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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Rejecting the Social Contract: Criminal Governance, Agrarian Inequalities and the *Autodefensa* Movement in Michoacán, Mexico

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Abstract

In many developing countries where formal institutions fail to guarantee rule of law, criminal organisations have emerged as intermediaries between citizens and the state. In some cases, these armed non-state actors adopt repressive strategies to govern their territories and local populations. This study asks under what circumstances local actors mobilise against criminal governance. Focusing on the case of Michoacán, Mexico, I argue that the emergence of vigilante groups, known as *autodefensas*, was prompted by the breaching of a social contract – a set of formal and informal agreements and obligations – between organised crime and civil society. As criminal governance spread in Michoacán, so did predatory behaviour against local communities, which gave way to an elite-organised social movement structured by rural inequalities.

Keywords: organised crime; vigilantism; violence; development; Latin America

On 24 February 2013, groups of armed vigilantes simultaneously took control of the towns of La Ruana and Tepalcatepec in the state of Michoacán, announcing themselves as the new purveyors of public security in their respective communities. Discontent with violence and extortion at the hands of organised crime, these 'self-defence groups', or '*grupos de autodefensa*', spread across the state of Michoacán. Within a year, vigilante groups had swept through the state's interior, crippling the criminal organisation known as 'Los Caballeros Templarios' ('The Knights Templar') and leaving behind independent units in each 'liberated' town. They stopped short of capturing the capital city of Morelia, where they would have faced the full force of the state's security apparatus, which was lacking in the communities that took up arms.[1]

[1]Interview with journalist A (Sept. 2019). Interview data were obtained during fieldwork conducted as part of a larger project in Michoacán between July 2019 and February 2020. Security concerns prevented ethnographic access to communities where *autodefensas* first organised. Most interviews were conducted in the cities of Morelia, Uruapan and Apatzingán. Informants also include civil society actors, public security

Armed mobilisations against organised crime are uncommon in Mexico despite ingrained traditions of vigilante justice.[2] Across Latin America, civic responses to violence are often obstructed or co-opted by armed actors.[3] Why then did the *autodefensa* movement arise in Michoacán? The state has a long history of rural violence and drug trafficking.[4] It is currently a major exporter of methamphetamine and fentanyl and, since the early 2000s, has experienced multiple territorial conflicts between criminal groups.[5] The *autodefensas* specifically mobilised against the Knights Templar, an organisation that exercised state-like control over a large swathe of Michoacán's territory. The Templars notably used violence to extract resources from local communities and to administer their territories.[6] What is it about criminal governance under this organisation, and about the communities they subjugated, that explains the emergence of vigilante groups?

To explain these mobilisations, I examine the agrarian political economy of Michoacán's Tierra Caliente region, where the *autodefensas* originated, and the dynamics of criminal governance that took root in its communities. I build on recent research examining how economic inequality within communities can facilitate the creation of patron-funded vigilante groups.[7] I argue that the driving form of inequality behind vigilantism in Tierra Caliente is land inequality due to the dominance of export-oriented agribusiness. The region's agrarian class structures are reflected in the internal structure of the vigilante groups. Cattle ranchers, farmers

officials and schoolteachers living and working in Michoacán's Tierra Caliente region, where the *autodefensas* originated. The names of informants are omitted for security reasons, save for former vigilante leaders who are vocal public figures. Primary source materials include a mix of national and local newspapers; a report published by Mexico's Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (National Human Rights Commission, CNDH): *Informe especial sobre los grupos de autodefensa en el Estado de Michoacán y las violaciones a los derechos humanos relacionadas con el conflicto* (Mexico City: CNDH, 2015); a memoir by José Manuel Mireles, the former spokesperson for the Tepalcatepec *autodefensas:* José Manuel Mireles, *Todos somos autodefensas: El despertar de un pueblo dormido* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2017); and one by María Imilse Arrue Hernández, a federal government advisor who played an important role in institutionalising the *autodefensas* into a rural police force: *Vamos topando: Autodefensas Michoacán* (Bloomington, IN: Palibirio, 2017).

[2]Leandro Aníbal Gamallo, 'Los linchamientos en México en el siglo XXI', *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 77: 2 (2015), pp. 183–213.

[3]Enrique Desmond Arias, 'Social Responses to Criminal Governance in Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Kingston, and Medellín', *Latin American Research Review*, 54: 1 (2019), pp. 165–80.

[4]Enrique Guerra Manzo, 'La violencia en Tierra Caliente, Michoacán, c. 1940–1980', *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México*, 53 (2017), pp. 59–75; Salvador Maldonado, *Los márgenes del Estado mexicano: Territorios ilegales, desarrollo y violencia en Michoacán* (Zamora: Colegio de Michoacán, 2010).

[5]José Gil Olmos, *Batallas de Michoacán: Autodefensas, el proyecto colombiano de Peña Nieto* (Mexico City: Ediciones Proceso, 2015).

[6]Falko Ernst, 'From Narcotrafficking to Alternative Governance: An Ethnographic Study on *Los Caballeros Templarios* and the Mutation of Organized Crime in Michoacán, Mexico', PhD dissertation, University of Essex, 2015; Edgar Guerra, *Vida cotidiana, organizaciones criminales y la construcción de un orden social ilegal. Un estudio de caso en Tierra Caliente, Michoacán* (Aguascalientes: CIDE, 2017); Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, 'Drug Cartels, from Political to Criminal Intermediation: The Caballeros Templarios' Mirror Sovereignty in Michoacán, Mexico', in Enrique Desmond Arias and Thomas Grisaffi (eds.), *Cocaine: From Coca Fields to the Streets* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), pp. 165–89.

[7]Brian J. Phillips, 'Inequality and the Emergence of Vigilante Organizations: The Case of Mexican *Autodefensas*', *Comparative Political Studies*, 50: 10 (2017), pp. 1358–89.

and other local elites made up the *autodefensa* leadership circles, while workers and their families occupied the front lines against the Templars.

The drug trade is deeply embedded in Tierra Caliente society. Historically, relations between traffickers and their communities have not been characterised by violence or repression.[8] I argue that the arrival of external criminal actors in Tierra Caliente led to the creation of a social contract between organised crime and society. By social contract I mean a set of state–society relations, or the formal and informal agreements and obligations between entrenched powerholders and local populations.[9] Beginning with La Familia Michoacana, criminal actors sought legitimacy through the provision of protection and public goods. This social contract was breached by their successors, the Knights Templar, whose rule was characterised by widespread extortion, dispossession, dominance over political institutions and the constant threat and use of violence. I argue that the level of predation reached in Tierra Caliente elicited an armed rejection of the social contract by local elites, whose mobilisation of a broad contingent of the population was facilitated by the region's unequal agrarian social structures.

This article proceeds with a conceptual intervention on criminal governance, followed by a discussion on the dynamics of vigilantism. I then provide a historical reconstruction of Michoacán's Tierra Caliente region from the mid-twentieth century to the *autodefensa* uprising of 2013–14. I begin with the development patterns that generated high levels of social polarisation in the region, followed by the changing criminal and political landscape that gave way to criminal governance. I then analyse the *autodefensa* movement by triangulating a mix of newspaper reports, secondary sources, and interviews with former vigilante leaders, journalists and other informants with a privileged perspective on these events. Finally, I further substantiate my arguments with a quantitative analysis of the municipal-level factors that explain the emergence of vigilante groups in Michoacán.

Criminal Governance as a Social Contract

Criminal governance refers to the administration of territories and civilian populations by criminal organisations.[10] Criminal governance is often associated with state weakness, but not necessarily state absence.[11] It emerges within political systems, occupying lower levels of the state that are prone to corruption and neglect.[12] Although the initial installation of criminal groups in a community can be

[8]Salvador Maldonado, *La ilusión de la seguridad. Política y violencia en la periferia michoacana* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 2018); Victoria Malkin, 'Narcotrafficking, Migration, and Modernity in Rural Mexico', *Latin American Perspectives*, 28: 4 (2001), pp. 101–28.

[9]Markus Loewe, Tina Zintl and Annabelle Houdret, 'The Social Contract as a Tool of Analysis', *World Development*, 145 (2020), article 104982.

[10]Enrique Desmond Arias, *Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[11]Benjamin Lessing, 'Conceptualizing Criminal Governance', *Perspectives on Politics*, 19: 3 (2021), pp. 854–73.

[12]Arias, *Criminal Enterprises*; Laura Ross Blume, 'The Old Rules no Longer Apply: Explaining Narco-Assassinations of Mexican Politicians', *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 9: 1 (2017), pp. 59–90; Ernst, 'From Narcotrafficking'; Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, *Votes, Drugs, and Violence: The Political Logic of Criminal Wars in Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

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disruptive and violent, criminal governance consolidates when a single organisation dominates a territory.[13] The scope of criminal governance varies, covering specific illicit markets and actors or entire communities and regions, as do its modalities.[14] These can include the administration of security and public goods, participation in and/or control over formal institutions and political processes, and influence in local economies and civil society.[15]

Recent studies have analysed these socio-political phenomena through the language of regimes,[16] emphasising the top-down relationships between rulers and subjects.[17] Beatriz Magaloni and her collaborators, for example, describe five types of criminal governance regime in Brazilian favelas.[18] Their typology is based on observed variation in criminal groups' territorial control, relationships with the state and relationships with local communities.[19] For example, 'insurgent' criminal orders arise where criminal groups hold territorial monopolies, but are at odds with the state. Greater violence-making capacities allow these groups to provide protection and other social provisions. 'Bandit' criminal orders are like the insurgent except that their lower organisational capacities encourage the use of abusive governance strategies. The problem with this line of theorising is that it reduces community relationships to by-products of the installation of criminal regimes. The contrary is true: community relationships form the social foundations of criminal power.[20]

From the vantage point of political sociology, I argue that criminal governance constitutes a *social contract*, or a set of state–society relations, between criminal organisations and local communities.[21] On the part of criminal organisations, social contracts can entail the delivery of public goods, supplies and foodstuffs to households, conflict resolution, the regulation of labour and commodity markets,

[13]Enrique Desmond Arias and Nicholas Barnes, 'Crime and Plural Orders in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil', *Current Sociology*, 65: 3 (2017), pp. 448–65; Ana Arjona, 'Civilian Cooperation and Non-Cooperation with Non-State Armed Groups: The Centrality of Obedience and Resistance', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 28: 4–5 (2017), pp. 755–78.

