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Stories of Drug Trafficking in Rural Mexico: Territories, Drugs and Cartels in Michoacán

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Abstract:

In the international media, drug-related violence, corruption and militarization have received much attention. While this is understandable in view of the prominence of border area operations of drug cartels, drug trafficking is a pervasive phenomenon in other parts of Mexico as well, not in the least in significant parts of Western Mexico (especially in Guerrero, Colima and Michoacán). The latter state has a long history of drug production and trafficking (poppies and marihuana), and of military campaigns against it, especially in the area known as the 'Tierra Caliente', Michoacán. In recent decades, however, the situation has acquired a new dimension. This paper will examine the socio-economic and political characteristics of the area and analyse the emergence of drug trafficking as part of profound processes of agrarian transformation, especially since the 1980s. What are these transformations and how can the drug economy of the area be understood? In recent years the Tierra Caliente has become the scene of particularly atrocious confrontations between rivalling drug cartels; hence it was also the first target of military intervention after Felipe Calderón assumed power. How is this explained and what are the main consequences for violence, human rights and the drug and peasant economy? *Keywords:* drug trafficking, state, region, drugs, violence.

Resumen: Historias del narcotráfico en el México rural: Territorios, drogas y cárteles en Michoacán

En los medios masivos internacionales el tema de las drogas y la violencia relacionada con la corrupción y la militarización ha recibido mucha atención. Si bien esto es comprensible en vista de la importancia de las operaciones de los cárteles de la droga en la zona fronteriza, el tráfico de drogas es un fenómeno generalizado en otras partes de México y de manera importante en el occidente de México (especialmente en Guerrero, Colima y Michoacán). Este último estado tiene una larga historia de producción y tráfico de drogas (marihuana y amapola), y de campañas militares en su contra, especialmente en el área conocida como la 'Tierra Caliente', Michoacán. En las últimas décadas, sin embargo, la situación ha adquirido una nueva dimensión. En este documento se examinan las características socio-económicas y políticas de la zona y analiza el surgimiento del narcotráfico como parte de profundos procesos de transformación agraria, sobre todo desde la década de 1980. ¿Cuáles son estas transformaciones y cómo puede comprenderse la economía de la droga en esta zona? En los

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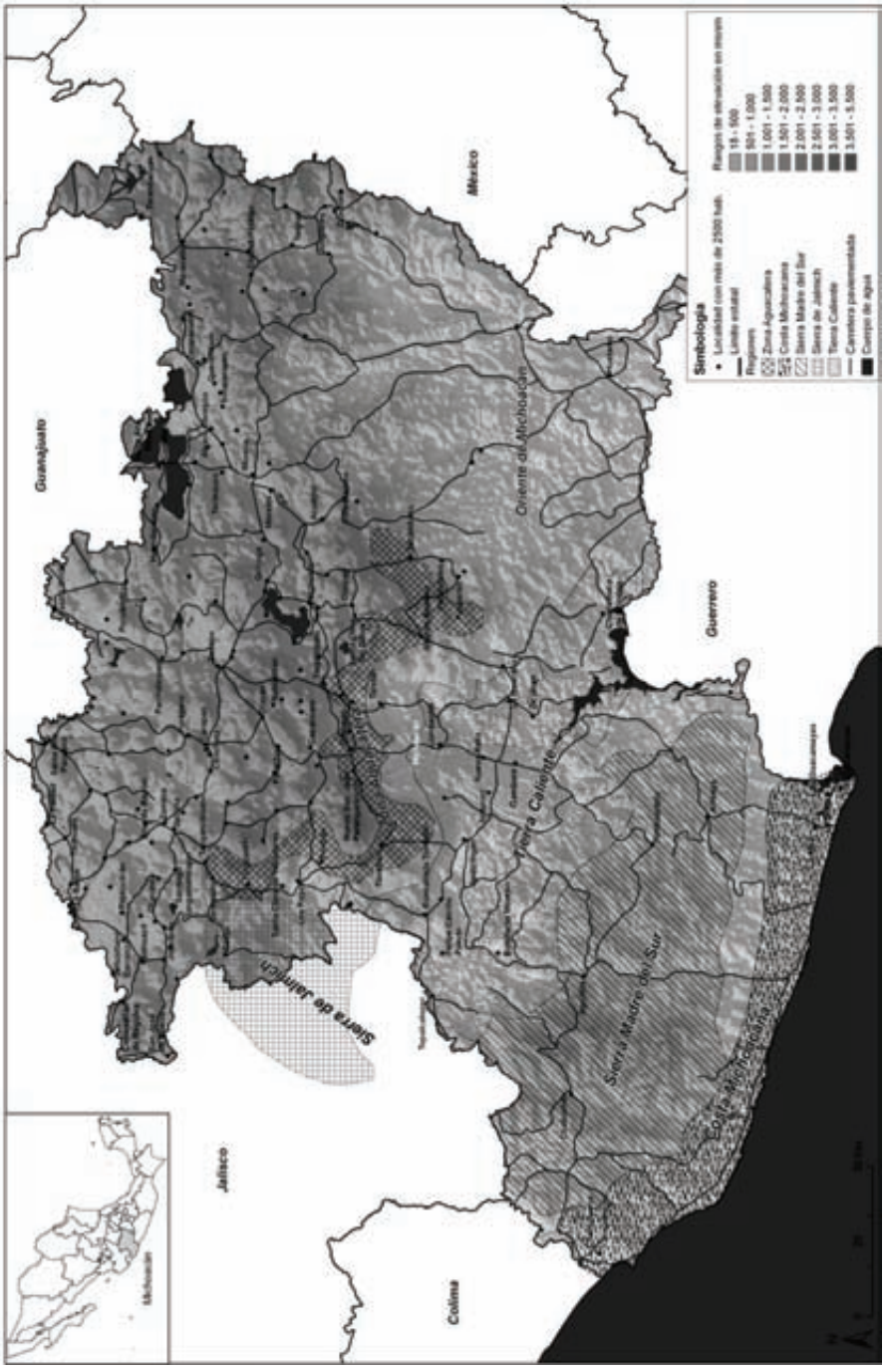
últimos años la Tierra Caliente se convirtió en el escenario de enfrentamientos particularmente atroces entre cárteles de la droga rivales y por lo tanto también se convirtió en el primer objetivo de la intervención militar desde que Felipe Calderón asumió el poder. ¿Cómo se explica esto y cuáles son las principales consecuencias de la violencia, los derechos humanos y la droga y la economía campesina? *Palabras clave:* narcotráfico, Estado, región, droga, violencia.

