention and liberation of Ovidio Guzmán, on the chaos that a city had been subjected to by “an urban guerrilla group,” and on the surrender of the Mexican State, the President of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, limited his comments to justifying what occurred, minimizing the mistakes that were made, and interpreting the events: “The situation became very difficult, and many citizens were at risk, many people, many human beings, and the decision was made to protect human lives.”

“The capture of a criminal cannot be worth more than human lives,” the President said. What he failed to say was that the capture of a criminal, no matter what the level of his crimes may be, is an obligation of the State as a part of the guarantee of the Rule of Law which, for now, is perceived as being non-existent in Sinaloa. The President never explained how those human lives he referred to so abstractly would

be at risk, or how many lives would be at risk, or why. He also failed to recognize the crisis of missing people in the state, and during his most recent visit to Sinaloa in early August 2020, he dared to affirm that “the stigmatization of Sinaloa as being a state with much insecurity and violence, is something that does not correspond to reality.” This “post-truth” account is an offense to the victims of forced disappearances, of murders, of femicides, and of other crimes which, even if they do not result in death, are extremely serious for those who suffer them. “Fake news” and “post-truths” are instruments of manipulation in the public and political arena. Some politicians in the United States call them “alternative facts,” while common sense would lead us to simply refer to them as falsehoods. When we live with our attention fixed on a digital world, it is of fundamental importance that we learn to distinguish between reality and falsehood, examining the facts from a place of reason, because simply observing them with the naked eye is not enough. When we talk about “post-truth,” we are talking about objective facts which are offered to the recipient in such a way that, after we filter them through the sieve of our emotions and ideology, they lose their force as facts which are able to generate serious, responsible public opinion. In Sinaloa, we can be afraid, but we cannot be indifferent when a person who has committed a crime is not punished, for the simple reason that they will then continue to commit crimes.

Prior to October 17, 2019, we Sinaloans already had a clear answer to the question, “Who is in control of Sinaloa?” Nonetheless, the events that occurred on that day confirmed the generalized perceptions of a cartel that was treated as an omnipresent and all-powerful entity. An indisputable truth among a web of falsehoods, half-truths, and “post-truths” is the fact that “Black Thursday” became a highly-valued piece of digital merchandise in the world of social media, obtaining millions of clicks and generating significant profits, with millions of views all over the world.



Photo/Héctor Parra

## WHAT WAS THE EXPERIENCE OF OCTOBER 17? ECHOES AND AFTERMATH

*Albaro Sandoval*

Fear took on the scent of gunpowder on the day that Culiacán was brought to its knees. Beginning at three o'clock in the afternoon, in the neighborhood of Tres Ríos, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Government engaged in a protracted exchange of gunfire.

For those whose recollections of October 17, 2019 continue to smolder, their silence about that fateful day—and their emotional response when they do describe it—are both entirely understandable.

Those who have emerged from that conflagration understand that hysteria has teeth, and while it may not bite off chunks of flesh, it does leave teeth marks in the skin, causing temporary madness. Those who have emerged from that conflagration must know that no one escapes unscathed from the ruins of their own city.

This is a portrait of that fateful day that was so cruel and alarming that it has become unforgettable. These are the echoes of a war that just a few people were invested in. Now, one year after the battle, the wound continues to fester.

### **Ovidio: The Target**

By the time that three o'clock in the afternoon comes around, the orders have already been given. The instructions are to rescue Ovidio, one of the cartel bosses, through fire and bloodshed, using all the arsenal and people available. Literally all of it.

The Navy forces have him surrounded in his house, located at 2340 José Muro Pico street, in the neighborhood of Tres Ríos, the most significant commercial location of the state capital. "There's the fucking government for you."

The excited chatter of spotters and hitmen crackles on the radios. The cartel shows up in full force. They're stacked deep and wide, but this is no crowd of aimless idiots here—there is an order guiding their movements, their deployment of force.

*"You shoot from here, you guys cover him over there, we'll be here. Fire on the chopper. Take out the armored vehicles, the 50 calibers, the AK-47s. Take down the cars, get the buses out of there. Set them on fire. Occupy the streets. Make the city go up in flames."*

The Cartel takes control of Culiacán, and one thousand, two thousand hostages are caught in the crossfire, at the mercy of a stray bullet or a volley of automatic gunfire. Let the world see who's in charge here.

### **Curled on the Floor of Her Sentra**

Meanwhile, here is Alexia sitting in her white Sentra, at the traffic light where Universitario boulevard intersects with Enrique Sánchez Alonso boulevard. It's looking like she won't get out of here alive. This is where one of the heaviest clashes takes place.

She is all alone, and the chaos has just begun. In that chaos, all the cars around her are at a standstill. The world screeches to a halt on this October day, around 3:00 p.m.

She hears the first noises. Maybe it's automatic weapons, maybe small arms gunfire, she couldn't say. She doesn't understand what's going on—she was just on her way to buy tickets for the Dorados soccer game this Thursday night.

She rolls the window down a crack, leaves the motor running, and dives onto the floor of the passenger seat. She curls up into a tight little ball. Fear causes her to

shrink down, making her fit in this tiny space where she could never have fit under other circumstances.

*"I heard the racket. There was a loud noise, and then a burst of automatic gunfire. Even though I'm from Culiacán, I had never gone through that kind of situation before. It didn't stop. Noise, racket, all kinds of different gunfire. I don't even know how I managed to curl up down there. I curled up into a tiny little ball. I don't know how I managed to squeeze into that space."*

She checks her cell phone and sees that her battery is down to five percent. She calls her boyfriend. She hears his voice and panics. She tells him that she's stuck in the middle of a crossfire and she doesn't know what to do.

She calls her dad. "What's up, girl?" he asks. She explains the situation. The only thing he can tell her is, "Don't move." He is going to try to come to her location, along with Alexia's mother, to try and rescue their daughter.

*"That was when I started to panic. I started to cry. I couldn't even scream. It was like I was consumed with anxiety. I was in my car for about three and a half hours. During those three hours, I was thinking, 'I could get hit by a bullet here at any moment.' I could hear the gunfire ringing in my ears."*

The operation to capture Ovidio Guzmán López is underway. It is being carried out by the Drug Trafficking Information Analysis Group (known by the Spanish-language acronym GAIN), a force under the Secretariat of National Defense. The Sinaloa Cartel responds with its own counter-operation to rescue their kingpin.

Alexia's father doesn't know any of this. The man attempts to approach the location. When he comes to the area surrounding the Dorados soccer stadium, he hits a wall—a group of cartel gunmen make gestures for him to leave. They have blocked off access to the intersection of Universitarios and Sánchez Alonso. He and Alexia's mother protect themselves and stay close by, waiting until they are able to enter the conflict zone.

For now, the operation to rescue their daughter, still balled up on the floor of her white Sentra, has come to a standstill.

## **Ground Zero**

Angie is not far from the traffic light by the City Club wholesale store when she becomes frantic. She wants to get away from this turmoil. The showdown has begun.

Nearby, at the same traffic signal, Erick is driving behind the Secretary of National Defense convoy. He sees the Sinaloa Cartel's gunmen when they begin to fire on the soldiers.

They unleash gunfire on them from the front and the rear. Erick gets out of his car, leaves it there, and runs for cover among the nearby stores. He stays there until seven or eight at night. "My car still has the bullet holes in it..."

Israel is also at the same traffic light by City Club. When he hears the bursts of automatic gunfire, he speeds up and heads toward Dorados stadium. He hears the loud gunfire of a Barret M82. He stops the car then and there, in front of some random house, and hits the floor. He sees several luxury automobiles. Armed men emerge from them.

He continues to head toward the Salón 53 ballroom, hoping to make it back to his home in the neighborhood of Tierra Blanca. At that intersection, Israel sees the gunmen stop a trailer, shoot at it, and set fire to it. He turns back and, at the intersection of Obrero Mundial and Enrique Cabrera, he comes across another trailer in flames.

*"I was afraid of getting hit with a stray bullet. I finally went inside a repair shop... I slept in there, because I didn't think it was a good idea to go back to Tierra Blanca. Later on, I saw the battlefield... Countless burned trucks and cars. I cried when I made it home."*

At the Milow Bowl & Fun bowling alley in the residential development of Tres Ríos, Elizabet is celebrating her nephew's birthday. There are dozens of children inside. "Thank God, we lived to tell about it. And for everyone who didn't, we pray for their eternal rest..." This is where the party stops.

## **Crying Without Tears**

Alexia cries without shedding a single tear. And she screams, she screams over and over. She screams inside her car, because she is all alone and she is afraid. The bursts of automatic gunfire around her do not stop. She can hear the weapons' discharge ringing inside her ears.

Alexia is more than just frightened—she is terrified. She now understands the true meaning of the word, and what it consists of. She knows what sets terror apart from fear. She swallows and the saliva burns her throat on the way down.

