

**From narco-trafficking to alternative governance:
An ethnographic study on *Los Caballeros Templarios* and the mutation of
organized crime in Michoacán, Mexico**

Falko Ernst

A thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D.

Department of Sociology

University of Essex

April 2015

Abstract

In this thesis, I unpack the mutation of Mexican organized crime by providing insights of unprecedented depth into one of the field's principal actors of the past decade, *Los Caballeros Templarios* (The Knights Templar, LCT). My elaborations are based on firsthand qualitative data. During a year of fieldwork, I conducted ethnographic research in LCT's core operational territory of Tierra Caliente, Michoacán, including interviews with LCT's leaders and local civilians. Drawing on these data, I situate LCT as a phenomenon deeply engrained in the liquefaction and reshuffling of social order, governance, and sovereignty in Mexico and other parts of the 'global south'. In this setting, the problem of survival is as eminent for non-state armed actors as it is for state actors. Upon revisiting historical transformations of Michoacán organized crime, I analyze how LCT sought to secure permanence through a hybrid form of criminal agency that defies default approaches to organized crime. The group perceived a minimum degree of legitimacy as crucial to control over locally rooted resources and thus survival. I argue that this drove the construction of a project of alternative governance; in essence a ceremonially enacted narrative portraying LCT as a guardian of social order. By contrasting 'official' claims with the lived experiences of civilians, I examine the latter's performance and impact on local communities and lives. Furthermore, and as opposed to the predominant reduction of state-organized crime-interactions (in Mexico) to violent antagonism, LCT did not pursue its project of alternative governance against or without the state *per se*. Rather, I contend, higher-level state actors and LCT converged in the production of a trans-legal order. The state's symbolic-legal façade is here carried by actors standing on either side of the binary licit-illicit-divide, which acts as a veil for shared access to resources stereotypically exclusive to 'the' state.

In profound gratitude to the late Karl-Heinz Sekatsch-Winkelmann.

Without your inspiration, fascination, and belief,

neither this work nor all that it entailed would have been.

CONTENTS

<u>Chapter 1: Introduction</u>	1
Basic themes, research questions, and aims	3
The seeming paradox of a phenomenon out in the open	3
What it takes to stay afloat: Survival in the world of Mexican organized crime	5
LCT's project of alternative governance as (perceived) condition to survival	9
Basic methodological remarks	11
The role of concepts – an eclectic approach to a hybrid phenomenon	11
Organized crime: a phenomenon out of sight and reach?	12
Methodological overview	15
Paradigmatic depictions of organized crime vis-à-vis Los Caballeros Templarios	18
The search for a unitary definition and identity	18
Criminal organizations as rational profit-maximizing machines	22
Legitimacy as an organizational goal	24
Overview of core empirical chapters	26
Chapter 4: An on-the-ground history of Michoacán organized crime	26
Chapter 5: LCT's project of alternative governance as enacted narrative	29
Chapter 6: State-organized crime-interactions	31
<u>Chapter 2: Literature Review</u>	36
Default imagery of state and state making	37
The loss of state centrality?	39
On the liquefaction of social order and the privatization of violence	43
Non-state armed actors and the structural underpinnings of alternative governance	45
On state failure.....	50
Complicating binaries	52
Critical accounts of state formation.....	54
The convergence of state and non-state and legal and illegal in the making of (dis)order.....	55
On parallel states	59
The historical normality of alternative governance	64
Expanding the conceptual boundaries of state	65
Questioning sovereignty.....	71
LCT vis-à-vis 'classical' organized criminal groups.....	73
<u>Chapter 3: Methodology: Close-proximity fieldwork on (Michoacán) organized crime between possibility and constraint</u>	76
The field from afar	76
Outside representations of Tierra Caliente	76
A conservative research design as a response to representations of impossibility	78
Gaining geographical access: Frustrated attempts and a way in	80
Inside Tierra Caliente	81
Flexibility, uncertainty, and the illusion of control	81
Negotiating permanence in the field with Los Caballeros Templarios	84
Discussion of data and methodological adaptations	88
LCT as a source	88
Triangulation	91
Local civilians as a source	92
Being around and participant observation.....	94
Representativeness.....	95
Generalizability.....	97
Gatekeeper centrality.....	98

Dealing with risks known and unknown.....	101
Chapter 4: Revisiting the history of Michoacán organized crime	104
What rises falls from its own weight	104
The career of Michoacán organized crime in four phases: Overview	109
Phase I: ‘And everybody went up to the hill’: The golden age of Michoacán narcotrafficking	111
Narcotrafficking as a widespread means of economic empowerment	113
Narcotrafficking as a diffusely arranged field of economic activity	115
(Narco) trickle-down economics	118
‘Simply working’: Narcotrafficking as an honorable activity.....	119
Dreams of modernity: Official and alternative pathways.....	121
Tierra Caliente’s stigma	121
‘Civilizing’ Tierra Caliente through large-scale modernization programs.....	122
Narcotrafficking as an alternative pathway to modernity.....	124
Phase II: Transitions	125
The rise of Michoacán’s first ‘homegrown’ criminal organization	127
Break-down of state regulation over the illicit	129
Phase III: The Influx of external criminal organizations and incipient spill-over	130
Los Zetas	131
Phase IV: The rise of <i>La Familia Michoacana</i> and alternative governance	133
A brief characterization of LCT’s project of alternative governance.....	134
Vis-à-vis the ‘golden age’: Organized Crime under Los Caballeros Templarios	135
Conclusion	145
Chapter 5: LCT’s project of alternative governance	148
The erosion of state governance and the demand for social order.....	153
Remarks on alternative governance and legitimacy	154
Approaching LCT as narrative	158
LCT’s self-narrative: Criminal distinction and (narco-)social engineering	160
Moreno’s passion as metaphor for the rightful existence of LCT	161
The claiming of a more perfect ownership of social order	166
The least bad solution: On the ground pragmatism	170
On the ground practices.....	174
Territorial penetration and the rules of the new order	174
Beyond the material: ‘Curing’ local society and minds	175
‘Those that don’t listen’: LCT’s quasi-judicial system	179
On-the-ground social control: Depth, deviation, and the spectacle of punishment.....	181
LCT evaluated by local civilians	184
Conclusion	190
Chapter 6: Shared sovereignty, trans-legal order, and state-organized crime- interactions in Michoacán	194
The licit-illicit-divide	194
The liquefaction of social order as a double-edged sword for illicit actors	197
The licit-illicit-divide as functional myth	199
Cohabitation and aggression in the counterfeit edifice of sovereignty	204
Compartmentalizing and sharing the territory	204
Respect the green ones... and hit the blue ones with all you’ve got: LCT vis-à-vis higher-level state actors.....	209
Caballeros v federales: Forging a shared victim identity	213
Convergence between federal government and LCT.....	217
The officially sanctioned production of San Nazario.....	217
The co-production of rogue state fragments	218
The lower reaches of the state: Rogue state fragments as de facto operational assets	221

Conclusion	223
Chapter 7: Conclusion	225
LCT's demise and a new alternative (dis)order	225
Continuity in Post-Templar Tierra Caliente	229
The centrality of the state	231
Non-state armed actors as state makers	235
LCT as a parallel state?	238
Multi-layered and shared sovereignties	240
A new language for new forms of (dis)order?.....	243
References	247

Acknowledgements

Letters cannot capture my gratitude towards those who have made and been life for me over the past years; those who have kept me exploring and dreaming; those who have given their love unconditionally. Letters do not suffice. And they do not need to. For those who know, know.

My parents Margot and Albert, for their generous support.

Bea Winkelmann, Hilde and Karl-Heinz Sekatsch-Winkelmann, Vikky Joyner and Ted 'T-Bone J' Jones, for being more than second families.

My terracalentana family, civilian informants, and friends, for granting me entry into their world with a warmth defiant of uncertainty, fear, and violence. For the same reasons, to them I can but dedicate a blank space.

Anna Sergi, for unquestioning affection.

My supervisors Dick Hobbs and Pete Fussey, for great liberty and nonetheless stepping up when it mattered most.

My sisters Marit and Berit, for culinary escapes not least.

Jackie Turton, Michele Hall, Robin West, and the Department of Sociology at Essex University.

Kanravee Pongpanit, for a late but all the richer highlight.

Angela Carrea, for a bright, warm light.

Kate Saunders-Hastings, Antony Fontes IV, and Graham Denyer-Willis, for making the dance around the black hole a communal experience.

Deniz Unan and Sait Bayrakdar, for incursions into Essex's wild side.

The (extended) hard core – Ramsin Romina, Timo Schmidt, Christian Füller, Dirk Ziegler, and Jan Engler – for the comforting illusion of time travel.

Julio 'Negro' Ruíz, Abril Oseguera, Adrián Mociños, Claudia Leguizamo, Erika Salas, América Contla, Andrés Benito, Géraldine Frongia, and Quiterie De Baeque, for mezcal, conversation, and further refuge.

Gareth Jones and Dennis Rodgers, for invaluable input and patience.

Salvador Maldonado and the Colegio de Michoacán, for an oasis.

Benjamin Smith, Trevor Stack, Peter Watt, and Romain LeCour Grandmaison for Michoacanología this side of the pond.

Pablo Vázquez, Esteban Illades at Revista Nexos, and Jo Tuckman for helping me transition into another genre.

The German Academic Scholarship Foundation, for generous financial support.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The process leading to the present thesis started some years before I officially commenced a PhD program at the University of Essex in late 2010. A year spent at a Californian high school proved highly formative in this respect. Fresno, situated in the heart of the Californian agricultural mega-industry and a classical migratory destination, offered a veritable chunk of Mexico north of the border and, personally, contacts south of it. Having fallen for Mexico whilst at Fresno and during a number of subsequent visits to the country, my incipient university career took a turn towards Latin American area studies. Following a semester's worth of studies in Mexico City in 2007, I was longing to escape from the city. The way to go in this respect had been established by my fellow *chilangos*¹ and the countless *mezcal*²-drenched tales praising all the hidden treasures of the Pacific coastline and their otherworldly beauty. All the more convincing were the stories my Argentinean flatmate and I enjoyed one night for the narrator, in this case, had not only high-proof liquor but also photographic evidence to back such tales up.

A couple of weeks later, my girlfriend and I arrived in Maruata and what we found exceeded our expectations. Sitting on the largely virgin coast of the federated state of Michoacán, the small fishing village was breathtaking. From the hammocks hung on our rustic cabin's porch, we gazed at a truly tropical paradise: to one side, a 180-degree panorama of the emerald green Pacific and the numerous small bays it had carved into the steep rocky coast, gradually giving way to fine sandy beaches; to the other, the village's palm-covered shacks, given a foggy, mysterious aura by the dispersed smoke columns emerging from open fires and set against a rapidly rising, lush mountainside. Maruata well

¹ Mexican Spanish for Mexico-City dwellers.

² An agave distillate similar to tequila.

deserved its name, meaning ‘where there are precious things’ in *náhuatl*³. Natural beauty was, however, not the only precious thing on offer. Nor was a roof over our heads the only service proffered by our landlord, a proud beer-bellied man in his mid-forties who introduced himself and was respectfully referred to by other locals as *El Mecho*⁴. With the price of the cabin negotiated and the obligatory introductory chitchat about preferences in football teams and the like finished, *El Mecho* undertook the strenuous five-foot passage from hammock to cabin. He reemerged with a large black garbage sack, reached deep into it, pulled out two handfuls of *mota*⁵, grinned widely, and bluntly asked: ‘So, how much do you want?’

Maruata’s illicit drugs portfolio, it turned out, further transcended export-grade *mota* grown in conformity to US-American demand (‘This is how the *gringos*⁶ like it’) on *El Mecho*’s plantation. Within the first few hours of exploring the community on foot, we were shown and offered opium, psilocybin (‘magic’) mushrooms, as well as cocaine. A few days into our stay, my reluctance to give in to my girlfriend’s apparent need for sunbathing received unexpected support. Having had the whole beach to ourselves for most of the day, company came in the form of a group of fifteen youngsters. The lavish tattoos across their faces and bare chests were a dead give-away of their *mara*⁷ affiliation. My greeting from afar was reciprocated yet a certain element of discomfort remained due to the awkward juxtapositioning of the intense display of violent masculinity to my right and my bikini-covered Northern European girlfriend to my left. At night, we once again used our contact

³ The most widely spoken indigenous language in Mexico.

⁴ Due to security considerations and with the exception of leading members of *Los Caballeros Templarios* (LCT), pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis.

⁵ Mexican Spanish for Marihuana (colloquial).

⁶ *Gringo* designates US-Americans (and, to a lesser degree, other foreigners who look alike) and can carry a pejorative meaning.

⁷ Widely feared Central/North-American youth gangs.

with local families serving fresh seafood in front of their shacks to inquire who these visitors were. Not originally from the community the youngsters would, we were told, sometimes come down to the beach. To take a break, our shrugging host hypothesized about the training imparted to them by a more organized group whose name he did not care to mention specifically.

Basic themes, research questions, and aims

The seeming paradox of a phenomenon out in the open

In retrospect, my vacation-turned-field research-trip provided my first contact with the local fall-out of *el narco*, the (somewhat nebulous) synonym for contemporary Mexican organized crime. These few days had sufficed for me to naively stumble across traces of some of the very themes that would define the whole of my PhD project. Most importantly, my first close-up encounter with Mexican organized crime had left me perplexed. As the sources – academic, journalistic, and official alike – I subsequently consulted offered little to satisfy my curiosity, it had provided the initial stimulation for the present study. As of the time of my visit to Maruata, Mexican organized crime had recently entered into its phase of hyper-violence, thereby capturing the world’s attention and firing up its imagination. On the day he entered office, Felipe Calderón Hinojosa declared the ‘war on organized crime’ – a mere relabeling of the ‘war on drugs’ – his presidency’s defining policy. The full force of the state, including its armed forces, would be applied until ‘public spaces would once again be for our children and not territories for criminals [sic]’ (Calderón, 2006). Michoacán, his home state, became the first stage for a fight without ‘truce nor mercy for the enemies of Mexico’ (Calderón, 2007, cited in: Emol, 2007). Indeed,

the coastal road leading to Maruata was loaded with checkpoints manned by soldiers. When stopping and searching travelers such as myself, they brandished semi-automatic assault rifles, visibly enacting the government's bellicose commitment. However, inside the community and barely a stone's throw from the closest checkpoint I encountered business as usual. *El Mecho*, for one, seemed confident enough to stock quantities of *mota* in his living room large enough to get him serious time in prison. *Mareros*⁸ said to collaborate with criminal organizations, were hanging about on the beach, and despite the ostensible presence of drugs and narco-trafficking⁹ in locals' lives (and livelihoods) the community's *seemingly* undisturbed tropical easiness contrasted with the outside world's suggestion of a constant state of emergency. Against all odds, organized crime (or its traces) manifested itself overtly and almost banally, imposing itself onto the willing and unwilling observer alike without any hint of attempted concealment.

On a larger and more spectacular scale, the seemingly paradoxical out-in-the-openness of a phenomenon usually asserted to be condemned to clandestinity due to its illegal nature found a reflection in the local emblem of *el narco*: *Los Caballeros Templarios* ('The Knights Templar', LCT).¹⁰ This group, counted amongst Mexico's major criminal organizations (e.g. Beittel, 2013), was not confining its activities to the sphere of the 'underworld'. Much to the contrary: from its creation in 2005 onwards, it deliberately sought public attention, feeding communiqués to diverse media or releasing them directly to local civilian populations. In these, it did not only claim dominion over Michoacán as its designated core

⁸ Members of mara gangs.

⁹ Reflecting common usage and unless specified otherwise, I use narco-trafficking generically to connote both drugs production and/or trafficking.

¹⁰ LCT first surfaced under the label *La Familia Michoacana* ('The Michoacán Family', LFM). The outcome of an internal scission in late 2010, the faction that emerged victoriously relabeled into LCT. For the purpose of this thesis and unless indicated otherwise, I use both labels indifferently to refer to the faction in question.

operational territory but advanced a narrative depicting it as much more than a criminal organization. Moreover, it claimed to have come into existence in the first place to 'clean up society' as a guardian of social order, a bulwark necessary to fence off internal and external threats alike. Despite such exposure, Calderón's proclaimed will to first take this very group out of the picture, and then eliminate territorial competition from hostile illicit actors, LCT appeared to have achieved the standing as *el poder fáctico* (the *de facto* power) by the time I returned to Michoacán in 2011 to conduct fieldwork. This was presented to me as fact by virtually anybody I interacted with, be they local civilians, journalists, actors in the private sector, civil society groups, the leaders of LCT themselves, and not least government functionaries.

What it takes to stay afloat: Survival in the world of Mexican organized crime

This thesis departs from this seeming paradox: What accounts for LCT's manifest degree of territorial dominion and, closely related, its seemingly favorable prospects for survival in spite of gravely adverse environmental circumstances? Under the volatile conditions that characterize contemporary Latin America and Mexico in particular, this question does not lend itself to an easy answer. Against the backdrop of the disintegration of the 'traditional' nation-state and its increasingly constrained capacity to govern and uphold its monopoly on legitimate coercion, societies across the 'global south' have seen the emergence and increasing prominence of 'multiple, localized, and relatively autonomous cores of power' (Davis, 2010:6). Davis (*ibid.*) refers to the resulting state of affairs as one of 'fragmented sovereignty'. Here, a true kaleidoscope of actors situated everywhere and anywhere on a blurry licit-illicit-continuum is involved in the reshuffled production of rule, governance, and authority. This encompasses actors as diverse as (ad-hoc) neighborhood watches,

more or less spontaneous expressions of informal justice (e.g. lynching), vigilantism, private security firms, state-connected and/or state-sponsored para-militarism, youth gangs, and also criminal organizations such as LCT. In addition, the outcomes produced differ enormously in terms of spatial extension, organizational structuredness, as well as duration (see Arias/ Goldstein, 2010; see also Koonings/Kruijt, 2004; Comaroff/Comaroff, 2006 and Clunan/Trinkunas, 2010 for well-informed overviews).

This constellation entails a severe problem of state control over territory, resources, and means of coercion. Much of the debate on the outlined developments has been centered on this finding, with emphasis placed on its threat potential for (democratic) state rule and how it should be countered from a policy perspective (see e.g. Duffield, 2001; Williams, 2010; Adams, 2011; Kaldor, 2012). Suggestions by (US) policy makers and associated academicians that the Mexican state has 'failed' or is on the brink of failing forcefully second such assessments (see e.g. New York Times, 2009). Though the latter assertion is certainly contentious and indeed of little help in analytical terms, anti-statist (neoliberal) reforms advanced in great intensity from the 1980s effectively entailed a significant loss in regulatory and governmental capacities (see Gledhill, 1995). In parallel, Mexico's one-party system, kept afloat by a mixture of paternalist social policy, repression, and the mitigation of societal cleavages qua top-down corporatism, underwent gradual dismantling (see Camp, 1999). Both factors would cast their shadow on the development of Mexican organized crime and contemporary conflict dynamics. For the loss in regulatory capacity extended well into the realm of the illicit. For decades, as the default argument goes, Mexican organized crime was characterized by low levels of violence due to the state's capacity to informally regulate criminal markets (above all narco-trafficking), mediate amongst participants, and establish the 'rules of the game'. To cut a long story short, the

dismantlement of Mexico's one-party system undermined the efficacy of this 'state-sponsored protection racket' (Snyder/ Duran, 2009; see also Astorga, 1996 and Flores Pérez, 2009:137-227), ultimately giving birth to the hyperviolence the country has become notorious for.¹¹

This constellation has proven paradoxical for Mexican organized criminal actors and, more widely speaking, for non-state armed actors. It provides increased action space and opportunities. What I refer to as the 'mutation of Mexican organized crime' – the phenomenon's spill over into societal spheres other than illicit markets and a core theme explored throughout this thesis – supposes a prominent outcome in this context. It simultaneously translates, however, into a constellation in which the possibility of maintaining control over a given (social) space is severely limited. Under conditions of fragmented sovereignty, the forms of social order produced tend to be as short-lived and unstable as the actors pursuing them. The result is fluctuation. In the cutthroat, quasi-Darwinian world of Mexican organized crime, this existential uncertainty is further accentuated. For the individual actor, being embedded in such an environment translates into a challenge of survival arguably greater in its magnitude than ever. The prominent trend towards organizational fragmentation within the field of Mexican organized crime (see Astorga/Shirk, 2010; Reuter, 2009) underlines the matter. Three main sources of existential contention come into play here: (i) the existence of national states (domestic as well as international) that operate, at least hypothetically, as champions of legality, (ii)

¹¹ Generally speaking, quantitative data relating to criminal activities have to be treated with utmost care and amount, in many ways, to little more than a 'guessing game' (Thoumi, 2005). This also holds true with regards to the casualties produced in the context of Mexico's 'war on drugs' where unreliable sources and the government's intransparency undermine accuracy. Estimations speak of more than 100.000 'drug-related' deaths between 2006 and 2012 (see Molzahn et al., 2012). These do not include thousands of 'disappearances' unaccounted for (see e.g. Newsweek Noticias, 2015). Just as unprecedented as the quantity of the violence is its quality, i.e. the brutality with which it is carried out and the communicational function that acts such as mutilations and decapitations and their public display fulfill (see e.g. Martin, 2012).

intense and violent field-internal competition, and (iii) the emergence of organized (and armed) forms of civilian opposition.

Rather than add to the concert of standard formulations that see the problem of control as an issue exclusively confronting 'the' state construed as a monolithic entity and, conversely, non-state armed actors as the only true driving force behind the dissolution of order, I turn the question on its head. I ask how the latter perceive such existential challenges and what action responses they develop to confront them. In particular, I constrain and explore the matter by providing insights into one particular project of organizational survival as pursued by one specific actor: LCT. This requires putting organized crime in its place. The question of the 'local' arises here, as I lay out over the following pages, as the center stage for said project. It therefore necessarily also constitutes the basis of my own analysis. What concerns me, in essence, is the identification of the ways in which LCT sought to 'work the local' so as to obtain and sustain access to resources enabling it to stay afloat. To introduce distance to externally imposed accounts, I deem it necessary to adopt the perspective of an empathic observer (see Blaikie, 2009:51) and thus a stance that strives for an understanding in the Weberian sense of *Verstehen* (see O'Hear, 1996). Empowered by a close-up perspective gained through ethnographic fieldwork within the group's core operational territory, I explore which resources LCT¹² *perceived* as vital and how these perceptions were translated into action. I here follow the broad understanding of organizational resources advanced by Yuchtman and Seashore as 'generalized means or facilities that are potentially usable – however indirectly – in relationships between the organization and its environment'

¹² As laid out in greater depth in Chapter 4, even though LCT does qualify as an organization it should not be understood as a monolithic organizational entity. For the sake of depicting the group's leaders' basic strategic orientations, I employ the label LCT to connote this highest copula.

(1967:900). Phrased differently: resources are what enable actors – here, a set of actors and individuals aggregated under what is as much an organizational construct as a label empowering for those with access to it – to get things done. The characterization of resources as vital depends on whether denied access would entail the serious malfunctioning or even the breakdown of the organization. In the present case, then, what counts as vital primarily depends on the degree to which efforts – or investments – undertaken by LCT to obtain and sustain access to them speaks of their perceived value.¹³ My main focus lies, in this vein, on the relational patterns between LCT and its local, immediate surroundings and its interactions with key actors present in it (civilian populations and state actors). With resources and their carriers situated, by and large, outside of the organization it is only by relating to the spheres in which they are embedded that they can be accessed. As a result a loop emerges: resources are needed both to act and relate to while acting and relating is necessary to access resources.

LCT's project of alternative governance as (perceived) condition to survival

The specific ways in which LCT sought to secure its permanence constituted, as I maintain, an immense shaping power on the group itself as well as its environments. The chain of argument I develop throughout the following chapters is anchored in the following: LCT strove for a duality of control¹⁴ over vital resources. The projected outcome of this duality amounts to an ideal scenario in which available resources become mobilizable in the group's interests while a mobilization to its detriment is prevented. LCT followed a

¹³ There exists an obvious tension between objective – measurable in terms of independently observable outcomes – and subjective vitality. Though the congruence between the former and the latter is also addressed at a later point in this dissertation, what primarily concerns me is the latter.

¹⁴ It should be kept in mind a *striving* for control cannot be equated to outcome.

comprehensive understanding of resources, comprising both material and immaterial, and by no means limited to immediately extractable economic resources but prominently encompassing symbolic and social capital. Its attempt to gain and sustain control over these sets of resources saw its engagement with those structures, processes, and actors carrying, possessing, and deciding their allocation and mobilization. The latter's diffuse arrangement across societal spheres beyond that of illicit markets is a key factor accounting for the expansion of LCT's action spheres. Here, it manifested a pattern of environmental intervention unprecedented both in terms of expansiveness and intensity. Claims of supremacy over the licit as well as the illicit economic, the social, but also the political-institutional were followed by corresponding action. What truly distinguished LCT, however, was not *that* it intervened so broadly but *how* it intervened. Here, the reckoning by LCT's leaders that a minimum degree of organizational legitimacy was paramount to survival as a sort of master resource exerted great influence. It ultimately acted, I argue, as the core mechanism underlying LCT's construction as an organizational construct of unprecedented hybridity. As much a product as a producer of the conditions, the latter's analysis offers exceptional insights into the dialectic of order and disorder in the 'global south' (see Comaroff/Comaroff, 2006:5ff.) and the role of non-state armed actors.

My aim is not to provide another recital of the socio-economic and political conditions that provide a 'fertile ground' for the emergence of organized crime as such. This has been addressed exhaustively, amongst others by Passas (2002) and, with a focus on Latin America, by Thoumi (2003). Factors such as socio-economic as well as cultural stigmatization and marginalization still find their place within this work. Not least since they surface prominently in informants' accounts. Rather than as structural conditions out

of which (organized) crime is frequently portrayed as emerging quasi-automatically, though, I primarily treat them as items reflected and related to by LCT in the construction of its project of alternative governance and thus of a form of agency *sui generis* within a broader population of criminal organizations. This outcome supposes, in many ways, a deviation from behavioral and organizational patterns predominantly associated with organized crime in Mexico and beyond. This deviation, then, must additionally shape my own approach as it pushes it well beyond paradigmatic bounds. The latter prove overly hermetic in terms of deciphering the eclectic shape the phenomenon attained in Tierra Caliente¹⁵, LCT's core operational territory and cradle. Key assumptions built into default scholarly sensemaking on organized crime stand in direct contradiction to the empirical realities I encountered and subsequently analyze. Against this background, in the following paragraphs I set out a brief review of the main building blocks of the 'paradigm'. I highlight how the latter lack in explanatory potential (to approach the present case), pairing each with a synthesized preview of my own findings.