Introduction

After the long decades in Mexico during which the State Party – PRI, *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* – dominated the presidency of the Republic and its legislative and judicial institutions, it was difficult indeed for Mexicans to imagine that when the country's political transition finally arrived, it would be accompanied by a wave of criminal violence that has seriously clouded its road to democracy. Nor could they have predicted that with the end of the PRI era, in 2000, drug-trafficking and organized crime would acquire powers so great that they would become capable of threatening to destabilize the nation's fragile security institutions. To understand how and why drug-trafficking emerged as one of the most pressing problems for the government during Mexico's political transition, academic studies and journalistic reports have developed interpretations that go in two key directions.

First, they have focused their inquiries on the inception and demise of large drug cartels with their bosses (*capos*), analysing the relationships between their grand feats, spectacular failures and betrayals and corruption. Their discursive emphasis that portrays traffickers as folk heroes that infringe on the law and corrupt government officials while raining benefits down on the common folk reproduces significant aspects of PRI culture, such as personality cults, impunity and the importance of informal relations (Pansters 1997). Second, they identify the breakdown of the *priísta* regime as the starting point for explanations of criminal violence (Astorga 2001; Villoro 2008). Unwritten pacts between politicians and drug lords (the so-called *narcopolítica*), they say, were arrangements that allowed the State to regulate trafficking until the crisis in the PRI's hegemony fractured alliances between traffickers (*narcos*) and politicians, largely freeing the drug cartels to battle for control of this illicit, but extremely profitable, commerce (Serrano 2007). One hypothesis derived from this view holds that the surge in trafficking was actually generated by constitutional limitations on Mexico's judicial system. The force that the structures of delinquency have attained is interpreted as a problem of gaps in the law, which would seem to suggest that it is necessary to implement reforms designed to impede illegal

Map 1. Regions of Michoacán



Source: Prepared by the author, based on a map by INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Geografía e Historia).

actors from overpowering or appropriating the apparatus of the State. The premise of this thesis is, of course, that the State holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force, but it fails to explain why not all the force that resides in the hands of State is legitimate (Das and Poole 2004).

These perspectives provide elements that are key to understanding drug-related violence and the consequent militarization of Mexico, though they continue to reproduce the image of a centralized, personalistic and highly homogenous regime in which this crisis is causing spirals of terror that stretch from the criminalization of the national political elite down to local levels of power. The centrist character of the regime leads one to assume that the State regulated violence through corporatist and clientelistic structures, or made concessions to certain groups or leaders as a means of avoiding conflicts. However, as several analyses of this assumption have shown (Rubin 2003), Mexico's regime was never sufficiently centralized or pyramidal to effectively contain violence. Instead, cases of drug-trafficking documented during the period of *priísmo* reveal a State that was wanting and that made strategic trade-offs in order to maintain peace, while its local level apparatuses were seized by groups acting on the border between legality and illegality (Enciso 2010; Flores 2009). Once it became clear that this regime was not a 'perfect dictatorship' and could not keep absolute control over criminal violence, what were the processes that set off this spike in trafficking and violence?

My objective here is to examine the issue of drug-trafficking through two interwoven dimensions. The first refers to the economic, political and social restructuring policies that helped generate a thriving drug market. Several multinational studies of the drug problem stress that structural adjustment policies have had a broad impact on social reproduction, economic mobility and funding for development and human wellbeing (Youngers and Rosin 2005), and led to a profound redefinition of standards of living that is reflected in scarce opportunities, limited mobility and lower standards of living in areas where the State has withdrawn from the population both socially and territorially (Maldonado 2010). The second axis concerns neoliberal transformations of the State and their effect on territory and social exclusion, as reflected in the coverage of public services (education, development, health, justice) across the country (Das and Poole 2004). These two domains help place the emergence of the drug trade in a historical-geographical context of processes of unequal economic and political development. This study focuses attention primarily on the local and regional impact of global processes by analysing in detail how certain regions that the State abandoned became ungovernable territories, zones where the rule

of law is ephemeral at best and fails utterly to fulfil its responsibility to guarantee public safety, where roads are few, commerce is difficult, and the few educational institutions – if, indeed, there are any – are sorely deficient (Dun 2009). Understanding the complexity of violence today requires visions that go beyond heroic or nationalist histories related to cartels (Maldonado 2010b).

Therefore, this article probes the linkages between neoliberal transformations of the Mexican State and economic, political and social restructuring policies, placing special emphasis on the regions most severely affected by the drug trade. To this end, I document the economic and socio-political conditions in one rural area in western Mexico, southern Michoacán, where a powerful, regional drug trade has emerged to challenge State institutions. I examine, briefly, how southern Michoacán constructed forms of local sovereignty thanks to its relative geographical isolation, the emergence of *caciques* (political bosses) and rebellions against Mexico's political centre, a situation that the post-revolutionary State tried to resolve by undertaking large-scale public works. But those projects were suspended or abandoned in the 1980s with the advent of neoliberal politics, and drug-trafficking and other illicit activities quickly moved in to fill the void. The dismantling of the State and economic crises associated with international migration and anti-drug policies are the main elements that have allowed powerful criminal organizations to surface there, and led to the emergence of the Valencia (*Milenio*) cartel, *La Familia Michoacana* and, later, *Los Caballeros Templarios*, groups that jeopardize the government's security policies. This is still an important poppy and marijuana growing and exporting region, one that also serves as a reception area for cocaine from South America and is now considered the global capital of synthetic drug production.[1] How could such a modest rural area have been transformed into a haven for the drug trade? What roles have local actors and the State played in the process? And, what is at stake in the war against drugs?