*"I screamed a lot. That day, I discovered a part of myself that I didn't know existed. I screamed, but then I got scared that someone would hear me screaming. I kept quiet, I swallowed my screams down, swallowed the anxiety down. I remember that I cried a lot, but the tears wouldn't come. It was terror. I was terrified. I wasn't sad—I was very, very afraid."*

The battle rages on for half an hour, 50 minutes. It doesn't stop. Neither side lets up. From her car, she can see a helicopter flying over the area. If they start shooting, she thinks, I'm going to get hit. I'm stuck in the middle of all this. How can I get out of here alive?

Alexia has opened the window on the driver's side just a crack. The motor is still on. She waits for her chance, for some sort of ceasefire, so she can escape, but it doesn't come. This is only the beginning.

She stays down there, crying without tears, filled with terror, curled up in a ball. While she has been curled up there for an hour already, she will have to stay in that position for two and a half hours more.

### **Gunfire and Screams**

While Alexia takes refuge inside her white Sentra, a few meters away, Sara and her two children see a crowd of people running toward them. They hear the first shots, the bursts of gunfire. They don't know exactly where they're coming from or what is happening.

The McDonald's shake that Sara had hoped to buy will have to wait until later. She, her children, her cousin, and her mother all hurry back inside the Bodega Aurrerá retail store.

People are running back and forth, looking for a place to take shelter. This confrontation is anything but subtle. People are getting out of their cars, running and screaming.

*"It was horrifying. We were standing there, thinking, 'What the fuck is going on?' It was one never-ending hail of gunfire. Those bursts of gunfire were horrible. On top of all that, then the explosions started. We heard them close by. It was awful. And the gunfire, and the screams."*

Sara and her family go inside Bodega Aurrerá, the store where, just a few moments ago, they bought the groceries to make lunch. They will stay inside this store for eighteen hours.

The security guards close the main entrance. As soon as they lower the metallic roll-up doors, they hear people pounding on them. Outside, the soldiers are shouting for them to open up. There are more people seeking shelter from the violence. The bursts of gunfire continue.

There are around 80 people inside the store. All of them are led to a room at the back of the building.

*"An hour went by, two hours, and the shooting didn't stop. It went on like that from three o'clock in the afternoon until eight or nine o'clock at night. At midnight, they started shooting again. We were totally bewildered, because we knew nothing, nothing at all."*

### **The Missing Chunk of Time**

There is a missing chunk of time that Alexia cannot remember. She says that she may have fainted or fallen asleep. A year has passed since that October 17th known as "Black Thursday," and she still can't recall it clearly.

All of a sudden, she wakes up. She is sweating; she feels very hot. The car's air conditioning has shut off. She is still in the same place, at the traffic light of the intersection between Universitarios and Sánchez Alonso, near the City Club.

*"I either fell asleep or I fainted; I'm honestly not sure. When I came to, I looked at the car's clock. It was about 5 o'clock. My cell phone battery was at 2 percent. I called my dad up and I told him, 'I'm fine, I'm inside the car.'"*

*"To tell the truth, I was 90 percent sure that I wasn't going to make it out of there alive. I was saying to myself, 'I don't want to die, but it's out of my hands; there's nothing I can do to save myself...'"*

A thousand different thoughts go through her head. If she's going to get shot, she hopes the bullet doesn't hit her in the head. Please, not in the head.

It would be better to get shot in the hand. Although, if her hand gets shot, then she won't be able to play with her band anymore. "We have a band and we play music." She also said, "If I get shot in the hand, that's it for my short musical career."

It would be better to get shot in the foot. Bring it on, bullet, bring it on. Let the bullet hit her wherever it hits her, but don't let it kill her. She's already going through this, but please just let it not turn into anything worse.

### **Mass Hysteria**

In the store where Sara has taken refuge, men and women are panicking. She sees women praying. She hears a man cry out somewhere. Other people want to get out of there; they ask to be let out the back door. The store employees don't let them leave. They will have to wait.

None of this is normal, and it isn't looking like it will turn out well. Something is happening here, something serious—and judging by how things look here on the inside, things must be even worse on the outside. Because the gunfire continues. And it isn't just sporadic gunshots, but bursts of automatic gunfire. Those endless, endless bursts of gunfire.

*"We stayed in there overnight. Bodega Aurrerá provided us with blankets and pillows. They rose to the occasion, but they wouldn't let us leave. Their security protocol was to not let us leave. So what happened next? People went into mass hysteria."*

They're acting out of fear, the same kind of fear that Alexia is experiencing in a physical way at this very moment, curled up in an impossible position on the floor of her car.

*"We were the ones who had to go through that, who had to suffer through it. I had to keep my head straight, I had to be patient and, above all, be strong, for my children. My children were crying non-stop. They were frantic. We got out of there at eight in the morning the following day (Friday the 18th). That was the time when they let us leave. We got into the car and we were like, 'Come on, step on the gas, let's go home.'"*

These are Sara's words almost a year after the events.

Meanwhile, among those still stuck inside the store, the women are doubled over weeping, feeling utterly alone. The men—with that pride that is characteristic of Culiacán men—are right there with them, standing close or keeping their distance, just as frightened as the women are. Everyone feels the same raw, palpable terror.

### **Peeking Out into the Chaos**

Alexia shores up her courage. She unfolds herself from the fetal position inside her car, raises her head, and peeks out to look at the chaos and the hail of bullets. There they are, sprawled on the ground, soldiers and cartel gunmen alike. "Fuck. I'm surrounded by them."

Yes. She is surrounded. The cartel gunmen are firing from the bridge of Dorados stadium, from Universitarios boulevard, behind the City Club. The armored vehicles join in as well, firing from the side of Sánchez Alonso boulevard.

The bullets strike everywhere, but they haven't yet hit the white Sentra. That stray bullet still hasn't hit Alexia's head—or her foot, or her hand. Her estimated ten percent probability of survival is still a possibility, here on this insane Thursday, as everything around her goes to shit.

Alexia sees a soldier lying on the pavement. The soldier shoots at the bridge by Dorados stadium. The man sees her and signals at her to wait, to hang on. He also asks her to duck down.

With the last bit of juice left in her cell phone battery, she calls her dad. She tells him that the soldiers have seen her.

This is her chance to escape the chaos. Two soldiers approach the Sentra and get Alexia out of it. They tell her, "Duck down as low as you can, and move fast."

Her father is there with her during the rescue, listening in on the cell phone. Then the phone dies. Alexia has not been shot in the foot, the hand, or the head.

It is nearly six thirty in the evening. Alexia has just spent three and a half hours listening to the volleys of gunfire, aghast with white-hot terror, curled up in a ball on the floor of her white Sentra, lucky enough to avoid getting shot. As far as she can tell, she's safe now. But nobody ever said the city itself was at peace yet.

### **The Other Chaos**

The soldiers take her to the Calz zapato shoe store, nearby where she left her car. Once inside, Alexia comes across a different kind of chaos.

Women, men, children, teenagers, all of them are weeping. Traumatized. Screaming. Some are passed out, others are waving air at them with pieces of cardboard, with improvised fans hurriedly fashioned for the occasion. For the mass hysteria of this war with no end in sight.

*"There were older people there, pregnant women, grandparents with children. There were about twenty of us."*

Alexia is brought up to the warehouse on the second floor. Once she's inside, her fear subsides. The store employees have given her a drink of water. There, among the shelves of shoe boxes, surrounded by the smell of new shoes, she lies down on the floor.

Alexia says that she did not speak with anyone inside the store. She may have said two or three sentences at most. She doesn't know why.

*"I felt indebted to the Calz zapato employees, because they treated me so well. So what I did was, about a month or two later, I went back there and I brought them a little gift. I wrote 'Thank you for your help' on it. I brought them a cake."*

Close to nine o'clock at night, when the Sinaloa Cartel had managed to free Ovidio Guzmán, when the Government had lowered its head and began its retreat, Alexia is reunited with her father. He has finally managed to make it into the conflict zone.

Alexia asks about her car. The soldiers point at the place where they parked it. There is her white Sentra, without a scratch, free of bullet holes.

*"My dad was looking at me, in tears. That's when I broke down crying, I let it all out. He told the soldiers, 'Thank you; thank you so much.' They told him they were just doing their job. My mom was in shock. As we headed home, the scene around us looked like something out of a horror movie."*

### **"I Don't Want to Die"**

At that time, Sara heard her son say:

*"Mommy, I don't want to die here. Mommy, I don't want to die... I want to see Daddy. I don't want to stay here anymore."*

He chokes the words out between sobs. Sara doesn't know what to do. She can't come up with the words to say to him, what to tell him, because she has no idea what is going on in Culiacán. All she knows is that out there, soldiers and cartel gunmen are battling it out, shooting to kill.