Basic methodological remarks

The role of concepts – an eclectic approach to a hybrid phenomenon

Two things should be made clear from *the outset*. My critique is not geared at replacing the concept of organized crime by advancing a competing, all-encompassing catchphrase as, for instance, Block and Chambliss (1981) attempted by advancing the notion of 'organizing crime'. My limitation to one specific setting and case prohibits such an undertaking. I furthermore find that it is precisely the concept's overly rigid nature, reproduced qua self-

¹⁵ Though primarily designating its stretch falling into the boundaries of Michoacán, Tierra Caliente ('Hot Land') can also indicate areas situated in two further federated states, both bordering on Michoacán. Throughout this thesis, I use the designation to refer to the former.

referential debate that sustains the distance from empirical realities. Its monolithic orientation, underlined below, is moreover diametrically opposed to the spirit of this thesis: shedding light on the locally contingent manifestation of a phenomenon that bears resemblance to organized crime in *sensu (re)stricto* and is yet significantly more complex. What I find is a fundamentally hybrid phenomenon that necessitates an eclectic and adaptable conceptual response. This is not to say that my findings do not speak to existing bodies of thought, both on what is treated as organized crime in *sensu (re)stricto* as well as the involvement of criminal organizations as non-state armed actors in the reshuffling of social order in contemporary Mexico and the Global South more generally speaking. An element of ‘theoretical generalization’ (Mitchell, 1983) is, in this sense possible (see Chapter 3). Yet, so as to avoid falling into the dogmatic trap of replacing one rigidity with another I follow Zaitch’s example (2002) and consider concepts first and foremost fitting tools that serve the sole purpose of helping shed light on concrete, real-life phenomena. This appears all the more pertinent since my study is one into a severely under-researched field and thus fundamentally exploratory in orientation. Against this backdrop, these elements primarily surface as aids to address the blanks left by existing approaches.

Organized crime: a phenomenon out of sight and reach?

The scholarly study of organized crime has been overshadowed by a fundamental and arguably foundational methodological dilemma. Any subject to be approached in a scholarly way, qua definition, presupposes a minimum degree of proximity by the researcher – foremost at a stage of inquiry where basic traits remain unexplored. Yet, proximity to organized crime and its protagonists has been declared unfeasible to achieve by many. Certain methods are consequently excluded from conceivable research designs *a*

priori. This specifically concerns ethnographic and other methods requiring physical field presence designed to explore hidden or sub-explored populations (see Rawlinson, 2008). Two main obstacles seem to stand in the way. Organized criminal actors are said to be anything but interested in disclosing their identities or in unveiling information concerning their existence and activities. Clandestinity emerges as a supposedly iron behavioral trait necessary for the avoidance of legal consequences. Hence, anyone trying to break this veil of silence and clandestinity is said to incur the risk of violent defensive reactions. Taken together, both obstacles underpin the widespread perception that close-up research on organized crime constitutes a ‘mission impossible’, as Rawlinson (*ibid.*) critically remarked.

This perception comes at the cost of a divorced relationship between concept and empirical reality: ‘rarely is there somebody with firsthand information’ (Finckenauer, 2005:63). Most accounts rely on little more than secondary data highly susceptible to bias. Official documents such as wiretaps occupy an important role in this context, enabling entire (successful) academic careers. They are, especially if the only source, considered highly problematic. Their gathering, systematization, and also release often follows institutional perspectives and interests, making their academic value questionable (see e.g. Chambliss, 1975; Bovenkerk et al., 2003).¹⁶ Moreover, the principal scarcity in firsthand data acts as an insulating membrane that serve to sustain manifold distortions, fallacies, and even outright myths that have been built into (scholarly) sensemaking of organized

¹⁶ A notable exception in this context comes in form of ‘leaked’ documents, something which has gained prominence as of late in the context of official documents released by platforms such as Wikileaks. Furthermore, in Mexico (investigative) journalists have long been embedded in a veritable informational economy through which (fragments of) official documents are channeled into the public sphere. An in-depth exploration of the forms of exchange here involved would certainly be in order, but goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Here, it shall suffice to say that, through contacts with journalists, I too obtained classified documents during fieldwork (see below). While these do inform my analysis I do not rely on them solely.

crime (see e.g. Woodiwiss, 2001; Paoli, 2002, 2003; Finckenauer, 2005). As Paoli (2002:72) states, sustaining these misconceptions is possible 'only by sacrificing empirical evidence'. While I concur, it also seems that less data, on one hand, and the convenient acceptance of the overly strong reliance on official data, on the other, renders such ignorance far easier.¹⁷ Given examples to the contrary, the notion of 'mission impossible' seems overly generalizing. To name but a few, Chambliss (1988), Hobbs (1988), Bourgois (2002), and Zaitch (2002) all conducted in-depth fieldwork on organized crime (or phenomena associated to it) and, like others having conducted 'dangerous fieldwork', 'lived to tell us' (Jacobs, 2006: 158). Similarly, in Latin America, (ethnographic) research of this sort has become more frequent in recent years (see e.g. Rodgers, 2006; Arias, 2009; Denyer Willis, 2015). However, by no means does such research represent a walk in the park as risks are real and cannot be ignored: the more so, arguably, in contemporary Mexico. There are, after all, reasons the country has become one of the riskiest places for (critical) journalists worldwide (e.g. Reporters Without Boundaries, 2013).

Correspondingly scarce or even altogether inexistent were (and still are) works on organized crime in Michoacán and specifically on LCT that could provide firsthand data and, not least, orientation in the shape of guiding insights for somebody such as myself seeking to study on-the-ground realities. The bulk of the works that touch upon the matter were (and remain) overshadowed by the same dilemma confronting scholarly sensemaking on organized crime in general. They are exclusively based on secondary, mostly journalistic data (Grayson, 2010/2011, the most cited work on LFM, confirms this pattern; see also Kostelnik/Skarbek, 2013). The literally less than a handful of works based

¹⁷ A thorough examination, inspired by Kuhn's seminal if somewhat simplistic work on academic knowledge production (1962), of the paradigmatic defense mechanisms at play here would certainly be in order but goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

on primary data and providing a closer exploration is, for the most part, outdated. None of these draws on data gathered directly from members of LCT. Moreover, most of these works (Malkin, 2001; McDonald, 2005) represent, as the authors themselves stress, by-products of studies with different core interests. Although they therefore necessarily lack in depth, they do address aspects of great relevance for organized crime-civilian populations-interactions and corresponding repercussions for local communities. Hence, they offer welcome points of reflection for my own analysis, one of the core contributions of which consists in addressing these matters in greater depth.

Methodological overview

Reflecting the constraints that go hand in hand with research on organized crime, the methodological part of this thesis (Chapter 3) oscillates between possibility and constraint. Security considerations and the attempt to mitigate potential risks as best possible formed an integral component of all stages of my research project. LCT appeared, even when measured by Mexican standards, exceptionally violent. The assertion of this trait as well as the suggestion that my intention to set foot in its core operational territory amounted to an eminent death wish on my part supposed a constant backdrop to my research. I initially reacted to security concerns (and corresponding institutional pressures) by elaborating a conservative research design. I omitted the *necessity* to either enter Tierra Caliente or to come into immediate contact with active members of the organization. The way in which I nevertheless sought to obtain data sufficient to construct a well-informed account was by conducting semi-structured interviews with informants that were equipped with a 'privileged perspective' on life within Tierra Caliente and that could be accessed outside of the region. While 'circling around the hot stuff' for various months led to the generation of

valuable information, I never categorically renounced the possibility to 'go deeper'. As the fruit of a months-long snowballing process through diverse social networks, a trustworthy contact willing to pave my way into Tierra Caliente emerged.

This contact would become my principal gatekeeper and enable the most intense phase of my fieldwork, both in terms of personal (not always positive) excitement and the data obtained. Most importantly, I was able to participate in everyday interactions amongst local civilians and could allow my methodology to morph into a true ethnographic approach. My presence in the field was met with a surprising willingness to share. My persona, deliberately constructed as a naïve outsider willing to listen and learn, invited reflection from local civilians – and moreover by LCT itself. Once my permanence in the field had been successfully negotiated, I was able to interview the two top leaders of LCT alongside further members of the organization. This readiness to tolerate my presence contradicts organized crime's supposedly iron law of silence. However, it also invites questions as to the agenda behind and the credibility of the accounts provided. The triangulation of accounts provided to me by LCT and civilians, respectively, their internal deviations as well as information contained in further sources (academic, media, and state documents) occupies, in this sense, an important role in my attempt to mitigate biases and construe an informed account.

Furthermore, and despite unexpected depth, my access and freedom of movement whilst remaining in Tierra Caliente was far from unrestrained. For one, I tried to develop strategies to mitigate risks – both for those I engaged with and myself – as best possible. In a severely understudied and volatile environment in which uncertainty is the norm, such an attempt is necessarily fraught with limitations. Conducting research in such a setting

presupposes renouncing, to a certain degree, the illusion of control. Many times, windows to gather data opened as quickly as they were expected to close again. Snap decisions on the basis of partial information characterized my fieldwork and gave Simpson's observation that 'you don't do fieldwork, but fieldwork does you' (2006) a distinct taste. The role of my gatekeeper was equally enabling and simultaneously constraining. My entry into, (safe) permanence in, and movements within Tierra Caliente as well as access to key informants depended on his ability to vouch for my integrity and to make introductions. Yet, with such prominence of a gatekeeper also come limitations in the perspectives captured.

As of the time of fieldwork, I was – to my knowledge – the only researcher who had ever stepped foot into this particular field with the agenda to study Tierra Caliente under LCT's rule. Reflecting the region's construction by the outside world as an impenetrable black hole and, for that matter, a deathtrap for researchers, it had remained severely understudied. My study is thus necessarily exploratory in nature and much of what I identify over the following chapters are themes that open up possibilities for future research. In the same vein, though exclusive and providing important windows into local realities, my data is far from all-encompassing. It neither covers the entire geographical range of LCT's territory nor the perspectives and experiences of all layers of the organization or those it interacted with.

Paradigmatic depictions of organized crime vis-à-vis Los Caballeros Templarios

The search for a unitary definition and identity

For decades, the scholarly debate on organized crime has revolved around the quixotic attempt of producing a definition capable of capturing ‘the activities of criminal groups and networks all around the planet’ (Siegel/Nelen 2008:1). According to von Lampe, a US-based scholar who has attempted to keep track, a staggering number of 180 definitions has been generated to date (the list is available under: www.organized-crime.de). Indeed, there seem to be so many ‘different notions of organised crime’ that have ‘little or nothing in common’ that one might be compelled to ask why they are still ‘somehow investigated under the same tag’ (van Dijck, 2007: 79). Yet, most remain within the same basic parameters, delineated as (transnational) organized crime became a matter of major international political preoccupation during the 1980s and especially the 1990s (see e.g. Paoli, 2002; Paoli/Fijnaut, 2004; van Duyne/Nelemans, 2012). A series of UN Congresses on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders served as a vehicle for the internationalization of the term, its construction as a formidable threat, and the (widely successful) call on national legislators to take corresponding action. ‘Little more than a category of administrative convenience for law enforcement agents’ (Paoli, 2011) rather than one built on sound empirical foundation, the wording cemented in the 2000 Palermo Convention obeyed the logic of accommodating all ‘politically relevant perceptions’ (van Duyne/Nelemans, 2012:43). ‘For the purposes of this Convention’, Article 2 reads,

‘(a) “Organized criminal group” shall mean a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established in

accordance with this Convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit;

(b) “Serious crime” shall mean conduct constituting an offence punishable by a maximum deprivation of liberty of at least four years or a more serious penalty;

(c) “Structured group” shall mean a group that is not randomly formed for the immediate commission of an offence and that does not need to have formally defined roles for its members, continuity of its membership or a developed structure...’

Standard definitions moreover add an element of violence and coercion as well as an element of ‘infiltration’ of the ‘legal’ economy and state bodies to the formula. The bulk of the definitions produced by scholars stay close to these basic points and the debate has been structured along three main corresponding lines: (1) the question of whether it is the set of activities (serious crimes) a group is involved in or the nature of the group itself that ‘makes’ organized crime; (2) what degree and type of organizational structuredness is to be assumed; and (3) what degree of organizational permanence exists.

Traditional imagery, propagated from the 1950s in the USA, equated organized crime to a (singular) centralized, hierarchical organization. Summarized as the ‘alien conspiracy theory’, Italian-Americans (*La Cosa Nostra*) were said to be ‘polluting the economic and social life of the country’ (Paoli, 2002:54; for the original formulations see Cressey, 1969). While the latter imagery never lost its popular allure altogether, from the 1960s the scholarly debate shifted towards the depiction of organized crime as the mere continuation of rational profit maximization by illicit means. This ‘Illicit Enterprise Paradigm’ (Paoli, 2002) has remained dominant to date, although associated images have somewhat gravitated away from lasting, large-scale organizations to loosely coupled networks (see e.g. Thoumi, 2003; Levi, 2007; von Lampe, 2009). Proponents of the latter nuance such as Reuter (1983) postulate that the pressures of illegality and the need to

evade law enforcement produce 'disorganized' crime. Here, participating units are seen as relatively small and less permanent, cooperating to capitalize on specific criminal opportunities (see also Blok, 2008; for overviews of past and contemporary strains of conceptualizing, see Paoli 2002, Paoli/Fijnaut 2004, Dorn/Levi 2005, Finckenauer 2005, von Lampe 2009).

In spite of (or perhaps precisely due to) such efforts, what 'we are now left with [is] an ambiguous and conflated concept' (Paoli/Fijnaut, 2004: 22). As van Duyne (1996:53) contends:

"Organized crime" is in many ways a strange concept: it is found in widely diverse contexts, being used as if it denotes a clear and well-defined phenomenon. Nothing is further from the truth. The concept of organized crime has constantly been redefined and contains all sorts of implicit ideologies and myths, ranging from the 'Mr Big' to the 'alien conspiracy theory'. Reviewing the literature on 'organized crime' one gets increasing doubts as to the scientific usefulness of the concept. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to relate the popular concepts and theories of 'organized crime' to the existing empirical evidence.'

Notwithstanding, the concept has become a 'political best-seller' (van Duyne/Nelemans, 2012:43). Given the quantity of works produced, it is an academic one as well. Even so, the concept seems to capture everything – and nothing at the same time. This observation also holds true when considering the case of LCT. LCT had been involved in serious crimes such as drugs trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and homicide. The Mexican (e.g. PGR SIEDO, 2009) and the US governments (e.g. DEA, 2013) as well as LCT itself, in interviews I conducted with its leaders, left no doubt in this regard. The group comprised more than three members and existed, in differing shapes, at least since 2005. It was involved in the generation and laundering of illicit economic proceedings. Its operations went across national borders and stretched, for instance, into the USA and Guatemala. It was characterized by a structured organizational body with an internal hierarchy and a

division of labor. It even had an explicit behavioral and disciplinary code (obtained in copy during fieldwork and discussed in Chapter 4). Recruits received training as well as indoctrination and lower-ranking members a monthly salary. It had corrupted, coerced, and applied overt violence against public officials and institutions and intervened in judicial as well as electoral processes (see Chapter 6).

Hence, on all counts, LCT complies with even the strictest definitions of organized crime. And yet, sticking to these aspects only captures a fragment of what LCT represents. Granted, a focus such as the one I choose might appear out of paradigmatic scope. However, even for those with an interest in organized crime in *sensu (re)stricto*, this hermeticism proves problematic. To illustrate: LCT clearly showed a capacity to 'organize crime'. Yet, the sustention of this capacity and, for that matter, its participation in spheres of paradigmatic relevance such as transnational markets for illicit drugs fundamentally depended on the capacity to simultaneously organize other and largely ignored processes. This concerns, crucially and as stated above, its performance on the local level as an important stage for organizational survival. In this sense, though neither its core contribution nor interest, my research goes full circle. Sticking to the narrow confines of the paradigm, then, does not only entail socially and culturally impoverished accounts (see Siegel/Nelen, 2008) but also the risk of poorly capturing the subject in itself.

The quantity of definitions and approaches to organized crime seems to suggest divergence and dissonance. Nevertheless, much of the debate remains within consensual, largely unquestioned confines. These (tacitly) accepted building blocks, contrasted below to my own findings, have partly been critically addressed by a number of the abovementioned authors (e.g. Paoli, 2002; Finckenauer, 2005; van Duyne/Nelemans,

2012). For illustrative purposes, I here mainly draw on Paoli's elaborations on the 'paradoxes of organized crime' (2002), a particularly concise and exhaustive exercise in this vein. For the most part, I support her observations, particularly with regards to the economic-rationalist reductionism inherent in the 'Illicit Enterprise Paradigm'. However, at the same time she too succumbs to what I refer to as certain binaries summarized below as the illusion of the licit-illicit-divide in that the separation between the stereotypical spheres of 'underworld' and 'upperworld' appears overly rigid (see Geffray, 2001 and the volume edited by van Duyne et al., 2002 for some critical reflections).

Criminal organizations as rational profit-maximizing machines

That organized crime is all about business has become largely taken for granted. Gill, for instance, states that 'it' 'may be defined as the ongoing activities of those collectively engaged in production, supply and financing for illegal markets in goods and services' (2006:280). Block and Chambliss, two authors generally known for their critical perspective, argue that: 'organized crime [should] be defined as (or perhaps better limited to) those illegal activities involving the management and coordination of racketeering and vice' (1981: 13). The 'Illicit Enterprise Paradigm', then, boils down the relevant subject-matter to that chain of working steps *immediately* associated with the generation of illicit proceedings (and their processing, e.g. Levi, 2007: 597). The identity and motivation of organized criminal groups is presumed, consequently, to consist in one sole goal: the generation of material benefits. Their permanence (or survival) then depends on their success in gaining access to one ultimately relevant resource (economic capital) within the sole relevant sphere of illicit, clandestine markets. The core focus here becomes the manner in which the question of how a task is translated into action is approached. A

simplistic formula is mainly applied: participants make rational choices, have the information and capacity to do so, and design organizational strategies, structures, and forms accordingly. With rational actor models successfully proliferated from the field of neo-classical economics to account for all facets of human behavior, making sense of organized crime has not been the exception. The 'view that organized crime [is] rationally oriented towards the maximization of profits through illegal business activities' (Paoli, 2012:54) or 'modern management techniques' (UN Secretary-General, 1991) has, in other words, become dominant.

My contention is not that economic activity should be neglected as a component of such a thing as organized crime. Yet, the above outlined reductionism of organized criminal groups to rationally designed one-goal-machines is problematic for a number of reasons. To begin with, the belief that there *can* exist such a thing as a social construct rationally designed to pursue one goal only has been revealed to be an illusion by organizational scholars.¹⁸ Diverse goals and sub-goals, differing in accordance to members' interests as well as over time, necessarily collide with one another. The behavior of organizations and the corresponding allocation of resources appear far less streamlined. Even in legal business organizations, the very goal of seeking profit is ultimately overshadowed by securing survival (see Meyer/Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio/Powell, 1983; DiMaggio, 1997 for basic formulations). Criminal organizations are, in this respect, no different. As Paoli notes, ends pursued by the latter are many times 'so different and often in open contradiction with one another that it is very difficult to select a single, typifying one', making it impossible 'to single out an encompassing function or goal' (2002:72).

¹⁸ It must suffice at this point to underline that the mere possibility to design organizations as rational systems has been convincingly debunked by authors such as March (1978) and Simon (1972, 1992). See Scott (2004) for an overview.

Legitimacy as an organizational goal

LCT, too, escapes the sense of reductionism outlined above. Its designation as a mere drug trafficking organization, transnational criminal organization, or 'drug cartel' falls short. The generation and extraction of economic capital remains *a* goal informing its actions – but not the only one. As I maintain, the striving for legitimacy surfaces as an organizational goal in its own right. In interviews I conducted with LCT's leaders, time and again it was stressed that a minimum degree of organizational legitimacy was paramount to its survival. Phrased in pragmatic terms by Servando Gómez Martínez, second in command at the time I interviewed him: 'if I treated them [local civilians] badly, they would put a bullet in me.' Such claims apart, I argue that the pursuit of legitimacy, even if not 'genuinely' motivated, produced palpable effects. Organized crime scholarship, much like the general public, has treated the association of legitimacy with organized crime as counterintuitive and even nonsensical, largely rendering it a non-subject. This adds to the reductionist take on criminal organization-environment-interactions. If 'the setting of goals is essentially a problem of defining a desired relationship between an organization and its environment' (Thompson/McEwan, 1985:23), the imagery of criminal organizations as one-goal-machines with little more than a predatory economic-extractive agenda leaves little space for complexity. The emergence of legitimacy as a prominent organizational goal complicates things – from LCT's and an analytical perspective alike. This is because its pursuit introduces a specific and different set of challenges, tasks, and corresponding action responses – different requirements, that is, of how to translate challenge into task and task into practice. Factoring in the profound impact this produced is crucial to understanding LCT's conduct at the local level, its interactions with local civilian populations, the resulting repercussions for the latter *as well as* for LCT, and not least the

shape of state-organized crime-interactions in the present case. Demonstrating how it shaped on-the-ground-realities consequently emerges as a core interest and contribution of this thesis.

Given the absence of analytical tools provided by organized crime scholarship, I turn to insights developed within organizational sociology and thus a body of thought that has long recognized the importance of legitimacy in shaping organizations. In the corresponding literature, legitimacy is essentially depicted as a function of an organization's alignment to norms, values, and expectations prevalent in a given environment. Whether those social audiences – here civilian populations – that evaluate its conformity and ultimately suppose the sources of legitimacy provide support or, at the very least, grant tolerance, depends on whether the organization is *perceived* to perform to their (material) benefit and on whether its existence seems cognitively appropriate – makes sense – within the particular cultural setting. When this form of 'cultural support' (see Meyer/Rowan, 1977; Meyer/Scott, 1983) is granted, it serves as a '*sine qua non* for easy access to resources... and long term survival' (Brown, 1998: 35) – a master resource. The contrary, however, can be existentially threatening as it triggers 'comments and attacks' (Pfeffer/Salancik, 1978; see also Deephouse/Suchman, 2008). The rightful existence of the organization is put in question and proactive action against it can follow. This invites reflections on the abovementioned duality of control over vital resources. From LCT's perspective, the principal challenge then consists in influencing social audiences' perceptions so as to prevent the organization's right to exist being questioned to a degree entailing hostile mobilization. LCT's project of alternative governance reads, against this backdrop, as a ceremonially-practically backed narrative suggesting alignment and even symbiosis with the local, as an attempt to relate to the local so as to confer

legitimacy to the organization in locally contingent ways. While there are strategic ways to ‘manage’ legitimacy, for instance by becoming ‘identified with symbols, values, or institutions which have a strong base of social legitimacy’ (Dowling/Pfeffer, 1975:127), it represents anything but a ‘free lunch’ and requires investment, sacrifice, and adaption (see Suchman, 1995). How the striving for legitimacy materialized into a specific pattern of action towards the local underpins the analysis in Chapter 5 of LCT’s discourse and practices of governance as well as their perception by civilian populations. Apart from an overview of the latter, below I provide brief overviews of the further chapters that constitute the empirically based core structure of this thesis as well as of its conclusion.

Overview of core empirical chapters

Chapter 4: An on-the-ground history of Michoacán organized crime

In Chapter 4, I portray the historical trajectory of Michoacán organized crime. Though I add new details and nuances, I do not make any claim to rewrite – or rather, as a comprehensive account has yet to be produced, write – the history of Michoacán organized crime. Doing so would go well beyond the scope of the present thesis. What I offer is an on-the-ground reconstruction of the phenomenon’s career as reflected and evaluated in the voices and on the basis of the experiences of those equipped with a privileged perspective: former narcotraffickers and local civilians. Drawing on conversations and interviews conducted with members of both groups, I trace the career of Michoacán organized crime in broad strokes in particular identifying four distinct phases of the phenomenon’s mutation. This introduces the historical-structural backdrop to LCT’s rise and thus elements without which the group’s agency *sui generis* within the local cannot be properly deciphered. To do so, I outline ‘grand changes’ within the field of criminal organizing in

Latin America and Mexico in particular. Inseparably interlinked are macrostructural socio-economic and political transformations, which I discuss correspondingly. Of particular importance is the changing role of the state in assuming (and, later, rejecting) representation of social order and progress. These macrostructural features are clearly reflected in the experiences captured and supposed driving forces behind the mutation. Central to these elaborations is the question of how locals evaluate the place that Michoacán organized crime, in its respective shapes, occupied within local society and what impact is exercised on locals' lives. In particular, four items derived from collective experience guide these evaluations: the role of violence; the moral status of activities and participants; the field's structure and conditions of participation; and the distribution of proceeds. Apart from structuring representations of the past, these items are of great importance. They resurface as the basis upon which local civilians evaluate LCT's narrative and performance. As such, these evaluations serve as the basis for the subsequent analysis of LCT's project of governance and its effectiveness in fostering legitimacy and organizational survival.

The four phases are as follows:

- 1) The emergence of Michoacán organized crime from the 1950s in the shape of narco-trafficking in *sensu stricto* as a diffusely arranged and loosely coupled field of economic activity, largely positively reflected upon as a generalized means of economic empowerment with the possibility for widespread participation. This phase surfaces as something akin to the 'golden times' of Michoacán narco-trafficking in locals' accounts.
- 2) The 1980s as a phase of grand transformations in the political and socio-economic fields and consequently in the field of Michoacán organized crime. While the first

phase's features are still eminent, first indications of a greater degree of concentration, centralization, and organization become apparent as well as a gradual increase in violence.

- 3) The third phase, which sets in around the turn of the millennium, sees the transformation of the second phase's features into exclusive and highly stratified forms of participation in narcotrafficking. This translates into accentuated expressions of violent competition amongst participants and undermines locals' access to narcotrafficking as a means of economic empowerment. Moreover, an incipient *el narco's* spillover into societal spheres other than criminal markets becomes apparent.
- 4) The fourth phase, from 2005, coincides with the rise of LFM as LCT's predecessor organization. Here, the mutation culminates in that it experiences the galvanization of organized crime and alternative governance into a fundamentally eclectic phenomenon that is firmly rooted in the past phases' transformations. Materialized in the contemporary setting of Tierra Caliente, these provide more than just a fertile context to LCT's insertion into the local as a force of alternative governance. For, in the latter construct, they surface as building blocks that LCT *explicitly* relates to and leverages upon. In Chapter 5, I analyze this phase in depth.

A fifth phase – which unfolded as a result of LCT's demise and disintegration over the past couple of years and which set in after I left the field – is here deliberately not included. Yet, the current situation in Tierra Caliente – characterized by the emergence of yet another set of non-state armed actors (so-called self-defense groups) and what I call a third-order territorial fragmentation – has everything to do with LCT's previous dominion over the local. My work provides, in this sense, important insights to decipher this constellation as

well as the more fundamental question of what drives the oscillation between order and disorder in Mexico and the 'global south'. Hence, I include a discussion of these matters in Chapter 7, the conclusion to this thesis.

Chapter 5: LCT's project of alternative governance as enacted narrative

Whereas Chapter 4 describes the historical backdrop to LCT's rise, Chapter 5 is dedicated to the analysis of the peak of its territorial dominion and lifespan. This phase moreover coincided with the period during which I gathered data *in situ*. As noted above, the striving for legitimacy as a goal worth pursuing is here scrutinized in terms of its palpable effects on the group's conduct towards the local as well as the resulting repercussions both for local communities and LCT itself. In particular, I draw on data gathered from within LCT as well as local civilian populations to provide an in-depth description of LCT's project of alternative governance. Rather than ascribing to LCT, as is frequently done, the identity of a monolithic entity capable of, as well as characterized by, perfectly coordinated action, I approach it as a contradictorily enacted narrative. The latter, I argue, best captures the essence of the project of alternative governance as an attempt to construe legitimacy and thereby organizational survival. First, I provide an overview of key concepts in the contemporary landscape of social order and sovereignty as well as in the relation between alternative governance and the question of legitimacy. This serves to situate LCT's agency within a broader context and thus a wider population of non-state actors involved in the provision of governance. These structural conditions – including the dysfunctionality of state rule and socio-economic marginalization – suppose important explanatory features in this context. LCT showed a clear capacity to 'read' and capitalize on their manifestation on the local level. This was therefore a key asset for the group as well as a main driver

towards its constitution as an organizational construct of unparalleled hybridity, rendering what I refer to as environmental reflexivity a central feature of my analysis.