Southern Michoacán: a house of horrors

To understand the complex history of this region, we need to explore some features of its historical and geographical background. The *Tierra Caliente*, which includes most of southern Michoacán, has long stood out for its frontier character. González y González wrote that 'it is a tropical area, a place with a nasty reputation, far from the main routes of commercial traffic [and] off the beaten track […]'; a region that '[d]ue to its isolation from well-trodden roads has earned the epithet Netherworld and been nicknamed 'the abysm of the globe"' (González 1991, 17). González goes on: '…

more than remote […] it was virtually inaccessible because of the sierras, crags and ravines that surround it'; a place that caused such wonderment that it came to be catalogued 'as a house of horrors' (González 1991, 108). The campaigns and missions of spiritual conquest '[…] obtained liturgical innovations, but failed as moralists and theologians. In the words of one eighteenth century 'inspector', the *tierracalenteños* [as the inhabitants of the Tierra Caliente are called] were obtuse, 'restless, insubordinate, drunken, double-crossing idlers, bent on unbridled lust, gamblers, ignoramuses, full of superstition'. Their indolent lifestyle was attributed to the lack of transformations. In the nineteenth century its 'access roads were less than impractical, temperatures hot and dry, whence arose fetid vapours like those of an open grave […] a habitat pleasant to the view but very unhealthy' (González 1991, 108). Caciques and hacendados exercised control primarily with private armies that quickly quelled any uprising or attack. The void opened by the co-optation of effective apparatuses of justice was filled by the iron fists of political strongmen who, in effect, enjoyed a kind of parallel sovereignty. In that century, most of those southern lands were controlled by just five hacendados. Historical sources suggest that drug cultivation probably became widespread around that century, as did mineral exploitation, and partially alleviated the weight of isolation and long workdays.

Southern Michoacán's reputation as a peripheral, indomitable, indolent place endured for centuries, until Mexico's post-revolutionary State decided to ameliorate its difficult geographical, political and social conditions by implementing a strategy for regional development. From 1947 on, hundreds of kilometres of highways and dirt roads were opened, thousands of hectares of land were redistributed to peasants, agricultural credits were made available and the prices of agricultural products were regulated. Also, large-scale irrigation, mining-metallurgy and hydroelectric projects were undertaken in an effort to 'integrate' the region into Mexico's national economy and politics. Those enormous public works and sources of public services created a pole of development that pleased such organizations as the World Bank (WB) and the International Development Bank (IDB), such that official support helped create a prosperous economy based on cotton, lime, cantaloupe, papaya and watermelon production on the area's extensive plains, much of which was exported to U.S. markets. Commodity production and exports made not only agricultural entrepreneurs and political bosses wealthy, but also drug-traffickers, who took advantage of the new infrastructure and commercial networks to grow and transport their products (Astorga 2001, 46). In reality, drug production had been commonplace among rural populations since the nineteenth century, but the products were

distributed by strongmen who used routes in the Pacific Ocean and isolated dirt roads transited only by local people. But with the emergence of transnational agriculture and official means of communication, drug-trafficking emerged side-by-side with commercial activities as regional political power also expanded. Ever since, drug-trafficking has had profoundly rural connotations.

The configuration of violent territories

Located around 1,640 feet above sea level (500 m), Michoacán's Tierra Caliente is known for its agricultural production for domestic and international markets. Apatzingán, the area's main city, houses government offices and agricultural companies and is home to wealthy businessmen, caciques and traffickers. Because the belt called the Apatzingán Valley borders the western Sierra Madre, many localities there took advantage of their geographical location, tucked away in the mountains, to become drug-towns (*narcopueblos*) that clandestinely grow drugs while cultivating perfectly legal crops below on the extensive plains. The most representative municipalities are zones where travelling can be dangerous. In the 1980s, one particular town, El Raspador, was widely known as a regional seat of influential drug lords, and many of the houses built near the main highway remind the passer-by of the Parthenon; the ostentatious, late-model vehicles parked in front could hardly be the fruits of legitimate farming operations.

Beyond the Tierra Caliente, the Sierra Madre del Sur Mountains, with peaks from 2,620 to 6,560 FASL (800-2,000 m), stretch along the boundary between the states of Michoacán, Jalisco and Guerrero. Some points along those borders are called small 'golden triangles' because the State's security apparatuses simply have no presence there. The main drug production centres are in and around the Sierra, lands rich in forests and woodland fauna and flora that went basically untouched during the post-revolutionary State's development projects. Due to the region's rough terrain, small airstrips were built to provide communications to its scattered, remote localities. Later, those landing areas came to be used by traffickers. Local towns had contact with the State only through caciques, the army, or on sporadic visits from some government agency. The glaring deficiencies in public services stand in stark contrast to such commercial goods as satellite television, cellular telephones, luxury vehicles, solar electricity and other products of an ephemeral modernity created by the drug culture.

Finally, the Sierra slopes down to Michoacán's Pacific coast, where Nahuatl villages dot the landscape at elevations of 1,640 to 2,300 FASL (500-700 m). While some Indian towns long withstood incursions by nearby

mestizo ranchers, in the end the mestizo majority took control of the entire region (Gledhill 1995). Throughout the twentieth century, that ethnic enclave was embroiled in disputes with ranchers who controlled their communal lands through illegal sales or simple seizures. Though some indigenous towns began to grow illegal drugs due to the vicissitudes of the economy or politics, they never settled the deep-seated agrarian conflicts with their mestizo neighbours who sought to privatize those fields, rent them to grow drugs or exploit them directly for that same purpose. In the 1980s, a federal highway was built following the coastline to connect the port of Lázaro Cárdenas with Manzanillo and Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo. It soon facilitated a huge increase in the movement of drugs, not only by land, but also by sea and even air. Since then, the area has been mired in continuous violence and disputes between the indigenous holders of communal lands and small, private landowners along the coast, and pressured by economic groups – legal and illegal – anxious to appropriate the land for investments in tourism, drugs or mining but, above all, to control the area's maritime harbours.

In this way, the complex spatial, economic and political networks that now typify this drug-infested region developed throughout southern Michoacán; networks coloured by a regional, *ranchero* culture that gives the drug trade much of its identity. *Ranchero* culture is characterized by gritty individualism, opposition to government, valuing the family above society, and an extreme form of popular Catholicism. *Rancheros*, as they are called, project a formal veneer of individual equality to the outside, though internal stratification is clearly marked. While they hold themselves to be far above the other inhabitants of Mexican rural society – Indians, *ejidatarios* – they are disdained by urbanites who pejoratively call them *catrines (*Barragán 1997, 186). They see themselves as a sector that lives on the margins of the State, one that rarely receives government benefits but suffers the partiality of its laws, a frequent victim of violent raids by the police or army. Their internal codes weave a web of silence and solidarity that envelops everyone who grows or distributes narcotics, so when the drug trade becomes integrated into regional economies and cultures, people adopt it as part of a lifestyle, in fact, a road to social ascendance.