*"My eldest son, who understands things better, told me, 'Mom, I don't want to die here. I don't want to die here. Being in here makes me"*

*scared.' And as a parent, how are you supposed to tell them that it's going to be all right, when you have no idea what's going to happen either..."*

Both her children cry. They cry while the battle rages on outside, in a cloud of gunpowder, amidst a hail of bullets. That damn hail of bullets is the defining feature of this day, Thursday, October 17—the day when the Government detained Ovidio Guzmán, and then let him go free again.

The crossfire rages on out there, the stray bullets. The gunmen are out there, and the AK-47s, the 50 calibers, the armored vehicles... As many clichés of the drug trafficking world as there are bullets.

Culiacán is in flames out there, and a cloud of black smoke issues from the smoldering vehicles and rises to the sky. Inside the Bodega Aurrerá store, Sara and her family sit in fearful uncertainty that stretches out into the night.

Once this passes, Culiacán will again have to reinvent itself, attempting to forget the unforgettable.

Forget. That will soon become the key word. Quirino Ordaz Coppel, the Governor of the State of Sinaloa, knows what it means, because a few days later, he will ask the public to turn over a new leaf.

Is it that easy to forget, to turn over a new leaf? Sara says it isn't. She says turning over a new leaf is something that she cannot do. She is now seeing the aftermath of that October 17. Her eldest son, just 10 years old, is unable to set foot inside a Bodega Aurrerá store.

*"My eldest son is terrified of Aurrerá stores. After what happened, we moved to Mazatlán. I decided to take my children there. On a normal day there, we were out doing our shopping, and we went to an Aurrerá store. And my eldest son didn't want to go inside. My children won't set foot inside an Aurrerá store."*

She has also noticed a change in the behavior of her youngest son, age six. She talks about pyrotechnic firecrackers—her youngest son associates them with gunfire.

*"He freaks out. He gets very nervous, he says he doesn't want to go, he doesn't want to, he doesn't want to. They both get panic attacks. My anxiety became severe. It was a very difficult feeling, a very intense one. The Friday after it happened, my cousin packed her bags and left town."*

## **Dreaming About that Cursed Thursday**

Alexia says that sometimes, what she lived through doesn't seem real. She isn't able to process what actually happened. She agrees that she has become very anxious.

A few months afterwards, she was driving to work when she felt the same kind of panic. All of a sudden, the light was green but the cars weren't moving forward. People were honking their horns, and Alexia became frightened.

*"The cars aren't moving... What's going on? I can't see anything! I relived the whole scene."*

She put her car into reverse to escape, and she crashed into the truck behind her. "What's going on, girl?" the truck's driver asked her. "I'm sorry, are you all right?" she said. Everything was all right.

Alexia got back into her car and started crying. Damn it. It happened again.

*"I'm afraid to honk my horn, to gesture toward other drivers. I get terrified when I'm stopped at a red light, waiting for it to change."*

*"For this whole year, I have dreamed about that scene playing out in many parts of Culiacán. I dream that I'm stuck in the middle of a shootout, and I have to hide. I've dreamed about that tons of times. It happens in different places. It's really weird. Sometimes I have a flashback out of nowhere, and I freak out, I get really anxious."*

The company where Alexia works has provided her with psychological counseling to work through her fear.

*"It has helped me, but I have to admit that I'm still very afraid... I feel like I need to go back to the psychologist. I still don't feel entirely well."*

She says that she has gone back to that place where she was caught in the crossfire. The first few times, she refused to go near the place. One time, she was in the car with her father, giving a ride home to a friend who lived in the area. As they drove closer and closer to the location, she became more and more afraid. Her father took the long way around.

Nonetheless, later on she went back and faced the place. Her stomach hurt and she felt nauseous.

*"You know, it's inevitable that I'll feel like a sinking feeling in my chest... Every time I go by there, I get a burning feeling."*

What she feels is that bad vibe that comes when you feel like you're trapped with no way out. Because it's one thing to talk about Them, about the people in charge. But when you see them and feel how nearby they are, you buckle over, you lower your head and become submissive.

The terror that Alexia feels is everyone's terror. This terror that causes one's knees to buckle is brought back to life as the anniversary approaches, casting a dark shadow over the heart of Culiacán.

### **Yes and No**

Sara says that the Government made the right choice... But then again, they didn't. She speaks about the Government's retreat, when they surrendered to the Sinaloa Cartel. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador later justified this withdrawal, under the argument of not putting the population at risk.

*"When the decision was reached (to withdraw the troops) in order to not put the population at risk, so that civilian lives would not be affected, because more than 200 innocent lives would have been lost... And the decision was reached. I gave the orders to stop that operation and let the presumed criminal (Ovidio Guzmán) go free."*

*Sara says that she agrees with this, in part.*

*"You catch him and you don't let him go... And all those you-know-whats are out there, killing people left and right. I'm saying this from the point of view of someone who suffered through what I went through: I wouldn't have liked for the Government to have said, 'We're not going to let him go no matter what, so deal with it.' And then I'd show up on the news later on, as one more person on the list of the deceased... From that point of view, I can't say a thing, I can't go and say 'López Obrador is a stupid you-know-what'... Thanks to that decision, my children and my family and I are safe. A year has gone by since then, and I'm here to tell about it. Imagine what would have happened if they had thrown grenades into that store, where eighty of us or so were inside..."*

*“And yet, I still don’t think it was the best decision. The drug traffickers are just going to keep on doing what they do. What is the only message that was sent here? That the Government can’t take on the drug traffickers. The Government has no say at all in what’s going on.”*



Photo/Héctor Parra

## **THE TWO BLACK THURSDAYS IN CULIACÁN AND THE CHALLENGE TO THE CODES OF URBAN SPACE**

*Iliana del Rocío Padilla Reyes*

It is common for outsiders to construct a narrative, based on myths surrounding drug trafficking, about the alleged normalization of violence in Sinaloa. In addition, this idea is used by public officials to justify their omissions and to draw up hasty interpretations. The reality is that the residents of Sinaloa—and of Culiacán in particular—are not ignorant of the complexity of the situation. Rather, they create strategies that allow them to coexist in the urban spaces, recognizing and coexisting with what we have called “the codes of violence in Culiacán”.<sup>i</sup>

With the high levels of violence that occur, with 40 homicides per month<sup>ii</sup> and 6 people who are disappeared every day, the residents of Culiacán go about their routines with relative confidence—however, this does not mean that they are not

afraid. According to the most recent figures of the National Urban Security Survey (known by the Spanish language acronym ENSU), which is conducted on a quarterly basis by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), 77.8 percent of residents feel unsafe in their city.

A few years ago, I conducted interviews with several people who faced violence on a daily basis in the areas of Culiacán with the highest levels of crime. I saw that a social order has been established in the city, characterized by the creation of codes on the street or in the neighborhood which allow individuals to carry out their routine activities with a certain degree of confidence and tranquility, despite the constant risk posed by violence. Business people, police, criminals, and other residents of the city share these codes. *Culichis* (colloquial term for residents of Culiacán) are aware of the complexity of the various types of violence, and some of them participate in it as well. The networks of involvement and complicity in crime, which are extended through connections of convenience, family ties, friendship, solidarity, and fear as well, give rise to unwritten codes of behavior: where not to go, what not to talk about, how to interact with others, and when to look the other way.

These codes keep daily life in the city working in spite of the violence, but on occasion they are disrupted. This occurred, in particular, on two Thursdays that are recalled, in the recent history of Culiacán, as moments when, for a few hours or even days, organized crime broke with the established order and was tolerated (but not normalized) as it terrorized the population in public spaces, suddenly increasing the level of the already well-known and accepted insecurity.

### **The First Black Thursday**

The first Thursday referenced herein occurred in May 2008. Residents of the city heard the blast of a bazooka and 500 shots fired from the AK-47 that ended the life of Édgar Guzmán López, the son of Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, in the parking area of a shopping mall in one of the busiest areas. That Black Thursday remains in the collective memory because we *culichis* had to take cover inside our houses, due to the constant threats that were made on social media, and the rumors that a war had begun which would take place in different public spaces.

People spent that weekend sharing messages and recordings via digital media in which unidentified individuals warned the population to not leave their houses, because they would be setting off bombs on the streets and in shopping malls.

In an account that he wrote for the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, journalist Javier Valdéz described the events:

*“Streets shut down, helicopters flying overhead, soldiers and police everywhere, on every corner. Nobody honks at other drivers, and certainly doesn’t curse them out. People are very afraid. At every traffic light, people glance at the other drivers out of the corner of their eyes. If they see a pickup truck, they don’t move until the truck leaves.”<sup>iii</sup>*

The city went silent, but for the noise of bullets and the alert messages that did not stop coming in. Merchants shut up their shops in the middle of the Mother’s Day celebrations—observed on May 10 in Mexico—and the shopping malls remained empty.