In particular, I argue that locals' negative reflections on the contemporary turn of Michoacán organized crime towards its highly coagulated, exclusive, stratified, and hyperviolent shape (see Chapter 4) entailed as much of a necessity as an opportunity for LCT to create distinction and thereby foster legitimacy. This concerned, first and foremost, distinction *from itself*. LCT's self-narrative – one out of two pillars carrying its governance and widely diffused amongst local populations but also via diverse media channels – speaks loudly in this respect. LCT portrayed itself as a benevolent guardian of the local, as the only actor willing and capable to confront threats to local society as embodied by state and non-state enemy others. The latter, construed as forces blamed for disorder and destruction, serve as elements of distinction. They underpin LCT's claim to belong to the category of revolutionarily inspired social movements with the goal of bringing about a just and orderly society rather than that of criminal organizations. As much as the group's existence reflects this, they are geared towards neutralizing their permeation of the local so that it appears as a necessity. As shared threats, they moreover provide the basis for the suggestion of a natural communion of the group and local society. The latter discursive strain of distinction is amended by an absolute one in which positively connoted elements that promise to confer legitimacy are borrowed from a wider array of ideological currents and eclectically arranged alongside symbolic carriers that suggest a shared history and cultural identity. As a result a proclaimed project of (narco-)social engineering is established. Its existence turns, as I argue, binary depictions of the relationship between the licit and the illicit, the legal and the criminal, the moral and the immoral on their head

insofar as LCT claimed nothing less than more perfect ownership of very same ideas, norms, and values stereotypically championed by the (Mexican) state.

On analyzing the group's official narrative with the help of documents obtained directly from LCT (see Chapter 3) – publicly non-available and, in offering the densest crystallization of the narrative, of great value – I contrast it with more pragmatic accounts as voiced by members of LCT in interviews. Unveiling contradictions and, again, the plural configuration of the organizational construct of LCT, this provides rich insights into the interstices between front- and backstage, as Goffman (1959) would have it. I then move on to discuss how both discursive levels resurface in form of that set of palpable practices that characterized LCT's insertion into local communities. I here focus on patterns of social control, which includes the implementation of a quasi-judicial system, as well as, more generally speaking, encounters with LCT as a fixture of everyday life within local communities. The accounts provided to me by civilian informants allow me to interrogate the tensions between discursive claims and on-the-ground realities. These moreover serve to examine the effectiveness of LCT's self-narrative as locals evaluate the group's performance and, more fundamentally, the degree to which it appears (or not) as legitimate to them.

Chapter 6: State-organized crime-interactions

Any attempt to approach the 'pluralization of regulatory authority' (Roitman, 2005) as a dynamic characteristic for contemporary Latin America needs to bring in the state. For, despite its weakening and an eminent loss in governmental and regulatory capacity, by no means does it simply vanish and leave such a thing as a perfect vacuum (see Davis 2009,

2010). This, in turn, implies that to non-state armed actors such as LCT, the state remains a factor to be reckoned with. In Chapter 6, I incorporate the matter into my own analysis by providing a depiction of the ways state-organized crime-interactions played out in the present case. It forms a central feature of my exploration of the above formulated question of how, under utmost adverse environmental circumstance, LCT sought (and succeeded, up to a certain point) to secure its own survival. My findings in this arena contradict dominant accounts of state-organized crime-interactions and, more widely speaking, of the way the licit relates to the illicit. Non-state armed actors are, in this vein, asserted to thrive under conditions of (violently induced) state absence and to produce 'ungoverned spaces' or even 'failed states'. Similarly, paradigmatic accounts on organized crime depict the fundamental relationship between upper- and underworld thus: By definition, as Paoli (2002: 64, 65) phrases it, organized criminal groups *must* operate 'against the state' and moreover 'without the state'. Law and 'the' state are here asserted to constitute a quasi-natural, ever-looming existential threat to those standing outside of it. The boundary between the licit and the illicit appears as largely taken for granted, punctured only as 'criminal energy' is channeled towards the neutralization of 'the law' qua infiltration, corruption, perversion.

This binary imagery of the 'licit-illicit-divide', as I refer to it, surfaces in especially clear ways in the debate on Mexico's 'war on drugs'. Here, two monolithic blocks – the modern nation state as the stereotypical champion of law, legality, and (moral) order and nihilistic forces of illegality and disorder – are seen to confront each other in existential antagonism. Prima facie, the existence of projects of alternative governance such as the one in question here supports such assessment. The more so since it invokes contention with 'the' state in its very core arenas of action. Three themes thus sustain the imagery of the licit-illicit-

divide as the iron dividing line between upper- and underworld: exclusivity, supplantation, and monolithic antagonism. All three prove, I maintain, fallacious and rooted in one and the same basic normative distortion: the failure to distinguish between 'the law' in its idealized projection and its empirical manifestation (see Heyman/Smart, 1999:11).

To approach realities in Tierra Caliente as well as elsewhere in the 'global south', the recognition of the law as an 'indeterminate system of meanings manipulated in actual social practice' (ibid.) is essential. It acquires the quality as a resource moldable by actors situated on both extremes of the licit-illicit-divide. This trait surfaces, in great clarity, in the case of LCT and in what I term its 'differential positioning' towards the Mexican state and its fragments. As I maintain in Chapter 6, law and legality appear less as a given existential threat to be evaded and neutralized than as a rich playing field. Specifically, LCT recognized the plural and contradictory composition of 'the' state. Leveraging on the interstices between 'ideal' and 'empirical' law enabled LCT to access the state as a rich pool of resources, as crucial to its performance and survival as those derived from interactions with local civilian populations (see Chapter 5). It did so on three distinct levels:

- 1) The gap between state actors' legal mandate and their *de facto* behavior allowed LCT to engage with them in differential ways transcending the licit-illicit divide. This enabled LCT, for instance, to (successfully) seek an accommodation with higher-level state actors such as the military and the two presidential administrations while transforming municipal state structures into external, yet *de facto* organizational assets.
- 2) The same gap allowed LCT to justify its existence and generate legitimacy by criticizing the inefficiency and corruption of state actors and functionaries, presenting itself as a better solution for social order.

- 3) The same ideas, norms, and values embodied in the Mexican legal code and especially its progressive constitution, served LCT as a pool from which to borrow building blocks informing its discursive self-legitimation.

A seeming paradox arises out of this constellation: so as to be able to continue manipulating and populating the interstices between ideal and empirical law, LCT had a vested interest in the reproduction of the project of the Mexican nation state (in its empirically deformed shape), in fostering the balance between its legitimacy and its illegitimacy. In this sense, the state, despite its erosion, remains the only thing close to a superstructure providing a degree of predictability under liquefaction and uncertainty. LCT's interest correspondingly lay far from a will to overthrow and to replace state or system altogether. Rather, its positioning towards relevant (i.e. higher-level) state actors speaks of an (effectively reciprocated) offer to engage in the coproduction of a trans-legal order, based on the partition or sharing of the fruits of sovereignty according to each party's needs. The licit-illicit-divide reemerges as a highly functional myth allowing for mutual accommodation. The ceremonial reproduction of the state's symbolic, legally committed façade and thus the very basis for its existence occupied a place of central functionality in this context. LCT actively invested in producing signals required to this end. Amongst other things, it would, as its leaders told me, 'give' the state 'a meth lab every once in a while', allowing the state to 'impersonate itself' (Comaroff/Comaroff, 2006:16) and to simulate its capacity and will to advance the rule of law. As I explain further, municipal elections were effectively co-organized by both sides, thereby sustaining the illusion of an electoral democracy to the benefit of one and producing organizational assets for the other. All the while LCT's project of governance largely proceeded under conditions of non-interference *and* spatial coexistence with higher-level state actors. In a nutshell,

LCT did not primarily pursue its project of alternative governance and thus its organizational survival despite, or even in direct antagonism to, the state per se but was able to do so due to a skillful insertion into the extant landscape of sovereignties.

Before I set out to analyze LCT's rise as well as the shape and effects of its attempt to guarantee its organizational survival, in the following chapter I discuss key themes and concepts that are being prominently discussed in the contemporary literature on the reshuffling of social order in the Global South and the role of non-state armed actors herein. These are therefore also of great importance for the interpretation of my own data in Chapters 4 to 6, which are furthermore preceded by a discussion of my methodology in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This thesis' goal to decipher the mutation of Mexican organized crime and its Michoacán variant in particular can be traced back to 'naive' encounters with it. Encounters, as I have pointed out in the introduction, with a phenomenon that manifested itself out in the open and thus where, common as well as default academic sensemaking indicate, it was not supposed to be found. How could a violent non-state actor such as LCT publicly claim and effectively exercise a significant degree of control over an important chunk of the Mexican territory? The more so since this was happening in a country that had, just a few years before, been widely lauded as a model democratizer that had non-violently and gradually transitioned from authoritarian rule to democracy like no other political system in Latin America before it (see Chapter 4 for details). This observation, bewildering to most outside analyzers and hotly discussed both within and outside of scholarly circles, raises important questions. These concern, most obviously, the role and standing of the state. More specifically, the interactions and relations between non-state armed actors and the state are of the greatest importance for deciphering the mechanisms and driving forces underlying the reshuffling of social order in Latin America and the Global South more generally. The same is therefore true for this thesis. Hence, to lay the groundwork for the discussion and themes I develop over the following chapters, what I provide below is a succinct reflection of the main items and strains of the debate. I do so by centering on the concepts and strains of reasoning that are of the greatest relevance for reflecting and interpreting my own data and the findings derived from it. I first discuss 'traditional' understandings of state, state formation, and sovereignty and examine ways in which these have been drawn upon to account for transformation in order creation (in the Global South) and interaction between state and non-state elements. I then contrast these by

introducing more recent, critical conceptualizations that provide analytical tools more fitting for significantly changed sociopolitical conditions such as those the case of LCT has been embedded in.

Default imagery of state and state making

The narrative of Mexico's ascendance to a poster country of democratic and economic development was drowned for good as the country's 'narcoviolence' hit new highs in the aftermath of the militarization of anti-organized crime measures under President Calderón. To doomsayers of different backgrounds, this and the admitted loss of control by the Mexican state over parts of its territory in Michoacán and elsewhere harbingered the partial or utter failure of the Mexican state. As irreconcilable and distant they seem, both assertions – that of the triumph of democratic progress and process and that of Mexico's drug-propelled decay into a state of anarchy – are base on the same traditional imagery of state and state formation. Both, that is, are rooted in a metaphysical genealogy of social order that postulates a linear development of human society. Simply put, an initial, socially atomistic state of anarchy is seen as the point of departure. Fundamental insecurity or even a war of all against all is here perpetual but ultimately overcome as individuals see the reason for and agree upon a 'social contract' which gives society coherence and its members security through norms of reciprocity (Hampton, 1986 provides a good overview of this genealogy of societal order based on in social contract theories, most famously by Hobbes and Locke). From this point of inception starts a civilizational process that gives birth to states, crucial for securing civilizational advancement and social order through their capacity to bind and dominate sources of violence that would otherwise be disorderly arranged, thus harboring a high potential for or inevitably leading to disintegration and

chaos. Especially in Hobbes' account, man does not appear as a 'social animal' by nature and is only tamed through the state.

The term 'state' itself is deeply rooted in Western thought and dates back to the Middle Ages. It first connotes an embodiment of a particular ruler and of a particular form of rule herewith coupled. This starts to change in the Renaissance where it begins to be construed as a particular form of government the ruler has a certain responsibility to reproduce. This thought of abstraction and transcendence culminates with the rise of the modern nation-state: '[A]ccording to the modern concept, the state is an entity with a life on its own, distinct from both governors and governed. And because of this abstraction, it can demand allegiance from both sides' (Asad, 2004:281). Not only that, but it is furthermore vested with the legitimate right to do so. For it is, from this perspective, only through the state's historical success in monopolizing both taxation and violence that late feudal societies' fragmentation and conflictivity is overcome and a higher civilizational state obtained. This is not to say that violence within society is eradicated altogether. But, as Weber (1919) famously argued, the state's monopolization of it as well as its use for the public and not the private good according to a rational, independent, and legally bound and committed bureaucracy makes it 'civilized violence' (or simply 'force'). Hereby, the existence of the state as such becomes legitimate (good examples of critical overviews of default accounts of state formation come from Asad, 2004, who draws on Skinner's work of 1978 to trace the trajectory of the term in Western thought; Davis, 2009:225ff.; Pansters, 2012:19). Weber's formulation is still predominant and the gold standard tacitly accepted and reproduced by most social scientists. In this vein, the modern nation-state is understood as a 'human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory' (Weber, 1919). Expressed differently in summary of

the above outlined imagery, the state appears as a political-institutional body that acts in unity, rationally, and legally and which furthermore is the only actor within a given territory that holds the means of violence and decides over their activation vis-a-vis a given subject population by which its right to do so is recognized as legitimate. The latter also holds the inseparably entangled definition of 'sovereignty', which is of utmost importance for the case and setting I analyze in this thesis and to which I dedicate more attention below. Suffice it to say in the meantime, that sovereignty is 'taken as the absolute authority a state holds over a territory and people' and 'treated as an already settled question'. Particularly so within political science and international relations and thus scholarship with great influence over sensemaking on non-state armed actors, as Cynthia Weber, herself a member of that discipline, laments (1995:1). The 'evolution of "political man"', as Arias and Goldstein critically remark (2010:13), is moreover widely accepted as culminating in Western-style democracy, which theoretically pairs a functioning state as laid put above with a wide regime of individual rights and protections against state abuse. 'It' – the Western democratic state, that is – embodies the desirable product of said evolutionary process and, as such, the marker of good vs. evil, civilized vs. uncivilized/barbarian, rational vs. irrational/erratic, force vs. violence, order vs. disorder/anarchy, and law vs. arbitrariness and abuse.

The loss of state centrality?

Increasingly so after the end of the Cold War and the formulation of world order as multipolar rather than bipolar, the above outlined traditional narrative of state making and of state itself has become questioned. While angles towards the reexamination of the matter have been informed by diverse interests, sets of presumptions, and disciplinary

perspectives, most of these have centered on the observation that the 'trinity' of the modern nation-state – the monopoly of violence, sovereignty, and legitimacy – has undergone profound transformations. The weakening of the nation-state's capacity to govern and to effectively control populations and territories has surfaced as one the most prominent themes in this context. The default argument has it that forces previously held at bay through the partition of the world among the 'super-powers'; the USSR and USA. Each had an interest, as well as the resources, in fostering state survival in their respective areas of influence. All in all, this leveled out the respective opponent's attempts to the contrary and gave stability to existing nation-states. This often took the form of providing resources and expertise such as military aid and training, not least so in Latin America (see Gill, 2004 for an in-depth account of US-American counterinsurgency programs in the region). This either allowed sitting regimes to quell opposition groups or, vice versa, opposition groups to overthrow sitting regimes, concentrating, in any case, power and force at the state level. While this also ensued support for non-state actors (a prime example would be US support for the so-called mujahidin in Pakistan and Afghanistan against a state supported and installed by the USSR upon its invasion of the country in 1979), this is nevertheless seen as having kept conflicts under relative control as, with only two blocks involved, things remained relatively clear-cut. As, however, a multipolar structure arises and the pressure to provide resources evaporates, regimes and states hitherto kept alive quasi-artificially began to reveal their true weakness and crumble.

This line of argumentation has been most vocally advanced by scholars with an explicit concern for matters of 'national security' (see Davis, 2009:221ff. for an excellent overview). States situated in the Global South are portrayed as most adversely affected. Their 'decay', 'malfunctioning', or even 'failure' – formulations vary – is said to present the

greatest threat potential for Western states and thus a new set of security challenges. Non-state armed actors such as terrorist and insurgent groups are here often asserted to thrive under conditions of 'weak' or altogether 'absent' states, a condition only further accentuated as non-state armed actors such as the aforementioned are seen to inherently strive to confront, undermine, and ultimately overthrow the state. This, it has been argued, leads to the production of 'ungoverned' and thus 'dangerous spaces' where 'dragons' (Williams, 2010) wreak havoc and tear apart societal arrangements and stability. As opposed to previously dominant ways of war-making, conflict migrates from the international to the sub-national sphere where unleashed non-state entities confront each other as well as the state, entailing a serious destabilizing potential both for domestic as well as foreign states as 'ungoverned spaces' are seen as safe havens for threats such as international drug trafficking and terrorism. The body of literature outlined here shows a significant overlap with default sensemaking on organized crime, the main building blocks of which I have discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Firmly built into this literature is a threat perception and positioning to law, state, and order that mirrors the assessment that non-state armed actors strive to confront, push back, and replace established forms of order. Both are built, that is, on the same totalities, notably the construction of the Western nation-state as the natural and only true guardian and 'owner' of civilizational progress and thus morality, legality, rationality, and 'good' social order more generally.

Recent works that seek to decipher questions of societal ordering from the bottom up qua ethnography and other suitable methods, many of which have been elaborated by anthropologists, have also treated the role of the state as well as of non-state armed actors prominently. While the recognition that the state is undergoing transformations and that it might be in decay (see e.g. Davis, 2010) is widespread, these works paint a more complex

picture of the forces driving these transformations. Crucially, this concerns the role of non-state armed actors such as LCT, which are not reduced to entities with an easily delineated legal and moral identity, agenda, motivation, and relation to the state. Too-virulent-to-control forces and flows of globalization – including but not limited to organized crime as a phenomenon propelled not least through technological advances and the associated impossibility to make national borders ‘airtight’ (see Nordstrom, 2000; Berdal/Serrano, 2002) – are factored in. Yet, the erosion of governmental capacity is portrayed as driven, not least, from within the state. That is, while indubitably an effect of a ‘pressure from above’ (see Trouillot, 2001:125) insofar as they have been significantly diffused through actors and processes situated at the supranational level, neoliberal reforms were ultimately still legislated and implemented by state functionaries (see Clunan/Trinkunas, 2010:22ff.). The ‘weak state’, as Sousa (2006:43) notes, is not least produced from within. Following the neo-classical belief that private solutions to problems of governance (specifically within and over markets) are superior to those the state is capable of offering, this ensues the significant reduction of activity by, or retreat of, the state from previously assumed regulatory functions (see Gledhill, 1995; Meyer, 2000). The latter include the provision of social security and health care, the regulation of economic activities, and not least the provision of security, which is also increasingly either left for self-regulation or outsourced to private actors. The privatization of policing as well as of armed forces have been discussed as prime examples in this context (see Forst/Manning, 1999; Mandel, 2001; Sklansky, 2006).

On the liquefaction of social order and the privatization of violence

This privatization and outsourcing of the state's force is inscribed in an overarching dynamic of the privatization of violence, which has become a dominant feature of contemporary Latin America (see Caldeira, 2000 and Huggins, 2000). The term implies a trend towards the disintegration of the monopoly of violence by the state and is based on the observation that private actors situated on the sub-national level have increasingly come to bundle means of coercion. The 'pressure from above', Sousa (2006:44) extrapolates from his discussion of the resurgence of 'traditional' authorities in Africa, is complemented from below. In Latin America, Kruijt and Koonings (2004) find a 'new violence' (see also Pereira/Davis, 2000; Kurtenbach, 2003), which they deem an effect of its dispersion in the aftermath of the formal democratization of the region's political regimes over the latter quarter of the twentieth century (the volume edited by Mainwaring and Scully, 1995, provides an overview). Violence that, it is argued, was previously bound to the state and used to secure or challenge given regimes (in a Cold-War climate) is subsequently refracted away from it. It resurfaces, to a large degree, in the hands of non-state actors who employ it in the pursuit of diverse private interests, including private security solutions (more on the matter below). If, as the authors contend, this new violence is not geared at 'at conquering state power' (Kruijt and Koonings, 2004:8) anymore, this would effectively imply its de-politicization. Yet, as I discuss below, this notion can be questioned insofar as it seems to equate state power to formal control over state institutions and to take for granted that such a thing can be clearly delineated and tied to formal political institutions in the first place. Searching for state power in and around formal institutions of government alone is, however, problematic, as I further discuss in reference to Trouillot's work, insofar as it does not only manifest itself in such 'empirically

obvious' (2001:126) ways. Apart from these changes in the region's prevalent type of political regime, the 'neoliberal turn' is, here too, identified as a driver of the privatization of violence beyond the mentioned aspect of the direct outsourcing from state to private sphere alone. Specifically, as amongst others Stanford (1994), Gledhill (1995), Snyder (1999), Harvey (2005), as well as Arias and Goldstein (2010:14ff.) have discussed, neoliberal reforms can be seen as having accentuated the region's deeply rooted social inequality, poverty levels, as well as indices in violence, which most adversely affects already vulnerable populations.

The state's reduced capacity and/or unwillingness to govern and to provide security forms, alongside the propagation of individual responsibility and self-help as the ideological *Unterbau* of neoliberal globalization is, according to Zygmunt Bauman, part and parcel of the past decades' great structural changes. Bauman's highly influential concept of 'liquid modernity' (2000, see also 2006 and 2007) opposes, as he argues, the overly crude portrayal of Western societies' transition from modernity to postmodernity. The latter departs from the notion that modernity was essentially stable, based on and interwoven by ordering institutions such as the family, the profession, the nation-state and nationalism, all of which underpinned and made for relatively fixed identities and forms of community and belonging. These 'old' institutions of 'rationalizing' that act as containers and stabilizers undergo erosion as, not least induced by technological changes, social change picks up speed during the twentieth century's last decades and a trend towards societal atomization ensues. To Bauman, such a neat transition from one societal state to another proves overly simplistic insofar as the duality and tension between constraint and conservation on one hand and change on the other was already well present during modernity, only that the above mentioned institutions kept the processes of change at a

relatively low speed. Hence, to Bauman, social change and the pervasiveness of social change as such are nothing new necessarily. The essential elements that make what comes after 'classic' modernity are already well present (and do not simply vanish later either). But as of yet they have not entered a comparable state of acceleration and flux. He thus deems it more pertinent to speak of a transition from solid to liquid modernity rather than to distinguish between modernity and post-modernity as altogether discrete epochs.

Non-state armed actors and the structural underpinnings of alternative governance

Bauman's account of liquefaction captures and helps to understand core processes that come into play in the reshuffling of Latin America's and Mexico's security and governance landscapes. It also surfaces as a key theme in my exploration of LCT as a group that, as I lay out in the core empirical chapters of this thesis, emerges out of a regional tradition of narco-trafficking but mutates into a far more complex phenomenon and organizational form insofar as it ventured into a sphere of governance. A true kaleidoscope of non-state (armed) actors that has, across the region and the Global South more generally speaking, come to assume designated core functions of the nation-state such as the provision of security and welfare. LCT resembles, in this aspect, non-state entities as diverse as lynch mobs, vigilantes, private security firms, paramilitaries, youth gangs, as well as 'classical' criminal organizations, whose involvement in different shapes and degrees has received increasing attention by recent scholarship (amongst other by Reno, 1995, 2000; Koonings/Kruijt, 2004; Comaroff/Comaroff, 2006; Litzinger, 2006; Arias/Goldstein, 2010; Baylouny, 2010; Clunan/Trinkunas, 2010).

This 'pluralization of regulatory authority' (Roitman, 2005) cannot simply be accounted for by asserting that violent actors *force* themselves onto a given civilian population. The role of violence is beyond any doubt great in settings with high non-state armed actor presence. This is indubitably the case in sites like Tierra Caliente, characterized by a criminal actor population that by any standard qualifies as extremely violent. Yet, while important, violence alone can neither account for the emergence of non-state actor-carried governance nor can it exhaustively describe their interactions with given civilian populations. As I show in reference to LCT in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively, just as important for its production and formulation is uncertainty. The latter is, according to Bauman, one of liquid modernity's central features and effects. The liquefaction of the state-centered model of social ordering and the rapidness with which other building blocks of identity (see above) undermine ontological security leave individuals longing for some sort of orientation. Bauman sees the past decades' strengthening of religious fundamentalism and nationalism as clear examples in this context.

In Latin America, the world's most violent region, this uncertainty is arguably further accentuated. It underpins what Koonings and Kruijt (1999) have called 'societies of fear'. Disorder and insecurity is here perceived by many to be a, if not the, defining feature of everyday life. As the state is widely blamed and perceived to be unwilling, incapable, and/or corrupt, citizens seek alternative solutions for social order. Comaroff and Comaroff (2006:19ff.), writing on (dis-) order in the post-colony, argue that it should come as no surprise that the demand for order – and the variety as well creativity of forms in which people try to satisfy it – is greatest precisely where it is perceived to be most absent. They go so far as to diagnose a 'fetish' for law and order in many parts of the Global South. A similar argument has been advanced by Goldstein, who has conducted extensive

ethnographic work on lynchings as a form of alternative justice and vigilantism more generally in Bolivia (e.g. 2003, 2005; on lynchings see also Godoy, 2005; on vigilantism see also Huggins, 1991; Hurrell, 1998; Ungar, 2007). Interpreting lynchings as ‘a form of political expressions for people without access to formal political venues’ (2003:23), he opposes the common dismissal of lynchings and other forms of vigilantism as primitive and essentially pre-modern expressions of hatred and revenge. On the contrary, it is a means via which ‘the powerless attempt to communicate’ (2003:23), making lynchings a call on the state to fulfill its obligations rather than the attempt to carve out autonomous space from and against it. They thus appear as an attempt to pursue and are indeed often justified qua reference to the very same values the state ideally embodies but fails to, in reality, advance. They suppose not only ‘simultaneous embrace and rejection of the official order’ (Goldstein, 2003:25) but moreover embody, as Goldstein contends, a consequential instantiation of neoliberalism’s self-help and responsibility ethos. This supposes an interesting parallel to my elaboration on LCT insofar as, as I demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 6, LCT claimed appropriation and more perfect representation of values and ideas stereotypically associated with the state. Here, too, it becomes apparent that in sites where they seem to be altogether absent, these elements are often recycled and reemployed in a seemingly paradoxical fashion.

The disjuncture between expectations of progress, justice, and state performance as formally defined and everyday realities that significantly depart from the latter plays a crucial role in the privatization of violence. The same is true for the emergence of diverse forms of alternative governance, which has seen the involvement of criminal organizations involved in drug trafficking. As Davis (2009) shows by referring to Mexico and particularly the so-called *Zetas* – commonly assumed to be the bloodiest amongst the country’s

criminal organizations (Ríos/Dudley, 2013) and one of LCT's predecessors (Chapter 4) – criminal actors not traditionally counted amongst non-state armed actors are involved in the constitution of 'new imagined communities'. She implies, by this term, imagined communities other than those of nation-states and construed to foster 'loyalty and allegiance' by populations who have grown estranged from the state. My own elaborations on the case of LCT, particularly those I present in Chapter 5, add both new data and complexity to this observation insofar as I unpack LCT's own attempt to form such a community, revealing the underlying strategic motivations, discursive techniques applied, as well as the impact of this attempt both on civilian populations and LCT itself. More than just drugs or other goods, I argue, LCT peddles ontological security. The latter is one of the main features that distinguishes LCT from 'normal' organized crime groups and renders it unique.