[14]Lessing, 'Conceptualizing Criminal Governance'.

[15]Arias, *Criminal Enterprises*; Vanda Felbab-Brown, Harold Trinkunas and Shadi Hamid, *Militants, Criminals, and Warlords: The Challenge of Local Governance in an Age of Disorder* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018); Michael J. Wolff, 'Building Criminal Authority: A Comparative Analysis of Drug Gangs in Rio de Janeiro and Recife', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 57: 2 (2015), pp. 21–40.

[16]Arias, *Criminal Enterprises*; Beatriz Magaloni *et al.*, 'Living in Fear: The Dynamics of Extortion in Mexico's Drug War', *Comparative Political Studies*, 53: 7 (2020), pp. 1124–74; Benjamin Lessing and Graham Denyer Willis, 'Legitimacy in Criminal Governance: Managing a Drug Empire from behind Bars', *American Political Science Review*, 113: 2 (2019), pp. 584–606; Trejo and Ley, *Votes*.

[17]Arjona, 'Civilian Cooperation'.

[18]Beatriz Magaloni, Edgar Franco-Vivanco and Vanessa Melo, 'Killing in the Slums: Social Order, Criminal Governance, and Police Violence in Rio de Janeiro', *American Political Science Review*, 114: 2 (2020), pp. 552–72.

[19]The five types of criminal order according to this typology are insurgent, bandit, symbiotic, predatory and split.

[20]Marcos Mendoza, 'The Tyranny of Narco-Power: Political Rule and Austere Domination in Michoacán, Mexico', *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 26: 3–4 (2021), pp. 408–26.

[21]Barrington Moore, Jr, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (New York: Routledge, 2015 [1978]).

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and protection from other armed actors. Local communities can in turn offer recognition of legitimacy, loyalty and silence, the payment of taxes, and the availability of a labour force for illicit market activities. To this end, local communities are bound by a social contract to the extant governing actor, not just the state.[22]

Criminal governance does not constitute an alternative or hybrid form of governance, as some authors argue, nor does it imply that there are multiple and competing sovereignties within modern states.[23] The idea of a social contract instead emphasises the embeddedness of these violent actors within existing socio-political structures. The lines between criminal, social and political actors are often blurred and the rise of criminal governance rarely means the state's authority is upended or replaced. Criminal organisations instead tend to play an intermediary role between local communities and the state,[24] while also sharing key aspects of sovereignty with the state:[25] in particular, claims to territory, taxation and the use of violence. Criminal groups insert themselves into the state's structures by exploiting local and subnational institutions, as well as strategic industries, for their economic and political resources.[26] In other words, criminal actors effectively co-organise societies in conjunction with the state. This means that criminal governance is not dissimilar to other neo-patrimonial formulations that are common in the Global South, whereby local powerholders mediate state–society relations while appropriating state resources.[27] It also exists as part of a larger universe of informal orders that define socio-political relations across Latin America.[28]

Finally, although there is a clear imbalance of power between criminal organisations and subject populations, as there is in any political society, the term 'social contract' implies that both parties must meet certain obligations to maintain social order. It also implies that the governed have mechanisms, or at least motivations, to make claims on their rulers when these obligations are not met. Whereas the breaching of the social contract by the governed may lead to punitive violence,

[22]David Brenner, *Rebel Politics: A Political Sociology of Armed Struggle in Myanmar's Borderlands* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, 'The Rise (and Sometimes Fall) of Guerrilla Governments in Latin America', *Sociological Forum*, 2: 3 (1987), pp. 473–99.

[23]Marcela López-Vallejo and María del Pilar Fuerte-Celis, 'Hybrid Governance in Northeastern Mexico: Crime, Violence, and Legal-Illegal Energy Markets', *Latin American Perspectives*, 48: 1 (2021), pp. 103–25; Rafael Duarte Villa, Camila de Macedo Braga and Marcos Alan S. V. Ferreira, 'Violent Nonstate Actors and the Emergence of Hybrid Governance in South America', *Latin American Research Review*, 56: 1 (2021), pp. 36–49; Wil G. Pansters, '"We Had to Pay to Live!" Competing Sovereignties in Violent Mexico', *Conflict and Society*, 1: 1 (2015), pp. 144–64.

[24]Arias, *Criminal Enterprises*; Pierre Gaussens, 'La organización del crimen: Delincuentes y caciques en tiempos de "guerra al narco"', *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales*, 65: 240 (2020), pp. 119–45; Maldonado, *La ilusión*.

[25]Graham Denyer Willis, *The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

[26]Joel Salvador Herrera and Cesar B. Martinez-Alvarez, 'Diversifying Violence: Mining, Export-Agriculture, and Criminal Governance in Mexico', *World Development*, 151 (2022), article 105769; Trejo and Ley, *Votes*.

[27]Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State–Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[28]Wil G. Pansters, 'Drug Trafficking, the Informal Order, and *Caciques*: Reflections on the Crime–Governance Nexus in Mexico', *Global Crime*, 19: 3–4 (2018), pp. 315–38.

its infringement by the governing authority may incite some level of resistance.[29] As I argue occurred in Michoacán, the breaching of the social contract by the Templars resulted in their outright rejection by certain social sectors.

The Dynamics of Vigilantism

Vigilantism refers to 'the collective use or threat of extra-legal violence in response to an alleged criminal act'.[30] It requires a target, a justification and motivation to organise, and its organisational forms and repertoires of violence vary widely.[31] Vigilante justice, especially in the form of lynchings, is widespread in Latin America as it historically provides a channel for dealing with perceived injustice and for making demands on the state.[32] Furthermore, these popular forms of justice tend to be defensive and embedded in local power dynamics, and thus employed as a form of social control.[33]

This study focuses on the vigilante *group*, a community-based subcategory of armed non-state actors.[34] Vigilante groups are primarily concerned with protecting their communities (e.g., neighbourhood, town) from criminals or other armed actors, which differentiates them from more politically, economically or ideologically driven organisations such as guerrillas and paramilitaries.[35] Vigilante groups also develop organisational qualities that allow them to coordinate and carry out *sustained* crime-control and violence-making activities.[36] Vigilante groups are generally associated with high levels of crime and with state weakness in the provision of public security.[37]

[29]Arjona, 'Civilian Cooperation'; Eduardo Moncada, *Resisting Extortion: Victims, Criminals, and States in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[30]Eduardo Moncada, 'Varieties of Vigilantism: Conceptual Discord, Meaning and Strategies', *Global Crime*, 18: 4 (2017), pp. 403–23.

[31]*Ibid*.

[32]Angelina Snodgrass Godoy, 'When "Justice" is Criminal: Lynchings in Contemporary Latin America', *Theory and Society*, 33: 6 (2004), pp. 621–51; Jim Handy, 'Chicken Thieves, Witches, and Judges: Vigilante Justice and Customary Law in Guatemala', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 36: 3 (2004), pp. 533–61; Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, 'Lynching and the Politics of State Formation in Post-Revolutionary Puebla (1930s–50s)', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 51: 3 (2019), pp. 499–521.

[33]Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, *In the Vortex of Violence: Lynching, Extralegal Justice, and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020). Vigilantes stand in stark contrast to Eric Hobsbawm's 'social bandits'. According to the Marxist historian, social bandits are outlaws who resort to banditry as a primitive form of protest against landowners and state officials. Although criminals in the eyes of the state, bandits typically count on the support of peasant communities and are glorified in local folklore. In the case at hand, the social bandits are the criminal organisations that challenge the state's authority and extort local elites while redistributing some of their profits to the poorest in their communities. In contrast, the *autodefensas* were formed by local elites interested in restoring a status quo upended by criminal groups. And as Hobsbawm's critics point out, real-life bandits, like criminal organisations, generally cause more harm than good to rural communities. Anton Blok, 'The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14: 4 (1972), pp. 494–503, citing Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels* (1959).

[34]Moritz Schuberth, 'The Challenge of Community-Based Armed Groups: Towards a Conceptualization of Militias, Gangs, and Vigilantes', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 36: 2 (2015), pp. 296–303.

[35]*Ibid*.

[36]Edgar Guerra, 'Organización armada. El proceso de toma de decisiones de los grupos de autodefensa tepalcatepenses', *Estudios Sociológicos*, 36: 106 (2018), pp. 99–124; Phillips, 'Inequality'.

[37]Martha K. Huggins (ed.), *Vigilantism and the State in Modern Latin America: Essays on Extralegal Violence* (New York: Praeger, 1991).

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However, in Mexico, vigilantism is largely absent in areas with the highest rates of crime and lowest levels of state presence.[38] As will be discussed below, the issue is not necessarily the level of crime, but the dynamics of criminal authority.

Recent studies have focused on the material and organisational resources available to vigilante groups. As some have suggested in Mexico, historical memory of previous insurgencies provide local actors with access to cross-generational information and skillsets that facilitate armed mobilisation.[39] Mexican vigilante groups also benefit from remittances, supplies and direct participation by returning migrants.[40] In Michoacán, military officials played a key role in coordinating the initial *autodefensa* mobilisations.[41] While there is evidence that individual officials chose to support the vigilantes, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent the state played a role in creating and arming the *autodefensas*.[42] Notwithstanding historical and external factors, the availability and distribution of resources within communities are arguably more important factors in the mobilisation of vigilante groups.[43]

A final line of argumentation focuses on the socioeconomic roots of vigilantism.[44] From this perspective, unequal access to resources often translates to unequal access to security. This is especially true for peripheral and marginalised communities that lack public or private protection. Furthermore, inequality within communities can facilitate the creation of vigilante groups that are patron-funded.[45] These vigilante groups have a clear division of labour between local elites who occupy leadership roles and workers that make up the rank and file. Such vigilante groups were the dominant type of organisation that appeared in Michoacán between 2013 and 2014.[46] This leads to the following question: what does it take for local elites to mobilise their resources and for workers to take up arms?