The war between two groups—on one side, the Beltrán Leyva group, and the group of Zambada and Guzmán on the other—created an atmosphere of uncertainty in the city, one that was exacerbated even more so by the threats that were made against the population. The Culiacán-Navolato military operation was the subsequent punitive response that increased the violence. Sinaloa experienced clashes between the two groups, and also with government forces.

In Culiacán, there are still many wounds and marks left by that first Black Thursday, when terror and threats against uninvolved civilians disrupted the social order of chronic violence, that order that consisted of unwritten agreements and tolerable levels of insecurity. One of these marks left on the city, evoking what occurred during those days, was the nearly two meter-high cenotaph that the Guzmán family built in the parking area of the shopping mall, which can also be seen from the street, because they often decorate it ostentatiously to attract the attention of passersby.

The youngest residents of the city identify the cenotaph of Edgard Guzmán as “the monument to El Chapito”; this is how they refer to it when they play the video game in which they hunt for Pokemon with their cell phones in real spaces. “Look, mom, there’s a Pikachu on the ‘monument to El Chapito,’” my son tells me, although when the murders and threats were taking place, he was still in my womb.

### **The Second Black Thursday**

The second Black Thursday—the more recent one—terrorized the city on October 17. *Culichis* recall it as the day in 2019 when people who were “in bad company” (young people involved with drug trafficking and their admirers) took to the streets to spread terror. They set up checkpoints in a perimeter surrounding the city, they fired guns and grenades to frighten spectators, and to threaten or attack the police and the armed forces. People who found themselves in public spaces ran to take cover inside offices and commercial establishments, in order to avoid falling victim to the

crossfire, and they stayed there for the rest of the afternoon—some of them even remained there all night.

Within a couple hours, the streets were nearly empty. Some people peeked out their windows and balconies to record the barbarism with their cell phones, and to watch the armed men taking control of the streets. The right to occupy the city had been eliminated for everyone except them, and now they were seen firing their guns to the beat of their *narcocorrido* music, shouting, driving around at breakneck speed, and later on, when it was assumed that Ovidio Guzmán had been set free, they were seen celebrating, setting cars on fire, throwing empty bottles into the air, and holding drag races in a state of total chaos.

During those hours when the urban space was violently taken over in an improvised fashion, the unwritten codes were ignored. The understood agreements had been defied, and those who were on the streets, or watching from their windows, witnessed, in shock, the siege of their city. The habitual fear now turned into uncertainty, and the information obtained from the media was scarce in comparison with what was circulating on social media: audio messages with warnings, messages with alleged detailed explanations regarding the arrest of two of “El Chapo’s” sons, explicit photographs of the victims of the clashes, and also wartime images (although they were not from that place and time).

The Secretary of Public Safety of the State of Sinaloa stated, in a meeting with activists and the media, that on that day, “the people of Sinaloa saw the true face of drug trafficking.” In my opinion, we Sinaloans are familiar with the various faces of drug trafficking in our state. What they had not seen—and this is the reason for the shocked reaction—was the betrayal of a tacitly agreed upon order that had made it possible for the various social actors to coexist in the same urban space. Those who terrorized the streets, to quote Arendt, were not unknown monsters, but rather “men who were efficient at the tasks entrusted to them.”<sup>iv</sup>

According to the testimonies and interviews that journalist friends of mine wrote, some of those young people who we saw on the videos that were shared on social media had been recruited and armed on that very afternoon. In this way, “El Chapo’s” people showed that their operational structure can be extended, at any given moment, to include sympathizers who are not a regular part of drug trafficking groups, but who appear to be quite numerous.

On the following day, in a press conference with the Security Cabinet in Sinaloa, the National Secretary of Public Safety, Alfonso Durazo, recognized that they had not

predicted the scene that would result from the poorly-planned strategy to arrest Ovidio Guzmán. They did not foresee it from the center of the country, despite the history: the ambush launched on soldiers in 2019, in the very city of Culiacán, and the violence following the murder of Edgar Guzmán during the war between the two groups in 2008. They forgot, or—even worse—they were unaware of the fact that, in cities like Culiacán, where the active parties of drug trafficking establish networks of coercion and complicity, social order is largely shaped by those who have the upper hand of power.

Although the President of Mexico has called, before the media, for a redirectioning of the bilateral policy of fighting drug trafficking—seeking for the United States to also recognize its own active role as the main consumer of drugs and provider of weapons—in practice, beyond the level of discourse, security strategies continue to focus on capturing the heads of a massive hydra that puts out dozens of new tentacles every day. A year after the second Black Thursday, the policy of “hugs, not bullets” continues with all its contradictions, lack of clarity, confused instruments, and scarce resources. There are no specific diagnostic tools—or, at least, there is no knowledge of them—and the National Guard has had poor results.

The murder rate has gone down in Culiacán, but reports of forced disappearances have gone up. Following the difficult event, in which the established order was betrayed, the codes of violence were redefined, and although the perception of insecurity grew, the city’s residents went back to their routines. Those who consider themselves “the good guys” went back to coexisting with well-known levels of violence, in which young people are disappeared and murdered, but people are not engaged in full-blown shootouts on the streets. The chronic, tolerated kinds of violence are back, but with one constant factor: the fear that, at any moment, that order may vanish all over again.

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<sup>i</sup> Padilla, I., and Botello, N. A. (2019). Códigos de la violencia en espacios económicos en Culiacán, Sinaloa, México. [Codes of violence in commercial spaces in Culiacán, Sinaloa, Mexico.] *Papers: revista de sociología* [Papers: Journal of Sociology], 104(1), 25-45.

<sup>ii</sup> Data on homicides for each month of 2020, “Crime Indicator of Sinaloa,” with figures from the Attorney General’s Office of Sinaloa.

<sup>iii</sup> Valdez Cárdenas Javier and Gustavo Castillo. (May 14, 2008). “El ejército ocupa Culiacán y Navolato, en un intento por abatir ola de violencia” [The army occupies Culiacán and Navolato, in an

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attempt to abate the wave of violence.] *La Jornada*, Politics section. Available online: <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2008/05/14/index.php?section=politica&article=012n1pol>

<sup>iv</sup> Arendt, H., y Kroh, J. (1964). *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. New York: Viking.



Photo/Héctor Parra

## **CARTEL, CULTURE, AND CITY: THE CONTEXT OF FAILED POLICY**

*Juan Carlos Ayala Barrón*

The events of October 17, 2019 which rocked the city of Culiacán were, perhaps, the most indelible framework in a year in which violence appeared to be knocking the government down. However, beyond changing the perceptions of the public with regard to national security and organized crime, a reaffirmation was made, therein, of what had been a part of the daily zeitgeist for decades already: the strength of criminal groups, the complicity of the local authorities, the corruption that existed between the two, the civil connections, the social support for the criminal groups involved in drug trafficking, and the configuration of a culture around drug trafficking which is now referred to as “narco-culture.”

Nonetheless, the events of that day were not isolated ones. They occurred in an historical, social, cultural, and economic context which has been built up in this region across the past several decades.

Beginning in the 1940s, the farming of mind-altering substances such as poppies and marijuana proliferated. This activity spread across a great part of the territory of the state of Sinaloa. Closed relationships of identity were built around it, primarily based in family units and communities, as the illegal nature of the activity itself required this.

By the 1970s, the trafficking of drugs had spread into most of the state, bringing with it the creation of certain cultural constructs based around the groups who performed this work; in other words, a very specific nucleus of identity was emerging, which appeared in various fields of Sinaloa's culture, such as music, mannerisms, architecture (both of residences and cemeteries), along with a form of specific religious faith, as the figure of Malverde (the "generous bandit" of the early 20th century) had been adopted, beginning in the 1970s, as the patron saint of drug traffickers.

Massive, unusual homes were owned by drug traffickers, set apart from the rest of the population by their enormous size. A cemetery appeared in the Jardines del Humaya graveyard, to the south of the city, with graves built like grandiose mausoleums, including kitchenette, bathrooms, bedrooms, and air-conditioned living rooms, equipped with video surveillance systems.

Singers and musical groups emerged who dedicated their lyrics and music to the achievements and deaths of well-known figures in the world of drug trafficking in Sinaloa. Some examples of these include Chalino Sánchez, Los Tigres del Norte, Los Tucanes de Tijuana, and more recently, Movimiento Alterado, which brings thirty musicians together just to sing songs to the Sinaloa Cartel.

What occurred in the world of criminal subculture was reproduced among the youth of Culiacán as well, as many of them had the same tastes, fashion, luxuries, and lifestyles, even if they were not involved in drug trafficking. Many of them also boasted about the drug traffickers' style of violence.

As a result, a form of culture developed which was connected to drug trafficking and was very deeply-rooted among the youth, permeating all of the social spheres of our state.