While criminal organizations' involvement in the provision of security and even ontological security might seem a paradox from a perspective that sticks to the assumption of the state's moral integrity, a deeply engrained division and mistrust between populations and state actors is common in Latin America and frequently based on a history of human rights abuses. This, in combination with the fact that local (criminal) power holders can simply be 'closer' than agents of the state that often have little to no personal connection to the community entails that 'low-income populations often [feel] more protected by the 'real' criminals than by the police...' (Leeds, 2007:24/27-30). This schism, in turn, can be leveraged by criminal actors to foster their own legitimacy and survival. It also underpins, alongside other factors such as the modified role and presence of the state, the hybridization of Mexican organized crime into a phenomenon characterized by the galvanization of 'classical' organized criminal actors, traditionally taken to be motivated by

profit, and 'classical' non-state armed actors, assumed to be driven by a political agenda (see Davis, 2009:221-225; for an overview of the 'greed vs. grievance debate' see Berdal, 2005).

In the case of LCT, the striving for organizational legitimacy surfaced as a core building block of the group's survival strategy. Key in this context is that legitimacy needs to be conceptually decoupled from a Weberian reading that postulates it as a something only the state can truly own and delegate (I discuss the matter of legitimacy in greater depth in Chapter 4). On-the-ground realities such as the ones found in Tierra Caliente prove this understanding overly static as non-state armed actors effectively strive for and are granted by a degree of legitimacy by the true sources of legitimacy, specific social communities. In the case of LCT, it also constituted a central force in shaping its behavior towards and interactions with local civilian populations. Drawing on his work on Rio de Janeiro's networks of traffickers, politicians, and civic leaders, Arias (2006, 2009) assigns similar importance to legitimacy as a necessity for criminal organizational survival and shows how and why, in this particular case, traffickers invest in it. Although the drug trafficking gangs he studies show an arguably less ambitious and systematic approach to the matter when compared to LCT, the logic largely remains the same. Traffickers invest in their social legitimacy by making material investments in the community, coopting and/or staying in the good books with local civic leaders, providing vigilante security (against certain types of crime), and by taking up a mediating function in certain conflicts. Positively reflected upon by local residents (2006:315), this provides them with protection against certain state actors (non-collaboration by locals is here, just as in Tierra Caliente, the name of the game). As Arias argues, the thus garnered social capital serves, in turn, as a type of currency in accessing needed resources held by the state and to negotiate with members of

'respectable society'. As traffickers need to maintain a low profile and moreover lack the necessary social skills, the ability to do so and the sustention of said networks depend on the mediation of local civic leaders.

On state failure

The above outlined transformations have triggered a wide debate on the presence and future of the nation-state as well as on how social scientists should conceptualize them. The Weberian notion of state and the underlying narrative of (Western) state formation as a linear civilizing process remains, in spite of an increasing array of arguments that undermine its central assumptions (see below), dominant. Joas and Knöbl argue that 'a substantial number of social scientists are still caught up in the peaceful utopian mood of the European Enlightenment and continue to dream the dream of non-violent modernity' (2013:2). These assumptions resonate prominently in the assertion that the nation-state is being threatened and pro-actively pushed back by forces situated outside of it. In this context, voices declaring contemporary Mexico a poster country for state failure have not been scarce (see my discussion of some of these voices in Chapter 6). The fear that a stable and long-standing international system of nation-states is being eroded by hostile non-state armed actors digging away at it from below shines through prominently. Such a trend is, of course, easy to detect if one sticks to a classical understanding of the state. Considered from this angle, states – particularly in the Global South – neither exercise effective control over their own territory nor are able to enforce and sustain the monopoly of coercion. Their malperformance in these arenas and the resulting incapacity to guarantee citizens' basic rights suggests moreover that its legitimacy is at risk, already severely undermined, or already damaged beyond repair. Hence, the three main pillars

that make states 'states' in a Weberian sense seem seriously challenged at the very least. The assertion of state failure – partial, as Kruijt and Koonings (2004) indicate by speaking of 'governance voids', or more absolutely, as amongst others such as Zartman (1999) and more recently Grayson (2011) have suggested – is just a stone's throw away from these observations. In Latin America, it is the generally high levels in violence that are often focused on in this context. In the Mexican case in particular, it is chiefly the concentration of violence in the hands of criminal organizations and that these are seen as employing it against the state – 'head-on', as Knight (2012:134) phrases it – that is cited to support this claim.

Equivalent to that on state failure runs the debate on the supposed failure of democracy in Latin America. As Arias and Goldstein (2010: 2) lay out in some detail in the introduction to their volume on 'violent democracies', the persistently high levels of violence in the region have been taken as a 'measure of democratic failure', i.e. a sign that its countries have not yet reached the highest stage of (political) evolution. '[A] whole range of adjectives – including imperfect, illiberal, incomplete, delegative, and disjunctive ', they write 'have been proposed to characterize the differences between democracy in Latin America and the supposedly more ideal forms extant in Western Europe and the United States' (2010:3). Both discussions have been accused of uncritically reproducing the very totalities the above-discussed Weber-derived logic of state formation as a process of civilizational advancement with a conceivable and attainable endpoint as embodied and largely achieved by Western nation-states (see Arias/Goldstein, 2010:x). In particular, they have been criticized for being ethnocentric, i.e. the Western schemes of thought and analysis in ignorance of other cultures' and settings' specificities (critiques have been produced amongst others by Gledhill, 2000; Hönke/Müller, 2012; Morton, 2012), and to

suffer from a 'state-centered bias' in the sense that state rule is taken to be 'the natural and right form of political organization that delineates and produces world order' (Clunan/Trinkunas, 2010:20). Anything that departs from these ideals is, by that definition, incomplete.

Complicating binaries

This binary approach, as amongst others Arias and Goldstein forcefully argue, is of little help as it fails to penetrate the institutional and formal surface under which dramatically different social realities and practices are hidden. That is, as the mentioned authors and Hönke and Müller (2012) similarly contend, these deviations from what ought to be are not to be seen as something exotic that runs counter to that which cannot be reconciled with Western ideals. These simply never materialize, leaving the task of investigating in which other and local-specific ways they are instantiated and enacted instead (see also Moore 1978). Needed, from this perspective, are approaches that overcome this binary simplicity by recognizing and conceptually factoring in that ideal and empirical realities simply do not overlap (see Smart, 1999). This appears all the more pressing to reduce distortions in the portrayal of state-non-state and state-criminal relations. Already pointed out as central to the present study and reflected upon in-depth in Chapter 6, these are frequently portrayed as structured along an iron licit-illicit-divide. One side – the good, morally whole, legal – is seen as principally embodied by the state. The other – the evil, amoral, illegal – is seen as populated by forces of criminality with an agenda of state and societal dissolution. Both confront each other in a striving for mutual annihilation. This imagery stands in line with the portrayal of state formation as an evolutionary-civilizational process in which 'order' comes to be monopolized by the state and during

which the uncivilized is reduced throughout society and, crucially, pushed outside of the state, which comes to serve as a marker in this sense. This view, as I argue in Chapter 6, clearly surfaces in the rhetoric surrounding (and arguably fostering) the ‘war on drugs’, which is construed on precisely these assumptions (see here Morton, 2012, who discusses the ethnocentric bias inherent in this rhetoric).

Heyman and Smart (1999) argue that this binary imagery is simplistic and call for ‘open-minded, empirical studies of state-illegality relations [that] enable us to transcend the stultifying assumption that states always uphold the law’ (1999:1). The essays contained in Heyman’s volume on ‘states and illegal practices’ (1999) reflect this spirit as they revisit extant conceptions and conceptualizations of the state’s relation to illegality and crime and question the idea of the state as a natural champion of legality and civilization. A collection of essays with a similar tone comes from Briquet and Favarel-Garrigues (2010). Both find a more complex relationship, characterized not least by states’ frequent and consistent involvement with actors labeled ‘criminal’. Schneider and Schneider (1999), for instance, address the normality of deep and persistent ties between Italian (organized) criminal groups and the country’s political elite and find ‘a weaving together of illegal and legal within states and societies that is usually obscured by the reification of the ‘law’ and that only becomes visible in ‘historical moment[s] of transparency’ (1999). Similarly, Gallant (1999) examines the historical relationship between the state and criminals, finding that both are by no means opposites but often intrinsically interwoven and that definitions of the boundary between the two are highly arbitrary and frequently change as rapidly as the labels applied to particular actors. Pirates, for instance, were initially tolerated and indeed sponsored and employed by some states (e.g. England) to further their interest and to the detriment of others (e.g. Spain). Other ‘military entrepreneurs’ would occupy double roles,

oscillating between directly and officially serving in the name of the state and pursuing a 'primitive' accumulative agenda formally defined as illegal.

Critical accounts of state formation

A similar and widely cited challenge to the portrayal of the modern nation state as the embodied antithesis to violence and illegality has been formulated by Charles Tilly (1985). He, too, de-romanticizes the default narrative of state formation. In particular, he compares it to an essentially unintended by-product of war making amongst a wider population of violent entrepreneurs. States, in their early phase, appear by no means as the well meaning and enlightened entities they were later made out to be. Rather, he sees them as 'coercive and self-seeking entrepreneurs' who, so as to gain the upper hand in competition over power and territorial supremacy, needed to outperform militarily. This, in turn, required the extraction of resources (read: taxation) of given populations. To Tilly, early states are thus no different than organized crime-type protection rackets, which also sell trade protection for tax (see also Gambetta, 1993). Successfully sustaining this scheme, however, requires a certain degree of acceptance from a given population, which presupposes convincing it of the existence of benefits: 'Apologists for particular governments and for government in general commonly argue, precisely, that they offer protection from local and external violence. They claim that the prices they charge barely cover the costs of protection' (1985:171). The modern nation-state's legitimacy does, from this perspective, not appear as constituted *ex-ante* for being traceable to a social contract whose necessity and materialization through the state is equally state shared by governed and governors. Rather, it supposes an *ex-post* construct to justify and thus stabilize, towards the inside as

well as the outside, regimes whose roots of resource extraction are more unveiled and which could be constituted in the first place through violent performance.

Tilly complicates the narrative of state formation by revisiting the relation between states, violence, and violent actors. While this argument alone might be interpreted as leaving the door open for the assumption of a later 'purification' of the state to closer resemble its self-designated civilizational role, other authors such as Anthony Giddens (1985) have demonstrated that the state's relationship with illegality and violence has not become less complex as a result of the advancement of modernity. Worth considering in this context is Stanley Cohen's take on the commission of state crimes by Western states (2001; see Chambliss et al., 2014, for a good overview of current debates about state crime). Cohen draws on Sykes and Matza's (1957) work on how individuals justify their deviant and/or criminal behavior or deny it as well as the harm stemming from it altogether. States too, he contends, employ 'techniques of neutralization' to deny their crimes, to play down their occurrence or the harm they cause, or to redefine them as measures necessary under exceptional circumstances (consider here Huggins' discussion of the justification of torture in the context of the war on terror and Kramer's examination of the bombing of civilians from the latter half of the 20th century, both included in Chambliss et al., 2014).

The convergence of state and non-state and legal and illegal in the making of (dis)order

The realization that the imagery of illegal (violent) practices and the modern nation-state as natural opposites falls short helps to resolve the seeming paradox of the parallel existence of democracies and persistently high levels of violence in Latin America. Arias and Goldstein (2010) make an important contribution in conceptually reconciling both by

arguing that violence per se is not a sign for democracy's failure but part and parcel of its empirical, far-from-ideal instantiation. What is more: the type of violence experienced and the way it is deployed is perhaps *the* core mechanism 'keeping in place the very institutions and policies that neoliberal democracies have fashioned over the past several decades, as well as a an instrument for coping with the myriad problems that neoliberal democracies have generated' (Arias/Goldstein, 2010:5). Correspondingly, they call for 'a conception of politics that looks to the complex ways in which order (and/or disorder) is created through the interactions of multiple violent actors, both within and without the state' (2010:10). Here, the interaction and indeed cooperation between state and non-state armed actors is not the exception but the stuff of everyday life. The modalities and mechanism of order creation here appear, of course, far from their Weberian ideal, already as state actors effectively share and thus punctuate the monopoly of force. Latin America's contemporary states, that is, do not exist in spite of illicit armed actors but because of the ways they engage with them (2010:9).

Alan Knight has argued that such encounters and the normality of their occurrence are often underestimated or ignored altogether due to the overly rigid focus of many social scientists on the formal: 'focusing on the high politics of the nation-state... and formal politics, they have tended to overlook the hot, dense, and often dirty undergrowth of local politics' (Knight, 1997:108). The 'dirty undergrowth of local politics' forms part of those sites and zones in which legal and illegal as well as state and non-state intersect and interact in ways which transcend their ascribed opposition. Under terms such as 'gray zones' (Auyero, 2007) and 'shadow states' (Gledhill, 1995/ 1999) and usually veiled through the myth of the state as 'the very embodiment of reified legality' (Heyman/Smart, 1999:11), they have received increasing scholarly attention as spaces crucial for

contemporary dynamics of state formation (in the Global South). The existence of non-state armed actors might contradict the myth of the state as a champion of legality and civilization, yet, in actual social practice, forms of order are rarely if ever configured along such clear lines and frequently see a convergence of state and non-state elements. The state's role is here more complex than commonly assumed. This begins with its role in defining certain activities as illegal through legislation, thereby constituting spheres and actors that subsequently can come to be defined as major threats (a good synthesis of this fundamental relation between states and illegality is provided by Heyman and Smart, 1999). The international market for illegal drugs can be seen as a prime example in this context as well as for the consequences this has entailed, not least so in Latin America (Mena and Hobbs, 2010 discuss the effects of prohibitionist legislation on human rights in Brazil).

Apart from this more abstract role of introducing, embodying, and enforcing the dividing line between legal and illegal, the state is well present in the shape of those real-life actors acting in its name and enacting it in everyday life. The realization that states are by no means naturally 'bound by law' (Spinoza, 1951 [1883]: 311, cited in: Rodgers, 2006:326) appears crucial for studying social (dis-)order in Mexico and beyond. This thus also holds true for the relationship between organized crime and the state as one subset of these interactions. In Mexico, for one, organized crime attains its current shape due to what Knight has called an historically 'incestuous relationship' (2012:120). Snyder and Duran (2009) introduce the term 'state-sponsored protection racket' to highlight that drug trafficking grew under the auspices of a state providing protection to traffickers in exchange for kick-backs and a basic respect for the 'rules of the game', including keeping levels of violence low (see also Astorga, 1996; Flores Pérez, 2009:137-227; Watt/Zepeda,

2012). Similarly, Davis finds that Mexican drug trafficking could, and still can, only thrive through the 'tacit support of the police and the military, who often prioritize the protection of their own institutional sovereignty and/or involvement in these black market activities, rather than the protection of citizens' (2010:37). Arias' above-cited study is another good example of the more complex role of the state as he shows how order in urban areas stereotypically portrayed to be 'out of state control' and characterized by the 'absence of the state' is in fact constituted through the interwovenness of state and non-state actors.

Interactions defying simplistic notions of legal and illegal, of state and non-state, and of state formation are neither a recent development nor one limited to Latin America or the Global South.¹⁹ Reno (1995, 2000) traces such structures back to colonial rule in Sierra Leone and underlines their high degree of durability and institutionalization. Similarly, Gingeras (2011) shows how the Turkish state obtained its current form and could expand its dominion within its own territory with the help of heroin traffickers and other criminal groups. These provided, alongside things such as financial means, paramilitary force used to quell 'insurgent' groups and even troops for war, including World War I and, in this context, the Armenian genocide. To him, this murky intersection between state agents and (officially designated) criminals, between state security interests and drug trafficking, supposes the very basis of the much-cited Turkish 'deep state'. My observations on the case of LCT, too, speak of such complexity. To provide a glimpse of my findings, the state is neither absent nor does such a thing as war-like confrontation between state and LCT

¹⁹ While exploring this matter in depth would go beyond the scope of this review of literature, it should be kept in mind that the existence of informal and hidden spheres of power are by no means limited to the Global South. Gledhill (1999:205), for instance, points out that '[e]ven the most robust liberal-democratic states have always invited questions about the backstage power of corporate capital and the extent of political control over national security services. It was, after all, Eisenhower who coined the phrase "the military-industrial complex.'

become apparent. Such a scenario was, as LCT's leaders reckoned themselves, neither feasible nor desirable for fostering its survival. Tellingly, they perceived the state as a plurally configured construct the many fragments of which neither acted in harmony nor naturally in defense of the law. This, in turn, allowed LCT to engage particular state actors in interactions well beyond those of an all-out confrontation.

On parallel states

The above-discussed complexities of state-non-state-interactions are of great importance in terms of the critical reflection of another popular hypothesis voiced in reference to the increasing prominence of non-state armed actors. Namely, that these actors have come to control²⁰ chunks of territory and populations and the challenge to the state's monopoly of force, sovereignty, and legitimacy; this is said to suppose what has been equated to the existence of 'parallel states'. Williams (2010), for instance, cites the Mexican case as well as the wider post-Cold-War environment (see above) to contend that state sovereignty has been undermined and splintered to such a degree that a return to medieval times can be detected. The more so if they are seen to compete with the state in its very core arenas of governance such as the provision of 'justice', social welfare, and security (see Clunan/Trinkunas, 2010:19) and thus seem to threaten to replace it. Milhaupt and West (2000), for instance, survey different organized crime groups and find that their provision of 'property rights enforcement and protection services' places them in competition with the state. Kruijt and Koonings (1999:11) argue, in a similar vein, that non-state armed

²⁰ In light of the impossibility for such a thing as total control of *any* governing body over a territory to ever materialize (see Cynthia Weber's critique above and my discussion of sovereignty below), I deem it crucial not to use the term 'control' in an absolute but only in a relative sense.

actors such as drug trafficking groups have 'managed to mount parallel systems of violence and enforced order.' Davis (2010:36-37) observes that in Mexico 'well-organized cadres involved in illicit activities often take on the equivalent role of miniature states by monopolizing the means of violence and providing protection in exchange for loyalty and territorial dominion'. Sousa (2006) situates a similar development within a wider trend of the post-colonial state's transformation into what he terms the 'heterogeneous state'. The latter comes about as an effect of the above-discussed pressures on the traditional nation-state 'from below' and 'from above'. These forces undermine the state's coherency and lead to 'the uncontrolled coexistence of starkly different political cultures and regulatory logics in different sectors (e.g., in economic policies and family or religious policies) or levels (local, regional, and national) of state action' (2006:44). In 'extreme cases', under such circumstances 'microstates' can develop within the state itself (ibid.). Particular state segments, that is, obtain a degree of autonomy that allows them to decouple their own logic of operation from that of the rest of the state.

Though at times subtly and perhaps tacitly, the very notion of the existence of 'parallel states' incorporates the assumption that non-state armed actor-'controlled' spaces exist somehow independently from the state or have been carved out and are being sustained in opposition to and in spite of the state. The notion of control here advanced is similarly totalistic as the one underlying traditional understandings of sovereignty (see above for Cynthia Weber's critique). The more so if they come to replicate those characteristic and functions that make states 'states', their very existence seems to stand in mutual exclusivity to the state qua definition. And indeed, as pointed out above, there is no doubt that non-state armed actors have not only come to take up functions of governance but to moreover claim the legitimate right to do so. One clear example here is LCT. As I explain in

detail in Chapter 5, the group's behavior within the local setting took the shape of a veritable project of alternative governance. Though never free of contradictions, it provided material benefits and 'justice' to local civilian populations. However, the term 'alternative', just as the term 'parallel', needs to be treated with care (also in Chapter 5, I discuss the matter in greater depth). As Davis has pointed out, non-state armed actors cannot be thought of as operating in a state-less 'vacuum' (2009:229). Even if the state is seen as weakened or decaying, it does not just disappear without trace and still occupies some role. It follows that non-state armed actors must inevitably arrange themselves with states (and other non-state actors) in some form. Leaving clear that these relations transcend violent conflict, she calls for the deciphering of the 'diplomatic' relations amongst this multitude of actors and underlines that these remain understudied (my exploration of LCT-state-relations in Chapter 6 takes up this question). This still leaves, of course, the door open for the notion of parallel states. Yet, to merit this classification, these sub-state entities would have to fulfill the theoretical criterion of, as it were, being state without the (sitting) state and to come to replicate the latter's functions. Yet, the empirical evidence, especially when it comes to criminal organizations, suggests otherwise. In Latin America, where the vast majority of Guerrilla groups has disappeared, there are indeed only a handful of examples left for non-state armed actors whose political agenda includes the overthrow of sitting states. Of these, only Colombia's FARC have arguably reached a corresponding level of territorial control, and even in this case the line between the criminal and political aims is blurred (see Eccarius-Kelly, 2012).

More fundamentally, the notion of 'the state' as a coherent entity capable of concerted action and, for that matter, willing to pursue a coherent and legally committed agenda has been criticized as simplistic. Alan Smart underlines, in this context, that '[s]tates are

internally complex and composed of many agents'. This makes it 'inappropriate to refer to states doing or intending things' (1999:104). Das (2004) goes a step further and calls the Weberian-based narrative of state 'metaphysical'. To her, the inherent idea of 'the' state as a somehow coherent body that has a life and identity of its own and that is thus capable of doing and causing things amounts to 'magic', a term she borrows from Taussig (1997; see also Coronil, 1997). Adding the fact that, as already mentioned, states' commitment to legality cannot be taken for granted, this embeds non-state armed actors and criminal actors such as LCT in structures that are principally pliable to their interest. Briquet and Favarel-Garrigues, summarizing the case studies on state-illegal-dealings gathered in their edited volume, contend that it is precisely for this reason that criminal actors tend to be 'satisfied with the existing rules of the political and economic game... [as] their familiarity with "the system" allows them to detect opportunities that enable them to develop their activities' (2010:4). To many criminal actors, there is simply no incentive or necessity to take over the state's functions or to substantially change the state's empirical (and not ideal) functioning. Against this backdrop, it can be argued that confronting the state 'head-on' (see above) is counterproductive, as amongst others Lessing (2012) has argued. The Brazilian and Mexican drug trafficking groups he has examined refrain from an overly violent approach to the state as this could warrant the state's attention, activate it against them, and thus question their survival. It can moreover be argued that the vast majority of non-state armed actors never achieve (or want to do so in the first place) an organizational capacity and volume that would allow them to perform as a (counter-)state bureaucracy. Nor do they come anywhere close to an armed capacity that could seriously challenge sitting (Latin American) states in the arena of force. The Mexican state, for one, has repeatedly demonstrated that it is still in the position to effectively mobilize its coercive potential against specific non-state armed actors. LCT's eventual disintegration, which I

discuss in greater depth in the conclusion to this thesis, provides a prime example for the continued centrality of the state in this sense.

A third argument that has been brought forward in contradiction of the existence of parallel states is based on the observation that such a polarization of forces in clearly delineated, opposing blocks does not correspond to on-the-ground realities. Such an assertion of parallelity – similarly applied to economies, for instance by Shortland and Varese (2015) – falls short insofar as it departs from an ideal never materialized. What can instead be observed is interwovenness, in the sense that resources pertaining to the state (including the symbolic power rooted in its myth or ‘magic’) are accessed and mobilized by networks integrated both by nominally legal as well as illegal actors. The normality of ‘gray zones’, mentioned above, here adds empirical fodder insofar as they are effectively formed around the shared use of these resources. Arias, drawing on data from the abovementioned study on Brazil, argues on these grounds that ‘[r]ather than creating “parallel states” outside of political control... these networks link trafficker dominated favelas into Rio’s broader political and social system’ (2006:293) and that ‘more than filling in space left by the government, illegal networks appropriate existing state and societal resources and power and use them to establish protected spaces in which traffickers can engage in illegal activities. More than parallel ‘states’ or ‘polities’ drug trafficking in Rio represents an expression of transformed state and social power at the local level’ (2006:322). The qualifier ‘alternative’ in governance is then more accurately used to indicate a departure from said ideal but not necessarily an absence of the state or forms of governance construed in opposition to or as an alternative per se to the state. Any form of governance ever materialized and recorded in the Global South and, for that matter, Mexico has arguably been characterized through the intermingling of what ought

to be and what ought not to be, of nominally criminal and nominally legal (state) elements. There would, from this perspective, be nothing but 'alternatives' or, as Comaroff and Comaroff (2006) would have it, 'counterfeits'.

The historical normality of alternative governance

Historical analyses make a crucial contribution in placing the involvement of non-state elements in governance as well as their relation to the state and *vice versa* in perspective. As stated above, a principal agreement exists that the 'traditional' nation-state has undergone some degree of erosion and that non-state armed actors' involvement in the creation of social (dis-)order has been accentuated as a result and manifestation of a wider trend of. Yet, not all's new under the sun. Bauman, for instance, finds that the assertion of post-Cold-War anarchy and decay might have been exaggerated and owe, to no small degree, to the fact that, 'by dividing the world, power politics conjured up *the apparition of totality*' (correspondence between Bauman and Dennis Smith, cited in: Smith, 1999:205). The history of post-colonial states reveals, in this context, a great continuity in 'alternative governance' in the sense of a principal and lasting interwovenness of state and non-state actors in the production of governance and social order. Hansen and Steputat (2006), in revisiting existing arguments on sovereignty, show that 'the reach and efficacy of colonial states was uneven and often severely limited' from the beginning on, a constellation that was never altogether and in some cases not at all overcome (pp. 304ff.). This gave 'rise to a complex range of *informal sovereignties*' (2006:305), amongst others exercised by non-state (private) actors such as pirates and slave traders and connected to formal institutions in manifold ways. 'Legal pluralism' here appears as a fixture of (colonial) state formation (see here Sousa's overview, 2004). So does 'private indirect rule' (Mbembé, 2001:67ff.), a

term which underlines that states frequently outsource governmental functions and privileges, including territorial and populational control, and/or govern through private actors. One example is the licensing of pirates by the British Empire, a more recent one would be the entangledness of the Colombian state and paramilitary groups, of which Grajales (2011) provides an excellent study. Private and public interest here become blurred beyond recognition. The co-existence and interwovenness of state and non-state actors has been similarly palpable in Latin American states where ‘contested state formation’ (Davis, 2010:43) has been the norm. Especially so in the region’s freshly independent republics of the nineteenth century, central governments struggled to and never fully achieved control over marginal (geographical) areas of their own territory. This, in turn, resulted in the persistence of strong regionalisms, with local strongmen enjoying great discretion vis-à-vis the central state and thus great power of local populations: ‘The tentative rule and local despotisms of these forces often structure the lives of ordinary people more profoundly and effectively than does the distant and far-from-panoptic gaze of the state’ (Hansen/Steputat, 2006:305; for overviews see Pansters, 2012:22-23, Arias/Goldstein, 2010:13ff., Davis, 2010:38-43).