The drug trade has expanded into the more temperate zones around Uruapan and invaded large areas of the so-called Jalmich Sierra (the border area between Jalisco and Michoacán). Marihuana seeds were introduced into this zone in the 1970s. Some of the more daring men began to grow 'weed', and cultivation widened as forest-clearing to open fields for corn plants diminished (Barragán 1997, 187). At the same time, the temperate belt around Uruapan consolidated its stature as a prime avocado-producing

area for export to North American and, later, European markets. Not surprisingly, many believe that huge amounts of capital were invested in avocado orchards as a means of laundering drug money. During the 1970s drug boom, the army destroyed 924 acres (374 ha) of poppies and nearly 500 (200 ha) of marihuana, plus innumerable small plantations, while also intercepting drug shipments in the region.[2] Official figures show high indices of confiscations and destruction, including 13,500,000 poppy plants, 74 acres (30 ha) and 2,000 small poppy plantations, several kilos of heroin and almost a ton of seeds. With respect to marihuana, 1.5 million tons of street-ready 'weed', 1,360 acres (550 ha) of fields and approximately 500 small plantations and 95 tons of seed were destroyed, to mention only some significant figures.[3]

Structural adjustment policies, drugs and violence

The economic crises of the 1980s led to the introduction of structural adjustment policies that severely affected southern Michoacán. Budget cuts on infrastructure projects, agricultural credits, production inputs and guaranteed prices for farm produce crippled the region's once prosperous economy. Also, with the drop in international prices for produce, local domestic and entrepreneurial economies collapsed, exacerbated by the webs of corruption among government agencies, *ejidal* associations and private property owners. The result was that a particularly violent kind of *caciquismo* surfaced, one that operated with total impunity. Companies and stores went out of business and much official infrastructure was abandoned. Farmers and owners of fruit- and vegetable-packing plants stopped re-investing profits because of low prices and other problems – many of them chronic – in marketing their produce. Large transnational companies cancelled agreements with producers, leaving fields seriously damaged by the overuse of insecticides and chemical fertilizers applied to increase yields (Stanford 1993). Though the government implemented compensation programmes, export volumes never returned to optimum levels. During Carlos Salinas de Gortari's presidency, the State also opened up the agricultural sector to private investment (national and foreign), but suspended its strong political-economic support for growers' associations and rural producers, measures that effectively ended State assistance and drastically reduced capital investment in agriculture. Therefore, money-laundering and the influx of illicit cash eased deteriorating social conditions, as more and more rural dwellers opted to grow drugs in the hills and sierras.

Those neoliberal policies soon intertwined with three key processes that combined to give trafficking new and unprecedented importance. First, the

application of anti-drug policies in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia reduced production, processing and distribution there, which obviously decreased supplies of illicit substances.[4] But Mexico then stepped forward to seize a key role as a marihuana, opium and heroin producer for U.S. markets. Since then, Mexico – specifically, its Pacific coast – has become a strategic zone for drug shipments to the U.S., and today, southern Michoacán, with its long and, until recently, poorly patrolled coastlines, a reception centre for cocaine while exporting marihuana and poppies. And its importance continued to grow when traffickers in Sinaloa and Colombia forged links with Michoacán to better conduct their business. Second, capital flight from the countryside and anti-drug policies occurred during a government programme of administrative decentralization (reform of article 115 of the Constitution) that empowered state- and municipal institutions often controlled by political groups or *caciques*. Those reforms strengthened local/regional 'arrangements' among actors involved in drug-trafficking and politics. In Michoacán, the state government impugned federal government centralism and the army's participation in public security, arguing that it was the responsibility of the police. This led to poor monitoring of illegal activities long concealed from the public eye.

These factors have had a huge impact on the expansion of regional trafficking, as more and more people opt to grow and/or process drugs, while others choose to migrate to the U.S. As domestic and international demand for drugs increases and migratory flows expand, illegal trans-border and interregional associations flourish. Through networks of family ties, bonds of common origin and drug connections, one sector of migrants has joined criminal organizations at home or in the U.S., a situation that was exacerbated in 1986 with the enactment of the Simpson-Rodino Law, a measure that blocked the massive entry of undocumented migrants. Many young people who had hoped to follow their fathers, brothers or friends on the route to legal migration suddenly faced obstacles that channelled them into extra-legal means of constructing a better future for themselves and their families. A fortunate few earned huge profits by growing or distributing drugs, which led many people to believe that it was only possible to progress through illegal means and that the drug trade was the best way for people whose hopes of building a better life or achieving social mobility to get ahead had been frustrated or dashed.

The physiognomy of drug-trafficking in mid-size cities in the Tierra Caliente is not exactly the same as in the highlands and coastal areas of Michoacán. Though conscious of the danger of over-generalizing, my inquiries reveal that people say that drug cultivation increased in the 80s and

spread into areas with no terrestrial means of communication, setting off a wave of population shifts towards more inhospitable areas of the sierra for the purpose of growing drugs. Now it is common to hear folk talk, often in whispers, of large movements of settlers (locals and outsiders) into the Sierra where they begin to plant drugs after contacting one broker or another. Some of the traffickers who reap those harvests and cartel middlemen have built ostentatious ranches and bought land and cattle, while whole families have been expelled from the Sierra or the coast due to the precarious conditions of social vulnerability. Popular anecdotes abound of groups of 'ragged', 'filthy' peasants who show up at automobile dealerships in southern Michoacán to purchase flashy pick-up trucks, paid for in cash in dollars; or of brokers operating between rural towns and drug lords who enter remote communities in luxurious vehicles and then offer to trade them for small drug plantations: 'How many plants do you think this truck is worth?', they say. Such legends synthesize how trafficking surfaces in areas that the State has simply abandoned to their fate. In the Sierra Jalmich, 'it is clear that marihuana freed many farmers from the 1980s economic crises […] In fact, it is the biggest catalyst behind the transformations that have occurred in the region. Despite the high cost in human lives, marihuana provided indispensable resources to build roads [and] buy pick-up trucks; it gave the economy a second wind' (Barragán 1997, 186).