[38]Phillips, 'Inequality'.

[39]Javier Osorio, Livia Isabella Schubiger and Michael Weintraub, 'Legacies of Resistance: Mobilization against Organized Crime in Mexico', *Comparative Political Studies*, 54: 9 (2021), pp. 1565–96; Michael J. Wolff, 'Insurgent Vigilantism and Drug War in Mexico', *Journal of Politics in Latin America*, 12: 1 (2020), pp. 32–52.

[40]Lourdes Cárdenas, 'Michoacanos al grito de guerra', *Nexos*, 1 Nov. 2014, https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=23081 (all URLs last accessed 15 Dec. 2022); Sandra Ley, J. Eduardo Ibarra Olivo and Covadonga Meseguer, 'Family Remittances and Vigilantism in Mexico', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47: 6 (2021), pp. 1375–94; Clarisa Pérez-Armendáriz and Lauren Duquette-Rury, 'The 3x1 Program for Migrants and Vigilante Groups in Contemporary Mexico', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47: 6 (2021), pp. 1414–33.

[41]Gil Olmos, *Batallas de Michoacán*, pp. 253–62; Denise Maerker, 'Auxilio, ¿dónde está el Estado?' *Nexos*, 1 April 2014, https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=20052; Salvador Maldonado, 'Los retos de la seguridad en Michoacán', *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 81: 4 (2019), pp. 737–63.

[42]My own conversations with journalists provide mixed insights. Some claim there is no evidence of the state's involvement and others are sure of it. The most likely case, as one informant explained, is that the state may have been involved in arming some vigilante groups but not all of them. He cites the stark differences in armament across groups. Some had unusual access to military grade weapons, which they claimed they had decommissioned from the Templars. Other groups carried mostly hunting rifles and shotguns.

[43]Moncada, *Resisting Extortion*.

[44]Phillips, 'Inequality'.

[45]*Ibid*.

[46]The *autodefensas* of Tierra Caliente differ radically from more 'grassroots-community vigilante organizations' (Phillips, 'Inequality') that began to form in Michoacán's indigenous communities as early as 2008. The latter, known as *rondas comunitarias* (community patrols/police) were mobilised based on

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The Making of Michoacán's Tierra Caliente

Tierra Caliente is a semi-arid lowland region that spans the interior of Michoacán. The *autodefensa* movement originated in the western Apatzingán Valley, close to Tierra Caliente's political and economic centre (see Figure 1). Peripheral to Morelia and Mexico City, Tierra Caliente is characterised by historical underdevelopment and chronic political and rural violence.[47] Nonetheless, the region's agricultural potential made it the focus of an extensive development project known as the Tepalcatepec Commission.[48] Between 1947 and 1960, the Commission built hydroelectric dams and irrigation systems, as well as public infrastructure including electrification, sanitation and communication lines.[49] The Commission was inspired by the Tennessee Valley Authority that transformed a large portion of the US South.[50] Like its northern predecessor, the Commission made Tierra Caliente more legible for the state through technocrat-directed social and economic change.

Prior to the Tepalcatepec Commission, Michoacán had been the testing ground of Mexico's agrarian reform.[51] Between 1930 and 1970, over 350,000 hectares of land were redistributed to peasants in the Apatzingán Valley.[52] Over half of these lands were expropriated from just five landowners and distributed among 135 *ejidos* – the agrarian communities that formed the basis of Mexico's new land tenure system.[53] Land reform fundamentally altered the region's productive structure

local traditions of indigenous self-governance. The most well-known case is that of Cherán in the Meseta Purépecha, the indigenous highlands that lie just north of Tierra Caliente. In 2011, locals organised to oust political parties and formed a community police force to protect their forests from illegal logging. Maldonado, 'Los retos', pp. 746–8.

[47]Guerra Manzo, 'La violencia'; Maldonado, *Los márgenes*.

[48]The Comisión del Tepalcatepec originally focused on developing the Apatzingán Valley, which includes the municipalities of Apatzingán, Buenavista, Gabriel Zamora, La Huacana, Múgica, Parácuaro and Tepalcatepec. As the work of the Commission progressed in the 1950s, it expanded to include the entire Tepalcatepec river basin, including parts of the Meseta Purépecha and Sierra Costa regions. In 1960, the Río Balsas Commission absorbed the project, which extended the state's development efforts across the Balsas basin that encompasses parts of Puebla, Tlaxcala, Oaxaca, Jalisco, Guerrero, Estado de México and Morelos. Marco A. Calderón Mólgora, 'Lázaro Cárdenas del Río y las Comisiones Hidrológicas del Tepalcatepec y del Balsas', in Ivonne del Valle and Pedro Ángel Palou (eds.), *Cardenismo: Auge y caída de un legado político y social* (Boston, MA: Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana, 2017), pp. 231–55; Juan Ortiz Escamilla, *General Lázaro Cárdenas: Fundador de pueblos. La Ruana, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Michoacán, 1955–2005* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 2005), pp. 10–11.

[49]David Barkin and Timothy King, *Regional Economic Development: The River Basin Approach in Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Elinore M. Barrett, *La cuenca del Tepalcatepec*, vol. 2: *Su desarrollo moderno* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1975).

[50]James C. Scott, 'High Modernist Social Engineering: The Case of the Tennessee Valley Authority', in Lloyd L. Rudolph and John K. Jacobsen (eds.), *Experiencing the State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 3–52.

[51]Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996). Extensive land redistribution was initiated in Michoacán under the governorship of Lázaro Cárdenas del Río (1928–32) and was expanded nationwide during his presidency (1934–40). Cárdenas would later go on to direct the Tepalcatepec Commission and its successor the Río Balsas Commission.

[52]Barrett, *La cuenca del Tepalcatepec*, p. 46.

[53]*Ibid.*

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Figure 1. Michoacán, with Municipalities
Source: Author's elaboration.

despite the persistence of private property.[54] The region was further transformed by a cotton boom that displaced the cultivation of traditional food crops (maize, beans) and reoriented Tierra Caliente's political economy toward the export market.[55] This section examines the consequences of these development patterns, in particular the polarisation of the region's social structures that underlay its export-oriented political economy.

The Social Polarisation of the Countryside

The rise of export agriculture and ongoing state interventions set off a process of social polarisation and land concentration in Tierra Caliente. Widespread land reform without sufficient access to credit meant that *ejidatarios* – the peasant beneficiaries of the reforms – could not fully exploit their land grants. Although the Tepalcatepec Commission provided credit and resources to small producers, *ejidatarios* were left with the work and costs of preparing their lands for cultivation and connecting their parcels to irrigation systems.[56] Contract farming proliferated in Tierra Caliente as private investors filled the resource gap left by the state.[57] Despite legal restrictions, *ejidatarios* often rented out their lands for several seasons due to debts incurred with investors or because they lacked the capital to produce

[54]Juan M. Durán Juárez and Alain Bustin, *Revolución agrícola en tierra caliente de Michoacán* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1983), pp. 63–5.

[55]Maldonado, *Los márgenes*, pp. 116–40.

[56]Luz Nereida Pérez Prado, 'Gente, agua, cultivos y desarrollo desigual en el valle del Tepalcatepec: Imágenes, recuerdos y la "memoria históricamente instruida"', *Relaciones*, 22: 87 (2001), p. 124.

[57]A. René Barbosa and Sergio Maturana, *El arrendamiento de tierras ejidales: Un estudio en Tierra Caliente, Michoacán* (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones Agrarias, 1972).

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on their own.[58] The shortcomings of land reform thus created the opening for new market actors to supplant *ejidatarios*.

Income and land became highly concentrated in Tierra Caliente as the dividends of economic growth were concentrated within the non-*ejido* sector.[59] A small set of actors dominated the more profitable export market while most *ejidatarios* were relegated to producing food crops or renting out their lands, creating a sectoral dualism in agriculture.[60] While many *ejidatarios* did not see a major increase in income or living standards, those with privileged access to irrigation and private credit managed to capitalise on the market.[61] These *ejidatarios* ascended to the status of middle-class farmers and accumulated capital by renting and farming the lands of other *ejidatarios*. Overall, the concentration of land and resources, including within *ejidos*, severely limited the reproduction of small and independent producers in the region.

Rural wage workers in Tierra Caliente were just as precarious as the peasantry. By 1970, most workers earned no more than subsistence wages, save for those who found agro-industrial employment in packing plants and cotton mills.[62] The workforce included a large contingent of internal migrants who arrived during harvest months. These workers often negotiated inferior contracts compared to locals, were paid less, worked longer days, and lacked formal and personal protections in an environment where pesticides were used liberally.[63] Thus, despite land reforms and the state's modernising intentions, Tierra Caliente society had bifurcated into those who benefited from export-led development and those who did not.

Crisis and Reform

Tierra Caliente's export-driven boom was relatively short lived. Plant diseases and falling international prices caused the cotton industry to decline by 1970.[64] Investors left the region as did many workers and families. Melon replaced cotton as the region's cash crop by the mid-1970s, but it was also phased out of production a decade later by price fluctuations and the removal of state subsidies.[65] Following a temporary drop in exports and employment during the late 1980s, the region's export sector was revived, monopolised and diversified by the private sector, in particular by foreign agribusiness.[66] At this time, Mexico implemented a series of market reforms that gutted industrial policies and liberalised trade and finance. The combined crisis and reform period deepened the sectoral dualism between commercial and small producers across the country, as it primarily benefited the former

[58]Pérez Prado, 'Gente', p. 125.

[59]David Barkin, *Los beneficiarios del desarrollo regional* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1972), pp. 171–6; Barbosa and Maturana, *El arrendamiento*, pp. 91–6.

[60]Durán Juárez and Bustin, *Revolución agrícola*, pp. 148–50.

[61]Susana Glantz, *El ejido colectivo de Nueva Italia* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1974), pp. 183–9.

[62]Barkin, *Los beneficiarios*, pp. 173–5.

[63]Durán Juárez and Bustin, *Revolución agrícola*, pp. 196–8.

[64]*Ibid*., p. 102.