Expanding the conceptual boundaries of state

It is against this backdrop that Trouillot calls for ‘a sober awareness that the national state was never as closed and as unavoidable a container—economically, politically, or culturally—as politicians and academics have claimed since the 19th century’ (2001:130). He thus also opposes simplistic approaches to the state that seek to pin it down to one clear shape and identity. While he refuses to engage in the production of yet another exercise to define what ‘it’ is, he does reject its reduction qua a political science-type focus

on the normative and those formal institutions that make 'government' as well as the reduction of state to a mere discursive construct-come-organization to elicit legitimacy from subject populations as for instance Abrams (1988:76, cited in Trouillot 2001:127) would have it. At the same time, he does not go to such extremes as other authors like Radcliff-Brown, who categorically deny the existence of 'state' altogether and calls 'it' 'a fiction of the philosophers' (1995 [1940]:xxiii, cited in Trouillot, 2001:126), granting that only 'an organization, i.e. a collection of individual human beings connected by a complex system of relations' exists while 'such thing as the power of the State' does not. The understanding of 'state' he proposes instead is an 'enlarged' one that approaches the state as an 'open field with multiple boundaries and no institutional fixity... [that] needs to be conceptualized at more than one level' and that is best grasped 'not an apparatus but a set of processes. It is not necessarily bound by any institution, nor can any institution fully encapsulate it. At that level, its materiality resides much less in institutions than in the reworking of processes and relations of power so as to create new spaces for the deployment of power' (2001:127). 'State processes and practices', he specifies, ultimately become 'recognizable through their effects', which boil down to a number of specific techniques of populational ordering and control (2001:126). Methodologically, this means venturing behind institutional and normative surfaces as the 'empirically obvious' (ibid.) and ethnographically exploring those sites in which state effects and those actors from whom these effects emanate can be detected and analyzed.

Theoretically, and following Foucault's (1991) similar delineation in his much quoted governmentality lecture, this severs the unity between state and government. 'Government... can be clearly distinguished from sovereignty', as Foucault (1991: 94) puts it. However, whilst critiquing the 'excessive value' (1991: 103) attributed to the state,

Foucault's vision is closer to Trouillot's than Radcliff-Brown's. For all its 'mythicized abstraction' (ibid.), the state (in the form of sovereignty) is neither effaced nor entirely fictionalized. Rather, elements of it are deemed to exist only insofar that they are permitted by governmental manifestations of power:

[T]he state, no more probably today than at any other time in its history, does not have this unity, this individuality... this rigorous functionality, nor... this importance... Maybe what is really important for our modernity - that is, for our present - is not so much the *éstatisation* of society, as the 'governmentalization' of the state' (*Ibid.* emphasis in original).

Power or, more precisely, governmental power, becomes emergent and transported via a diverse range of apparatuses, technologies and other mechanisms. The range hereof is later articulated by Foucault in his concept of 'dispositif',

"a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions. . . What I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. (Foucault 1980, 194).

Also important here is to acknowledge how power does not only 'seep' below the state but may simultaneously operate *above* it (Collier 2009), as expressed during his later theoretical development of 'biopolitical' power that functions at more aggregated populational scales of governance (Foucault 2008).

Following both Foucault and Trouillot's readings, then, offers acknowledgement of the separation of state and government. From this follows, too, Trouillot's argument that, in a liquefying context of social order and rule (see above), governmental capacity might have been reduced. The same does, however, not hold for state power, which can be seen as dispersed 'into the murkier reaches of the private sector', as Comaroff and Comaroff similarly observe (2006:16). Apart from the task of spotting state effects in practices by

actors other than state actors, this calls for identifying how and by whom means and mechanisms of power, social control, and governance are being redeployed and how the thus enabled practices might or might not differ from those previously employed by the state. I develop my contributions on LCT's practices of governance towards local civilian populations (Chapter 5) and LCT's relating to government and state (Chapter 6) against this backdrop.

As state effects are by no means bound to state as a set of institutions of government, this shifts the analysis to unexpected sites, which under current conditions appear all the more important for the exploration of what state is and how it is made. In this vein, Trouillot's work stands in close proximity to Das and Poole's volume of 2004, the contributions to which explore 'the margins of the state'. Das and Poole (2004b) are critical of the interpretation that the seeming 'disorder' and sense of being in the margins is simply a result of an incompleteness of the state which is anything but necessary and which can be overcome through the achievement of a higher stage of political evolution. They break open the traditional reading of the state as the embodiment of, and vehicle towards, progress departing from a point of 'invention' of law and order. The process of making and remaking of law, order, and state is, they argue, constant and knows no static end product. A constitutional and latent characteristic of the state, it moreover meanders through the entire state body and is by no means confined to what is commonly perceived to lie outside of it, not only in geographical but also behavioral-civilizational terms. The state as *the* antithesis to the uncivilized and from which the uncivilized and irrational has been expelled and 'a centralized administrative and political community whose density decreases as one moves toward its territorial margins' (Poole, 2004:49) does not hold. Margins can effectively overlap with 'borderlands' and other areas where state rule is seen

as not (yet) fully implemented and its reach as limited. Yet, they go well beyond the territorial dimension to define and approach margins from three different viewpoints (ibid., 2004b:9, see also Asad, 2004:279), which all resemble Trouillot's state effects. The first examines the 'specific technologies of power' developed and applied by modern states to control and 'pacify', if not integrate, populations seen as 'insufficiently socialized into the law'. The second focuses on the state's 'writing practices' as the production of documents, categories, and data that is to render the state itself and above all populations 'legible' (and controllable). It ends up, however, producing a simultaneous 'illegibility', for instance as its practices and documents become distorted and falsified in social practice and interactions, creating uncertainty amongst subjects as to what the state is and does. The third is concerned with bio-politics and the (de)construction of life, chiefly through linguistic categorization (reflections here of Giorgio Agamben's work, see below). In all these spaces, the state is present, utilized, and felt, but remains incomplete and is indeed enacted or employed in ways which do not live up to its own standards (rationality, legality (in the use of violence)) and thus contradicts what it ought to be. And yet, as the exception becomes the rule, it is precisely through these contradictory practices that continuously make and remake state, law, and order on an everyday basis. The margins and what goes in them are no anomaly or simply an exotic, pre-modern occurrence but 'a necessary entailment of the state, much as the exception is a necessary component of the rule' (Das and Poole, 2004b: 4).

The real-life practices found in these sites transcend, frequently and in many ways, what the state ideally ought to be. The blurring of private and public interests and the mobilization of state resources for or against such interests, the at best muddled boundary between what is legal and what is not – this is the stuff that makes and sustains the state in

the everyday. Consider the example of Peru's *gamonales* (discussed by Das, 2004). These local strongmen are often important private landowners who simultaneously occupy and effectively *are* the local state bureaucracy. Routinely abusing their power to further their own interests while enforcing the law at other times, the *gamonales* stand both inside the law and state body as well as outside of it. This does nothing less than to keep in place a *de facto* state which otherwise might not exist. All of the above is also true for the *cacique*, Mexico's version of the *gamonal* and key for representing and making the state in the provinces. In exchange for loyalty to (higher-ups in) the central government, wide-reaching discretion over given populations was granted. The simultaneous sustention of the state and the routine transgression of its rules has also underpinned institution building in Mexico in that 'officeholding [was] a lucrative business whose gains were seen as supporting national revolutionary projects as much as personal pocketbooks' (Davis, 2010b:45). This is moreover reminiscent of Arias and Goldstein's argument surrounding the functionality of violence in sustaining institutions and democracy in Latin America (see above). This, just as the murkiness of the boundaries of what is state and what is not, is of great importance for the interpretation of my own case and context and serves as a point of departure for one of my core contributions. Here too, as I show in Chapter 6 and further discuss in the conclusion to this thesis, the state is not only kept in place through seemingly paradoxical arrangements and interactions between state actors and the criminal organization in question, giving rise to a constellation in which the latter does not only exercise state effects and moreover proactively invests in the sustention of the state.

Questioning sovereignty

The above outlined critical reexamination of what the state is (or perhaps rather: of what it has never been) as well as the widely shared observation that power has somewhat drifted away from state or at least governmental institutions towards the sub-national and non-state sphere has gone hand in hand with a debate on sovereignty. Judging from the above-discussed works, the state has never been the monolithic, unified organizational apparatus it was made out to be and never exercised the degree of territorial control it would suppose, the Weberian notion of sovereignty has come to be questioned. This has all but done away with the predominance of traditional approaches (in most social scientific discourse), yet research conducted to no small degree in the Global South has stirred up debate. Hönke and Müller capture the essence of new approaches to sovereignty and state more generally by calling for a move 'beyond the static analytics of 'bounded units' and fixed territorial spaces' (2012:386). Doing so, and not squeezing the emergence and proliferation of non-state armed actors into traditional shapes is highly relevant for the case of LCT, as well, since the complexity of interactions between both 'camps' as well as of the way sovereignty is at times contended over, at times effectively split and shared, and at other times conjointly enacted and exercised is far greater. Reflecting similar scenarios, Rodgers (2006:289) draws on Latham's detachment of the ownership of sovereignty from the state (2000) to find 'social sovereignty' resting with Central American gangs (2000). Davis, whose work on Mexican organized crime and state formation I have already cited several times over the past pages, speaks of 'fragmented sovereignty' and Arias (2006:296) of 'localised sovereignty'. Van Dun refers to the way Peruvian cocaine traffickers attempt to gain legitimacy from and social control over locals as 'narco-sovereignty'. In one way or another, all these works and terms reflect that the above-discussed pluralization of

violence breaks open the notion of state sovereignty and underline its impertinence by pointing to the fact that actors apart from the state exercise social control and violence over particular populations and pockets of territory.

Hansen and Steputat, too, refer to this context (in the Global South) to argue that sovereignty in a Weberian sense is an impertinent tool to capture social realities, especially in the Global South. State sovereignty, they argue, in a traditional sense cannot be achieved and represents little more than 'an ontological ground of power and order, expressed in law or in enduring ideas of legitimate rule' that should be replaced with 'a view of sovereignty as a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy from the neighborhood to the summit of the state' (2006:296/297). State sovereignty à la Weber, that is, is unattainable as it is always contended and manifests more as ideology than observation. What makes sense from an empirical point of view, in contrast, is to depart from and describe 'de facto sovereignty', which boils down to 'the ability to kill, punish, and discipline with impunity' (2006:296). The latter approach draws, as does Mbembé (2001, 2003; Das and Poole, 2004, and Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006, advance very similar notions), on Giorgio Agamben. Though Agamben himself is inconsistent in regard to this matter (for a critique see Fiskesjö, 2012), Fitzpatrick (2001) shows that Agamben's (1998) work is crucial for the understanding of political constructs and mechanisms that strip individuals of their rights and reduce them to 'bare life', which does not deserve to live' (2001:80) and which, 'killable', be done away with without consequences. As Das and Poole remark (2004:13), Agamben's work furthermore helps to comprehend the frequency with which states can resort to 'states of emergency' in which the boundaries and categories of the killable, as becomes blatantly clear in war, are shifted. Qua definition, as

the sovereign they stand above the law and can thus do so. This, they argue, is however not limited to what could be differentiated as true and spectacular states of exception of exception. For the exceptional, including the state's standing both within and outside of the law, is the stuff of the everyday. This line of argumentation, as well as Hansen and Steputat's call to transcend officially stipulated and metaphysically underpinned parameters to search for and analyze sovereignty 'wherever it is found and practiced' (2006:296), is of great importance for my own study. For what I analyze and present data on is just such a construct that seeks to render certain individuals killable within and in the name of a 'new imagined community' (Davis) and that constitutes a non-state actor-carried form of sovereignty (that nevertheless does not exist independently from other forms of sovereignty, neither spatially not temporally, see above).

LCT vis-à-vis 'classical' organized criminal groups

As argued above, the parameters established by standard accounts of organized crime prove far too rigid to capture LCT. This is certainly so as concerns organized crime in *sensu strictu* (see Chapter 1). While some parallels exist between the structural composition of LCT and depictions of other organized crime groups, a number of important differences remain, not least in the sense that LCT is far less streamlined in terms of organizational activities and goals. Nevertheless, some of its characteristics may invite its definition as a mafia-type organized criminal group. Like the Sicilian Mafia (see Gambetta, 1993), the Russian Mafia (see Varese, 1994/1997; Volkov, 2002), and the Japanese Yakuza (see Hill, 2006; Kaplan/Dubro, 2012), LCT is engaged in the 'business of private protection' (Gambetta) in the form of the extortionist but *de facto* regulation and ordering of segments of both licit and illicit markets (see Chapters 4 and 5). Here, too, it is the state's

dysfunctional presence, as I find (see Chapter 5), or, in Gambetta's account, its absence that provides the backdrop against which 'violent entrepreneurs' can provide alternative mechanisms for dispute settlement and contract enforcement.

However, apart from this principal overlap in terms of the engagement in the provision of some degree of governance, there are significant differences that set LCT apart. This chiefly concerns the role of clandestinity and its effects. As noted in Chapter 1, and in contrast to representations of mafia groups and other 'societies' or 'brotherhoods' (Paoli, 2003) that are seen to principally operate in the 'underground' (ibid.), LCT operates, in many ways, out in the open. The need for secrecy is comparatively low in Tierra Caliente (and other parts of Mexico and the Global South). This is already due to the fact that the relationship between the state and organized crime has historically not been an antagonistic one per se (see chapters 4 and 6 and above). This out-in-the-openness has been enhanced by the relative weakening of the state in the region. Moreover, it has enabled LCT to take up an active role of governance in spheres far beyond that of economic markets alone. As discussed and developed in Chapter 5, the functions of governance claimed and assumed by LCT represent far greater incursions into areas of social life than those of 'classical' mafia-type organized criminal groups.

Furthermore, this more evolved nature of LCT's political character becomes revealed through its communications with local society and the general public. The group has not only been untypically proactive in seeking attention through communiqués but has additionally advanced a discourse unparalleled both in terms of its eclectic arrangement of diverse ideological positions and the extent of political ambitions conveyed (see Chapter 4). LCT has claimed to be a revolutionary force fighting for the good of society, which

amounts to nothing less than the fabrication of 'new imagined communities' observed by Davis (see above and Chapter 5). This far transcends 'classical' 'criminal mores' (see Humphrey, 1999) in two important ways. Here, the values and ideas that the state stereotypically represents are not opposed and rejected but appropriated and recycled. Additionally, LCT's discursive production of itself targets audiences beyond its own organizational confines. In light of the criteria examined above and especially the organization's role in the production and reshuffling of governance, LCT resembles other non-state armed actors engaged today in the remaking of (dis)order in Latin America much more closely than 'classical' criminal organizations (see Koonings/Kruijt, 2004:8 for a typology of Latin American non-state armed actors that incorporates criminal organizations like LCT). Best situated and analyzed as part of that actor population, this is also the reason for the recruitment of the wider strains of literature and debate discussed above to inform my analysis throughout this thesis.

Chapter 3: Methodology: Close-proximity fieldwork on (Michoacán) organized crime between possibility and constraint

The field from afar

Outside representations of Tierra Caliente

As already indicated in the introduction to this thesis, the terrain I sought to study supposed a fundamentally under-researched terrain. Specifically, this was the case in three distinct ways. First, close-up, ethnographic enquiries into Mexican organized crime were and still are largely absent. The few examples to the contrary (Malkin, 2001; McDonald, 2005) represent, as the authors themselves tellingly stress, by-products of anthropological studies with different core interests, thus lacking the depth a study with a corresponding focus on the phenomenon as such would be able to provide. Maldonado (2010, 2012) elegantly situates the emergence of Michoacán narcotrafficking in wider socioeconomic and political processes, but largely holds back on ethnographic material. Second, they are outdated (see the publication dates) and thus of limited value for deriving insights into a rapidly changing and fundamentally dynamic field. One exception here is Campbell's more recent work on the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso metropolitan area, published in 2009. Yet, and leading to the third aspect, while it provides important insights and guidance, dynamics along the border cannot be taken as representative for other regions and actors. As of the time when I was attempting to get close to Tierra Caliente and LCT as its dominant (illicit) actor, access to the region was, as mentioned, widely considered impossible. Guiding knowledge as to which on-the-ground realities to expect and as for the inner workings of

LCT, was thus severely limited at best.²¹ This concerns, moreover, journalistic sources that, while staggering in terms of quantity, by and large lack in qualitative density.

In a sense, then, what I sought to study were two (interwoven) hidden populations: terracalentina civilian populations, on one side, and LCT as an organization but moreover as a hidden population arisen from the general hidden population on the other. As pioneered by representatives of the Chicago School and put to proof through their studies of deviance and crime as part of the urban environment (Bulmer, 1986 provides a comprehensive overview), methods such as ethnography that presuppose the researcher's immediate proximity to the subject prove not only suitable but outright necessary to grasp hidden populations' 'subjective meanings, perspectives, understandings, and salient issues' (Blumer, 1969, as summarized by Adler, 1990:44). However, and as laid out in the introduction to this thesis, my stated intention to try to gain a certain physical proximity to an active criminal organization so as to alleviate this scarcity in firsthand data was met with reactions oscillating between bewilderment and amusement.

Upon arrival in Mexico-City in August 2011, I began to establish communications with an array of individuals that seemed to offer a potential of further contacts or at least advice. Emblematic for a range of similar reactions, the response by a local representative of the academic institution of which I had become a PhD fellow to an email of mine in which I had expressed the idea of entering Tierra Caliente: 'You must be suicidal.' Telling, too, the comment by a renowned, Mexico-City based scholar on Mexican drug trafficking whose seminars I had participated in: 'Well, of course you can get in. The only problem is making

²¹ Arguably, though, and in spite of all constraints this entails, this simultaneously facilitates treating such a setting as 'anthropologically strange' (see here Schutz, 1964 and his ideal image of the ethnographer as 'stranger').

it out in one piece again.’ Another contact, already in Michoacán’s state capital of Morelia, felt similarly compelled to underline the disadvantages of my Northern-European looks, rendering me an obvious outsider anywhere in Mexico, but the more so in Templar territory: ‘How scary, with that *carita* [diminutive for face] of yours in Tierra Caliente.’ Strongly represented, thus, were the notion of close-proximity research on organized crime as ‘mission impossible’ (Rawlinson, 2008) and its categorical exclusion of precisely those methods most suitable for shedding light on ‘hidden populations’.

A conservative research design as a response to representations of impossibility

Prior to my excursion to Mexico, this had already been the case. My initial research design was correspondingly ‘conservative’, but formulated open-endedly. This was to reconcile an expectation of control with a degree of flexibility needed to explore the unknown. Reflected here were (institutional) security concerns – members of my home university nervously inquired whether it would in fact be necessary at all to leave my host university’s campus in Mexico City – but also served to keep expectations low in case deeper access would have effectively been blocked. Indeed, I spent the better half of a total of twelve months of fieldwork outside of Tierra Caliente. As envisioned in my original research design – getting close enough yet remaining sufficiently distant – I established contacts with informants not directly involved in any sort of illegal activities and that could be met outside of the region, for instance in Michoacán’s state capital of Morelia or other urban areas. These contacts had, for instance, entered the region just before ‘it got really bad’, as some would phrase it, or would still undertake sporadic entries due to their role as government functionaries in charge of overseeing local development projects. Hence, they could provide some privileged insights into criminal organization-community-interactions

in Tierra Caliente, albeit from a certain distance.

In retrospect, this phase proved valuable in two major ways. First, it allowed for my acclimatization to, as well as my sensitization towards, participants in a setting that, here too, was infused with fear and paranoia, two sides of the same coin. State-level functionaries I sat down with in Morelia, for instance, made sure we met after-hours. Though nobody else was present in the office, the name of *ellos* ('them', i.e. LCT) was preferably avoided altogether. If it did slip out, voices lowered to near-unintelligibility and telling looks over the shoulder followed. The density of the atmosphere I encountered was not only something I had to try to get used to myself – its transference to me was certainly impacting – but which I also had to learn to factor into my attempts to gain informants' trust and their openness, for instance through the choice of a corresponding language during conversations and interviews. Second, and even though coming nowhere close to the richness of the data I would ultimately obtain *in situ*, the information I gathered during this phase in the form of about twenty semi-structured interviews as well as a large number of informal chats proved valuable. Not least, they increased my comprehension of on-the-ground realities in Tierra Caliente. The fact that I had additionally obtained copies of extensive judicial documents specifically addressing LCT (PGR SIEDO, 2009) added to the feeling that I had already built a basis sufficient for a PhD thesis. Nevertheless, so as to produce a more significant contribution to the understanding of the field of study and specifically on-the-ground realities in Tierra Caliente, getting closer and being able to apply a richer methodology remained the ideal scenario. For, especially under conditions of fragmentation of social order and the cropping up of seemingly ever-fluctuating as well as spatially limited (organizational) responses, the local constitutes the ultimate ground where 'things are happening' and thus 'the place to be' for those seeking to shed light into a

field of research that is fundamentally under-explored.

Gaining geographical access: Frustrated attempts and a way in

Even though I never categorically abandoned the possibility of ‘going deeper’, an array of potential leads into Tierra Caliente stopped short of getting me where I wanted to go. In some instances, I could not trust these contacts or their motivations, and doubted their capacity to protect me. In other instances, it seemed that this lack of trust worked the other way around with contacts apparently deeming it too risky to be exposed by being associated with an outsider such as myself. One example was my attempt to access contacts via a local research institution situated outside of Tierra Caliente but still well within LCT’s area of influence, whose official representatives swiftly put an end to our conversation once I had voiced my intent. Then again, worsening security conditions undermined another promising ‘incursion’ into Tierra Caliente with a couple of journalists as in the days prior to the date of entry twenty-one dead bodies appeared in Morelia and bringing along a *güero* (‘whitey’) suddenly seemed like a bad idea. The actual access to Tierra Caliente with the help of the person who would later become my gatekeeper was ultimately the result of a chance encounter that opened up a whole new social network that I could relate to for ‘snowballing’ purposes (see Faugier/Sargeant, 1997 for the pertinence of snowballing to access hidden populations such as those labeled criminal; see also Atkinson/Flint, 2001). Back in Mexico-City to catch some breath and spending a day in the National Autonomous University’s library, I ran into a former fellow student with whom I had shared a class as an exchange student in 2007. Over lunch, it turned out that through his own research he had a contact to a social activist in Michoacán. The latter, after two meetings, introduced me to the leaders of an umbrella organization for social and

peasant organizations active throughout the state. Apart from a place to sleep, they offered further contacts; it might, they stressed, be worth having a conversation with one in particular. After about two weeks of failed attempts to put me in touch – I later learned that this was due to personal differences between the two parties – I received a call. Diego, a pseudonym for this contact and my gatekeeper-to-be, signaled interest in my study, welcomed its objectives, and said he is happy to show me ‘the side of Tierra Caliente you won't see in the media.’ He moreover offered to have a family member come pick me up early the next day and take me to Apatzingán, Tierra Caliente’s main city and LCT’s stronghold. Apart from a couple of people vouching for him and Diego himself assuring me that I have nothing to worry about, I had next to no information on which to base my decision as to whether or not to go. I briefly discussed the matter with a trusted academic via Skype. He told me not to risk anything. The next day I travelled to Apatzingán.

Inside Tierra Caliente

Flexibility, uncertainty, and the illusion of control

As the term ‘research design’ – an inevitable step to legitimize research projects towards institutions and funding bodies and moreover firmly built into the education of PhD students as the next generation of scholars – already invokes, social science research frequently carries the image of a linear, positivist-scientific process. Implied herein is that social realities and, for that matter, researchers’ immersion into them as well as their interactions with real-life actors are, to a good degree, foreseeable and controllable. Research in the real world is, however, far messier. Indeed, flexibility needs to be treated as a fundamental principle in order for qualitative and specifically ethnographic field

research methods to unfold their true (exploratory) potential. As an open-ended interactive process, 'the project, and the methodology, are continually defined and redefined by the researcher' (Burgess, 1990:25). The acceptance that 'you don't do fieldwork, but fieldwork does you' (Simpson, 2006) surfaces, in regard to the field in question here, as a requirement to step foot into it in the first place. Indeed, as Goldsmith (2003:111) states in reference to his fieldwork on violent Colombian state and non-state actors, 'adaptability is a necessary response to the uncertainty surrounding many aspects of the field [in volatile settings].' This presupposes, to a certain extent, renouncing the illusion of (complete) control (see here Jacob's 'case for dangerous fieldwork', 2006). The need for snap decisions based on incomplete information, or simply 'gut feeling', such as the one referred to above reflects the matter as much as it underlines an inherent trade-off between control and flexibility.

As I travelled into Tierra Caliente the first time, what travelled with me was a whole set of preconceptions and stereotypes formed on the basis of the outsider knowledge available to me and, for that matter, the representation of Tierra Caliente as something akin to a black hole (more on the historical construction of Tierra Caliente as a zone of danger in Chapter 4). Entering Apatzingán's dusty streets and crossing its center to make it to Diego's house, I spotted what I deemed to be obvious signs of the presence of *ellos*: large, powerful *camionetas* (pick-up trucks) of recent make, *modelo del año*, as Mexican media would have it. Inadvertently, I slid into a lower position in my seat. At this point, I envisioned a brief stay during which I intended to expose myself as little as possible and to conduct semi-structured interviews with informants in a surgical manner so as to minimize risks. I was pursuing something akin to a 'get-in-grab-data-get-out' strategy. Within hours, my plan went up in smoke and dissolved, as it were, in a haze of scotch. Having warmly received

me, Diego asked me to tag along to a baptism party that was taking place that night. About two-hundred people attended and, a rare view as the only obvious non-local, the idea to maintain a 'low profile' quickly proved ridiculous. I attracted, not least, the attention of an impersonator of a popular gay Mexican folk singer who invited on stage to give me an 'official' welcome, which included comical flirtation. I had gone from perceived impossibility to immersion into my first 'natural' local setting in little more than twenty-four hours. Rather than gradually crossing this geographical and ontological border, I was thrown over it. In plain expectation of signs of emergency and crisis, portrayed as the region's constant state by the outside world, the normality, openness, and banality with which the everyday unfolded before my eyes left me perplexed. Not least so since an array of individuals had been introduced to me countering my expectation of *el narco* as something principally clandestine as they had no problem in chatting about their past involvement in trafficking operations. In conjunction with mind-numbing temperatures of above forty degrees Celsius, my clinging on to the desire of control amidst principal uncertainty coated me in a fog. A fog which lingered on throughout and beyond my time in the region making appear unreal; which entailed frustration, at times, for countering my striving for *ad-hoc* sensemaking so as to regain ontological security; and which, in spite of everything, allowed me to function and perform as needed, for instance during later interactions with LCT's leaders.

In retrospect, I deem the effects of being emerged in uncertainty as the quintessential, albeit challenging practice of experiencing the setting itself. A theme I return to in following chapters, uncertainty forms part and parcel of a landscape of social order that presents itself, in Tierra Caliente and other parts of the 'global south' alike, fundamentally liquefied. In local civilians' statements, uncertainty surfaces as part and parcel of the

everyday experience characterized by the presence of armed actors – state and non-state alike – whose violent potential can be mobilized in unexpected and often arbitrary ways. The latter instability and flux also becomes the basis for LCT's insertion into the local as a master over the twilight zone between certainty and uncertainty (see Chapter 5). Its proclaimed supremacy over the local also provides, in this vein, the backdrop to the process through which I negotiate my right to stay with *ellos* and which I describe in the following in some depth.

Negotiating permanence in the field with Los Caballeros Templarios

Having spent barely three days in Apatzingán, I was inserted in the same logic of negotiating my permanence in the region that had previously been described to me as indispensable by state functionaries I had sat down with (see above). They had left no doubt that they considered accessing the region without obtaining prior approval by *el poder fáctico* on the basis of an 'informational package' detailing number of individuals traveling, vehicles used, routes traveled, as well as regarding the reasons for entry imprudent at the very least. An informational system, fed by a countless number of diffusely arranged sources, allowed LCT to jealously monitor movements into this land it claimed dominion over. It worked, in my case too. Though it is fair to say that detecting the only obvious outsider for miles constitutes a limited challenge. The day after the baptism party, I was already known as '*doctor alemán*' (German doctor) in the street I am staying in and neighbors came to enquire about the possibility of receiving medical assistance. A misconception I had to clarify to their evident disappointment.