Along Michoacán's coast, 'weed' cultivation reached a high in the Indian town of Pómaro in 1980-1984, when it caught up to and then surpassed corn production. Before 1980, a nearby airstrip was really just a narrow trail, but early in that decade it was paved and used by small planes to transport drugs out of the region (Alarcón 1998). Writing about the Tierra Caliente, Pérez Prado stressed the importance of elucidating the relationship between trafficking and agricultural investment but, for obvious reasons, that initiative never got beyond mere speculation. She notes with interest how in their conversations people defined the drug trade as a 'new form of political corruption', but one that clearly 'benefits' them more than 'earlier forms'. Drug lords assumed behaviour patterns distinct from those of *caciques* in part because they did not need to enrich themselves at the expense of local people; in fact, many made improvements and brought services to towns without taking advantage of the *ejidatarios* in any way (Pérez 2001) Similarly, Malkin suggests examining the links between international migration and trafficking. She argues that migration has caused social and cultural changes that affect prestige, status and class relations, and that the drug trade now constitutes the most effective means of achieving social ascendance in light of Mexico's collapsed countryside and tighter

controls on migration to the U.S (Malkin 2003). For all these reasons, local people often did not condemn drugs or see trafficking as a kind of evil phantom. Today, however, the drug trade is being questioned more and more as the number of deaths inexorably rises and military repression intensifies.

Some peasants in the Apatzingán Valley spoke to me of how they confronted the challenges arising from the agricultural crisis and the drug trade. In one interview, Mrs Ortega, a 50-year-old woman who runs a candy store in a poor rural town, outlined the strategies she has adopted to subsist. Though many members of her family reside in the U.S., neither she nor her husband are interested in living 'on the other side' of the border (*al otro lado*). She said they preferred to remain in their hometown and face the daily challenges of life in rural Mexico. When their agricultural labours 'do poorly' they contact brokers who give them marihuana seeds that they plant in nearby hills, simply because it is the only alternative they have. She complained that the government does nothing to help them buy seeds for corn or beans when remittances from their relatives up north dry up. In those places, small-scale marihuana cultivation helps people resolve their precarious living conditions. However, the army passes through the area regularly, surrounds the town, searches people's houses and scours the hills for plantations. The discovery of grow-ops leads to declarations and detentions, often preceded by threats or beatings. While the army conducts its searches, people rarely leave their homes, as the simple act of chatting with a neighbour carries the risk of being identified as a 'weed-grower' (*marihuanero*).

Salinismo and State violence

Available information suggests that trafficking in southern Michoacán has expanded at an accelerated pace since the 80s. Though data from the state government is unreliable, some important tendencies can be discerned. First, drug production and trafficking increased at least twofold from the 1970s to the 80s,[5] when poppies largely replaced marihuana, perhaps due to high international prices for opium and heroin. Second, cultivation shifted from the open plains and multiple-hectare sites common in the 70s, to smaller fields hidden away in hard to reach places. For example, official documents from the 80s show a decrease in the size of poppy and marihuana fields, but a huge increase in their number, as 4,940 acres (2,000 ha) representing some 22,000 plantations were destroyed, most of them marihuana fields. Plantations were moved to mountain slopes far from communication routes or police vigilance in a move that suggests that extended *ranchero*

families were no longer the only ones growing or processing drugs, but that single young men and new settlers had entered the Sierra in search of work. Many of them would later become hitmen for the cartels. Also important was the increase in seizures, which totalled 17 tons of marihuana and a few kilos of opium and heroin.[6]

However, when the Salinas de Gortari government came to power, the battle against drugs changed dramatically and gave the trade a new physiognomy. During his presidency, State apparatuses became directly and openly involved in the fight to eradicate drugs, but more for political reasons were intimately related to the political-electoral conflict that arose after the 1988 presidential elections that pitted him against his arch political rival Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Upon completing his term as governor of Michoacán in 1986, Cárdenas called on civil society to join an organized national movement to propel Mexico towards political pluralism. For years, he had stridently condemned both the State reforms that had pummelled Mexico's lower classes and the politicians who ratified them. Though still a member of the PRI, he broke away from the party when its internal processes designated Salinas de Gortari as their candidate for president, and formed an opposition movement that shook the existing regime to its very foundations. The ensuing electoral contest generated a political conflict of unprecedented dimensions.

One state that had felt the force of the State most critically was Michoacán, where the Cárdenas family enjoyed widespread popularity, especially in the south. Lázaro Cárdenas del Río (President 1934-1940, Cuauhtémoc's father) had a ranch there that was his headquarters for directing the public works projects initiated by the *Comisión del Tepalcatepec y Balsas* (Tepalcatepec and Balsas Commission). The *neo-cardenist* movement that Cuauhtémoc led united innumerable peasant, indigenous and urban communities throughout the state. But the State apparatus at the PRI's disposal soon implemented a series of violent strategies designed to dissuade people from supporting Cárdenas, including an intensification of police and army campaigns to eradicate drugs. The increase in the destruction of poppy and marihuana fields occurred primarily during two key years, which meant that the 1988 federal elections took place while one of the most aggressive military campaigns against drugs was at its height, marked by the destruction of nearly 220 acres (90 ha) of poppies and some 3,700 acres (1,500 ha) of marihuana in that year alone. A ground spraying programme was carried out in southern Michoacán, and 1,380 people allegedly involved in trafficking were arrested.[7] The battle against trafficking in 1988 was part of a strategy of military intervention in violent lands that awoke enormous indignation.

It was amid this spate of state-sponsored violence that Salinas de Gortari became president, an act followed by post-electoral conflicts that affected the renewal of local authorities. Michoacán's local elections in 1989 were marked by mobilizations and demonstrations against electoral fraud, and fierce repression that culminated with a declaration of a state of emergency (Beltrán del Río 1993). Again, the fight against drug-trafficking was used as a pretext to dissuade, repress or detain supporters of the *neo-cardenist* movement. Beltrán del Río, for example, estimates that electoral conflicts were at the root of as many as 50 murders between 1986 and 1993 (Beltrán del Río 1993, 19). Then, in 1990, when the recently-elected candidates were scheduled to occupy their public posts, *neo-cardenist* resistance movements mobilized to impede their installation in dozens of municipalities. In response, the federal government renewed its battle against the drug trade: around 1,500 marihuana fields were destroyed and perhaps 1,000 poppy farms. When we consider that those fields were farmed under the supervision of rural communities in hard to reach places, the relationship between anti-drug campaigns and transcendental political junctures springs into view. By 1989, southern Michoacán had become a bastion of political opposition to the regime, and Malkin suggests that the boom in opposition parties may well have been due to the emergence of new generations of traffickers who opposed local elites still associated with the PRI (2003, 571).