As if this were not enough, for some time now an animosity toward federal forces has been observed, due to the fact that for decades now, the military has launched

incursions in communities and has perpetrated countless abuses, plunders, arrests, and executions, which have established the military, in the collective memory, as an institution that violates human rights.

In order to explain, a bit, this discontent with our national security forces, we must recall that the military's actions against drug trafficking throughout the 1970s and subsequently, were brutal in terms of the physical damages inflicted upon the residents of Sinaloa's rural communities, bringing about discontent among the members of said communities, who were linked to each other not only by friendship, but by blood as well. They became communities that were on the defensive, but even so, they still continued to preserve their open and frank nature, although many of them modified forms and mechanisms aimed toward the production and trafficking of narcotics, with more discrete disruptive practices. In this way, the disrepute of the State as a regulatory institution progressed proportionally in relation to the strengthening of criminal groups in the state. This activity of the informal economy, as any source of work, produced a significant economic apportionment and a broad network of family and community complicity, supported by the social and cultural ties among the population.

In this context, it is not difficult to understand the gleeful admiration shown toward the posture of those gunmen who defended Ovidio Guzmán on October 17. Although the people of Culiacán were seized by panic for a few hours, social media then accumulated countless critiques of the federal government. The idea of a poorly-planned operation filled the minds of the people, one with deficient military personnel for an action of this nature, as it involved one of the leaders of the still-powerful Sinaloa Cartel.

The operation provoked an immediate reaction among hundreds of young gunmen who were associated with this group. While official figures referred to eight hundred of them, in reality there were many more. Evidence uploaded at the time of the events showed an uncertain number of additional young people who were waiting for orders to come in from the north or south of the state to the site of the events, or to block highways or access points—including the airport, if necessary.

For many people, the battle had been won, quite literally, as they came to see this operation as a clash between the military and "our people"—the Sinaloa Cartel's people. In fact, the young people involved were residents of the marginal neighborhoods of the city, and of surrounding towns, whose families represented a community link shared by many of us.

It is thus no accident that, at least as concerns the young people involved with organized crime, they viewed the events of October 17 as a great blow struck against

the system that had so broadly criminalized them, to the point of imprisoning their highest leader, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, with a life sentence. The phrase aimed at intimidating the system was spread in a matter of minutes: “Sinaloa will burn, Sonora and many other states will burn if you don’t let him go.” It was a challenge that brought immediate results: within four hours, they had managed to free the detained individual. The military and the federal government were quickly discredited.

These events suggest several points:

**First.** The context in which drug trafficking activity has taken place for years was shown: a narco-culture which provides for the contentment and complicity of a significant part of Sinaloan society, through drug trafficking and the profits derived therefrom. This also shows something that was obvious to many Sinaloans: if this phenomenon exists in a deeply rooted way, it is due to the fact that drug trafficking makes up a part of the daily life of our communities, and it comes to represent a great source of benefits and protection for many people, providing them with resources and benefits which the government should be providing to them. This is significant, as it should be stated that, almost in entirety, the young gunmen are of local, Sinaloan roots, which makes it possible to speak of a closeness between them and the population based on family, friendship, and community. On several occasions, they are protected and hidden from any pursuers. They are not turned in, for two main reasons: because people know them, or simply because they are known to be a part of the community that brings aid.

It is estimated that over 150,000 Sinaloans have some direct relationship with drug trafficking and with drug traffickers. For this reason, we can imagine the dimensions of the moral framework in which the phenomenon develops and how, based on this, it also structures its own identity, the characteristics and meanings of which leave their mark on the collective consciousness of Sinaloans.

**Second.** The leaders of drug trafficking in Sinaloa are assumed to be the great alternative authority in Sinaloa, with a strategy of control, expansion, and consolidation throughout nearly all the state’s territory, with lookout people, drug distributors, laboratories, fields of crops, control of jails, and communities where there is practically no military power capable of counteracting them.

**Third.** An operational capacity for deploying the armed forces of the Sinaloa Cartel, and the frequent use of networks, to quickly disseminate the strategies for defense and attack among its members.

**Fourth.** The Sinaloa Cartel's armed response to the operation on October 17 represented an additional warning, in demonstrating their capacity of responding to any incursion into the state, be it by military forces or by any other cartel in the nation. The demonstration of their firepower given by the criminal organization of Sinaloa on that day, against the military, would serve to show any outside criminal group what they would be up against, in the event that they should attempt to seize control of this territory.

**Fifth.** The capacity and efficacy of digital media was demonstrated for disseminating video recordings and photographs, as well as messages and audio recordings that were posted on social media and circulated immediately, in real time, showing their power as a vehicle of information with a high social impact.

Following this framework of interconnected implications and complications surrounding the events of a day that rocked the nation, the cultural and ethical motivations of the same stand out on their own. There can be no effective strategy, when a significant sector of the population meets a great deal of their needs through illegal activity, when the companies of various areas obtain high income and, on occasion, live from it, and when a simulation exists of actions from the public sphere against lawbreakers.

The alarming wave of executions related to organized crime over the past decades demonstrates the loss of the ethics in the lives of many Sinaloans, but also the increasingly unstructured of the public sector, established in a history of social discontent, of longstanding corruption, and above all, of recurring extreme poverty that functions as fertile soil for illegal activity.

Drug trafficking has created its own devices to enter into various areas of life in Sinaloa, achieving supporters, incorporating itself into the regular economy through money laundering, creating mechanisms of identity, and also creating its own distinctive signs of identity, which have been then incorporated into the traditional, legitimate culture which it *permeates*. We are currently suffering from the risk, in our culture, of being unable to clearly delimit the boundaries of identity in the collective imagination, which include those that correspond to drug trafficking.



## OCTOBER 17 AS EVIDENCE OF RESTRAINT

*Cecilia Farfán-Méndez*

As if the complexities of transnational criminal activities rested solely on one man's destiny, the extradition of Joaquín Guzmán a.k.a "El Chapo" prompted speculation about the weakening and potential disappearance of the Sinaloa criminal group. For some, the extradition and subsequent trial marked the end of an era and the eclipse of what had been seen as Mexico's most powerful 'cartel.' For others it was the beginning of another wave of violence in the rush to fill the vacuum Guzman's absence created.

Evidence against these conjectures was perhaps never as strong as on October 17, 2019. The criminal group effectively deterred the arrest, and potential removal from Sinaloa, of Ovidio Guzmán and in doing so, reignited debates about the power of the criminal group once left for dead. Discussions of what the group's high-powered operation meant, however, cannot solely focus on firepower. The image of an M2 machine gun mounted on the back of a truck should not obscure that the

deployment evidenced long-standing ties and loyalties ready to be mobilized in a context where state actors, rather than alleged criminals, are the ones seen as perpetrators of violence. For some in Culiacán, as Juan Carlos Ayala notes in this collection, the good ones “won” that day.

Paradoxically, the deployment also underscored the need to study the strategic use of violence by criminal groups. By unleashing the force they did on October 17, the Sinaloa organization reminded *non-sinaloenses*, of the firepower capacity they possess and, more importantly, the selectiveness with which they use it. The day left no doubt: while the group possesses the material capacity to inflict serious damage on the general population, it nevertheless chooses to exercise restraint. Examining the motivations for such behavior requires some conceptual clarification. When discussing the Sinaloa organization, I do not refer to a group led by a kingpin or assume there is only one leader.

Furthermore, I do not imply the organization is a monolith and that members always act in the interest of the group. However, my discussion of the Sinaloa criminal organization entails managerial levels and assumes that the incentives that exist for the top echelons are not necessarily available for lower ranking members of the group. Criminal activity, then, and the violence associated with it, defies easy categorization.

### **The Myth of Compulsory Criminal Diversification**

Media portrayals of gangsters feed the myth that all criminal activities are compatible, and that all criminal groups will seek to diversify. This idea has been particularly prevalent in Mexico where changes in U.S. drug markets are used as explanations for the diversification of criminal activities. Purportedly, a decreased demand for cocaine in the U.S. *caused* drug trafficking groups to become extortionists and kidnapers who fought over increasingly shrinking profits. From the official discourse, the narrative explained the behavior of a long-standing group such as Sinaloa as well as more recent organizations like the Zetas.

The problem with this alleged causal mechanism is that it assumes that criminal groups want and can succeed at any given criminal activity simply by virtue of being outlaws. Extortion and kidnapping require public displays of violence in order to issue credible threats: either you pay for “protection” or there will be consequences. Targets are not other criminals but the general population. In contrast, transnational drug trafficking requires interacting with other criminals and covertness is paramount. Violence may be exerted but does not demand publicity. The credible threats are not for the population at large but for those found in breach of contracts.