Tito was well-dressed. His dark black hair perfectly trimmed, no single hair escaped the proud order on his head. He was polite and seemed educated. In a low voice, he requested permission to take the stairs leading up to the second-floor balcony from whose shade Diego and I were sipping my fieldwork's drug of 'choice' – Nescafé – and observing the vehicles sporadically whirling up dust on the unpaved street in front of my new home in Apatzingán. Until I left the field – and effectively far beyond this point – my accentuated attention to signs of potential danger persisted. Having barely been catapulted into the region, my hyper-awareness was at an extreme. Every time a menacing growl announced the approach of *camionetas* and SUVs, my adrenaline level peaked. A casualty of an ill-timed stomach weakness, I spent my first full day in the region home alone. My plan was not to be seen and invite unwanted attention. The entry door did not lock. Yet, the oven-like temperatures that underlined why the region's name is well deserved drove me out onto the balcony. I still tried to lay low, literally so on one of couches placed outside. Lush potted plants provided cover. I had dozed off as a luxury SUV abruptly pulled up in front of the house. A man of about thirty-five years of age stepped out. He was buff; his tight, black shirt excessively underlining his muscularity. Over it, a golden chain was visible. He sported a 'crew cut' and a thinly trimmed mustache. This model *sicario*²² – a correct perception, I was later told – stared up at the balcony. 'Okay, now I'm fucked', I thought to myself. He hesitated for a moment, then shouted up: '*No está Diego* [Isn't Diego home]?' Having obviously been spotted, I got up, greeted him, and responded that Diego was expected back later that afternoon. 'Alright then. I was going to get him for *la lotería*.' As it turned out, *sicarios*, too, spend their Sundays playing board games. I wished him good luck and he drove off.

²² Sicario is the standard term used to designate Mexican criminal organizations' 'foot soldiers', their enforcers and 'hit men'.

In contrast, nothing visibly identified Tito as *miembro de*, as locals generically refer to membership in *el crimen organizado* and its contemporary local synonym, LCT. His appearance and the run-down taxi he abandoned in front of the house did not suggest any obvious connection. It is only when he, almost shyly, introduced himself and stated that *el jefe* ('the boss', here: Servando Gómez Martínez, then LCT's second-in-command) sent him in order for the two of us to have a *plática* ('chat') that I began to distinguish him from the regular flow of people frequenting Diego's home. Tito is a different cut of Templar²³. He is what I call an emissary and thus one of the unthreatening, plain-clothed individuals whose inconspicuousness destines them for specific tasks. Tito, hardly older than twenty years, uses his cover as a taxi driver to run errands for the group – 'well, really whatever *los jefes* need.' In this case, he had come to gather intelligence. My sudden appearance, he stated, raised the question of what I might be up to. The following chat took the form of mutual assertions. To counter suspicions that I might be an *oreja* ('ear', or government informant), I stressed my outsider's naivety, my status as a student, and my willingness to look behind the façade of government and media representations. In turn, he underlined LCT's benevolence and grandeur. A few hours later he returned, happy to announce that '*el jefe lo ve bien*' – i.e. that my presence would be tolerated for the time being – and that he might be able to receive me some time soon. He did, however, ask for details with regards to my stated university affiliation. Before allowing any sort of physical proximity to higher-level members, it appears, LCT wanted to run a background check.

²³ What weight the label LCT carries in spite of Tito's boyishly polite aura becomes clear before our second encounter later the same day. I am seated in the backroom of the office building occupied by the organization headed by Diego and conduct an interview with two informants as Diego comes in and states that Tito just called and would soon be arriving. Without further due, my informants get up and clear the room within seconds.

A week later, Diego and I were told to abandon our car at a second security checkpoint. We were now penetrating even deeper into LCT's core operational territory aboard a *camioneta*, driven by Alejandro, a twenty-one-year-old *sicario* who kept his AR-15 in reach right next to the driver's seat. We formed a three-vehicle convoy, manned by a small brigade of heavily armed LCT enforcers. Gómez arrived only after his personal guards – elite *sicarios*, young and well-trained members armed with grenade launchers mounted on semi-automatic rifles – had set up a security parameter. The meeting point was a cemetery in the middle-of-nowhere, indistinguishable from the desert-like, near-monochrome surroundings if it was not for the gaily-colored crosses indicating the existence of thirty-odd graves. It was at this stage that Gómez provided me with an introduction to prevailing *terracalentana* notions of justice: 'I have killed loads of people but only those who deserved it... people that lie, that pretend to be something they are not, that do not tell the truth.' The ground rules thus set – it was the only time I received something which could be read as a threat, expressed through words and location – and having once again explained the reasons for my presence and interest, Gómez turned to rapport. Diego would later tell me, himself relieved, that 'it seemed like he took a liking' to me. The latter was perhaps also a result of some rather out-of-place statements of mine such as my response to the bluntly formulated question: 'So, what do you want to know from me?' Born out of pure nervousness, I stated that 'I obviously came to talk about football' provoking laughter amongst those *Caballeros* present. Upon saying goodbye, and adding to the surreal feeling that accompanies such encounters, I received a brotherly hug from this man whose portrait greets travelers entering Michoacán from most-wanted billboards. He had already boarded his *camioneta* as he rolled down the window and shouted over something like: 'I'll talk about it with my *jefe*. We'll get you an interview. Almost certainly.' For the time being, I seemed to have gained the right of permanence by those claiming, time and again during

my fieldwork, to be 'the government' and 'the law'. Due to the latter's protection – and its capacity to provide it – I should have, as is moreover left clear, felt at ease. As a necessary condition of my prolonged presence in the region, I had thus entered – albeit on a dramatically different level – the same protection racket extended to local society as a whole.

Discussion of data and methodological adaptations

LCT as a source

Being able to gain and maintain access to Tierra Caliente opened up unexpected possibilities for gathering data more diverse and above all richer than I had deemed possible beforehand. To 'consider the conditions of [the field] of study... to conduct effective research in a particular social setting', as Burgess (1990:25) bluntly puts it, only truly became possible once I had already entered it. For one, I had gained unprecedented access to active members of one of Mexico's principal criminal organizations, including its leaders. These interactions can be classified as open-ended interviews, 'friendly conversations' (Spradley, 1979:56-58) during which I introduced and alluded to items of interest while taking care not to overstep or disrespect my conversational partners in any way. During these, I was being interviewed as much as I was doing the interviewing. The questions I was being asked were, in this vein, as unveiling as the responses given to me. I engaged in a total of seven such prolonged conversations (one to two hours each) with active members of LCT: two with the group's second-in-command, Servando Gómez Martínez; one with the group's founder and leader, Nazario Moreno González; two with an individual known as *El Inge* (short for '*El Ingeniero*', or 'The Engineer'), situated just below

the highest level of command and acting as a connecting element between Gómez and Moreno; and two with Tito (mentioned above). At least as rich and perhaps even richer than the conversations as such was the lead-up to them, which allowed for periods of participant observation amongst members of the group and within areas of LCT's territory to be considered 'high security and dominance', not least leading to interesting insights into the interplay between state and non-state actors (more on the compartmentalization of the local through state and non-state actors in Chapters 4, 5, and 6). Furthermore, in the context of direct interactions with the group, I obtained – was handed, to be exact – publicly non-available propaganda material authored by the group. These documents were, as mentioned before, of outstanding value for deciphering the group's discourse (see Chapter 5).

Data obtained directly from members of LCT were, beyond any doubt, of great value as they offered exclusive insights into the workings of an illicit actor hitherto not studied from close-up. Yet, these data and above all the conditions under which I obtained them raised important questions in terms of credibility. Why would an actor ideal-typically adhering, as far as default scholarly sensemaking on organized crime goes, to an iron law of clandestinity tolerate the presence of a nosy outsider and agree to talk to me? Clues as to the resolution of the latter paradox were, once again, provided directly in the form of statements and comments made by LCT towards me. I believe that I successfully conveyed an image of an unthreatening and fundamentally naïve stranger with a genuine interest in looking behind the façade of, as stated above, one-sided media as well as government representations (more on these binary representations in Chapter 5). Openness in 'impression management', advocated by Sluka (1990) as a golden rule for research in 'violent social contexts', was conducive to mining data. Of greater importance, though, was

its ethical component. Playing with 'open an open deck' was an absolutely indispensable component of guaranteeing my own physical integrity, let alone that of those who vouched for me and with whom I became visibly associated during fieldwork. As was expressed not least in the warning by Gómez cited above, covert or 'undercover' research, though employed by researchers on (organized) crime and deviance (e.g. Adler, 1985; Schepers-Hughes, 2004), did here not present itself as a feasible option. Being straightforward about my objectives and my persona communicated in the above described fashion seems moreover to have invited LCT's perception that I could serve to further the group's goals. Journalists, for instance, had previously been employed as proxies to lend support to its self-legitimizing discourse as a benevolent guardian of the local through the introduction of seemingly objective third-party voices. One example here is a 'reportage' diffused in the form of booklets, in which a local journalist describes how his doubts on the veracity of LCT's claims are dissolved thanks to convincing personal encounters with members of the group. Similarly, Gómez – informant as well as gatekeeper with a rather clear interest in steering me in a certain direction (on this issue, see Hammersley/Atkinson, 2007:51-53) – repeatedly asked me 'what I had found so far' and 'how things appeared to me.' He moreover showed a keen interest in my potential media publications, asked me how long it would take me to publish and what type of media contacts I had ('Do you have contacts with... what's the name... the BBC?'). At least implicitly, I was offered access for propaganda – or, phrased differently, the role of an 'active participant' beyond that acceptable for a researcher.²⁴ This was most clearly so when Gómez offered to take me to

²⁴ There are a number of scholars who have become involved more directly with the respective criminal groups they were conducting fieldwork on. Notably, Dennis Rodgers was initiated as a member of the Nicaraguan youth gang he was researching. Philippe Bourgois (1995) became so deeply embedded into the lives New York drug dealers he was researching that he walked a thin line not to become a direct asset in the commission of drug crimes. Nancy Schepers-Hughes (2004) conducted undercover research in human and organ trafficking rings. While in those cases, such proximity might have been appropriate and even necessary, becoming an asset to a drug cartel appears as obviously off-limits as well as highly dangerous to me.

one of the group's paramilitary style training grounds. I would be picked up by some of his men in Apatzingán, searched for tracking devices, provided with a new set of clothes, blindfolded, and taken up to *el cerro* ('the hill'), i.e. LCT's very core territory (see Chapters 5 and 6). Here, Gómez said, I would spend the night and be provided with a show of force: 'If you want, I'll put a thousand in front of you so you see how fucking strong we are [sic].' However, this offer was a conditional one: 'We ask for one thing only: if you like what you see, you publish; if you don't like it, you don't publish.' My response that I could not guarantee such a thing – I cite academic and ethical standards, but in the very instant I am also principally worried about getting caught in an uncontrollable dynamic – is met with comprehension ('Sure, you have your own mind...'), but also means that the visit does not materialize.

Triangulation

The true richness of the data thus (verbally) obtained lies in the different discursive levels they unveil as well as in the possibility to triangulate it. On the one hand, my conversational partners by and large *try* to present me with the group's official discursive line. On the other, however, neither particular accounts in themselves nor accounts provided by different members, when cross-compared, prove 'waterproof' (consider here the related question of 'whose meaning' is captured in interviews, posed by Seidman, 2013:26-30). Contradictions arise and allow for 'data triangulation' (Denzin, 1978). This specifically concerns the tension between front- and backstage (see Goffman, 1959), between 'official' discourse and its more pragmatic translation into the everyday as an admitted effect of on-the-ground constraints. Being able to incorporate LCT's perspective(s) supposes an important building block in my attempt to capture the group as

a phenomenon/dominant actor suspended in the local 'web of meaning', as Geertz (1973:5) would have it. I generally subscribe to an interpretivist stance – a 'search for meaning' rather than a positivist search for universal laws (ibid.) – that follows the 'assumption of multiple constructed realities' (Lincoln/Guba, 1985:295). Hence, I make no objective claims but focus, following the latter stance, on accessing the subjective experiences of those who inhabit, experience, and 'make' the world. This appears all the more pertinent in light of a setting governed, as mentioned above, by uncertainty. The perceptions of those participants embedded in it, in this vein, do not amount to anything coming close to such a thing as a 'uniform experience' that could underpin equally uniform constructs of sensemaking. In this context, Schutz's (1964) observation that even participants in their own cultures do not always understand what they do and why they do it seems especially relevant. Even so, this does not exclude the possibility of the production of a verisimilar account of the local state of affairs (see here also Hammersley, 1992:43-56 for his concept of a 'subtle realism' that allows for the notion of supra-subjective 'truth', albeit in a non-positivist sense). The absence of uniformity and the fragmented nature of experience and perception amount, in this sense, to an important and generalizable pattern in itself. Since my core exploratory interest ultimately lay on alternative governance, capturing the voices of those affected by its pursuit through LCT was crucial. This also helped to cross-reference and thus scrutinize the statements given to me by LCT (see Chapters 5 and 6).

Local civilians as a source

My goal to provide a verisimilar account is fostered by the possibility to include LCT's perspective(s) as an additional, unexpected layer of 'truths' that can be triangulated with

those held and voiced by local civilians. Along such lines, accounts of real-life encounters and experiences provide an essential reflection on LCT's attempt to impose its own 'truth', an exercise of positioning itself as an organic element within a reconstructed narrative of the local (Chapter 5). The subjects of, and at the same time, evaluating social audiences, local civilians' accounts are part and parcel of deciphering the on-the-ground materialization of LCT's project of alternative governance. Data gathered amongst civilian populations compose the bulk of the data collected. A rich source of information hitherto largely ignored – again, arguably an effect of the perceived impossibility to get close and the connected macro-focus of most studies on organized crime, non-state armed actors, and related matters of security – these are given considerable prominence in my elaborations. Reflecting their voices also contains a political aspect insofar as local civilian populations find themselves, many times quite literally so, in the crossfire between non-state and state actors as well as the object of stigmatizing representations imposed by the outside world. My persona as a naïve, albeit empathetic outsider with a genuine interest in looking behind such much-lamented accounts was, by and large, met with a principal openness to share their side of the story. Again, my out-of-place presence highly unusual for inhabitants of a region that sees little to no presence of foreigners – during the entire period spent in *Tierra Caliente*, I did not cross paths with another one – turned out to be an asset. Being German and thus from a country about which locals had little to no concrete information but which was positively connoted. This proved advantageous, especially vis-à-vis the category of *gringo*, tainted not least as an effect of the 'war on drugs' (see in this context Goldsmith's elaborations on how what he calls the 'gringo factor' affected his fieldwork in Colombia, 2003:107-109) and which I made efforts not to be put into. Moreover, as I had done in previous instances elsewhere in the country, I could play with the confusion stemming from my Northern-European looks and the not-so-easily-

reconcilable command of Mexican Spanish and slang. Still, the usual stereotypes about my country of origin – football, cars, economic success, and a certain mentality – provided welcome icebreakers for conversations with civilians as well as members of LCT. *El Inge*, for instance, lamented Bayern Munich’s recent defeat in the Champions League final and was moreover proud to show off some items of ‘German engineering’ in his possession. These include a 9mm handgun, which he takes the bullets out of, hands to me, and praises its ‘reliability’: ‘It has served me well.’ Engraved on the side of the barrel, I read Heckler und Koch GmbH.²⁵

Being around and participant observation

If ethnographic method boils down to the lowest common denominator of the researcher ‘participating... in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions... collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the emerging focus of the inquiry’ (Hammersley/Atkinson, 2007:3), it was the possibility for me to be around and partake in locals’ daily lives that allowed my methodology to transcend the boundaries I had initially deemed realistic. This enabled a shift towards a more intense, embedded form of participant observation within the setting of core interest itself rather than sporadic encounters with informants outside of it. Being there meant, for one, becoming a casual observer of the ways in which LCT’s presence manifested itself in the everyday. At times, even when I was trying to ‘take a night off’ – as it turned out something utterly impossible

²⁵ Later in the conversation, he moreover praises the G36 assault rifle, also manufactured by Heckler and Koch Ltd. The company, one of the world’s principal small arms manufacturers, has recently been accused of illegally trafficking arms to conflict areas officially embargoed by the German state, including parts of Mexico (see Knight, 2014).

when in the field – data seemed to miraculously find their way to me. Having a drink in a local bar, to cite one instance, members of LCT rushed in to hand out propaganda material. Being there moreover meant being able to gradually build up trust through normal everyday interactions such as shared dinners, grocery shopping, collectively cleaning houses, football matches, family celebrations, sharing a car during road trips, or simply hanging out. These interactions, emblematic for an ongoing methodological adaptation towards greater informality, paved the way for informants to open up, to unveil more sensitive details or for them to talk to me about items of interest in the first place. Much of the information was therefore not gathered during clearly delineated interview situations, but simply in the form of conversational fragments embedded in everyday interactions. One example is the afternoon I hung out with a group of women who were preparing *Caldo de Iguana* (Iguana stew) for a larger party and our conversation shifts from food in general to meals handed out by LCT in local communities. Nevertheless, I also conducted and recorded a total of twenty-one interviews. Some of these took the form of group discussions, with three to six people present.

Representativeness

As I have underlined, the research upon which the present thesis is based took place in a severely understudied setting. Fundamentally, then, it is exploratory in nature and much of what I identify over the following pages are themes pointing to possibilities for future research. As already made clear in the introduction, by no means do I claim to have obtained and present such a thing as an ‘all-encompassing’ data set that could be considered representative for Tierra Caliente’s civilian population as a whole. First, the majority of my informants are to be considered ‘regular’ dwellers from small rural

communities and situated within a specific stratus of society where the precariousness of livelihoods is prevalent. This group is of special interest to the goals of this study as these communities coincide with the zones in which LCT's control is highest, rendering their inhabitants immediate observers and/or direct recipients of the practices applied by LCT in this context. Second, the bulk of the communities in question are situated in the surroundings of Apatzingán. Inferences about realities in other parts of LCT's territory are therefore not necessarily to be made. The more so as LCT is not to be considered a monolithic actor characterized by or capable of perfectly concerted action (see Chapter 5). Third, and closely related to uncertainty as a factor underpinning the absence of uniformity in experience as mentioned above, I provide an interpretivist window into a particular and temporally limited arrangement of a fragment of local society and capture the subjective experiences of research informants. In this vein, my analysis 'resists the connotation of timelessness commonly described as "the ethnographic present"... that has adversely haunted traditional ethnography... [and] in which "the other" is inscribed in a static, unchanging, and enduring imprint' (Madison, 2011:11). Considering the constant state of flux characterizing social (dis)order in Tierra Caliente as well as elsewhere in the 'global south' (a theme prominently surfacing throughout this thesis), this appears all the more relevant. Hence, I employ the terms 'contemporary' and 'state of affairs' to carry the notion of an ephemerality limited to the time of fieldwork. Arguably, then, 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser/Strauss, 1967) supposes a possibility only insofar as it is comprehended as constrained by such a temporal frame.

Generalizability

The inevitably small sample sizes of ethnographic case studies such as the present one obviously renders generalizability in a statistical sense unfeasible (and perhaps undesirable; see LeCompte/Goetz, 1982 and Small, 2009 for syntheses of depth v width debate). What appears, in contrast, feasible and moreover gives value to ethnographic case studies beyond the description of particular empirical realities is the possibility for 'theoretical generalization' (Mitchell, 1983), or simply 'theorizing'. Some subscribe to the view that ethnography's *raison d'être* and the basis upon which to judge the merit of particular enterprises is the generation of formal theory (e.g. Athens, 1984). I make no such ambitious claim. Yet, in a milder formulation, ethnography can be neither strictly 'particularizing' nor strictly 'generalizing', neither solely 'ideographic' nor solely 'nomothetic' (see Brewer, 2000:149). That is, even though each case is recognized as particular and unique, overarching dynamics and structures can and indeed must still be factored in so as to capture it as an 'idiosyncratic combination of elements' (Mitchell, 1983: 188). Beyond merely '[examining] how the social situation is shaped by external forces' (Burawoy et al., 1991: 6), the success of such an approach rests on the examination of how social situation and external forces interact to create something *sui generis*. Corresponding analyses, then, can speak to, help to refine, and stress-test existing theory and conceptualizations. The present case therefore identifies deviations from default sensemaking on organized crime, questioning its pertinence. It moreover relates to an emerging literature on the reconfiguration of social (dis)order in the global south's liquefied landscape of governance and sovereignty and the role of non-state armed actors herein, adding nuance, new aspects, and above all depth to questions thus far insufficiently explored. Crucially, as I show, while the structures and dynamics identified in such a body

of thought surface prominently in LCT's conduct within the local, they do so in unexpected and seemingly paradoxical ways that question an array of largely taken-for-granted assumptions concerning law, order, and not least state-organized crime-interactions (see Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of this thesis' contribution).

Gatekeeper centrality

Gaining access (to data) in the fashion outlined above would have been impossible without the prominent role my gatekeeper occupied and moreover proactively assumed during my fieldwork in Tierra Caliente. Here, just as in criminological fieldwork in general, the gatekeeper occupies the position of *sine-qua-non* hero of access (see Jacobs, 2006:163). I consider the excellent personal 'chemistry' between us key in this context. He provided me with an array of initial contacts, introduced me to basic behavioral rules, and supported me in assessing risks and the trustworthiness of potential informants. Furthermore, he provided direct logistical support, driving me to rural communities as well as other places and thereby rendering my movements possible in the first place. Fundamental to this exceptional support was, as already pointed out, that he principally welcomed my interest in building up a first-hand understanding of the conditions governing local civilians' lives, the improvement of which supposed both a life-long passion of his as well as the stated *raison d'être* of the organization headed by him. The work of this organization, left-leaning to revolutionary in political orientation, consisted in channeling financial support into micro-development projects and in representing the interests of dwellers of rural communities towards the outside world, foremost state bureaucracies. Diego in particular, as civilians I interacted with stressed time and again, enjoyed significant popularity due to his and his organization's positively connoted role. This standing, in turn, rendered his

vouching for my integrity effective and my accounting for my presence credible in the eyes of locals.

His capacity to confer trust on to me opened doors. During the initial phase of my stay in Tierra Caliente, he moreover provided me with a blueprint of sorts for how to pertinently introduce my own persona and research goals. Many informants that ultimately shared their experience with me would, I am certain, not have done so without his mediation. Reflecting potential consequences imposed by LCT upon for 'those who talk' (see Chapter 4), an array of informants stated that they 'talked about such things with nobody', making our conversation the first time they did. A testimony to his centrality in vouching for me and thus enabling access to locals' accounts came as I abandoned the incipient conversation he and I had with an informant out on his porch to go inside to fetch drinks. Unintentionally, I had left the voice recorder running.²⁶ Listening to it later, I heard how as soon as I was out of range, the informant asked in a hush and preoccupied voice: 'But my name is not going to get out, right?' My gatekeeper soothed her:

'No, of course not... this is not for a newspaper or anything like that... it's just for documenting... and he comes from Germany, from Europe... the people there have erroneous ideas about what's happening... even in *el DF* [The Federal District, i.e. Mexico City] when you say that you're from Michoacán or even that you're from Apatzingán they look at you like... bad bad... that we all are Templars, that we're all assassins, that we all cut heads...'

As I rejoined the conversation, Diego filled me in on what he had told the informant and I added to the concert. The informant, apparently gaining confidence in my presence, told me 'yes, and how good that you came here with him... the people here appreciate him a lot,

²⁶ It should be noted that, apart from this methodological vignette, other data was neither obtained nor used in this way.

he helps them so much...’ The same function became apparent in interactions with *ellos*. He countered, for instance, Tito’s doubt that I might be an informant of some sort: ‘Nooo, but why do you think that, Tito? He’s not an *oreja*... otherwise we wouldn’t have him in our house...’

My being granted tolerance by LCT seems to have moreover been rooted in an interest on the group’s part to coopt or, at least, not to antagonize Diego and his organization, equipped with a considerable social base and influence on locals’ opinions, against it (see also Chapter 5). During our encounters, LCT’s leaders not only invoked an ideological congruence between both organizations, but moreover expressed that they ‘normally don’t do this [meeting outsiders such as myself]’. His standing seemed to have provided him, and in extension me, with a degree of protection from LCT. Diego himself speculated ‘if they kill me, my people will turn on them’. This bluntness moreover played out in interesting, albeit not entirely unproblematic ways for bearing potential risks, in conversations with members of LCT, during some of which Diego was present. At times, this resembled a ‘good cop bad cop’ dynamic: whilst I stuck to my role as a respectful outsider interested in their side of the story and only subtly referring to contradictions, Diego was straightforward in his critique and even outright aggressive in calling LCT on its hypocrisy (see Chapter 6 for a corresponding interaction with Moreno).

Dealing with risks known and unknown

Risk necessarily forms part of research in settings such as the one I conducted my fieldwork in.²⁷ Most pressing – and treated as such in the still relatively scarce literature explicitly addressing corresponding matters – appear ‘human hazards’. Howell (1990) hereby connotes physical risks. Though a factor in on-the-ground criminological research in general (see Jacobs, 2006), they appear especially acute in what Belousov et al. (2007:159, drawing on Giddens, 1985) refer to as ‘frontier zones’, i.e. ‘geographical [locations] within a strife-ridden setting typical of a post-colonial, transitional or otherwise criminalized state... [with a] prevalence of violence and the relative weakness of police and other state institutions’ (see also Goldsmith, 2002). So as to minimize them, the challenge becomes to anticipate risks and identify their sources as best possible. As already mentioned, my own ‘impression management’ was key to my own integrity as well as that of those who might have, had I overstepped, become subjects of acts of repression by LCT. Moreover, and also part of securing their trust, in interacting with informants I stuck to a ‘security protocol’ which I had detailed as part of the process of obtaining informed consent by informants. Initially, I presented interview partners with sheets on which I had listed corresponding measures (based on recommendations by the UK Data Archive²⁸). Even though I ceased to use the latter as my methodology shifted towards greater informality – informants moreover showed little to no interest in the prints but rather on my verbal explications – I strictly adhered to these measures. Most important amongst the latter, the non-disclosure of informants’ identities through anonymization or omission of real names, geographical locations, as well as other relational data such as the names of members of

²⁷ Notwithstanding, it should be noted that cases where potential risks actually materialized into bodily harm or even death are extremely rare (see Jacobs, 2006:157-158; Rawlinson, 2008). A notable exception is the research conducted by Belousov et al. (2007) in Russia, during which a gatekeeper was killed.

²⁸ Available under: <http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/create-manage/consent-ethics/anonymisation?index=2> , last accessed 3 January 2015.

LCT with whom informants had interacted or certain compromising details of the settings these interactions had taken place in or the interactions themselves. These steps were applied to both written material generated in the field (fieldwork diary, e.g.) and texts generated later on the basis of the data obtained (i.e. this thesis).