The Valencia or Millennium Cartel

It was in this context that one of the most powerful regional organizations congealed and reached international proportions. The emergence of the cartel headed by the Valencia Cornelio brothers was a direct result of disputes for control of southern Michoacán that involved other national cartels, like Sinaloa's. The Valencia brothers apparently came from 'traditional' rural roots, a family that made its living from well-stocked, local grocery stores and that had won respect as middlemen, hardworking folk who inculcated honour and discipline. As youngsters, their parents taught them the arts of commerce and showed them what goods people wanted, for both work and play. The long history of involvement in the drug trade of towns like Aguililla had blurred links among traditional families, politicians and traffickers, already confused in the social order founded on webs of friends and relatives that typifies Mexico's *ranchero* societies. It was this social milieu that the Valencia brothers left behind when they decided to migrate to the U.S. There they had experiences and formed the linkages that led them to set up their drug business. For this generation of traffickers, controlling

cultivation and distribution at the regional level was no longer the goal: their ambition was to open new markets and routes and introduce new substances, guided by an entrepreneurial vision that forced them to become intimately familiar with shifts in demand, power networks, financial engineering, and niches where they could launder the money that flowed through their hands.

According to journalistic sources, the brothers contacted cartels in Colombia to negotiate pacts to distribute cocaine on routes through Michoacán. Also, they became partners with the Amezcua brothers in the adjoining state of Colima to cement their joint control of the Pacific coast. The Amezcuas were the 'kings' of methamphetamines, a synthetic drug that had made inroads into Michoacán. By 2003, however, their cartel had been dismantled, but the void it left was soon filled by the Sinaloa cartel under Ignacio Nacho Coronel, who had had contact with the Valencias.[8] Since then, the *Milenio* cartel has kept an alliance with traffickers in Sinaloa, while in parallel form, according to Ravelo, they continued to increase their strength under the protection of Michoacán's governor, Victor Manuel Tinoco Rubí. Ravelo states that the Valencias not only enjoyed government protection but also that of another politician with a dark history: José Antonio García Torres, then a Senator for Michoacán (2008, 199). Furthermore, he affirms that the PGR (*Procuraduría General de la República*, General Attorney's Office) was aware of the Valencia family's involvement in the drug trade as early as 1998, when it apprehended Guillermo Moreno Ríos, a Colombian and their principal supplier. He declared that the Valencias had formed a powerful, cartel that moved tons of cocaine to the U.S. Indeed, the power that the Valencias amassed would cause significant changes in the drug trade.

One especially important change occurred when they began to ship huge amounts of cocaine to the U.S., thanks to their contacts in Colombia and pacts with other traffickers, including those in Sinaloa. Records show that the following quantities of drugs were confiscated in the 1990s: 28.5 tons of cocaine; approximately 800,000 psychotropic pills; 2,200 kilos of methamphetamines; 58 kilos of crystal; and 2,100 kilos of morphine, to mention only the most important figures. Also, authorities destroyed more than 3,210 acres (1,300 ha) of poppies and almost 14,800 acres (6,000 ha) of marihuana, and confiscated around 2,575 tons of the latter drug. Other actions included confiscating heroin and chemical substances required to produce synthetic drugs. Some say that during its reign the *Milenio* cartel invested some of its profits in avocado orchards in rich agricultural areas in municipalities like Uruapan and Periban, actions that extended the indirect

benefits of the drug trade to the owners of arable, irrigated lands with advanced technology, real estate agencies, and other commercial interests. Illegal financing of electoral campaigns is a daily topic of conversation among local people that surely has more than an ounce of truth to it.

Clearly, cocaine trafficking, poppy and marihuana cultivation and synthetic drug processing have transformed southern Michoacán into an area hotly disputed by armed actors, both legal and illegal. From 2000 to 2006, the Mexican army destroyed an average of 20,000 marihuana plantations covering 3,700 acres (1,500 ha) annually, plus an average of 60 poppy plantations and 14.8 acres (6 ha) of fields; though security strategies came to focus more on efforts to confiscate drugs, and an average of 55 tons of marihuana was captured per year.[9] The dearth of official reports on cocaine trafficking and synthetic drug production over the years suggests that the *Milenio* cartel may have knitted together a highly efficient network that used threats and extortion to keep its activities secret. But that same success soon made it the target of rivalries with other cartels.

Astorga writes that problems intensified when the group under '*El Chapo*' Guzmán entered Tamaulipas to fight Osiel Cárdenas, the Gulf cartel's capo, for control of the Nuevo Laredo region, a battle in which he was aided by the Valencias, gunmen called *Chachos* and traffickers from the two Laredos, though the exact nature of their alliances remains murky. According to Ravelo and Astorga, the most heated fighting raged between the Gulf cartel and the Valencia group, when Cárdenas tried to take control of the main transport routes and growing areas in Michoacán (Ravelo 2008; Astorga 2007). Violence surged again when Cárdenas joined forces with Carlos Rosales, '*El Carlitos*', an early associate of the Valencias, to seize control of the region. In 2003, Cárdenas raised the stakes by sending in the *Zetas*, an armed group headquartered in Apatzingán, the 'capital' city of southern Michoacán. But battles between hitmen from the two groups eventually led to the arrest of this *compadre* of Cárdenas in October 2004. Then, internecine struggles resulted in several more arrests that produced information, and in police work that soon led to the capture of several key capos: Armando Valencia, Benjamín Arellano and Cárdenas, and to the death of Ramón Arellano Féliz. These events, and many others, transformed southern Michoacán into a veritable battlefield of criminal organizations. After 2001, confrontations between the *Zetas* and the Valencias featured fighting that can only be classified as strategic-military in nature. Police sources affirm that hitmen employed by the Valencias were trained for battle by Guatemalan ex-*kaibiles* and former Mexican soldiers. It is also clear that the *Zetas* sought to dominate Michoacán through local leaders like

Jesús Méndez, alias *el Chango*, and Nazario Moreno, alias *el Chayo*, two so-called 'adherents' to that cartel. However, Méndez and Moreno instead formed *La Familia Michoacana* and began to dispute control over this territory with the Valencias and the *Zetas*.