Using violence selectively is not altruism but the result of a business model focused primarily on drug trafficking. This does not mean, that criminal groups involved with drug trafficking are never involved with criminal activities that are predatory towards non-criminals. Specially, when we consider that criminal groups are not monoliths and members may shirk. But the assumptions that all criminal activities are compatible and that all criminal groups can and want to diversify obscure our understanding of when and against who, violence is used. This is particularly important because as Le Cour Grandmason notes, criminal groups do not evolve as formal oppositions to the state and “can build social order amidst, through, and in spite of violence”.

### **The Stealthy Take Over of January 25**

What October 17 did not suggest was that the Sinaloa organization relies on violence to control public space. Three months later, another child of Joaquín Guzmán, his daughter Alejandrina Gisselle, took over downtown. This time there were no assault weapons. Her wedding in the city’s cathedral included photos of the bride and groom, some videos of the event circulated on social media, and articles appeared in major Mexican and foreign newspapers. Curiosity about the wedding was further piqued by reports that the groom is related to a known money launderer for the Sinaloa organization.

The wedding, just a few months later after *Jueves Negro*, was a useful reminder of how top members of the Sinaloa organization operate in their home state. In many ways, October 17 was the anomaly whereas January 25 is the norm. Streets downtown were closed, the Catholic church confirmed there was a wedding at the cathedral but refused to provide more details, the photos and videos on social media were not paparazzi snaps but shared by the hosts, and guests—including Ovidio—came and went undisturbed.

Onlookers knew not to transgress the event even if they were initially unsure about the identities of the bride and groom. Closed streets were the message. To occupy public space did not involve automatic weapons but rather a set of understandings and a perception that violence is not used indiscriminately, but rather as one of a collection of tools with which power is forged.

Data from the annual victimization survey (ENVIPE per its Spanish acronym) lend support for this assertion. According to the most recent ENVIPE, in Sinaloa 64.6 percent of the population believe living in their state is unsafe compare to the national average of 78.9 percent. More importantly, whereas in the last decade (since data are collected) perceptions of insecurity in the country have steadily grown, in

Sinaloa they have decreased. *Sinaloenses* feel safer today in their state than they did in 2011.<sup>vi</sup>

This contrast is even greater if we look at data at the municipal and neighborhood levels. Whereas 70 and 50.6 percent of Mexicans feel unsafe in their municipality and neighborhoods respectively, only 55.8 and 29.4 percent of inhabitants of Sinaloa do so. These numbers suggest not the normalization of violence, but a complex coexistence with it, and the codes and coping mechanisms that Iliana Padilla explains in her contribution to this collection.

### **The Value of Thinking of Violence as Strategic**

The events of October 17 are illuminating primarily as a paradox: the extreme violence of *Jueves Negro* reveals the restraint and selectiveness with which *public* violence is typically exercised, and the silence that surrounds more invisible forms. By thinking of the strategic use of violence by criminal groups we can develop a greater understanding of the different types of victimization citizens in Mexico face and in the varying strategies developed to exist in contexts of chronic violence. Additionally, it demystifies criminal groups and helps us think of criminal diversification as a process contingent on several conditions rather than an automatic course of action for all groups.

To do so does not require attributing excessive rationality to criminal groups and assuming that every decision is a textbook case of cost-benefit analysis. Yet, anecdotal evidence shows the Sinaloa group attempted to suppress the distribution of a *corrido* glorifying the events of October 17. This suggests not only that the organization may want to downplay its military capabilities, but that it also understands the panic the day's events caused among the population, and the repercussions of such negative publicity. In this, at least, criminal and official interests seem to have overlapped. Even if some think of October 17 as the day the Sinaloa organization won, it should not surprise us if they are not eager to have a repeat.

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[https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/envipe/2019/doc/envipe2019\\_presentacion\\_nacional.pdf](https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/programas/envipe/2019/doc/envipe2019_presentacion_nacional.pdf)



Photo/Héctor Parra

## **PHOTOGRAPHY, VIOLENCE, AND THE EXPOSURE OF AN OPEN SECRET**

*Héctor Parra*

In the various, interconnected contexts of this intricately globalized, mediatized 21st century, the way in which secrets are created, kept, and broken continues to be of vital importance for both the field of social sciences and public opinion in general.

The act of photographing has accompanied the development of societies since the early modern period. In its multiple forms of application, it has been the instrument par excellence to record the various faces of human development. Images testify to cultural diversity and daily interactions, conflicts and peace, and—inasmuch as they provide us with sensitive information regarding human activity—they act as a source of knowledge.

Black Thursday caught most of us by surprise. What began as an ordinary Thursday in the city of Culiacán would become a source of shock. Information circulated through various channels. Those in the halls of the Federal Government knew that something was about to occur while, on the broad streets of our city, it looked to be just another day. Much has already been said and analyzed about the sequence of events that followed, and the recordkeeping of them following the conflict.

On a symbolic level, a shattering event took place, breaking the surface tension of our placid, daily calm that keeps our public secrets under wraps, hidden behind our ability to pretend, which we have acquired in order to go on with our activities in peace. There are facts that we are not aware of, hidden relationships, secrets that—in the context of institutional corruption—make it more dangerous to know what should not be known.

In the deep recesses, secrets acquire symbolic forms that create terror for those who dare to inhabit that shattering event. The mechanisms of violence in these cases seek to create fear—fear of telling the truth, fear of knowing it—and lead to the configuration of a public secret. We may all know “who did it,” but it is more valuable for us to know that this is something we shouldn’t know. This is a strategy of self-preservation in the face of tragic events.

On Black Thursday, our secret was exposed. The superficial facade was torn to shreds, and rumors took on an objective form. At certain moments, we saw the power and size of the monster whose existence was well-known, and yet, many of us were unaware of its dimensions or what it was capable of doing.

In rising to the surface, the truth tore reality to shreds. In the end, it was a reality that walks, one that drives in motor vehicles down every corner of the city. The secret of our fragility was weakened, and we saw that the State did not have the only monopoly on violence. For quite some time now, it has also been in the hands of a different form of opposition, one veiled, existing in secret.



## HOW DID CULIACAN CHANGE AFTER OCTOBER 17?

### THE WOUND IS STILL OPEN

*Josué David Piña y Marcos Vizcarra.*

The walls have now been patched up. There is nothing left on the streets but dust; customers are ready to go back into restaurants, the City Club wholesale store is full, and the news reporters are now talking about any other topic, anything other than the idea that the threat, the pain, and the anguish are still there, latent.

The reporters for the world's main newspapers and television programs came here in search of the exclusive story: Why was Ovidio Guzmán López released, the son of Joaquín Guzmán Loera, "El Chapo," the most famous drug trafficker of Mexico, a member of the Sinaloa Cartel?

Most of them arrived late. By October 19, two days after the most impactful criminal event in the history of Sinaloa, attention was no longer focused on it.

*"-Why does nobody want to talk about this?"* - This was the question asked by Íñigo Herráiz, a Spanish Television journalist sent to document the history of the event being referred to as the "*Culiacanzo*" by national security analysts on television and radio programs based outside of Sinaloa.

Ten different officials posed for his cameras, speaking to him about working to prevent a similar attack, prepared to take action if necessary.

While this occurred, the Governor of Sinaloa, Quirino Ordaz Coppel, met with business people, politicians, deans and presidents of universities, civil society organizations, and the owners of media outlets, with one sole goal: to try to change the conversation about Sinaloa.

And he succeeded.

*"After that day, we said, 'Oh, damn, who are the good guys and who are the bad guys,'"* states activist Dante Aguilera, *"and I do feel like it lasted fifteen days, a month, maybe a little more. Even people who follow this type of movement, I feel like they felt attacked. But we quickly forgot about it, unfortunately."*

*"It was even the government's narrative, even talking with the media to have some type of collective negotiation, to say 'What's done is done' and we need to move on from it."*

### **"I started seeing a bunch of dead people"**

*By the time things more or less calmed down, it was about five o'clock, and the store's owners were telling us that we had to leave, because if more people showed up and we were stuck spending the night in there, things would be more complicated.*

*The people wanted to leave and they walked toward the City Club, but they realized that there was a cordon of soldiers there, and the soldiers themselves started pointing at the people. They told them, 'You can't come through here, go back.'*

*I just heard that, because I didn't want to come out of the bathroom, that's where I was. There were some people who were saying that they had tried to pass through the stadium, but the other guys were in there, the bad guys.*

*We couldn't move in one direction or another.*

*The men wanted to close up the shop, because they wanted to leave no matter what, until another person showed up and said that they were letting people go through the stadium, so then I called my husband and told him that was what I was going to do, I couldn't stay there.*

*There was a crowd of people walking, running. I started to see a bunch of dead people, people who had just opened up their car doors and they were lying there... People who had lost their lives, even though they didn't deserve it or expect it.*

*I felt like I was inside a video game..."*

- Mitzy, woman caught in the crossfire between criminal groups and soldiers in the area of Tres Ríos, two blocks from the home of Ovidio Guzmán López, where he was detained.