A further risk stemmed from getting caught in crossfire during a possible confrontation between LCT and one of its enemy groups, including federal agencies present in the region. Though I never witnessed violent encounters, they would sporadically break out unannounced in parts of Tierra Caliente. In a few instances, rumors of imminent attacks by state actors grew strong enough to prompt my 'withdrawal' to safer locations outside of the region (to Morelia and Mexico-City, for instance). This also followed the advice of one of the academics involved in overseeing my project at my home institution to sporadically introduce physical distance to the field so as not to become overly complacent and inattentive to risk. Furthermore, albeit ultimately of limited effectiveness, when undertaking excursions into Apatzingán's rural surroundings to meet members of LCT, I would ask a close friend to place a call to local contacts in case I failed to report back by a specific deadline. In spite of these measures to deal with identifiable sources of risk, the main issue stems from the fact that in such settings, as Campbell (2009:13) writes in reference to the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso border region, 'no one has all the information'. Nor is there anybody, for that matter, with *de facto* control over all processes and events. That entering territories such as Tierra Caliente exposes researchers to a certain isolation and powerlessness (see Sampson/Thomas, 2003) then it becomes more than just a function of the effective dysfunctionality of official law. As stated above, its non-state alternative as represented and claimed by LCT's leaders had promised me protection. Yet, even they admittedly exercised limited control over their own members and moreover headed a

group characterized by internal diversity (in action). Hence, I could neither necessarily take for granted that the decision to tolerate my presence had effectively been communicated throughout all the organization's layers nor that it would be welcomed by all segments and members. To a certain extent, my integrity depended on the effectiveness of LCT's (internal) criminal governance. The volatility and principal uncertainty of Tierra Caliente as the research setting moreover meant that I chose not to follow up certain leads. I declined, for instance, an offer to visit a methamphetamine laboratory and thus a different and literal kind of volatile environment. None of my trusted contacts possessed information sufficient to at least partly evaluate the risk involved.

Apart from physical risks, another source to be factored in consisted in potential legal repercussions. After all, I became privy to data officially of high relevance for 'national security' such as ways to locate designated 'enemies of the state'. Leading members of LCT I interacted with were included in both the Mexican and the US-American states' most wanted/ kingpin lists, with hefty sums written out as rewards. Moreover, as Hobbs has argued (1988:Chapter 1), anyone conducting on-the-ground criminological research and who establishes a certain proximity with active criminal necessarily becomes an accessory to the commission of crimes and could very well face legal consequences. Hence, I could not exclude the possibility of attracting unwanted attention by state actors. No such thing happened, and perhaps the responsible authorities simply did not notice my presence. Furthermore, I was by no means the only person in possession of such information. Arguably, a lack in intelligence did not suppose, as of the time of fieldwork, the major and perhaps not even a factor for LCT's leaders' continued liberty (see in this context my discussion of state-organized crime-interactions beyond the licit-illicit-divide in Chapter 6).

Chapter 4: Revisiting the history of Michoacán organized crime

What rises falls from its own weight

Paranoia is part and parcel of everyday life in Michoacán. A meeting I had arranged with a journalist from a national news magazine who has promised a chat was a casualty of this ever-present feeling of suspicion. Postponed and ultimately to be cancelled three times, I made my way out of Morelia's center and into the anonymous, concrete-dominated outskirts. With the rest of the shops abandoned, the Starbucks clone I took a seat in front of is all that is left to remind one of the largely futile attempts to attract the affluent and have them abandon their SUVs and dig into fast food and American apparel. The choice of location, in its desolation predestined to be a postmodern urban Westerner to be shot at, was no coincidence. Fashionably late, the journalist first asked me to switch places as he preferred not to turn his back to the street. As he made clear in a low voice, 'in this city you never know who's watching'. Just as paranoia – a perhaps impertinent and even unfair assessment that nevertheless was all I got to grasp as the fear *ellos* inspire in locals remains largely impalpable, abstract to me, at least outside of Tierra Caliente – shaped the conditions of our first encounter, it had left marks on his face. I caught myself reading the sweat that pours out of the oversized pores bedecking his red-swollen nose as confirmation of what it means to be a journalist in Michoacán and having to juggle pressures even greater than those of a profession notoriously precarious at the best of times. Confirmation too for the rumors I harvested as I carefully dropped his name in conversations with trusted informants. These depicted him as a somewhat shady character I should be wary of as he was said to reconcile the stress of serving two masters – his own editorial office was said to 'watch' him due to suspected ties to *ellos* – through alcohol and cocaine. *Anything* embedded in a comparable setting, it seemed, cannot be free of

permeation and adaptation. As (Western) ideals hit (or are hit by) the everyday – or the street-level, as Lipsky (1980) phrased it to underline the incongruence between projected and *de facto* performances of bureaucrats – deviation inevitably follows and is arguably the price of functionality, however distorted, in the first place. What remains stubbornly rigid incurs the risk of fracturing or even ceasing to exist altogether. This concerns professions as much as (nominally democratic) institutions, a theme that becomes prominent in my discussion of state-organized crime-interactions in Chapter 6. For the time being, suffice it to note that blundering into the reality – or what the powers that be, hidden behind a façade of administrative respectability and those complying with the stereotypical label of illegality alike, might perceive as such – in inquiry and reporting has been known to cut careers and lives short.

Propelled in whichever way, his success in frequently being the first to arrive at fresh crime scenes and thus being able to feed *nota roja* ('red item') newspapers with those images that lend them their designation and popularity informs the 101 of Michoacán's recent narcohistory I receive on the exhaustion of small talk. As he hastily filled me in on actors and events, he rushed through an extensive photographic collection of disfigured torsos and body parts, as well as the typical messages perpetrators adorn them with. It was not only these *narcomensajes*, or narco-messages, that provided a text beyond the deed itself, contextualize it, and frequently seek to explain – if not justify. (More on the spectacle of violence and its specificities in the present case below). Competition amongst participants is, so much is clear, by no means limited to physical encounters. The field of contention is in many ways also a symbolic one. The degree to which its semantics transcend the confines of such a thing as an illegal market to interact with and indeed push into all spheres of society testifies to the career of *el narco* as a phenomenon ever-

mutating. To the outside world, most of this meaning is lost as selected images become channeled into and blurred to indistinction in the sea of violent imagery that provides reporting on (and imaginations of) Mexico's 'drug-fueled conflict' with its visual backdrop.



Image 4.1: Murder as text in El Aguaje, Tierra Caliente, Michoacán, 2009. Courtesy of anonymized source.

The 2009 scene depicted in Image 4.1 and photographed by the above journalist contains the staging elements typical of Mexico's recent hyperviolence. The severed head, a symptom of an escalation that has seen the practice of decapitation and the display of its results becoming standardized since 2006; not least so in Michoacán (see Arteaga Botello, 2009). The message is a warning to competitors and those daring to collaborate with them, roughly translatable as 'To the informants and snitches that betray *La Familia*. Bye dude'. The scene's composition, with the head suspended by a pierced ear, designating the victim's culpability as an *oreja*, i.e. the same function as an 'ear' for the hostile entities Tito

had indicated I could have been mistaken for (see Chapter 3). It was no coincidence, either, that the head was hung from a cross, originally erected by family members to commemorate the abduction and killing of an individual in 2006 who had, just like those dumped here after him, chosen the wrong side.

However, to the group of five *apatzingenses* I shared this image with one afternoon in April 2012, it speaks of far more than just an assertion of power of one faction of participants in the field of organized crime over another. So do their remarks which unveil a contrast I struggled to reconcile. This and similar scenes, that is, appeared far more personal to them than to an outside observer. Events are rendered palpable as protagonists, victims and perpetrators alike are referred to by their first names and past interactions with them or their family members resuscitated. At the same time, however, they seemed detached and even bereft of the terror that coated me as I gazed at such scenes this time and many more in the future. Casually expressed with a sarcastic-humoristic undertone, being murdered becomes *morir de causas naturales* ('dying by natural causes') and disappearing to be later found assassinated *amanecer muerto* ('waking up dead'). As one of my informants, a woman of about fifty years of age, summarized:

'Recently, we were talking about this and we were saying... how sad it was that we were now seeing these things as part of everyday life... that we were seeing them as normal to a certain degree... ten heads... and we would look at the newspapers and "ah, so many dead then" [she shrugged to demonstrate a reaction of indifference]... so we have simply gotten used to these things happening.'

The constitution of these extreme expressions of violence as a normalized and even banalized fixture of the everyday life she lamented is perhaps inevitable. Yet, she also suggested that this represented a relatively recent adaption. Nowhere perhaps – albeit far

from here – does this find a more palpable expression than in El Aguaje, situated half way between Apatzingán and Aguililla and thus between two of Tierra Caliente’s localities traditionally associated with narcotrafficking. It moreover lies in direct proximity to the equally infamous black cross depicted in the photograph above. Locals depict El Aguaje as something akin to ground zero. And indeed, the narrations underpinning this label felt palpable as, a few days after the abovementioned conversation, my gatekeeper and I entered the locality at dusk. Its streets were endowed with a mysterious aura from a golden light further intensified as its rays catch the dust swirled up by a light breeze that did little to alleviate the relentless heat. The buildings that flank the main street appeared oddly out of place. The more so as all we observed from the overland road leading into El Aguaje were precarious shacks. Here, in contrast, we came across estates. Their nine-foot-high walls, painted in yellow and green, occupy long stretches of the street and hide lush gardens and swimming pools. Judging, moreover, from the security cameras observing events on both sides of the entrance doors, they aspire to be fortresses rather than just luxurious habitations. Ultimately, though, these measures could not prevent some of the original inhabitants being taken, attached to pick-up trucks with chains, and dragged to their deaths. ‘All that rises falls from its own weight.’ The latter (cited in Grayson, 2011:200) is one of the more cynical comments provided in 2006 via *narcomensaje* by those doing the dragging. Literally here and elsewhere in Tierra Caliente. As a result, its authors – members of the then up- and coming *Familia Michoacana* – successfully ousted from both power and villas what had been until then counted amongst Mexico’s principal drug trafficking organizations, the so-called *Cartel del Milenio* (‘Millennium Cartel’, also known as *Cartel de los Valencia*, see Nájjar, 2005).

El Aguaje, its streets now visibly deserted and emitting the atmosphere of a ghost town, serves as a marker of before and an after and as a reminder of the latest phase of *el narco's* career in the region. A career, that is, of a phenomenon that has formed part of the local as long as anyone can remember. One that began as a side product of and yet an intrinsic part of modernity and that would nevertheless remain largely marginal in impact relative to other social and political forces until after the turn of the millennium. The career of a phenomenon that has, as of late, become effectively political in that its protagonists have come to claim supremacy over as well as the right to shape and to even remake all spheres of local society. What is telling in the sense of this latest phase's prime characteristic of deep and pro-active societal penetration is that El Aguaje by no stands means alone in its symbolism. As a consequence, as I conducted my fieldwork in Tierra Caliente it was as if everything was dusted by the superstrate of semantic redefinition that this last phase has swirled up and coated the local with. Whisky, avocados, butterflies. Community organization, 'democratic' elections, cockfights, marriage, morals, honor, work, church and worship. Taxis, street corners, house façades, localities. The hills, the countryside, the forest. But for a few items of everyday life, touched upon in the following pages, the meaning of which have become modified, in the center of it all, the very phenomenon of *el narco*.

The career of Michoacán organized crime in four phases: Overview

This all-pervasiveness, embodied by the rise of LFM, represents the culmination of a decades-long process. Granting center stage to the voices and experiences of local civilians – current civilians, to be precise, for former narcotraffickers provide their viewpoints – I reconstruct the mutation of Michoacán organized crime throughout this chapter. In the

spirit of the core interest of the present thesis, market-internal dynamics provide a backdrop. Rather, I highlight how the ‘grand changes’ brought about by this mutation are reflected upon and evaluated by locals, especially as concerns their social and economic impact. I identify four phases.²⁹ The first phase appears in the narrations provided as something akin to a ‘golden age’ of Michoacán narcotrafficking, characterized by broad and sporadic participation as well as a positively connoted effect of economic empowerment. During the second phase, which materialized during the 1980s, the first phase’s diffuse structure of participation and participants revealed the first indications of greater concentration and centralization. The presence of criminal organizations, both local and non-local, became notable: This was, in essence, a phase of transition. The third phase initially saw the accentuation of the second phase’s features into exclusive and highly stratified forms of participation in narcotrafficking, a condition for which subsequently became membership in or at least servile affiliation to organized groups. This striving for exclusivity translates into the above touched upon expressions of violent competition amongst participants. It moreover led to *el narco’s* spillover into societal spheres other than criminal markets. In the fourth phase, marked by the rise of LFM and later embodied by LCT, this spillover became amplified to a degree of galvanization of organized crime and alternative governance into a fundamentally eclectic phenomenon. The phenomenon’s mutation into its contemporary shape, as I demonstrate below, would have been unthinkable without parallel and enabling developments in the role the state occupies within society and economy. LCT’s project of alternative governance can, in this vein, not be adequately comprehended without taking into account the ways in which it arose out of, related to, and built on the ruins of the Mexican state’s representation of social order and

²⁹ These phases should be thought of as ideal-typical. Traits prevalent during one phase can still be well present during another, albeit less strongly so. Given the scarcity of reliable (historical) data and the fact that this thesis does not seek to produce a comprehensive historical account, my aim can only be thus.

progress. Important clues are present here to the underlying question of what empowers LCT as project and organization.

Phase I: 'And everybody went up to the hill': The golden age of Michoacán narco-trafficking

'Where do think all of this came from?' My informant and I made the best of a shared insomnia, only further accentuated by a heat that was still merciless at three o'clock in the morning. This time we chose not to combat it with cigarettes, iced-cooled *Sangre de Cristo* (red wine best/only enjoyed cold), and long chats on the porch. We took an excursion into nighttime Apatzingán which took on the shape of an archeological exploration. We toured monuments to past episodes of the trade, erected in seemingly quixotic attempts to counteract the nearly always inevitable truth that a gained place in the sun is an ephemeral one. The one we eventually stopped in front of had four stories and towered over its surroundings. Its pseudo-roman pillars complied with the stereotypical nouveau narco riche kitsch. They also brought back memories of better times, from back when she lived in the mansion with a former husband. Where did all this come from? In this case, from acting as a local distributor of precursor drugs, brought in from Mexico City and needed for the highly profitable production of methamphetamines that started to pick up speed in and around Michoacán from the late 1980s on (see Fernández, 1999; Aguilar, 2011). She smiled as she told me how this had also led to her receiving a significantly greater allowance, just for her personal use. 'He [the ex-husband] would call me up and ask: "How would you like to make 10,000 pesos on the side? I need you to go pick something up for me and bring it back to town."' After he fled to Canada in 1998 – the wiser choice, as compared to the risk of 'getting in the middle of things' when pressure was being put on

him to 'coordinate' his business activities – the contact broke off and she remarried, just to see her husband die of cancer a couple of years later. The latter reason was enough for her to state that it was around that time that things started getting *más malo* (sic, 'more bad').

In contrast, what enables the golden age of Michoacán narco-trafficking appear golden in locals' memories is a combination of three principal and interdependent attributes:

- i) the absence of levels in violence considered extraordinary³⁰ and the equation of involved activities to honorable and respectable work (note how in the interview fragments cited below narco-trafficking is simply referred to as *trabajar*, or to work);
- ii) the possibility for independent actors to sporadically and (relatively) freely participate, without entry and exit being dependent upon membership in or lasting affiliation with more organized entities;
- iii) and thus the possibility for a relatively wide population to directly access or indirectly benefit from narco-trafficking as a tool for economic empowerment.

These attributes moreover aggregate into items along the lines of which the phenomenon's shape in its subsequent phases is evaluated: the role of violence; the moral status of activity and participants; the field's structure and conditions of participation; and the distribution of proceeds.

A comprehensive historical account of the emergence of narco-trafficking in Michoacán remains to be written and presumes an enterprise that lies well outside of the scope of this thesis. The few writings that do touch upon the matter, however, coincide in that such

³⁰ This does, as I discuss below, not imply the absence of violence altogether.

activities have formed part of the local economy at least since the 1950s (see Astorga, 1996:184; Maldonado 2012:11). In some parts of Tierra Caliente, they appear to have been generalized as early as the beginning of the 1960s. So much so that even the military – sent into the region a few years earlier to, amongst other reasons, lead an early anti-narco campaign – found itself surprised to find that poppy growers and opium traffickers had ‘inexplicably converted such activities into the normal work of some regions in the south of Michoacán’ (Military bulletin of 1962, cited in: Maldonado, 2010:345; note the representation of narcos as infiltrating, perverting agents).

Narcotrafficking as a widespread means of economic empowerment

Amelia, an informant of mine who grew up during the ‘golden’ period, upholds this observation. We had been introduced at an event at Diego’s organization’s offices and as we chatted over lunch, she let it emerge that her family also had a certain tradition. My follow-up questions and obvious interest landed me an invitation to the house she was brought up in in Arteaga. It was situated a two hour drive south of Apatzingán in the hills that mark the lower reaches of the mountains separating Tierra Caliente’s geological depression from the Pacific coast. Long before Arteaga became known as the home turf and stronghold of Servando Gómez Martínez, LCT’s second in command at time of fieldwork and one of my interviewees, locals became involved in the production and trafficking of marihuana:

‘Back then, when I was a child, my uncles were cultivating *enervante* [a term commonly used by locals to refer to *drogas enervantes*, or psychoactive drugs], marihuana... we kids knew what they were doing, that they were planting, and harvesting, and then packaging... we wouldn’t help since they were growing it in the *cerros* [hills], in the ravines... and as kids we would stay in the villages... but we did observe at home when they were

using a hydraulic press³¹ to make very compact packs... so they would bring it home... and under your bed there would be packs of *enervante*... my uncles weren't major producers either, it was more like everybody in the *ranchos* [small rural settlements] was growing... because it was the way to survive... one would always grow corn for consumption, and beans, some pigs and maybe some cattle... But if you wanted to have a little something extra, you had to grow *enervante* since that would give you a little more money annually... to buy clothing, shoes, and maybe it would even be enough for a vehicle... and what's more is that growing marihuana isn't difficult, this plant is so noble that you can just put it in the middle of a corn plantation, there it grows strong, big and beautiful plants... and you didn't even have to invest a lot, no fertilizer or anything like that... So everybody went up to *el cerro*³².'



Image 4.2: Peasant on Marihuana plantation in Tierra Caliente, Michoacán, 2011. Courtesy of Eduardo Loza.

³¹ These hydraulic presses are still used to form packs of one kilogram. See Image 4.3.

³² The term *el cerro* is generically used to refer to the region's rugged hills, places that lie outside of the 'regular' insofar as they connote spaces of wilderness, both in natural and civilizational terms.



Image 4.3: Marihuana harvested and pressed into kilo bricks for shipment, Tierra Caliente, Michoacán, 2011.
Courtesy of Eduardo Loza.

Narcotrafficking as a diffusely arranged field of economic activity

Well into his eighties, one of the uncles in question is now the sole occupant of Amelia's parental home. Measured by his own standards – 'the most important thing is to keep them strong and aggressive' – he masters his current business. The very second I naively placed my finger into one of the cages that made up two long rows on the back patio, one of the majestic fighting cocks he breeds pecks away at my finger. He was less keen to talk about previous business activities which he considered to be nothing but 'things of the past'. In contrast, his brother had no problem with digging up old stories. We visited him a few days later in a small coastal setting on the border between Michoacán and its neighbor to the east, Guerrero. He, Amelia had told me, used to 'do *narco* to take it' (*hacía narco para*

llevarse la'). That is, as he filled me in, he and a partner would approach local peasants, negotiate a price to buy up their harvest to then make three or four runs a year to and across the US border:

'I started doing that about forty years ago and I lasted for ten or fifteen years or so... and I did make *un dinerito* [diminutive for money]... we would buy here and sell in Tijuana... or sometimes we would cross [the border] and sell in *el gabacho* to the *gabachos*³³... back then you would load up here and go up north... you wouldn't take much either: 120, 130, 140 kilos in a *camionetita*, in a pick-up [sic]... since the *camionetita* was then empty, we'd take back like sixty rifles and sell them here...'

Intrigued by the early indication of what until today remains one of the flows characteristic for the bi-national interweaving central to the contemporary landscape of Mexican organized crime – guns one way, drugs the other (see e.g. Mercille, 2011) – I inquired whether it was hard to get his hands on guns:

'Well no, just like that... the thing is that over there, there were so many gunsmith's shops... it was a good way of making a living... we didn't need some contact, nor were there problems with the police [in Mexico]... once we got stopped by the *judicial* [judicial police] but they let us go for some money... when I finally quit the business, it was when we got caught at the border because the one in charge of packing [i.e. renting out a *camioneta* with hidden compartments to cross the border in Tijuana] wasn't much of a specialist at that, he was rather for killing people...'

How widespread participation in narco-trafficking had become by the 1980s at the very latest becomes expressed in the fact that many locals I interacted with considered their or their family members' trajectories not even worth mentioning. One example here is my gatekeeper's brother. He had shown himself willing to unveil an array of potentially compromising details. Prior to LFM's schism that rendered such interactions unthinkable, for instance, he would spend nights drinking and playing cards with *sicarios* from both

³³ *Gabacho* is used to either designate the USA or as equivalent to *gringo*. Both can but do not necessarily carry pejorative meaning.

factions. However, that he too had a story to tell he had failed to mention. My gatekeeper's remark – 'You see? I told you everybody here has a history!' – was followed by the request to his brother to 'tell us already!' 'So how did you get into it then?', I asked.

'Well, a friend from back at the *rancho* invited me, he tells me "c'mon, get your ass up, come work with me *al gabacho* [to the USA]..." and so I went with him... and he showed me how to work...' The work, in his case, consisted in retailing *chiva* [goat, colloquial for heroin] in a suburb of Portland, Oregon. '[In total], we were four, me and my friend and the two who brought the drug... about half a kilo every two weeks... we would buy it directly from the producers in Guerrero³⁴... and double it [the money] here... there was good money in it back then.'

He lasted two years. until one of his customers was caught and, as he speculated, cut a deal:

'At six in the morning they come knocking on my door... boom boom boom, very loudly... First I didn't want to get up, it was super early after all, but I looked from behind the curtain and saw that it was the narcs [sic, short for narcotics agents in American English, here for the Drug Enforcement Administration or DEA].'

'Did you have a lot of stuff there?'

'Well I thought well hidden, but there was drugs and... money... and they were searching and searching and I already thought they weren't going to find anything and that they were going to leave but then all the sudden *la vieja* [pejorative for woman, here one of the agents] shouts "Bingo!"... fuck [imitates his reaction and laughs].'

'Doing time, did you meet a lot of *michoacanos*? 'Uyyyyy the prison was full [stretches the word, emphasizing with typical *terracalentana* intonation] with them [laughs]!' 'A lot of them working for the same *jefe*? 'No... it was like everybody was working on their own... back then who wanted to work could work... and nobody told you "here you don't sell, here is my territory" ... nothing of that.'

³⁴ Abovementioned federated state bordering with Michoacán and traditionally associated with poppy cultivation.

(Narco) trickle-down economics

The above-cited experiences are emblematic for the overall positive place the 'golden age' occupies in locals' reflections of the past.³⁵ Narcotrafficking here appears as a taken-for-granted, diffusely composed field of economic activity in which small-scale enterprises – nowhere close to the degree of organization as expressed in larger, lasting structures and binding, exclusive membership associated with contemporary Mexican organized crime – could sporadically participate in, i.e. enter and exit freely. Frequently, participation in such enterprises seems to have followed the logic of generating start-up capital for licit economic activities. As Diego summarizes: 'a lot of people were doing it to buy a *casita* [diminutive for house], a *tiendita* [diminutive for shop], a parcel [of land]... and once you had that, [you would] not [do it] anymore'. Apart from flushing money into individuals' pockets, the local economy seems to have been stimulated by such activity. Reflecting similar experiences in other regions of the Americas (see e.g. Thoumi, 2003), this became most apparent in the construction sector. As houses such as those described above were being erected, demand for manual labor was created. I discussed the pros and cons of past and present with one informant at his son's school one afternoon. To him, the influx and distribution of *narcodinero* ('narcomoney') 'was like a chain. If they work them you get something as well... and if I tell you "listen, you're from the organized crime [sic] and you got money and I'm a worker and you give me work and I give work to somebody else

³⁵ While this is true for my civilian informants from Tierra Caliente across the board, it should be noted that these experiences are not to be taken as representative for the entire local population, a claim this thesis does not and cannot make. The bulk of my informants are, as already mentioned in Chapter 2, from the very strata that originally benefitted most from the rise of narcotrafficking as a tool of economic empowerment and social mobility previously largely unavailable to them, i.e. mostly Tierra Caliente's dependent (agricultural) laborers or small farmers struggling to stay afloat. It might thus be assumed that, given that said mutation affected them and their livelihoods most immediately, the 'golden age' is reflected by them more favorably than by other strata with divergence economic opportunities and, at times, detrimentally affected by the original rise as the nouveau narco riche pushed up the social ladder to contend their status and standing. Yet, there is little doubt that to (most of) them, too, what was before was better than what is.

[subcontracting]...” then, yeah, it’s like a *cadenita* [diminutive for chain] and a lot of people benefit...’ This, then, is the basis of trickle down (narco-)economics. In the same vein, all three abovementioned studies that discuss Michoacán narco-trafficking in some depth (Malkin, 2001; McDonald, 2005; Maldonado, 2010 and 2012) emphasize that ‘much of the economy was kept afloat by drug money’ (Malkin, 2001:109). This dependence is further increased as the 1980s’ economic crisis adversely affected already scarce licit alternatives (see below).

‘Simply working’: Narcotrafficking as an honorable activity

Though they are voiced with a degree of conviction that evokes an inherent and absolute quality, these positive reflections arise as the present is evaluated through the contrasting recurrence of past experiences. Violence, for one, was an undeniable and, again, taken-for-granted factor well before El Aguaje. Tales of local gangs stealing the harvest were as frequent as small-time traffickers being stopped or hauled off overland buses and ‘relieved’ of their merchandise at gunpoint. This was all part of the game, as Amelia’s uncle relates: ‘I’ll tell you something... you know well that here in Mexico, if you’re a smuggler and I’m a smuggler... as much as I want to kill you sometimes you want to kill me sometimes to get something extra...’ At the same time, however, the quantity and quality of violence thus produced appears not to have been significant enough for narco-trafficking to shine through as an extraordinary source against the backdrop of persistently high regional levels of violence (for an in-depth discussion of its roots and manifestations in Michoacán see Maldonado, 2010 and Montes, 2011:317-322; Arias/Goldstein, 2010 provide a fresh look at the matter in the broader context of Latin America as the world’s most violent region). As Malkin (2001:119) observes with regards to the rising prominence and

visibility of the social group of *los narcos*: ‘This is not the arrival of a group that brings violence to an otherwise peaceful community.’

Even so, narcotrafficking supposes not merely a tool for economic empowerment, but a more honorable one at that. Don José used to be *metido* (‘in it’) as well, as my gatekeeper points out after we had finished dinner at my first day’s baptism party (see Chapter 3). I approached him with two glasses of Buchanan’s twelve-year-old Scotch, *narcocultura*’s liquid status symbol (see Campbell, 2009:25 for a list of some of its insignia, material and else; see Ovalle, 2005 and Rincón, 2009 for general depictions). I was feeling unsure of how to start the conversation. Don José was, after all, the first ‘real-life narco’ I had interact with. He, however, brusquely dismissed my doubts, barely hidden as I touch upon his past:

‘Tranquilo boy, I have nothing to hide. I’ve paid for it [gone to jail] and that’s that... Back then, I was young and I wanted to get into something to have something, to have some money... so I was thinking about becoming part of the *judicial* [state police]... but then I realized that another path was better, you understand? In the *judicial* you had to kill people and so on, and no, I am a different class of people.’