As years passed, the spiral of these drug wars intensified, until just a few weeks after Lázaro Cárdenas Batel occupied the governor's chair in Michoacán in 2001, breaking the PRI's longstanding monopoly on power there. Fierce fighting among cartels broke out once again and several government officials were murdered due to changes in the personnel named to the upper echelons of the organs entrusted with public security. Since then, innumerable terrorist acts against the highest spheres of state power have occurred, causing a tremendous impact. There have been attempts (some successful, others not) to assassinate several close collaborators of the state's PRD governors including the Secretaries of Public Security under the two most recent governors, Lázaro Cárdenas Batel and Leonel Godoy. In the past few years, at least 16 former mayors have been killed, most of them because of alleged links to, or threats from, traffickers.

Attacks on the state government have taken place amidst other heinous acts of violence: horrific decapitations of rival traffickers, settling of accounts with corrupt police officials, and bloody internecine disputes. Those events caused consternation inside Mexico and beyond its borders for they appeared to seriously compromise the state's capacity to assure internal governability. Then, on one day in September 2006, fears for public safety reached alarming levels when members of a group calling itself *La Familia Michoacana* tossed several severed human heads onto a dance floor at a night club in Uruapan. The group claimed to have come together in the Tierra Caliente to battle groups of traffickers from other states, especially the *Zetas*. A message written on a large banner said that they did not kill women, children or innocent people, nor for money: 'Only those who deserve to die should perish. This is divine justice' ('*Sólo debe morir quien debe morir. Esto es justicia divina*'). One particularly noteworthy characteristic of this group was its claim to a regional identity that it felt was being threatened by external forces. This may explain in part why its cruel methods are tinged with religious fanaticism, and why its organizational form resembles that of para-military cells or guerrilla units fuelled by ideas of social justice (Finnegan 2010). The participation of *La Familia* in a war that already involved cartels and government forces has dramatically reconfigured the panorama of organized crime in Michoacán.

Michoacán's joint operation against drug-trafficking

Two weeks after assuming the presidency in representation of the PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional*), Felipe Calderón, who is from Michoacán, announced a national crusade to combat trafficking and organized crime. His militarized model was one part of an international strategy concocted with U.S. officials to confront the drug trade, inspired mainly by the so-called 'Plan Colombia' that had militarized drug-ridden areas in that nation in order to destroy plantations and interrupt the processing and movement of coca leaves and cocaine. Like that Plan, Calderón's strategy focused initially on the regions most severely affected by drug violence; not surprisingly, the first campaign was launched in Michoacán, under the code name Joint Michoacán Operation (*Operación Conjunta Michoacán*).[10] It sent over 7,000 elements from different police and military groups to patrol the state, especially its southern regions. In 2007, action by the Joint Operation proved especially dramatic and effective in terms of official mobilizations and results. Newspapers and government reports were filled with stories of the destruction and/or confiscation of illegal substances, arms, communications equipment, money, police uniforms used to extort money, and raw materials for synthetic drug manufacturing, etc. The confiscations of thousands of firearms and piles of ammunition uncovered a weapons' trade that operated parallel to trafficking, prostitution, the sale of alcohol, etc. Among many other actions, the Operative apprehended several bosses of the *Milenio* cartel and relatives and lieutenants of the Valencia family in incidents that led to confrontations among hitmen and resulted, for example, in the death of Ventura Valencia, brother of the maximum leader of the *Milenio* cartel. The capture or killing of key traffickers had repercussions throughout the chain of illegal activities, from drug growers to synthetic drug producers, middlemen involved in storage and distribution, hitmen, and local bosses, and even forced realignments in the links between the drug trade and public power.

However, operatives in this campaign have also committed horrendous human rights violations and killed many civilians, acts that people have condemned so vociferously that they drown out all praise for the anti-drug effort. Mexico's National Human Rights Commission says that from 1 December 2006 to 17 May 2008, 634 complaints were filed against soldiers in Michoacán, including 250 for the improper exercise of public functions, 221 for illegal searches, 182 for cruelty, 147 for arbitrary detentions, 85 for theft, 41 for threats, and 32 for intimidation. On 27 October 2008, the annual report by the president of Michoacán's Human Rights Commission affirmed that cases of torture had surged 300 per cent in one year.[11]

Then, amidst all these contradictions in the combat against drugs a particularly serious event took place: on 15 September 2008 in Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, celebrations of the anniversary of Mexico's independence were in full swing when two fragmentation grenades were flung into a crowd, killing three civilians and injuring another 111. This attack on the civilian population changed the logic of the war between the State and traffickers, and battles between *La Familia* and the Federal Police ensued. That tragic incident convinced federal authorities that the government of Michoacán had ties to *La Familia*, though this organization counter-accused the Federal Police of protecting the Gulf Cartel. This politicization of the anti-drug effort took on new dimensions when, on 26 May 2009, 29 government officials in Michoacán were arrested in an unprecedented police action. Included among the detainees were 10 mayors from different political parties, mostly the PRD and most from southern Michoacán. The PRD-led state government protested this intervention in municipal buildings and the Palace of Government, because the arrests were effectuated with no prior warning given to state authorities. The result was a whole series of political allegations and counter-accusations and tense relations among Mexico's public authorities. The 29 officials were accused of protecting *La Familia* after police found a list of pay-offs on a low-level trafficker. Several weeks later, two mayors were released for lack of evidence, but just a few weeks after that, three others were detained on similar charges. After a year, most of the officials were released from prison for lack of proof, and only three were remanded into custody. In another recent case, a half-brother of Michoacán's governor, Godoy, an elected Federal congressman, was also alleged to have links to the drug trade. Mexico's Attorney General's office issued a warrant for his arrest, but he fled. After months on the run, he finally took possession of his seat in Congress, only to see the immunity from prosecution that comes with the position stripped away by the House. Today he is still a fugitive from justice. Federal allegations of collusion between the state government and *La Familia* have stirred up enormous controversies, though it is easy to believe that some functionaries are involved. It was in the context of this attack on public authorities in Michoacán (called the *michoacanazo*) that it became clear to all that *La Familia* is the most important, powerful drug cartel in the state, and that it has transformed the Hotlands into the largest amphetamine factory in the world.[12]