[65]Lois Stanford, 'El Tratado de Libre Comercio y el impacto de los cambios en la política agraria: El caso de la Tierra Caliente michoacana', *Relaciones*, 14: 54 (1993), pp. 71–101.

[66]*Ibid*.

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while exposing the latter to import competition.[67] In Tierra Caliente, these processes consolidated pre-existing trends of export-led development and social polarisation.

The economic downturn and overall lack of economic opportunities led many in the countryside to mitigate the crisis by migrating to the United States or by participating in the drug trade.[68] Illicit drug production thus expanded during the 1980s and 1990s with increased labour and capital inputs. Young men, above all, increasingly sought work cultivating cannabis and processing synthetic drugs.[69] Investments from agricultural elites increased the drug trade's capital supply and fundamentally tied together the profits from the region's licit and illicit exports.[70] Drug production also grew in scale and organisation as small producers created support networks in the face of land invasions and state repression.[71] As in the broader export sector, the dividends of the drug trade became concentrated in the hands of a small set of producers and later within criminal organisations.[72] The expansion of the illicit drug market in Tierra Caliente is therefore directly linked to the development patterns that polarised the region. Rural inequality and a booming (licit and illicit) export market thus paint the backdrop to which criminal governance, and later the *autodefensa* movement, emerged in Tierra Caliente.

The Rise of Criminal Governance in Tierra Caliente

As the Mexican economy liberalised toward the end of the century, so did its political landscape. Beginning in the late 1980s, several states including Michoacán saw the mobilisation of opposition parties that sought to challenge the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) at the ballot box.[73] Tierra Caliente suffered a destabilising episode of state violence during this period as army deployments – officially assigned to combat drug trafficking – were sent to Apatzingán to repress dissident organisations and sympathisers.[74] Political violence continued through the early 1990s as the leftist Partido de la Revolución Democrática (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD) made significant headway in contesting municipal elections.[75]

Democratisation at the state level, however, did not occur until Lázaro Cárdenas Batel took over Michoacán's governorship in 2002 under the banner of the PRD.[76]

[67]Juan Carlos Moreno-Brid and Jaime Ros, *Development and Growth in the Mexican Economy: A Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 197–9.

[68]John Gledhill, *Neoliberalism, Transnationalization and Rural Poverty: A Case of Study of Michoacán, Mexico* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995); Malkin, 'Narcotrafficking'.

[69]Maldonado, *La ilusión*, pp. 42–4.

[70]Pérez Prado, 'Gente', pp. 126–7.

[71]Maldonado, *La ilusión*, p. 44.

[72]*Ibid.*

[73]Wayne A. Cornelius, 'Subnational Politics and Democratization: Tensions between Center and Periphery in the Mexican Political System', in Wayne A. Cornelius, Todd A. Eisenstadt and Jane Hindley (eds.), *Subnational Politics and Democratization in Mexico* (La Jolla, CA: Center for US–Mexican Studies, 1999), pp. 3–16.

[74]Maldonado, *Los márgenes*, pp. 406–7.

[75]Pascal Beltrán del Río, *Michoacán, ni un paso atrás* (Mexico City: Libros de Proceso, 1993).

[76]Lázaro Cárdenas Batel is the grandson of Lázaro Cárdenas del Río. His father, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano, also served as governor of Michoacán (1980–6) before founding the PRD with other PRI dissidents.

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As in other parts of Mexico, political liberalisation in Michoacán created an opening for criminal organisations to expand and penetrate state institutions.[77] This section examines the emergence of criminal governance following Michoacán's political opening. I focus on the capture of municipal governments and local economies by criminal organisations and the remaking of relations between criminal actors and society.

The Shifting Criminal Landscape

Michoacán's first drug trafficking organisation emerged during the era of political liberalisation. The Valencia Cartel was founded by cannabis producers who established connections with the Sinaloa and Tijuana Cartels to export to the US market, as well as with Colombia's Medellín Cartel to traffic cocaine through their territory.[78] Their presence in Michoacán did not last, however, as other organisations sought to gain a foothold in their strategic territory. In 2001, a conflict broke out between the Valencias and the Gulf Cartel.[79] The Gulf Cartel sent its enforcers, Los Zetas, to capture territory from the Valencia Cartel, who were still in alliance with the Sinaloans, setting off the first wave of violence in Michoacán.

Violence re-escalated between 2005 and 2006 as a new organisation called La Familia Michoacana emerged with the purpose of eliminating Los Zetas from Michoacán.[80] La Familia was initially formed by defectors from the Valencia Cartel and Los Zetas who progressively gained control over Tierra Caliente by capturing territory from rivals, incorporating local traffickers into their ranks, and by infiltrating municipal governments and police forces.[81] La Familia's presence in Tierra Caliente was temporarily consolidated following Operativo Conjunto Michoacán (Joint Operation Michoacán), a collaboration between the central and subnational state to crack down on organised crime. This incursion by the military and federal police dealt a severe blow to Los Zetas, crippling its presence in Michoacán.[82]

Despite initial collaboration, intra-state cooperation deteriorated when La Familia launched an attack against civilians in September 2008.[83] The federal government, controlled by the conservative Partido de Acción Nacional (National Action Party, PAN), responded by ending security cooperation with subnational and municipal authorities and by punishing its political opposition, arresting public

[77]Luis Astorga, *El siglo de las drogas: El narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio* (Mexico City: Plaza y Janés, 2005); Trejo and Ley, *Votes*.

[78]Salvador Maldonado Aranda, 'Drogas, violencia y militarización en el México rural: El caso de Michoacán', *Revista Mexicana de Sociología*, 74: 1 (2012), pp. 23–4.

[79]Gil Olmos, *Batallas de Michoacán*, pp. 80–7; J. Jesús Lemus, *Tierra sin Dios: Crónica del desgobierno y la guerra en Michoacán* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2015).

[80]Eduardo Guerrero Gutiérrez, 'La dictadura criminal', *Nexos*, 1 April 2014, https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=20026.

[81]Guerra, *Vida cotidiana*, pp. 20–1.

[82]Guerrero Gutiérrez, 'La dictadura criminal'.

[83]Two fragmentation grenades were detonated in the main square of Morelia during Independence Day festivities the night of 15 September. The explosions and ensuing panic killed eight people and injured over 100 more. Alejandro Suverza, 'El evangelio según La Familia', *Nexos*, 1 Jan. 2009, https://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=12881; Trejo and Ley, *Votes*, pp. 193–8.

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officials and launching a media campaign against PRD governor Leonel Godoy.[84] As the federal government criticised Godoy and the PRD's ability to govern and contain violence in Michoacán, power struggles within La Familia gave rise to a splinter group, the Knights Templar, in 2011.[85] Taking advantage of the intra-state conflict, the Templars proceeded to consolidate power in Tierra Caliente and much of Michoacán.[86]

Remaking the Social Contract

Drug trafficking is deeply embedded in the rural communities of Tierra Caliente. By the 1980s, many inhabitants of the region had come to participate in the drug trade as a means of economic mobility without the social or moral stigmas that is otherwise attached to illicit markets.[87] Successful traffickers often acted as benefactors toward their communities and were highly regarded by locals.[88] Many of these illicit entrepreneurs invested time and money integrating themselves into local politics, business associations and civil society organisations.[89] Traffickers in turn accumulated a great deal of political and economic power within their communities. This is not to say that drug trafficking in Tierra Caliente is historically non-violent.[90] But, for the most part, traffickers and early criminal organisations did not direct violence toward local communities, nor did they extract resources from them.

The remaking of relations between criminal actors and society began with the arrival of Los Zetas, who imported new profit-making strategies into the region. They used extortion, kidnappings, and dispossession as quick and low-risk methods of exploiting local communities.[91] This 'invasion', as Tierra Caliente people call it, uprooted local drug trafficking networks and gave rise to a new territorial discourse employed by criminal groups.[92] When La Familia Michoacana emerged,

[84]In what was dubbed *el michoacanazo,* 38 public officials were arrested between May and June 2009 due to alleged ties to La Familia. These included more than 20 members of Godoy's security cabinet and a dozen municipal presidents. Guerrero Gutiérrez, 'La dictadura criminal'.

[85]To a certain extent, the Templars can be considered a rebranding of La Familia. The power struggles that gave rise to the Templars ousted some key figures of La Familia, while converting others into Templars. The main difference between them, as will be discussed shortly, is the level of predatory behaviour toward local communities.

[86]Trejo and Ley, *Votes*, pp. 193–8.

[87]Ernst, 'From Narcotrafficking', pp. 111–20.

[88]Malkin, 'Narcotrafficking', pp. 111–15.

[89]Maldonado, *La ilusión*, pp. 67–8.

[90]Many communities have been epicentres of violence at different points in time. For example, drug eradication campaigns and political conflicts made Aguililla a hotspot during the late 1980s and early 1990s. A *Proceso* article from 1990 describes a community where locals were afraid to talk too much about the drug trade and violence. Aguililla was patrolled by armed men in pick-up trucks who frequently engaged in gun fights after dark. Violence, however, was not aimed at the community and many saw the drug trade as a necessary evil. The article cites a local priest who claims that everyone in Aguililla benefited from the drug trade. Even the Church received generous donations from traffickers. Pascal Beltrán del Río, 'La lucha antidrogas, que empezó a perder el PRI, empobrece a Aguililla', *Proceso*, 21 May 1990, pp. 10–13; article accessible at https://publicacionesdigitales.proceso.com.mx/library/.

[91]Guerra, *Vida cotidiana*, pp. 18–19.

[92]Romain Le Cour Grandmaison and Noria Research, *Entender para atender: Por una estrategia de estado en Michoacán* (Mexico City: México Evalúa, Centro de Análisis de Políticas Públicas, 2014), pp. 6–7.