The local and federal authorities sustain that fifteen people died from the shooting that day, including three innocent victims in the neighborhood of Tres Ríos, Ground Zero for the events of October 17, 2019.

Nonetheless, there are witnesses who state that they could count dozens of dead people.

On that day, vehicle thefts occurred. According to the authorities, there were more than 50 of them. Of those, at least 20 were set on fire in various points around the city, to blockade streets and highways.

The facades of businesses, homes, and public buildings were defaced, but nearly everything was repaired in less than three days.

### **The Style of a New Generation**

Dozens of videos made the rounds of cell phones, computers, and news broadcasts. Women were seen praying, men asking their children to lie on the ground, police carrying people to safety, and armed men on trucks with more weapons aboard.

The show of power, of the physical and social control of territory, was made clear to the expectant public.

*"I think that civil society and the local government found themselves in the middle of a huge surprise, given the events that were taking place. We never imagined that they would unleash that amount of terror on the public,"* states Tomás Guevara

Martínez, Doctor of Social Sciences and member of the Department of Psychology of the Autonomous University of Sinaloa.

The dose of reality opened up a new perspective on criminal groups in the state. People stopped viewing the Sinaloa Cartel as a savior or protector, Guevara Martínez adds.

*"I am certain that most Sinaloans, being familiar with the situation in the state, were surely thinking, 'That would never happen in Sinaloa'... Setting things on fire and shutting down the points of entry and exit for the city, firing on homes, as happens now in other states,"* he states.

What occurred on October 17, 2019 was a watershed moment, with regard to the official narrative and the idyllic impression of society, based on the image created by the members of the group known as the "Sinaloa Cartel" themselves.

*"The cordial relationship that had existed between civil society and the Cartel was undermined. It didn't break, but it suffered serious cracks. I think that a significant part of civil society took the path of saying, 'We don't need this group in Sinaloa anymore,'"* states the sociologist. However, he also called for analytical thinking regarding the current context.

In the opinion of the researcher, who is a member of the Observatory of Violence in Sinaloa, **there is an historic reasoning to understanding the behavior that was witnessed that day, in order to try to free the son of Joaquín Guzmán Loera.**

He explains that this behavior must be understood in the context of generational change, where the old criminals created the image of being kind-hearted individuals, defenders of their territory, while the new bosses are the children or grandchildren who have been put in charge of the inherited business.

*"They grew up in luxury,"* Guevara Martínez states. He then refers to different events, such as the wedding of one of Guzmán Loera's daughters, just four months after the event that paralyzed Culiacán.

For the wedding, orders were given to close the Cathedral of Culiacán to the public. A private protection operation was set up, used from there to the event hall in a luxurious neighborhood in eastern Culiacán, where actors had been contracted to perform live.

**This behavior was the key to making the public reflect on things. First, they saw the horror; then they saw the remorseless ostentation.** This especially occurred with women and young men.

*“Young men changed their position. Young men now saw themselves as victims, they saw themselves as vulnerable individuals, and they saw themselves as objects of exchange, they saw themselves as people who could lose their life at any moment, as a result of an event that was out of their control,”* states César Burgos Dávila, Doctor of Social Psychology.

Nonetheless, that path of reflection was harmed—not by criminal groups, but by the authorities.

*“I really remember that, after October 17, a few days after it happened, there was this insistence, a political message at different levels, saying that it was all in the past, that we had to get back to normal. They even said that—I don’t recall if it was Quirino, who said that he had already gone to Costco, and **people had already forgotten about those violent events**, and that Culiacán was now very safe, because who knows how many soldiers had arrived from the Army and the National Guard,”* states the full-time researcher with the Autonomous University of Sinaloa.

*“The political message was practically saying that we had to forget about it, and they invited us to believe that the State of Sinaloa was a resilient state, and we would ‘move forward.’”*

The men, women, girls, and elderly people who were caught in the middle of that maelstrom of violence were left in fear. Nobody approached them to stand with them, but only to ask them to “Move forward.”

*“The problem is that it seems like there were two fronts: one of them, between the cells of the criminal groups themselves, and the other, the supposed action of government authorities fighting against them. However, in both scenario A and B, there is always a civilian population that is the victim of these events,”* Burgos Dávila states.

### **“A lot of people moved away from here”**

*It was something surprising, because we weren’t expecting the gunfire. We have lived here for quite some time, and that had never happened. We were not prepared for that; we were alone.*

*There was fear, all of us were afraid. We locked ourselves inside immediately. I went into the kitchen, because it was a safer place, even though we asked ourselves what was going on.*

*There were apartments that they went into because they were looking for soldiers, and we were frightened, and they were shooting at cars. Our family, our children, we were all afraid.*

*It lasted a long time... Well, we felt like it lasted a long time, like an hour. When everything calmed down, I went out to see what was going on.*

*Thank God nobody died, but we were afraid. A lot of people asked to move, they moved away from here with fear in their hearts because of everything that was happening."*

- Candelaria, resident of the "21 de marzo" military residence complex

According to the account of the federal authorities, the criminal groups who were seeking to release Ovidio Guzmán López made various threats, among which they threatened to attack the families of the military personnel living in the "21 de marzo" residential complex in Culiacán.

The warning included the mention of using grenade launchers and possibly setting fire to the gas pipes surrounding the apartment buildings.

At least 80 military families left for other residential centers, or moved out of the state, out of fear of a similar event taking place again.

### **Amnesia or Resilience?**

The only truth that is accepted by everyone in the country is that which has been admitted by Alfonso Durazo, the Secretary of Public Safety and Citizen Protection of Mexico: **the operation to capture Ovidio Guzmán López was a failure. Period.**

The criminal groups who took action to release him were familiar with the local territory, an advantage they held over the authorities who, clinging to their perspective, did not know what actions to take, according to the Sinaloan sociologist and essayist, Ronaldo González Valdés.

*"There is a sort of 'uncharted territory,' a blind spot, not specific to this particular federal administration, but one that exists, in general, for all levels of government. Local matters appear to be an unknown dimension where they move through, feeling in the dark, or an area that is simply omitted from all consideration, not only from public policy, which translates into the way that the operation was carried out that day," he says. He later provides an example:*

*"That can also be seen in the way that many media work and broadcast. For instance, when someone comes to Culiacán from the national press, or from other parts of the world, they come here with a bit of that stereotypical idea, that morbid curiosity, of wanting to go see Malverde or go to the cemeteries."*

This all follows the rationale, according to González Valdés, of the fact that public policies governing matters of public security give little consideration to the local level, their social conflicts, despite the fact that social fabric can be created starting at the local level.

*"What happens there is particularly important for any public policy, and especially for matters of security,"* he states.

However, this way of dealing with local affairs is not exclusively something the authorities do. González Valdés believes that there is an easily observable stereotype, held by those who were not born in Sinaloa, that is based on the construction of violence and criminal authoritarianism as common actions, which is reflected in television series, journalistic accounts, and novels by authors who found this to be a profitable source of income.

The violence that was experienced on October 17, 2019, although it was unprecedented in the form in which it was exercised by the "Sinaloa Cartel" criminal organization against the population of Sinaloa, has an historical context which has been seldom analyzed outside of academia, which now has another level of nuance that requires analysis.

*"I believe that the public of Culiacán, the culichis [term for Culiacán residents], has changed, but the change cannot be that drastic following an event of this nature,"* he states.

**The sociologist states that, according to the terms of social psychology, this change can be measured in three instances.**

**The first** is the immediate trauma, regarding which a group of social actors was superimposed, who expressed the need for change.

*"There was an interesting, constructive, immediate reaction, which has to do with the resilience that we Culiacán residents were not even aware was a part of our own collective personality,"* González Valdés recalls in referring to the group named **"Culiacán Valiente."**

*“The large march that was held shortly afterwards, to show a decisive choice to move forward, to show opposition which was also related with a public decision that was reached, which translated into that operation which put us lives at risk.”*

**The second instance**, according to the Sinaloan essayist, lies in how the collective psyche was affected, which translates into the reactions that all of us have had or experienced.

*“For instance, I recall that in December we were getting ready to start our second session of a seminar, and after I came back from work, I saw that the streets were empty. Then I started checking social media, and I saw messages about supposed clashes between two groups. The schools were the first places to empty out that day. I mean, just think, we’re talking about over a month after October 17, and that was still going on,”* he states.

The event that he refers to occurred on December 3, 2019, just a month and a half after Guzmán López was captured and then released.

On social media, videos and audio recordings were shared that narrated a similar threat to that of October 17. This immediately caused such horror that work and classes were suspended at the Autonomous University of Sinaloa.

The chaos was back, and the police were headed toward the northern end of the city in caravans of trucks, to an area where reports were made of a mobilization of armed men aboard trucks.