In fact, *La Familia* is now considered the most violent of all the criminal groups in Mexico. Since the apprehension of one of its leaders, *El Cede*, efforts began to portray it broadly as a criminal association propelled by

religious fanaticism that recruits hitmen in drug rehab centres and groups of Alcoholics Anonymous. Though some cases have been proven, *La Familia* is much more than that: it has become the most powerful criminal organization in Michoacán, where it controls and directs delinquency and is busily stretching its tentacles into other states and even the U.S. It co-opts everyone from high-level public officials to local police forces; maintains a solid national and international network to produce and distribute drugs, both vegetable-based and synthetic; has cells in many municipalities that control all manner of illegal activities; commits acts of 'popular justice' by eliminating common criminals or delinquents; intermediates in personal conflicts; extorts money from local businesses; and runs protection rackets, etc. This suggests that the State has effectively been taken captive in Michoacán, a situation that has terrible repercussions for civil society. The takeover of institutions and threats against public officials led to decisions that border on illegality, while apparently generating greater autonomy that allows delinquent groups to freely kidnap, murder and force elected authorities from office, leaving public affairs in a shambles.

Step-by-step, *La Familia* is becoming the State's main enemy. On 10 July 2009, one of *La Familia's* key leaders, known as *La Minsa*, was arrested in a police action that set off the hugest conflagration yet, as in a series of well-coordinated actions, 16 Federal Police stations were attacked and several officers killed. Using unusually strong language, the federal government staunchly refused to explain those incidents, instead, sending several thousand more Federal Police to patrol the state, while *La Familia* continued to cavalierly ambush federal convoys unimpeded. In early December of that year, *La Familia* put on a show of force that demonstrated its real strength, when a convoy of Federal Police making its rounds through several rural communities in the Apatzingán Valley was assaulted by groups of well-armed hitmen. That conflagration took on unprecedented proportions, not only because of the number of dead and wounded in both groups, but especially because the news media announced that one of the key leaders of *La Familia* – Nazario Moreno, alias *El Chayo*, or *El más loco* – had died in the carnage. Finally, several days later, *La Familia* and the government officially declared that '*el más loco*' had died, though no proof of any kind was presented. Meanwhile, the criminal group distributed messages to the general public indicating that it had decided to disband, but was more than willing to support any group that wished to continue defending *michoacanos* from threats and danger. Then, in March 2011, a new group called the *Caballeros Templarios* (Templar Knights) announced its appearance on the public stage by hanging the bodies of two young men

from pedestrian bridges in a town in the Tierra Caliente. The Knights is the most important organization that currently dominates Michoacan and several regions of Mexico, with a strength that visibly influenced the processes of election authorities.

Conclusions

My intention in writing this article was to show that the problems of drug-trafficking and organized crime can best be understood by analysing the violence they breed from the perspective of the configuration of the violent territories where those activities prosper. Some theses that start out from the idea that drug-related violence is a product of the decomposition of the regime help us better comprehend how networks of power involving politicians and traffickers were woven, but they do not allow us to visualize in space and time just how those linkages have been objectified in material reality; *i.e.*, how certain rural areas emerge as zones so deeply penetrated by the drug trade. To achieve this we must inquire into political economies at the regional and global levels. Thus, we saw how southern Michoacán constructed local sovereignties that turned out to be more efficacious than the national legal order in terms of defending their lands and resources, despite the best efforts of Mexico's post-revolutionary State to eliminate them through policies of public intervention. The State's vision of integrating disparate regions into the nation through programmes of agricultural or political modernization certainly had significant effects, but they came too late, as drug-trafficking had already penetrated deeply into local economic and political life.

However, after the 1980s, the situation changed radically. One effect of Mexico's economic crises and the implementation of structural readjustment policies was that the State abandoned rural regions whose support had been indispensable, despite rampant corruption and the prepotency of many government officials. Not surprisingly, that vacuum of power and resources was soon filled by illegal groups that took advantage of the situation to impose criminal violence, while the State turned to the military and other forces of public security to try to deter the juggernaut of transnational drug commerce. But trafficking and organized crime grew virtually unimpeded and became intertwined with other phenomena characteristic of century's end, such as drug prohibition policies, international migration and control over it, the lack of public safety in drug-infested regions, inadequate public services, and growing poverty and social and political exclusion. Together, these phenomena amplified the image among rural populations in southern Michoacán that they had been totally abandoned, that any semblance of the

rule of law had long ceased to exist, and that impunity and corruption were rife in the apparatus of the State. After all, if the army and the Federal Police are free to practice violence with exactly the same degree of illegality as the drug lords, then what arises is a network of impunities in which justice ceases to be a concrete reference, and the view that drug-trafficking is actually redrawing the formal limits between State and nation through rebellions on its margins, while at the same time challenging a historical process that has long been plagued by inequalities and exclusion.

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Notes

1. *El Universal*, 06/02/2009. From 2007 to 2010, the destruction of some 150 drug laboratories in southern Michoacán was reported.
2. Source: Archivo Histórico del Poder Ejecutivo (AHPEM), ramo municipios, Apatzingán, box 7/exp.3, *Boletines militares*.
3. *Informes del gobierno*, State of Michoacán.

4. According to Gootenberg, the impact of these anti-drug policies on different producing countries varied, and Colombia surpassed Peru and Bolivia in the production of coca leaves and cocaine hydrochloride (2008). See also Maldonado (2010b).
5. For example, according to information from government reports, in the 1970s 30 ha of poppies and 1,725 plantations were destroyed, while in 1985 alone 43 ha of poppies and 1,485 plantations were destroyed.
6. *Informes del gobierno*, State of Michoacán.
7. *Informe del gobierno*, State of Michoacán.
8. http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/78713.html
9. Results from the *43/a Zona Militar*, Apatzingán, Michoacán. Information from SEDENA obtained under the Freedom of Information Act.
10. Prior to this operation, on 05/12/2006 nearly 19 tons of pseudoephedrine – a substance required to produce synthetic drugs – were confiscated in the port city of Lázaro Cárdenas.
11. Information from the Dirección de Orientación Legal, Quejas y Seguimeinto, Comisión Estatal de *Derechos Humanos*, Michoacán.
12. *El Universal*, 02/06/2009.

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