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the organisation employed a nativist rhetoric – emphasising its local roots and presenting itself as the legitimate protector of Michoacán from external and internal threats.[93] Exhausted with repression by Los Zetas, many social sectors, including local elites, welcomed La Familia and its promise of public security.[94] The organisation further legitimised itself by providing economic opportunities and investing in public infrastructure such as schools and drainage systems.[95] In Apatzingán, La Familia gained support from the disenfranchised by levying taxes on local businesses that were redistributed to thousands of poor families.[96] Despite its social commitments, La Familia adopted some of the extractive techniques employed by Los Zetas, in particular the extortion of local traffickers and of mining and agricultural industries.[97]

Criminal governance under La Familia was consolidated through its control over local political institutions. Despite its revolutionary rhetoric, La Familia did not attempt to replace or overthrow the state. They instead inserted themselves into its lower structures by taking over municipal governments and police forces.[98] By 2007, La Familia had consolidated its presence in more than two-thirds of Michoacán's 113 municipalities.[99] In Mexico, public resources are often used to establish patronage networks between local populations, elites and elected officials. By fully appropriating these channels of political intermediation, La Familia, and later the Templars, effectively became the principal authorities of Tierra Caliente.[100] They governed through an overtly criminal form of *caciquismo* – a neo-patrimonial formation in which local powerholders shape and uphold local social orders through a mix of formal and informal mechanisms.[101]

[93]La Familia made themselves known in 2006 through a series of public messages. On 6 September, a group of armed men stormed into a nightclub in Uruapan leaving 17 severed heads on the dancefloor along with a note that read: 'La Familia does not kill for money, it does not kill women, it does not kill the innocent; it only kills those who must die, let it be clear to everyone, this is divine justice.' Later, on 22 November, La Familia had their manifesto published in Michoacán's two leading newspapers: *La Voz de Michoacán* and *El Sol de Morelia*. Here they described their mission to eradicate kidnappings, extortion, robberies and synthetic drug sales in Michoacán, as well as their commitment to helping communities abandoned by the state. Suverza, 'El evangelio'; Lemus, *Tierra sin Dios*, pp. 60–4.

[94]By mid-2006, La Familia had captured Apatzingán, the heart of Tierra Caliente. One of the organisation's leaders, Enrique 'El Kike' Plancarte Solís, gave a public speech in the city's main square in which he celebrated the triumph of the people of Michoacán over Los Zetas. His words were reportedly received with applause from hundreds of spectators and the sound of AK-47s being fired into the air (Lemus, *Tierra sin Dios*, p. 56). Years later, in an interview with journalist Denise Maerker ('Auxilio'), one vigilante leader lamented that his community had accepted the help of La Familia out of desperation to get rid of Los Zetas – with the promise that the community would finally live in peace.

[95]Stephen Gibbs, '"La Familia", mucho más que un cartel', *BBC*, 22 Oct. 2009, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/internacional/2009/10/091022_1909_mexico_familia_rb.

[96]Lemus, *Tierra sin Dios*, pp. 83–4.

[97]Guerra, *Vida cotidiana*, p. 22; Redacción Animal Político, 'Sostienen a "La Familia" mineros, ganaderos, deudores y palenqueros', *Animal Político*, 27 June 2011, https://www.animalpolitico.com/2011/06/mantienen-a-%E2%80%9Cla-familia%E2%80%9D-mineros-ganaderos-deudores-y-palenqueros/.

[98]Ernst, 'From Narcotrafficking', pp. 223–4.

[99]Lemus, *Tierra sin Dios*, p. 6.

[100]Le Cour Grandmaison, 'Drug Cartels', pp. 181–2.

[101]Pansters, 'Drug Trafficking'.

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If Los Zetas introduced criminal governance to Tierra Caliente, then La Familia fundamentally reshaped state–society relations in the region. They essentially implemented a new social contract, where social order was guaranteed through violence and patronage. The Knights Templar built their criminal enterprise on this legacy. The transition from Familia to Templar rule was marked by benevolence and generosity in terms of social provisions.[102] But state crackdowns and the fiscal requirements of war-making and self-maintenance led the Templars to expand their extractive activities, initially aimed at local traffickers.[103] Increasing coercive capacities requires money, which was secured by broadening and intensifying protection rackets.[104] To this end, the Templars differed critically from their predecessors in that they extracted resources from and enacted violence against local communities in a more systematic manner.[105]

The change in governance first became apparent in the economic sector, as most market activities were gradually subject to taxes. *Cuotas* (fees) were regularly applied to livestock ranches, lemon groves, food stands, tortilla producers and many other businesses.[106] In the non-economic sphere, violence was employed to promote the organisation's vision of social order. The Templars punished crimes and other infractions such as theft, sexual and domestic violence, and adultery.[107] In some communities, they went as far as to regulate daily life by limiting socialisation in public squares and parks, which made locals afraid to interact with their friends, family, and neighbours.[108] The violent imposition of order, along with continued narratives about social justice and protection from external threats, gave the Templars a certain level of legitimacy with (reluctant) local communities.[109]

The Templars' maintenance of social order, however, quickly became repressive and their taxation regime increased the cost of living in Tierra Caliente.[110] By 2013, the Templars had disembedded themselves from local society by subjecting individuals and families to new dynamics of arbitrary and excessive violence. The proliferation of executions, kidnappings, dispossession and sexual violence had breached and reconfigured the social contract which had previously limited these types of violence.[111]

[102]Ernst, 'From Narcotrafficking', pp. 175–6.

[103]Guerra, *Vida cotidiana*, pp. 24–5.

[104]Moncada, *Resisting Extortion*, pp. 125–82.

[105]Raúl Zepeda Gil, 'Violencia en Tierra Caliente: Guerra criminal e intervenciones federales de 2000 a 2014', MA thesis, El Colegio de Mexico, 2016, pp. 117–19.

[106]Luis Hernández Navarro, *Hermanos en armas: La hora de las policías comunitarias y las autodefensas* (Mexico City: Para Leer en Libertad, A.C., 2014), pp. 311–12; Lemus, *Tierra sin Dios*, p. 174.

[107]Ernst, 'From Narcotrafficking', pp. 182–3.

[108]Le Cour Grandmaison, 'Drug Cartels', pp. 173–5.

[109]Ernst, 'From Narcotrafficking', pp. 184–90.

[110]As one informant from Apatzingán recalls, the Templars periodically delivered bulletins to all houses in his neighbourhood containing public announcements. Sometime in 2012, he received a notification that all households were to contribute a monthly tax of 200 pesos per person. He remembers his mother's reaction: '*ya nos van a cobrar por respirar*' – 'now they are going to start charging us for breathing' (interview, Feb. 2020).

[111]According to CNDH, *Informe especial*, the Templars employed sexual violence as an instrument of terror and domination over local communities. Testimonies show that women and teenage girls were

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A Social Upheaval

On Sunday afternoon, 24 February 2013, Hipólito Mora rallied a growing crowd of people in the town square of La Ruana to fight against the Knights Templar.[112] With shotguns and hunting rifles in hand, the vigilantes set off to search for Templars. The group took La Ruana without firing a shot – their targets fled the town upon hearing about the uprising. Meanwhile in Tepalcatepec, weapons and white t-shirts were being distributed among a group of about 80 people from the local ranchers' association.[113] The t-shirts read 'Policía Comunitaria' ('Community Police') on the front and 'Por un Tepalcatepec Libre' ('For a Free Tepalcatepec') on the back. A group of Templar *sicarios* (henchmen) interrupted the meeting, but they were subdued by the vigilantes with help from an army patrol. The Tepalcatepec *autodefensas* proceeded to hunt down the remaining Templars in their community. By that afternoon, over 3,000 people had joined their ranks.[114] Two days later, a third vigilante group mobilised against the Templars in the town of Buenavista Tomatlán.[115]

Following the uprisings, the Templars laid siege to La Ruana, Tepalcatepec and Buenavista Tomatlán. For several months, the *autodefensas* withstood attacks by caravans of *sicarios* who were mobilised from Templar strongholds in Apatzingán, Aguililla, Arteaga and Tumbiscatío.[116] Many vigilante-controlled communities suffered supply shortages due to blockades installed by the Templars.[117] The Templars also organised protests throughout the state and published online attacks attempting to delegitimise the vigilantes.[118]

Despite the backlash, the initial mobilisations inspired several communities in Tierra Caliente and the Sierra Costa region to take up arms. These included Coalcomán, Aguililla, Chinicuila, Los Reyes and Aquila. Many vigilante groups formed with the strategic or armed support of the original *autodefensas*. By the end of 2013, some groups had embarked on a 'liberation' campaign across Michoacán, leaving independent units in communities captured from the Templars.[119] By early 2014, vigilante groups were present in over 40 municipalities. What began as a loosely coordinated uprising quickly evolved into a social

kidnapped and raped with impunity. Between 2006 and 2013, sexual violence increased by 183% in the municipalities that eventually took up arms.

[112]Maerker, 'Auxilio'.

[113]Mireles, *Todos somos autodefensas*, pp. 156–8.

[114]*Ibid.*

[115]Locals from Buenavista Tomatlán originally planned to mobilise on the same day as the other communities, but the uprising failed to materialise at the last minute. An attempt to organise in Coalcomán was also foiled by the Templars. Interview with journalist A, Sept. 2019. Hernández Navarro, *Hermanos en armas*, p. 306.

[116]Mireles, *Todos somos autodefensas*, pp. 171–80.

[117]Gil Olmos, *Batallas de Michoacán*, p. 109.

[118]Soon after the uprisings, a video was published online accusing the *autodefensas* of being financed by the Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel. The accuser was Servando Gómez Martínez, known as 'La Tuta', a founder and leader of the Templars who frequently used social media to make demands on the federal government, denounce corrupt officials, and diffuse his organisation's social justice message. A copy of the video can be found at https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2n250v.