The Secretariat of Public Safety later classified this as a false report, but it was enough to show the collective psychosis.

*“We are talking about a situation of psychosis that remains crystallized in there, like a snail inside the personality of each one of us who went through such a traumatic experience,”* he ensures.

**The third social reaction** analyzed by the sociologist is based on the official narrative.

*“This narrative of saying ‘Nothing happened here,’ beginning on the day immediately following the event. It’s perfectly understandable, but you can’t just say ‘Let’s start with a clean slate,’ from a government position. These are things that happened, and if they keep acting in the same way, they may happen again.”*

That could be seen beginning on October 18, when people started cleaning the streets. The bodies that had been lying on them were being collected by the

authorities, and the facades of the homes and businesses in the Tres Ríos neighborhood were being repaired.

After a very short time, the official narrative was no different. The event was not discussed in universities, or in the Chamber of Deputies or in the local media. They all heeded the call to speak positively about Sinaloa, to throw their weight behind denial, and to try to forget the pain of that wound that never healed.



Photo/Héctor Parra

## **PRECEDENT, RUPTURE, AND MEMORIA AMID MEXICO'S VIOLENCE**

*Michael Lettieri*

On October 18, Culiacán's residents hesitantly emerged from their shelters in homes and businesses. As they did, they confronted not just the memory of violence, but the question of what the events had meant. Nine days later, a peace march streamed down one of the city's main roads to a protest in a central park. It was a display of resistance to frequent characterizations of the city as a place of ineradicable criminality, but the march, like the violence, left much unresolved. What did it mean to be a survivor, not just of *Jueves Negro*, but of the city's constant atmosphere of fear?

Much of this dossier has been concerned with the question of whether October 17 did, as so many analysts affirmed in the moment, represent a precedent? And if so, what was that precedent? The question is essential, from an interpretive standpoint:

so many of the “precedent-setting” events in Mexico’s drug war had implications that were rarely predictable, and often imperceptible. In revisiting the events of October 17, our goal was not to fix that *Jueves Negro* as an indicator of a worsening security situation, but rather to suggest that we must look below the surface, and past faint ripple effects, if we are to understand what happened. And in many ways, the events defy understanding. It is still uncertain what the day meant, both for those who experienced it, and those attempting to analyze it from afar. Two conclusions are clear, however. First, it did not represent the national watershed for security that so many predicted in the immediate aftermath. Second, for those who experienced it, the significance of the events remains a complicated trauma.

For well over a decade, our narrative of the crisis has been driven forward by sensational headlines that at every turn sought to find a new dynamic, each scarier and more threatening than the last. How else to punctuate the numbing drone of insecurity and bloodshed but with the first severed heads, the biggest mass grave, the largest drug seizure, the government’s worst mistake? Yet often the anniversaries of these events are quickly forgotten; the notion of precedent useful only in the moment and rarely in retrospection.

Few events register as significant one year later. The annual commemoration of the Ayotzinapa disappearance is exception rather than norm, the rare event that reverberates across years of violence. And yet neither was Ayotzinapa itself truly unprecedented: the events of September 26 had been preceded by largely unremembered mass disappearances in San Fernando—the singular massacre of 72 migrants in 2010 and the slow-motion brutality of 2011 in which more than 300 were disappeared. Smaller waves of disappearance had also previously swept Guerrero, Baja California, and elsewhere.

Perhaps what confers the status of near historical importance is not any momentous or lasting change in security dynamics, but rage: rage at corruption and official malevolence, rage at impunity and callousness. In this sense, October 17 may lack the necessary characteristics. While the initial operation was undoubtedly ill-conceived, and quite possibly illegal, the government also chose not to double down on its errors and provoke a bloodbath, a decision for which many residents of the city were openly grateful.

This is not to say that we should ignore major developments or incidents that may not ultimately rate as significant, but that we might moderate a tendency toward analytical overreach by paying more attention to the on-the-ground experience. That perspective has major implications for how we narrate the drug war and how we understand the impact of violence.

Such an approach yields insights that are not necessarily surprising, but which reveal an underlying truth. When talking with people across Mexico, you quickly discover that the events that have lasting meaning are not always those outsiders deemed to have the most significance. In Culiacán, for example, one reference point emerges again and again when discussing the city's contemporary violence: *cuando mataron a Javier*.

The murder of journalist Javier Valdéz in May 2017, was, at least within a certain circle, a moment of rupture more profound than any possible clash between criminals and security forces. For many, it represented not just the killing of an internationally recognized journalist but the loss of a friend, mentor, and confidant. The point is not that Javier's murder represented a watershed in a way that October 17 did not, but rather that the violence of the drug war has inscribed thousands of different calendars of grief. These calendars are both individual and collective, and their ritual cycles revolve around events that often escape the headlines.

For the families of the disappeared, their moment of unprecedented violence was not a hail of bullets, but the day their loved one vanished. Their marker of time is not an arrest or seizure or explosion, it is something more personal and painful.

In this sense, all calculations, all descriptions of violence in Mexico fail. In quantifying the dead and disappeared we give a cruel finality to the events; we cannot count the missed birthdays, the empty chairs at meals, the anniversaries uncelebrated.

To reexamine the events, to truly understand their impact, we should listen to the stories of the victims. Three were killed in the crossfire that day, another eleven allegedly died while fighting. For friends and family of those fourteen, that day in October represented a moment of when life stories changed irreversibly. For many more, the terror and the memories of the day lingered. The city of Culiacán itself became a victim.

The testimonials collected by *Revista Espejo* for this project speak of that trauma. They tell of children afraid to reenter supermarkets, of sudden anxiety at stoplights, of driving a car that still has a bullet hole. The city's wounds were both visible and invisible, and there was a similar duality to its healing. Physical reminders of the day were quickly erased, as officials seized on a narrative of resilience that sought to forget the violence. But residents cannot forget the terror they felt.

These collective narratives tell us a great deal about why even the most astute security strategy analyses struggle to predict, explain, or resolve Mexico's violence. Integrating this perspective into our understandings will help illuminate how communities respond to trauma, fear, and victimization, both independent of policy interventions and as a reaction to them. For most events, however, this reflection never occurs.

Precedent without memory loses its meaning, and without revisiting violence we cannot learn from it. We must do this because the "drug war" does not have direction, its headlines cannot be assembled into a plot, because the story is not linear: it is cyclical. It is not the growing tally of deaths, but the innumerable memorials, the countless returns to traumas that mark the passage of time for individuals and communities. It is singing *las mañanitas* to ghosts..

## **AUTHORS**

### **Dr. Juan Carlos Ayala Barrón**

Juan Carlos Ayala Barrón is a Professor of Philosophy at the Universidad Autónoma de Sinaloa. He has written extensively about narco-trafficking and regional culture.

### **Josué David Piña**

Josué David Piña is a reporter and historian from Culiacán, Sinaloa. He holds a Masters in contemporary history from the Instituto de Investigaciones José María Luis Mora.

### **Dr. Cecilia Farfán-Méndez**

Cecilia Farfán-Méndez is Head of Security Research Programs at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies and a co-founder and Managing Editor of the Mexico Violence Resource Project.

### **Dra. Patricia Figueroa**

Patricia Figueroa is a researcher and political analyst specializing in narco-trafficking, social conflicts, corruption, violence and ethics. She has a Ph.D. in Social Sciences from the Autonomous University of Sinaloa and is a native of Culiacán.

### **Philip Johnson**

Philip Johnson is a Ph.D. Candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center, Fellow at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, and member of the Noria research network.

### **Dr. Romain Le Cour Grandmaison**

Romain Le Cour Grandmaison holds a Doctorate of Political Science from the University of Sorbonne. He is Co-founder of Noria Research and coordinator of the Mexico and Central America program, and a Fellow at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies.

### **Dr. Michael Lettieri**

Michael Lettieri is a Senior Fellow for Human Rights at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies and a co-founder and Managing Editor of the Mexico Violence Resource Project.

### **Héctor Parra**

Héctor Parra is a photojournalist and anthropologist with a Master's Degree in History from the Autonomous University of Sinaloa (UAS).

### **Dra. Iliana del Rocío Padilla Reyes**

Iliana del Rocío Padilla Reyes is a Professor at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) Juriquilla Campus. She is a native of Culiacán.

### **Albaro Sandoval**

Albaro Sandoval is a Sinaloan writer and reporter and member of the Revista Espejo team. He is the autor of the novel Lodo en tierra santa (Tierra Adentro), winner of the binational writing prize Novela Joven Frontera de Palabras / Border of words

### **Marcos Vizcarra**

Marcos Vizcarra is a Sinaloan reporter specialized in coverage of human rights. He is a member of Revista Espejo and has collaborated on the various projects examining disappearances.



# **MEXICO VIOLENCE**

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