[119]After liberating a community, the *autodefensas* would call a public meeting in the town square where they asked locals to decide if they wanted to establish their own vigilante unit. Many communities accepted

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movement and armed conflict that brought Tierra Caliente into the international spotlight.[120]

Mobilising Inequalities

Despite broad popular support and participation, there were clear class divisions between the vigilante rank and file and leadership. The organisers and leaders of the movement were predominantly farmers, cattle ranchers and other local elites (including drug traffickers) with the economic means and motivations to mobilise their workers.[121] In order to institutionalise themselves and dispel accusations of being criminal organisations, several vigilante groups created community councils with operational oversight.[122] In Tepalcatepec, the movement was organised by the cattle rancher, cheese producer and alleged drug trafficker Juan José Farías Álvarez ('El Abuelo');[123] Juventino Cisneros Andrade ('El Tilín') and Alberto Gutiérrez ('Comandante Cinco'), both cattle ranchers and farmers;[124] and local politician Martín Barragán Cerna.[125] The first community council to oversee Tepalcatepec's *autodefensas* was made up of professionals, ranchers and farmers, most of whom held positions in local and regional economic associations.[126]

The connections between the *autodefensas*, export industries, local politics and organised crime were clear across southern Michoacán. Coalcomán's vigilantes were led by a former mayor and sawmill owner named Misael González.[127] Adalberto Fructuoso Comparán Rodríguez, another former mayor and alleged ex-Templar, headed the movement in Aguililla with funds from the mining industry.[128] The *autodefensas* of Zicuirán were organised by the president of the melon producers' association, Ulises Sánchez Garibay ('El Inge'), who allegedly took orders from an important drug trafficker in the region.[129] The *autodefensas* of Buenavista Tomatlán were founded by Luis Antonio Torres ('Simón El Americano'), a known criminal operative.[130] Comandante Cinco, mentioned

the help of the *autodefensas*, but others refused due to fear of reprisals from the Templars (interview with journalist A, Sept. 2019).

[120]*Cartel Land*, directed by Matthew Heineman, Paramount Pictures, 2016.

[121]Arrue Hernández, *Vamos topando*, p. 60; interviews with journalists B (Dec. 2019) and C (Feb. 2020).

[122]Interview with José Manuel Mireles (Nov. 2019).

[123]Paula Chouza, 'No soy un capo, si acaso un capón', *El País*, 11 Feb. 2014, https://elpais.com/internacional/2014/02/11/actualidad/1392154701_540374.html.

[124]Ioan Grillo, *Gangster Warlords: Drug Dollars, Killing Fields, and the New Politics of Latin America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 409–15.

[125]'Quiénes son los líderes de las autodefensas', *Milenio*, 12 Feb. 2014, https://www.milenio.com/policia/quienes-son-los-lideres-de-las-autodefensas.

[126]These included representatives and presidents of associations for landowners and dairy, mango, papaya and lime producers. Mireles, *Todos somos autodefensas*, pp. 171–4.

[127]Maerker, 'Auxilio'.

[128]Marco Antonio Coronel, 'De "templario" a líder comunitario', *Milenio*, 29 Jan. 2014, https://www.milenio.com/policia/de-templario-a-lider-comunitario.

[129]Carlos Arrieta, 'Detienen en Michoacán a presunto lugarteniente del Cártel Jalisco', *El Universal*, 8 Aug. 2018, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/detienen-en-michoacan-presunto-lugarteniente-del-cartel-jalisco-nueva-generacion.

[130]Ignacio Alzaga, '"Los Viagra" operan con fachada de autodefensas', *Milenio*, 13 Jan. 2015, https://www.milenio.com/policia/los-viagra-operan-con-fachada-de-autodefensas.

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above, allegedly cleaned the Templars out of Parácuaro with the help of another criminal group and installed a new vigilante unit under his command.[131]

In La Ruana, the Templars not only taxed the town's most important industry – limes; they also took over control of its production by periodically closing packing plants in order to inflate prices.[132] Of the approximately 100 people that made up La Ruana's vigilante group, the overwhelming majority were lime pickers and bricklayers. Only a handful were ranchers and fewer were lime producers, such as their leader, Hipólito Mora.[133] Across the region, it was not uncommon for local elites to organise or to send their own workers to fight in their place.[134]

In Zicuirán, local melon producers began arming their workers in late 2013 after their taxes to the Templars were doubled.[135] Vigilante leaders from Tepalcatepec arrived in Zicuirán on 18 December to help them establish their own *autodefensas*. According to anonymous testimonies, melon workers were called to the town square by El Inge, mentioned above, who promised them overtime pay.[136] Others were fortifying the town's entrance during the public meeting when the army arrived to disarm them. According to José Manuel Mireles, spokesperson of the *autodefensas*, the people at the town square rushed to the scene to support their comrades. Testimonies collected by the CNDH, however, suggest that they were ordered there by their *patrón* (boss).[137] The soldiers opened fire in the commotion, injuring two packing plant workers and killing another. Scenes like this highlight the patronage dynamics within the vigilante movement, which was turning its leaders into Tierra Caliente's new *caciques*.[138]

The diffusion of patron-funded organisations reflects the agrarian inequalities that predominate in southern Michoacán. Decades of export-oriented development generated the unequal social structures in Tierra Caliente that facilitated the rise of elite-organised vigilantism. Although the region's export economy began to take shape in the 1950s, market reforms during the 1980s and 1990s consolidated long-standing patterns of social polarisation, land concentration and illicit market activities. The accumulation of land and resources within agricultural elites made them susceptible to extortion by the criminal organisations that emerged during the 2000s. Their resources, and the availability and willingness of workers to become 'violence specialists', were critical for the uprisings to materialise and spread across Michoacán.[139]

As Figure 2 visualises, vigilante groups generally emerged in municipalities with high levels of land concentration, that is, where large landholdings measuring at

[131]Arrue Hernández, *Vamos topando*, pp. 71–2.

[132]Omar García-Ponce and Andrés Lajous, 'How Does a Drug Cartel Become a Lime Cartel?', *The Washington Times*, 20 May 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/20/how-does-a-drug-cartel-become-a-lime-cartel/.

[133]Interview with Hipólito Mora (Feb. 2020); interview with journalist B (Dec. 2019).

[134]Hernández Navarro, *Hermanos en armas*, p. 314.

[135]Mireles, *Todos somos autodefensas*, pp. 330–1.

[136]CNDH, *Informe especial*, pp. 281–4.

[137]*Ibid.*

[138]Enrique Guerra Manzo, 'Las autodefensas de Michoacán: Movimiento social, paramilitarismo y neocaciquismo', *Política y Cultura*, 44 (2015), pp. 7–31.

[139]Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, '"*Vigilar y limpiar*": Identification et auto-justice dans le Michoacán, Mexique', *Politix*, 3: 115 (2016), pp. 103–25; Maldonado, 'Los retos'. For 'violence specialists' see Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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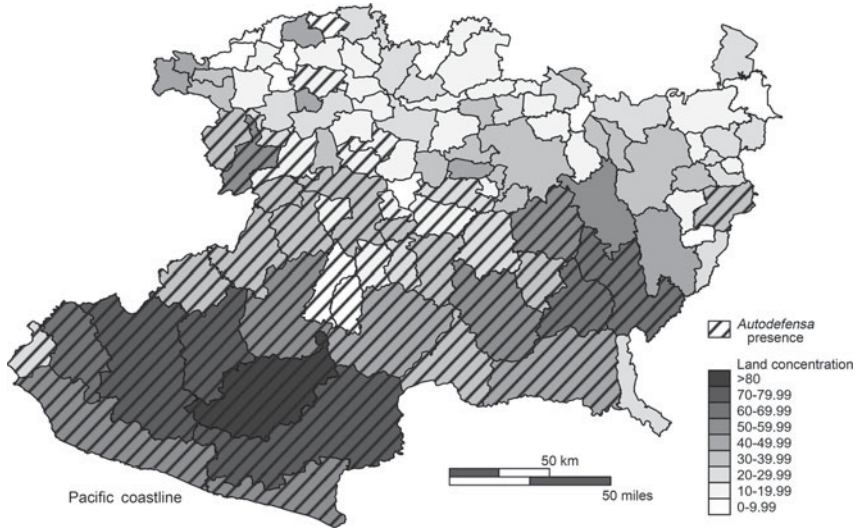

Figure 2. Michoacán: Land Concentration and Vigilante Group Presence
Source: Elaborated using data from INEGI, *Censo agrícola*; CNDH, *Informe especial*; and various primary sources (see 'Statistical Analysis' section).

least 100 hectares dominate the agricultural sector. This includes most of the municipalities of Tierra Caliente, and the entire Sierra Costa region. The latter is also characterised by unequal agrarian social structures – not to mention the highest levels of land concentration in Michoacán – that stem from private property regimes that were unaffected by agrarian reform.[140] It is therefore no surprise that communities in the Sierra Costa, such as Aquila and Coalcomán, figured prominently within the *autodefensa* movement.

Social inequalities are relevant to understanding not only the *autodefensas*, but their antagonists as well. Templar warlords exploited a private army of *sicarios* and *halcones* (lookouts) to build their criminal enterprise, administer their territories and fight back against the *autodefensas*. According to documents confiscated from Templar safe houses, the organisation paid its workers a minimum of 8,000 pesos a month – approximately US$625 in 2013.[141] Those employed as lookouts were the lowest paid. *Sicarios* earned slightly more at about 12,000 pesos per month (US$940). Although not high, these wages are attractive in Michoacán, where over half of the population makes under 6,000 pesos a month.[142] Despite their crucial role within the organisation, illicit workers earned

[140]Hubert Cochet, *Alambradas en la sierra: Un sistema agrario en México: La sierra de Coalcomán* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1991).

[141]Redacción AN, '"Templarios" ganan desde 8 mil hasta 100 mil pesos, "depende lo que hagan los muchachos"', *Aristegui Noticias*, 21 Jan. 2014, https://aristeguinoticias.com/2101/mexico/templarios-ganan-desde-8-mil-hasta-100-mil-pesos-depende-lo-que-hagan-los-muchachos/.

[142]Maricruz Rios, 'Más de la mitad de los michoacanos gana menos de 6 mil pesos al mes', *La Voz de Michoacán*, 29 Nov. 2019, https://www.lavozdemichoacan.com.mx/economia/mas-de-la-mitad-de-los-michoacanos-gana-menos-de-6-mil-pesos-al-mes/.

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peanuts compared to their bosses, who would earn up to 200,000 pesos a week (US$15,700).[143]

These illicit workers – mostly teenagers and young men – formed the social basis of the Templar organisation just as the rank-and-file *autodefensas* were the core of their movement. Nonetheless, despite their patron-funded structure, the *autodefensas* counted on extensive, but not universal, support and participation from local populations.[144] Much like La Familia and the Templars, the *autodefensas* employed narratives of state abandonment and external threats to gain legitimacy within their communities.[145] Claims to legitimacy notwithstanding, widespread discontent with criminal governance produced a social upheaval. Whereas resource distribution and concentration may have facilitated the creation of vigilante groups, the most proximate and determining factor behind vigilantism is the installation of criminal governance and the transformation of state–society relations in Michoacán.

Statistical Analysis

At the height of the movement, *autodefensas* were present in 42 out of Michoacán's 113 municipalities.[146] Although concentrated in the south, vigilantism spread to nearly all corners of the state (refer to Figure 2). It is important to note, however, that Michoacán is geographically and culturally diverse – a mosaic of regions with multiple political and economic centres.[147] This section therefore applies a test of generalisability for the argument developed from the Tierra Caliente case. To do so, I employ logistic regression analysis to examine the factors that explain vigilantism in Michoacán between February 2013 and March 2014. The dependent variable is dichotomous, where '1' denotes the presence of vigilante organisations in a municipality and '0' their absence. The period of analysis captures the core of the *autodefensa* movement before it was demobilised by the federal government.[148]

The key socioeconomic variables to consider are *land concentration* and *land inequality*. Whereas land concentration should capture the potential for local elites to fund vigilante groups, land inequality captures the propensity for workers to participate in armed vigilantism.[149] Land concentration is the percentage of agricultural land contained in landholdings measuring over 100 hectares in surface

[143]Interview with journalist A (Sept. 2019).

[144]Antonio Fuentes-Díaz, 'Narcotráfico y autodefensa comunitaria en "Tierra Caliente", Michoacán, México', *CienciaUAT*, 10: 1 (2015), pp. 68–82.

[145]Alexander Curry and Leonie Ansems de Vries, 'Violent Governance, Identity and the Production of Legitimacy: Autodefensas in Latin America', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 23: 2 (2020), pp. 262–84.

[146]This count is based on data extracted from the CNDH's *Informe especial* and supplemented with articles from national newspapers (*La Jornada*, *Milenio*, *Proceso*).

[147]Jorge Zepeda Patterson, 'Michoacán antes y durante la crisis o sobre los michoacanos que no se fueron de braceros', *Relaciones: Estudios de Historia y Sociedad*, 8: 31 (1987), pp. 5–24.

[148]Independent variable data are from 2012 or from the closest available year.

[149]Data on agricultural land holdings were created using stratified data on the number and size of farms in Mexico obtained from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics, INEGI), *Censo agrícola, ganadero y forestal 2007* (Mexico City: INEGI, 2007).

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area. Land inequality is a Gini index for agricultural landholdings that ranges from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating greater inequality. The models presented in Table 1 show that a one percentage point increase in land concentration increases the odds of vigilante group formation by 3.8 per cent, and each one-point increase in land inequality increases it by 4.5 per cent. *Income* inequality,[150] for the sake of comparison, produces higher but only marginally significant results (+18.2 per cent), which suggests that it is a less reliable predictor of vigilantism. The argument that agrarian inequalities underlay the *autodefensas* movement thus holds across Michoacán.

The next factor under consideration is criminal governance. According to Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, it is possible to proxy criminal governance by identifying which municipalities are vulnerable to capture.[151] They argue that local governments are a key target for criminal groups that aim to establish territorial control over specific areas. To achieve their goals, criminal groups are incentivised to launch attacks against local political actors. Therefore, a binary indicator of *criminal attacks* is used to proxy criminal governance.[152] Between 2007 and 2012, Michoacán experienced a total of 69 high-profile attacks – 28.5 per cent of all attacks in Mexico – distributed among 37 municipalities. The models suggest that municipalities that suffered criminal attacks were 270 to 440 per cent more likely to see the emergence of vigilante groups, compared to those with no attacks. The argument that vigilantism is a direct response to criminal governance also holds.

Vigilantism is often associated with high levels of crime and weak state capacity.[153] Like prior research,[154] the models show no relationship between vigilantism and homicide rates.[155] I proxy low state capacity with an *inaccessibility* variable that measures the percentage of the population with low access to paved roads.[156] Accessibility to road networks is important not only for people to access markets and public services, but for the state to 'see' and administer its territories and subjects.[157] The models suggest that inaccessible municipalities are more likely to see the emergence of vigilante groups.

[150]Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy, CONEVAL), *Medición de la pobreza: anexo estadístico de pobreza en México 2018* (Mexico City: CONEVAL, 2019), https://www.coneval.org.mx/Medicion/MP/Paginas/AE_pobreza_2018.aspx.

[151]Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley, 'High-Profile Criminal Violence: Why Drug Cartels Murder Government Officials and Party Candidates in Mexico', *British Journal of Political Science*, 51: 1 (2021), pp. 203–29.

[152]This variable is coded '1' if a municipality suffered any number of criminal attacks against political actors between 2007 and 2012, and '0' otherwise. Political actors include government officials, party candidates and activists. These data are borrowed from Trejo and Ley, 'High-Profile Criminal Violence'.

[153]Huggins (ed.), *Vigilantism*.

[154]Phillips, 'Inequality'.

[155]INEGI, *Demografía y sociedad: mortalidad* (Mexico City: INEGI, 2019), https://www.inegi.org.mx/temas/mortalidad/.

[156]CONEVAL, *Medición de la pobreza*.

[157]James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

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Table 1. Logistic Regressions of Vigilante Group Formation in Michoacán

	Model		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Criminal attacks	5.153** (3.244)	3.676* (2.393)	5.387* (3.920)
Land concentration	1.038* (0.015)		
Land inequality		1.045* (0.023)	
Income inequality			1.182^{+} (0.108)
Spatial diffusion	8.983** (7.159)	10.13** (7.803)	13.54*** (10.58)
Homicide rate	1.011 (0.015)	1.010 (0.013)	1.010 (0.013)
Inaccessibility	1.027* (0.011)	1.022^{+} (0.012)	1.032** (0.012)
Social deprivation	0.443 (0.241)	0.548 (0.297)	0.485 (0.275)
Migration intensity	0.587* (0.133)	0.532** (0.115)	0.567** (0.125)
Indigeneity	1.009 (0.013)	1.009 (0.015)	1.002 (0.015)
Constant	0.075* (0.096)	0.105 (0.150)	0.000* (0.001)
Observations (number of municipalities)	113	113	113
AIC	103.899	105.280	105.615

Odds ratios with robust standard errors in parentheses (***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05, $^{+}$p < 0.1). An odds ratio with a value greater than 1 indicates that an event is more likely to occur as the predictor increases. A value less than 1 indicates that the event is less likely to occur. To facilitate interpretation as a percentage change, holding all other variables constant, subtract 1 from the odds ratio and multiply by 100.
AIC = Akaike Information Criterion, an estimator of prediction error

This finding is unsurprising since inaccessibility, or illegibility, can give rise to armed non-state actors, such as criminal organisations and vigilante groups, that have more intimate knowledge of the terrain and of their communities. Although these violent actors also benefit from accessible infrastructure, they do not rely on it to engage in market or violence-making activities.[158] As different journalists explained, there is a network of dirt roads that cut through southern Michoacán. These roads connect Tierra Caliente's localities to each other, to mountain communities, to the coast, and to economic hubs such as Apatzingán and Lázaro Cárdenas. Locals, including criminal groups and *autodefensas*, can navigate these terrains better than the state's security forces. During Joint Operation Michoacán, federal police convoys were sometimes mobilised into the Sierra Madre del Sur – where criminal garrisons were located – only to get lost, ambushed and killed in the mountains.[159]

[158]In the case of the drug trade, illicit crop production took root in Michoacán in part thanks to its inaccessibility, but this industry also benefited from the region's connectedness to the international economy. Maldonado, *Los márgenes*.

[159]Interviews with journalists B (Dec. 2019) and C (Feb. 2020).

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Other variables considered here include *spatial diffusion*,[160] *social deprivation*,[161] *migration intensity* (to the United States),[162] and *indigeneity*.[163] The models show a diffusion process in which municipalities were 900 to 1250 per cent more likely to have vigilante groups if a neighbouring municipality had vigilantes. Recall that some *autodefensa* groups collaborated to 'clean' Templar rule out of other communities and 'liberate' them. Indicators for social deprivation and indigeneity produce no significant results. Finally, the models show that migration intensity is negatively associated with the presence of vigilante groups. These results contradict national studies on migration and vigilantism, as well as evidence provided by journalists.[164] There is a simple explanation. Michoacán as a whole is a migrant-sending state. While migrants may have played a clear role in the mobilisations, migration rates are higher in the communities that did not mobilise.

Concluding Remarks

This article contributes to the study of criminal governance by making a sociological intervention in the literature. This emerging and interdisciplinary area of research is dominated by political scientists who focus on the top-down relationships between criminal organisations and the communities they govern,[165] which inadvertently obfuscates the complex interactions between these armed actors and civilians.[166] From the standpoint of political sociology, I argue that criminal governance constitutes a social contract – a set of state–society relations – between organised crime and society. This approach focuses on the informal agreements and commitments that actors in power have with different social and political sectors, as well as the consequences of breaking these arrangements.[167]

To this end, this research provides two key conceptual insights for the study of violence and governance in Latin America. The first adheres to Weberian tradition: local social orders are shaped by those who lay a *claim* to violence. This means that criminal rule is not an issue of alternative governance or competing sovereignties, as many claim,[168] because it does not challenge or deviate from existing socio-political structures. This is instead a question of haphazard state formation. Criminal actors are simply local powerholders that co-organise social relations in conjunction with

[160]Following Phillips ('Inequality'), I measure spatial diffusion using a binary variable where a value of '1' indicates the presence of a vigilante group in a bordering municipality and '0' the absence of any such groups.

[161]'Social deprivation' is a socioeconomic underdevelopment index capturing a multidimensional view of poverty and economic wellbeing that includes access to education, food, housing, basic services and healthcare. CONEVAL, *Medición de la pobreza*.

[162]Consejo Nacional de Población (National Population Council, CONAPO), *Índices de intensidad migratoria México–Estados Unidos 2010* (Mexico City: CONAPO, 2012).

[163]'Indigeneity': percentage of the population that self-identifies as indigenous. INEGI, *Censo de población y vivienda 2010* (Mexico City: INEGI, 2010).

[164]Cárdenas, 'Michoacanos'; Ley *et al.*, 'Family Remittances and Vigilantism'; Pérez-Armendáriz and Duquette-Rury, 'The 3x1 Program'.

[165]Arias, *Criminal Enterprises*; Magaloni *et al.*, 'Killing in the Slums'; Magaloni *et al.*, 'Living in Fear'; Lessing and Denyer Willis, 'Legitimacy in Criminal Governance'; Trejo and Ley, *Votes*.

[166]Arjona, 'Civilian Cooperation'; Moncada, *Resisting Extortion*.

[167]Brenner, *Rebel Politics*; Moore, *Injustice*; Wickham-Crowley, 'The Rise'.

[168]Ernst, 'From Narcotrafficking'; Felbab-Brown *et al.*, *Militants*; López-Vallejo and Fuerte-Celis, 'Hybrid Governance'; Villa *et al.*, 'Violent Nonstate Actors', Pansters, 'We Had to Pay to Live!'

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states that rule their peripheries through intermediaries.[169] Landowners, agrarian reformers and religious groups, to name a few, have filled similar roles in Mexico across time and space – and many have done so with violence.[170]

The second insight is admittedly Polanyian: criminal governance does not emerge in a social vacuum. Criminal orders are embedded in locally and regionally specific political economies and social relations. Yet the burgeoning literature on criminal politics in Latin America tends to overlook the social foundations of violence and illicit markets.[171] This is a severe oversight in a region where the proliferation of new armed actors has accompanied political and economic liberalisation.[172] Criminal governance systems have unsurprisingly materialised in this context of 'democratised violence'.[173] Therefore, it is important to consider how criminal orders are rooted in both longstanding and changing class structures and inequalities.

These insights suggest that the social contract framework can be used to study state–society relations and criminal authority in drug-producing and transit communities across time and space. Within Mexico, future studies should consider how community relationships with local powerholders were transformed by the cartelisation of the drug trade.[174] There is also a lack of research on the gendered dynamics of vigilante movements,[175] let alone research that genders criminal rule. Criminal groups have risen to prominence in a variety of contexts across Latin America, but there is an urban bias in the literature.[176] As a result, we lack a systematic comparison of criminal authority and social responses in rural versus urban settings.

As the case of Tierra Caliente demonstrates, the emergence of criminal governance and increasing repression against local communities led to the dissolution of a local social order that historically accommodated drug trafficking and violence. The Knights Templar established themselves as *de facto* rulers in their communities, effectively reorganising state–society relations through the excessive and arbitrary use of violence and extortion. The result was an armed rejection of criminal governance built on the region's unequal class structures. Local elites led the movement by organising their workers on the moral grounds of ending extortion and violence at the hands of the Templars. Their goal was to mitigate violence, not to eradicate it

[169]Migdal, *Strong Societies*.

[170]Alan Knight and Wil G. Pansters (eds.), *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2006).

[171]Joel Salvador Herrera, 'Cultivating Violence: Trade Liberalization, Illicit Labor, and the Mexican Drug Trade', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 61: 3 (2019), pp. 129–53. On criminal politics in Latin America see Nicholas Barnes, 'Criminal Politics: An Integrated Approach to the Study of Organized Crime, Politics, and Violence', *Perspectives on Politics*, 15: 4 (2017), pp. 967–87; Angélica Durán-Martínez, *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Benjamin Lessing, *Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[172]Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt (eds.), *Armed Actors: Organised Violence and State Failure in Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 2004).

[173]William Ascher and Natalia Mirovitskaya (eds.), *Economic Development Strategies and the Evolution of Violence in Latin America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

[174]Natalia Mendoza, *Conversaciones en el desierto: cultura y tráfico de drogas* (Mexico City: CIDE, 2017).

[175]Irene María Álvarez Rodríguez, 'Más que hombres armados. Revisitar el movimiento de autodefensas de Michoacán', *Estudios Sociológicos*, 39: 115 (2021), pp. 7–36.

[176]Laura Ross Blume, 'Narco Robin Hoods: Community Support for Illicit Economies and Violence in Rural Central America', *World Development*, 143 (2021), article 105464.

altogether, by recreating an old social order where violence and illicit markets were regulated by moral economies.[177]

The case study is further substantiated with a quantitative analysis of the political and socioeconomic factors that explain the emergence of vigilante organisations. I report three key findings. First, greater levels of land concentration and land inequality are associated with the formation of *autodefensa* groups in Michoacán. Resource concentration increases the likelihood for local elites to fund vigilante groups, while unequal access to resources increases the propensity for workers to become violence specialists. Second, municipalities that suffered attacks against local political actors were more likely to form vigilante groups. As Trejo and Ley argue, such high-profile attacks are often precursors to the installation of criminal governance systems,[178] and, in turn, to the transformation of state–society relations in these communities. Third, vigilante groups were more likely to form in inaccessible territories, or in areas with weak state capacity. Road and communication networks make territories legible, and in turn governable, which is far more crucial for external state agents than it is for local armed actors.

What of Tierra Caliente and Michoacán since the *autodefensa* movement? After initially refusing to acknowledge the severity of the crisis, the federal government eventually intervened by attempting to institutionalise the vigilantes.[179] A few groups adhered to the state's mandate to demobilise by May 2014 and still exist as state-sanctioned community police. This is the case with Tepalcatepec's *autodefensas*. Some groups failed to endure as their leaders and members were imprisoned. This was true of La Ruana's *autodefensas*. Others refused to lay down their weapons and instead morphed into criminal organisations. Thus, one direct consequence of the movement is the smashing of the Templar empire into over a dozen smaller criminal groups.[180] Another is the creation of new channels of political intermediation – or new social contracts – occupied by armed actors who were empowered by the vigilante movement.[181]

Unfortunately, parts of Tierra Caliente and the Sierra Costa are undergoing new waves of violence and displacement as a new organisation – Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación – expands its presence in Michoacán.[182] And according to several informants, the traditions of criminal governance have been kept alive by the multitude of armed actors spread across the state. While the *autodefensas* did succeed in eliminating their oppressors, the short-lived movement ultimately perpetuated the cycle of violence in Tierra Caliente.[183] As a local priest commented at the end of an interview: '*Vamos a terminar peor que cuando estaban los templarios*' ('We are going to end up worse than when the Templars were here').

[177]Irene María Álvarez-Rodríguez, 'The Moral Economy of Drug Trafficking: Armed Civilians and Mexico's Violence and Crime', *Latin American Perspectives*, 48: 1 (2021), pp. 231–44; Le Cour Grandmaison, '*Vigilar y limpiar*'.

[178]Trejo and Ley, 'High-Profile Criminal Violence'.

[179]For a reconstruction of these events, see Maldonado, *La ilusión*, Chapters 6 and 7.

[180]Interview with journalist A (Sept. 2019).

[181]Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, 'Becoming a Violent Broker: Cartels, Autodefensas, and the State in Michoacán, Mexico', *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 112 (2021), pp. 137–58.

[182]Ernesto Martínez Elorriaga, 'Desplazadas, 100 familias por violencia entre "narcos" en Michoacán', *La Jornada*, 24 July 2020, https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/estados/2020/07/24/se-desplazan-unas-100-familias-de-michoacan-por-violencia-del-cjng-5260.html.

[183]Joel Salvador Herrera, 'The Limits of Resistance to Criminal Governance: Cyclical Violence and the Aftermath of the *Autodefensa* Movement in Michoacán, Mexico', *Global Crime*, 22: 4 (2021), pp. 336–60.

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Rechazando el contrato social: Gobernanza criminal, desigualdades agrarias y el movimiento de autodefensa en Michoacán, México

Spanish abstract

En muchos países en desarrollo donde las instituciones formales fracasan en garantizar el estado de derecho, organizaciones criminales han emergido como intermediarias entre los ciudadanos y el Estado. En algunos casos, estos actores armados no estatales adoptan estrategias represivas para gobernar sus territorios y a la población local. Este estudio pregunta bajo qué circunstancias los actores locales se movilizan en contra de la gobernanza criminal. Enfocándome en el caso de Michoacán, México, argumento que la emergencia de los grupos de vigilantes, conocidos como autodefensas, fue incitada por la ruptura de un contrato social – acuerdos y obligaciones formales e informales – entre el crimen organizado y la sociedad civil. En la medida que la gobernanza criminal se expandió en Michoacán, también lo hicieron las conductas depredadoras en contra de las comunidades locales, lo que dio paso a un movimiento social organizado de élite estructurado sobre las desigualdades rurales.

Spanish keywords: crimen organizado; vigilantismo; violencia; desarrollo; Latinoamérica

Rejeitando o contrato social: Governança criminal, desigualdades agrárias e o movimento *autodefensa* em Michoacán, México

Portuguese abstract

Em muitos países em desenvolvimento, onde as instituições formais não garantem o estado de direito, as organizações criminosas surgiram como intermediárias entre os cidadãos e o Estado. Em alguns casos, esses atores armados não estatais adotam estratégias repressivas para governar seus territórios e populações locais. Este estudo pergunta em que circunstâncias os atores locais se mobilizam contra a governança criminal. Com foco no caso de Michoacán, no México, argumento que o surgimento de grupos de vigilantes, conhecidos como *autodefensas*, foi motivado pela quebra de um contrato social – um conjunto de acordos e obrigações formais e informais – entre o crime organizado e a sociedade civil. À medida que a governança criminosa se espalhou em Michoacán, o mesmo aconteceu com o comportamento predatório contra as comunidades locais, que deu lugar a um movimento social organizado pela elite e estruturado pelas desigualdades rurais.

Portuguese keywords: crime organizado; vigilantismo; violência; desenvolvimento; América Latina

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