However, he underlined that he was ‘not a coward either.’ ‘You always feel death... because you know you’re moving outside of the law, *está cabrón* [‘it’s really tough’]... so I always carried a pistol *y la chingada* [‘and shit’].’ Yet, first smuggling *mota* (‘the fucking car was doing rounds and rounds’) and later *chiva* to California to ultimately ‘drop’ three to four kilograms of cocaine a week to retailers in and around Los Angeles seemed to be the better solution:

‘You were watching out for *la pura ley* [‘nothing but the law’, i.e. the police], you understand? I never killed anybody. The whole thing appeared clean to me. When the whole drug thing started, I started to make money... but not, say, by killing... it was a cleaner way of making a living. You were simply working [*trabajando*].’

Dreams of modernity: Official and alternative pathways

Tierra Caliente's stigma

By the early 1980s (at the latest), narcotrafficking had become so generalized as to constitute an 'integral part of everyday life' (Malkin, 2001:103; see also Montes, 2011:315-317) in Tierra Caliente. The same holds true for other parts of Mexico, primarily the north (see Campbell, 2009:17). While largely painted in a positive light in locals' memory, to the outside world its rise seconded the historically deeply engrained image of Tierra Caliente as standing outside of law, morality, and progress. Already by the Spanish, the region was perceived as backward, uncivilized, barbarian, and rebellious. Tucked away in a depression in the south of Michoacán and surrounded by rugged mountains and hills that would make transport into and out of the region challenging and led to a certain isolation until the latter half of the twentieth century, it earned the designation of *el fondillo del mundo* (diminutive for 'bottom of the earth', see González y González, 2001:17). Its untamed nature, desert-like climatic conditions, and inhabitants alike were portrayed as hostile enough to '[make] even devils flee' (ibid.:19). This motivated a variety of projects to civilize the region (Maldonado, 2010 provides the most comprehensive portrayal of the latter). The Roman Catholic Church, alongside other religious organizations, tried to break the *terraclenteños'* 'indolent life style' (González y González, 2001:28) – supposedly characterized by the five vices of 'alcoholism, lechery, spleen, idleness, and gambling' (ibid.:38-39) – through missionary work and evangelization campaigns. In a similar vein, the region became inserted into the dynamics of the formation of the Mexican state, which sought to integrate this and further 'marginal' territories into a homogenous national political, economic, and cultural project (see e.g. Pansters/Ouweneel, 1989). This took the shape, above all during Mexico's liberalist regime in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries, of attracting and colonizing the region with 'European minds' (González y González, 2001:33) and by relying on the socializing machinery of educational institutions.

'Civilizing' Tierra Caliente through large-scale modernization programs

At the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, Tierra Caliente becomes the stage for what Malkin (2001:104) calls 'one of the largest experiments in agrarian and agricultural reform' in Mexican history (Maldonado, 2010/2012; Montes, 2011; Ortiz, 2011; and Thiebaut, 2011 provide overviews). From 1947, substantial investments in infrastructure were made and bridges, streets, train lines, and irrigation systems built. This also enabled the mining industry to thrive. In the center, however, stood the region's agriculture the potential of which was finally realized. By becoming a site of industrial-scale production, Tierra Caliente was meant to make a key contribution in bringing the epoch's attempt at making Mexico economically (and thereby politically) independent³⁶ to fruition. Yet, incorporating Tierra Caliente 'as an integral part of the national project' (Malkin, 2001:15) included more than just economic modernization and the conquest of a nation-state's remaining internal geographical frontiers. The moral-interventionist approach remained part and parcel of bringing modernity to the region. Seeking to root out that considered 'unmodern', an expression of backwardness, and thus an obstacle to linear progress towards the envisioned society so-called 'sanitizing campaigns' were conducted. To this end, the Mexican military was deployed and established a permanent presence in the region for the first time. These campaigns included 'regular' police work and were intended to establish 'law and order', for instance by trying to curb petty crime

³⁶ This policy of 'important substitution industrialization' was dominant in Latin America for much of the 1950s and 1960s (for overviews see Baer, 1972; De Janvry, 1981).

and prostitution. In the foreground, however, stood actions against narcotraffickers, for instance in form of eradication campaigns. The ‘war on drugs’, in its Michoacán variant, found an early precedent in these campaigns. In differing intensities, they would remain a fixture of the local until today (see Maldonado, 2010: 283 ff. for an overview and an examination of official motivation and meddling in counterinsurgency objectives and, more generally, the suppression of political opposition and social movements).

In these images and the policies construed around them, narcotrafficking appeared as a formidable other. As an antithesis to modernity that has, unsurprisingly, found fertile ground in this exotic, backward, and depraved land whose ‘indolent spirit, scarcity of [human] energies, [and] pleasure of the easy and the delectable’ ‘neither the factory, the school, nor the temple achieved to dismantle’ (González y González, 2001:52).³⁷ What this overlooked was how intrinsically interwoven the very phenomenon of narcotrafficking was with the outlined project of modernization. The latter has been widely depicted as a failure. When measured by its own promises, this indubitably holds true. Meant to finally materialize the ideals of Mexico’s 1910-1917 revolution, it entered decay and underwent distortion almost as soon as the initial infrastructural mega-projects were completed (see Malkin 2001:115ff.). Broad-scale empowerment of the rural poor remained an illusion. In spite of the partial expropriation and redistribution of large estates, land concentration remained high through mechanisms that were legal, illegal, or lay somewhere in the murky grey between. Coercively backed land grabbing was but one common practice. Those fortunate enough to get their hands on a small parcel – conflict over rightful ownership was and remains rife – suffered from a credit structure playing out to their disadvantage.

³⁷ As I discuss in greater depth in Chapter 5, such exoticizing binaries are key building blocks of the licit-illicit-divide mentioned in the introduction and of great importance for shaping state-organized crime-interactions (in Tierra Caliente).

Competition with larger producers – or the refusal to rent out their parcels at low prices, for that matter – was thereby rendered additionally complicated. First gradually and more blatantly as the 1980s were approaching, economic policy moreover became characterized by a shift towards neoliberalism. This entailed, in ways more overt and amplified than before, the re-concentration of land as conditions favorable to domestic and foreign private capital were created (see Calderón, 2001; Maldonado, 2010; for general overviews of this problematic of great relevance across Latin America see Stavenhagen, 1970; Thiesenhusen, 1989; Stanford, 1994; Sanderson, 2013).

Narcotrafficking as an alternative pathway to modernity

While failing to deliver on the originally envisioned outcomes of economic and social engineering, the attempt to make Tierra Caliente a poster region for progress set the fundamentals for its transformation into a laboratory for what McDonald (2005:117) calls a 'locally reconstituted' form of modernity. Corresponding dreams of social ascension and material(ist) achievement had been churned up not least through the mantra-like promises of politicians that entry into the 'first world' was just around the corner. Licit ways to materialize them were, in contrast and as pointed out above, blocked for the many. A textbook-like constellation of anomie resulted (see Merton, 1938 for the original formulation and Passas, 2000 for a recent application to globalization and crime). Apart from migration to the USA – Michoacán has become one of Mexico's main sending regions (see Rendón et al., 2013) – narcotrafficking has emerged as a widespread alternative means. Its proliferation into a generalized phenomenon in Tierra Caliente began to become apparent, as mentioned above, around the same as the outlined project of modernization kicked off. The latter is no coincidence and is fostered, as Malkin (2001) and Maldonado

(2010, 2012) both highlight, as much by the region's unprecedented cultural connectedness as by its now excellent infrastructural communication with the outside world. New train lines and paved roads facilitate illicit drugs exportation. The construction of Mexico's largest container port on the state's coast at the end of the 1960s in the city of Lázaro Cárdenas moreover made it an attractive transshipment corridor. In this light, narcotrafficking (in Tierra Caliente) supposes by no means an antidote to modernity. Much to the contrary³⁸ it arose out of the propagation of modernity in discourse and deed and became firmly sedimented as an alternative pathway to access its promised fruits. As 'a colonizing phenomenon' (McDonald, 2005:118), it effectively developed into a self-perpetuating carrier of (a reductionist version of) modernity in its own right in that it sustained and further deepened the region's connectedness to the outside world.

Phase II: Transitions

From the 1980s, far-reaching transformations were produced in the political, economic, and social arenas as well as in the field of narcotrafficking in the Americas. This exceptional confluence of factors produced profound changes in Michoacán narcotrafficking and, by extension, in the ways in which locals experience and evaluate it. Across Latin America, the previous assistentialist paradigm, based on the state's leading and pro-active role in shaping and fostering national economies, gave way to a neoliberal one (see above). The implementation of the latter – in essence the state's negation to be a state insofar as the dismantling of its governing capacity was driven from within – provoked important repercussions that were felt most intensely in rural areas. Programs heavily criticized for

³⁸ Consider, in this context, Arlacchi's (1986) argument that organized crime is but an unvarnished, more consequent manifestation of the capitalist spirit.

their inefficiency and ineffectiveness and yet supposing a source of financial support to small farmers were abandoned or replaced with programs of lesser scope. Amplified by a crisis in the Mexican economy from 1982 (see Ramírez, 1989) and the dependence of local agriculture on particular produce, rural poverty levels reached new heights (Stanford, 1994; Gledhill, 1995; Snyder, 1999; Malkin, 2001:102). Narcotrafficking as an alternative pathway to modernity, as my informants and writings addressing the matter (Malkin, 2001; McDonald, 2005; Montes, 2011) stress, became more prevalent than ever.

Simultaneously, changes in the composition of the field of narcotrafficking in the Americas brought Mexican actors to the forefront. Until the start of the 1990s, Colombian actors had been considered as occupying the dominant position, benefitting most from serving a booming US cocaine market (see Krauthausen/Sarmiento, 1991; Thoumi, 1995; Gootenberg, 2009). This changed with increased enforcement efforts and larger scale Colombian organizations³⁹ such as the so-called Medellín Cartel were dismantled. The hitherto most frequented Caribbean shipment route (bypassing Mexico to reach Florida) was interrupted as US agencies increased levels of surveillance and interdiction. As a result, more and more cocaine was now being channeled onto Mexican soil via the Pacific and then into the USA. In 1989, thirty percent of the substance passed through Mexican territory and by 1998 amounted to fifty percent. At the beginning of the millennium it had reached between seventy to eighty percent⁴⁰ (see Serrano, 2012). ‘This shift’, as Serrano (2012:139) remarks, ‘radically altered the nature, size, and organization of the Mexican drug market.’ As actors diversified their traditional portfolio (marihuana, heroin) to

³⁹ The term organization should, as mentioned above, not be equated to perfectly coherent and hierarchically structured, monolithic entities. Paoli (2002:68-69) makes a convincing case for the impertinence of such imagery to describe Colombian ‘cartels’.

⁴⁰ As, amongst others, Thoumi (2005) has argued, estimations of any numbers relating to illicit markets need to be treated with utmost care and resemble a veritable “numbers game”. Here, they serve to underline a tendency.

include Cocaine and moreover methamphetamines, financial resources flushed into the field and available to Mexican actors reached a new dimension. They thereby did not only gain power vis-à-vis their Colombian counterparts but moreover the Mexican state as higher sums became available for corruption and bribery (see Andreas, 1998; Serrano/Toro, 2002).

The rise of Michoacán's first 'homegrown' criminal organization

Michoacán, with its long stretch of Pacific coast, came to gain unprecedented prominence as a transshipment territory. In this context, narco trafficking in Tierra Caliente experienced its first important moment of organizational aggregation in the shape of the previously mentioned *Cartel del Milenio*, which enjoyed privileged contacts with one of the principal actors on the national scene, the so-called Tijuana Cartel (Proceso, 2003; Guerrero, 2014). As opposed to those that asserted Michoacán's first 'homegrown' drugs trafficking organization's general '[control] of illicit crops in Michoacán' (Guerrero, 2014), the way local informants reflected upon it speaks a different language. Accordingly, its existence did not translate into strict exclusivity, with one actor aiming to level competition and strive for monopolization. Don José, who bought his first significant quantities of Cocaine in El Aguaje, remembers that it was common knowledge that the community 'was theirs'. Yet, 'there were various [actors]. *El chaparro, El Roby, El Bonbon...* all of them did their business in El Aguaje... so maybe what I got there was sometimes from the Valencias, and other times from others...' Here and elsewhere in the region, the coexistence of actors of various sizes seems to have been prevalent. The participation of smaller, independent actors also appears to still have been possible. To my gatekeeper's brother, too, the existence of more organized actors was no secret. However, as he puts it, 'they didn't

bother you that much then.’ Most importantly, as judged from the perspective of civilian populations living in proximity to the Valencias’ strongholds, narco-trafficking was still narco-trafficking. Phrased differently by one informant: ‘they didn’t mess with the people... [since] they were purely dedicated to narco-trafficking.’

Over the course of the 1990s, signs that things were taking a turn for the worse became apparent. Traffickers ran into problems in Tijuana, gateway to San Diego and the US American South-Western markets and *michoacanos*’ prime drop-off and border crossing point. According to Diego’s brother, ‘those *cabrones* [colloquial Latin American Spanish, oscillating between disgust and admiration, between ‘asshole’ and ‘badass’] from Sinaloa and the Arrelano Felix’ start charging *cuota*, i.e. dues to be paid for using a *plaza*, a specific territory or corridor (see in this context Knight’s 2012 overview of key developments in the field of Mexican drug trafficking). In introducing and leveraging on tighter forms of territorial control, actors hitherto primarily dedicated to narco-trafficking effectively expanded their portfolio of sources of income and thus organizational activities towards the provision of protection to already subordinated actors or actors to be subordinated. Simultaneously, competition over the control of *plazas* and thus the possibility to tax grew stronger amongst larger actors in the Mexican north. It was then, in the late 1990s, that ‘all this shit really starts... that they start killing each other’ (Don José) and when the participant populations began to thin out. This first spike in violence might be considered merely as a foretaste of what was yet to come. The same basic structural features nevertheless drove it and the role of the state occupied, again, prime importance.

Break-down of state regulation over the illicit

Amongst others, Astorga (1996) has argued that Mexican drug trafficking's violent potential was historically held at bay due to the state's capacity to (informally) regulate illicit markets and mitigate conflicts amongst participants. Mexican drug trafficking – the field out of which more diversified criminal organizations would emerge – was thus shaped under what Snyder and Duran (2009) call a 'state-sponsored protection racket'. The considerable power of a decades-long stable one-party-system headed by the *Partido Revolucionario Institucionalizado* (PRI) was, in other words, not employed to (indiscriminately) enforce the law and the state permitted drug trafficking with highest-ranking functionaries directly involved in many instances. In exchange, traffickers were expected to provide shares and, crucially, to respect the rules of the game keeping levels of violence to a minimum. As indicated above, the PRI's grip over the Mexican state and society gradually dissolved from the late 1960s on. Reforms were introduced and the country's political system underwent an evolution from authoritarian rule to multiparty electoral democracy. In 2000, the first non-PRI president was elected (see Magaloni, 2006). This diversification in political parties' access to power and positions was internationally and domestically lauded, prompting optimism with regards to the country's future. However, these changes are also blamed for triggering a fragmentation of a hitherto relatively coherent protection racket (see Flores Pérez, 2009). The resulting parallel existence of multiple patron-client-protection-networks is said to have undermined the latter's effectiveness and ability to create certainty, thus increasing the potential for friction and violent competition (see Snyder and Duran, 2009; Ríos, 2013). In the absence of a regulatory superstructure, illicit actors henceforth had to rely on coercion as the sole available mechanism for dispute settlement and contract enforcement (see Gambetta,

1993 for some basic arguments about the relationship between illegality and violence). In synthesis, these developments are to take into account as a basis to the deciphering of state-organized crime-interactions in contemporary Mexico and, for that matter, Michoacán (see Chapter 6).

Phase III: The Influx of external criminal organizations and incipient spill-over

Fundamentally, then, the mutation of *el narco* in the late 1990s towards its contemporary shape was driven by the confluence of two interlocking developments: the self-dismantling of the state's governing capacity and the (hereby enabled) increased capacity of financially better equipped criminal organizations who would, at least attempt to, impose their own rules of the game and expand their geographical reach.⁴¹ Around the turn of the millennium, Michoacán and Tierra Caliente in particular become fully integrated into these dynamics transforming the field of Mexican organized crime. This had important repercussions in terms of the production of the third phase of the mutation of Michoacán organized crime. Aiming to establish control over the region and its flows of illicit goods, two of Mexico's most powerful criminal organizations increased their physical presence in the region. Thus inserted into the accompanying logic of exclusivity in organizational membership and affiliation, Tierra Caliente became one of the main stages for violent contention between both groups (see Astorga, 2007:184-210; Ravelo, 2008: 202-203; Guerrero, 2014). Moreover, Alliances spun between local actors constituted channels through which new operational features and organizational practices could find an influx into the local. The 2003 dispatching of the Gulf Cartel's armed wing, *Los Zetas*, was crucial

⁴¹ As I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 5, while this constellation supposes greater opportunities, it also entails an increased existential challenge. The shortlivedness of many criminal organizations involved as well as the field's eminent trend towards organizational atomization speaks to this effect (see Reuter, 2009).

in this context. These former Mexican military special forces (see Osorno, 2012; Grayson/Logan, 2012) were sent to help an allied faction of the now divided Valencia Cartel to gain the upper hand. Both Nazario Moreno González and José de Jesús Méndez Vargas – the leaders-to-be of LFM’s two dominant factions – formed part of the latter. Sinaloa’s proxy, the remainder of the Valencia Cartel, mirrored this strategy. It began to recruit former *kaibiles* (see Maldonado, 2012: 23-30; Guerrero, 2014), members of a Guatemalan elite unit created under the tutelage and with the support of the USA as spearheads for counterinsurgency campaigns during the Cold War period and notorious for a variety of crimes against humanity (see Arteaga Botello, 2009; see Gill, 2004 for a vivid overview of US involvement in counterinsurgency training programs in the Americas). It was against the backdrop of these groups’ arrival in Michoacán that violence reached the above outlined new quantity as well as quality.⁴²

Los Zetas

The arrival of *Los Zetas* to Michoacán and their success in swiftly gaining territorial supremacy through a coalition with *La Empresa* marked the onset of the third phase of the mutation of Michoacán organized crime. A defining feature of the latter here became apparent for the first time: the phenomenon’s spillover into societal spheres other than those of illicit narcotic markets. That is, *Los Zetas’ modus operandi* differed from previous organizational models in that it was no longer limited to direct participation in criminal

⁴² Establishing a direct correlation between these groups’ participation and transformations in violence should be treated with care. It remains doubtful whether the experienced escalation in fact dependent upon the influx of ‘expert violence’ or could have simply been produced through other, less mystified means. Attempts to pinpoint a specific origin and point of entry of specific practices – Arteaga Botello, 2009 ties the decapitation of victims to the recruitment of *kaibiles*, for instance – remain challenged by data scarcity. Official documents I obtained and which describe the recruitment of *kaibiles* by LFM suggest, in this vein, that symbolic considerations (signaling strength and violent capacity) weighed just as heavy as practical ones.

markets or the imposition of protection rackets onto other participants. It moreover comprehended the extraction of *cuota* ('protection tax') from a wide array of licit business activities (see Ríos/Dudley, 2013; Guerrero, 2014). The group's designation as a 'drug trafficking organization' or even a 'drug cartel', still predominantly employed to refer to Mexican criminal organizations across the board, appeared outdated in light of this expanded set of organizational activities. More importantly, the local subsequently became more than just a territory, the control of which enabled transshipment corridors as well as the possibility to tax subordinate participants in narcotrafficking to be kept open. Rather, it became, in itself, a pool of economically exploitable resources that could be tapped into so as to obtain income qua extortion. As an effect of this operational turn to the local, as I phrase it, civilian populations became subject to a different set of practices that were now directed at them immediately.

The depth of societal penetration achieved by *Los Zetas* does not compare to LCT's subsequent territorial supremacy over Tierra Caliente. Across the board, informants presented as a taken for granted fact that 'all this [Tierra Caliente] was *Los Zetas*'. Yet, they had little concrete information to offer. Excluding LCT's leaders, direct interactions were only remarked upon by Tito (see Chapters 3 and 5) who had admittedly formed part of *Los Zetas* before joining LCT's ranks. Nevertheless, displays of extreme violence authored by *Los Zetas*, second-hand stories of encounters, and general rumors sufficed to allow the label 'Zeta' appear as the sum of all fears, a concentrated and palpable embodiment of the most violent and gruesome features of contemporary Mexican organized crime. Thus evoked in local informants' statements, this corresponds to the wider discursive representation of the 'brand *Zeta*' (Ríos/Dudley, 2013). An asset strategically fostered by the group and crucial to its rapid territorial expansion upon breaking with its mother

structure of the Gulf Cartel (ibid.), *Los Zetas*' sanguine image was further amplified through corresponding reflections by media, policy makers, and some scholars alike (e.g. Grayson/Logan, 2012).

Phase IV: The rise of *La Familia Michoacana* and alternative governance

One individual in particular, Carlos Rosales, seems to have served as a cohesive element between Empresa, Gulf Cartel, and *Los Zetas*. Upon his arrest in 2004, the coalition fractured leading to a confrontation between *Los Zetas* and Empresa, now under the leadership of Nazario Moreno. The execution of this schism subsequently surfaced in displays of violence that were, after El Aguaje, not necessarily new. Yet, as *Los Zetas* had made Apatzingán their regional hub, it was more palpable. As we passed an intersection on our way to a meeting outside of the city, Diego underlined how locals' memory of a number of places had become transformed as a result: 'Pretty much overnight, bodies started appearing all over the place... they dumped five bodies on this intersection... and then six bodies on some other street corner the next day.' Equally, for another informant:

'this separation was very harsh. When the wave of dead bodies [sic, *ola de muertos*] begins... such ugly things... with heads hung from bridges... heads placed on our monuments... there were so many dead... many many... because there were people who said they wanted to keep being Zetas (sic) and didn't want to be *disidencia* (sic, 'dissidence')... and they were also killing people that didn't want to be with them [LFM].'

A brief characterization of LCT's project of alternative governance

From the rise of LFM onwards – publicly so in 2006, yet already well visible to locals over the course of the year 2005 through the above referred to publicly staged displays of violence – the latest phase of the mutation of Michoacán organized crime was to develop its defining features in full. Reaching from ‘simple’ narcotrafficking (Phase I) to reveal higher degrees of greater coagulation, organization, as well as violence (Phase II), in Phase III it morphed into a more complex form of organized crime. Here, it became characterized by a strong momentum of exclusivity and violently enforced protection rackets within the criminal sphere whilst simultaneously spilling over into the non-criminal. In Phase IV, the latter features were further amplified and the mentioned ‘operational turn to the local’ became both more expansive and pervasive. It was here that the career of Michoacán organized crime culminated. It completed its mutation from a by-product of modernity from which an indirect, albeit important, effect on the local societal setting was transformed into an organizationally concentrated force that proactively intervened in and effectively shaped societal processes far beyond the confines of illicit (and licit) markets. In this vein, the claim that ‘Here, we are the government’ – repeatedly voiced in interviews with LCT’s leaders – can be understood as emblematic of LCT’s behavior towards local society. The attempt to secure a duality of control over locally rooted (social) capital, LCT followed the ‘governance mixture’ of terror and generosity identified by Hansen (2005). Reckoning that a minimum degree of social legitimacy was crucial to organizational survival, its leaders forged a narrative of LCT as a benevolent actor with local society’s interests at heart. Far more than just an undisputed dominion over criminal markets, it claimed nothing less than ownership of social order *per se*. This ultimately translated into a project of alternative governance, driven by a form of criminal agency of unprecedented

hybridity. The repercussions of this novel mode of territorial control for *both* LCT as well as affected civilian populations remain underexplored or even entirely ignored in the existing literature. In essence, then, Phase IV of the mutation of Michoacán organized crime was characterized by the mutually empowering galvanization of ‘criminal’ governance and organized crime in *sensu stricto* into an eclectic phenomenon that escapes default approaches. Before I go on to discuss LCT’s project of governance in depth (Chapter 5), I portray below locals’ accounts of the shape Michoacán organized crime had attained in Phase IV. I do so in accordance with the items specified above (the role of violence; moral status of activity and participants; the field’s structure and conditions of participation; distribution of proceeds).

Vis-à-vis the ‘golden age’: Organized Crime under Los Caballeros Templarios

In a field now structured in accordance to exclusivity in membership and affiliation, fault lines between enemy groups increasingly appear as profound and absolute. In spite of the latter, they also appeared more ephemeral than ever. Shifts are, in this vein, not only produced in the shape of changing intergroup alliances. Reflecting the field’s trend towards organizational pluralization, they frequently opened up as groups underwent schisms through which they resurfaced as smaller factions. Doña Mari, too, found herself on the losing side of the separation that split LFM in two during late 2010 and out of which the winning faction finally emerged under the new label of LCT. She is one of the informants in whose presence trauma becomes, to me, most intense. She was frail and seemed to be broken. Her voice was constantly on the verge of dropping to unintelligibility. For a brief moment, though, her eyes flared up with a glimpse of joy. She remembered how José de Jesús Méndez *alias El Chango*, co-founder of LFM and close to her, would come to hang out

in front of her 'grocery store' (which only sells beer) where we had picked her up from half an hour before. Then, she recalled, Moreno and Gómez teamed up against *El Chango* in a case of treason motivated by pure greed, according to her. This was a necessary step to keep his faction from further tarnishing LFM's good name through kidnapping-for-ransom and extortion, as amongst other LCT leaders as Gómez would later tell me. Whichever the reason, her proximity to Méndez (by no means limited to the occasionally shared beer, as other informants relate) qualifies her as *disidencia* by default – and thus as up for being killed. The cleansing lasted for about a week. 'Even right here on this corner', an informant whose house is situated a block down from one whose bullet-riddled façade provides a lasting testimony, 'they were confronting each other in shoot-outs.' 'Right here?' 'Right here! And then they would come down on the houses where they knew *Chango* had people... they went there to kill.' 'Obviously', Diego stated an obvious fact, 'the Templars were finishing them all off'. Doña Mari being spared, in turn, was dependent upon certain conditions. 'We [herself and some family members] were able to arrange to stay... not to have to flee... [hastily adding] but not to work.' 'And they respected that deal?', I asked. She responded:

'Yes... but just without having any communication with them [Méndez' people]... since... the one they found out to have communication with them... pickup trucks would come there [in front of her house] and they would wait... first I thought they were just there to buy beer but they were just sitting there and waiting... for somebody to come... and, I think, if anyone would come... they would take them and [her voice breaks]...um... kill them...'

Others were, as a dweller of one of ‘Moreno’s’ communities⁴³ told me, confronted with either switching sides or bearing the consequences:

‘My brother, they have him by the short hairs [*bien agarrado*] out there... he was with *La Familia* first, renting a parcel for *El Chango* as a nominal holder... and then, when the change came and they [LCT] took the *rancho* [sic] they told him that *La Familia* was a thing of the past already and that he should forget all about them... they took him down to the river and forced him to throw away his cell phone with all the old numbers... the *mero jefe* [*the boss himself*] came and threatened him real ugly...’

‘Who? *La Tuta*⁴⁴’, I asked, not convinced that Moreno was still alive. Her voice lowers to near unintelligibility: ‘No... *El Chayo*⁴⁵.’

Just as heavy as the extended intergroup violence locals are confronted with as a result of the integration of Tierra Caliente into the new modalities of organization, competition, and territorial control within the field of Mexican organized crime, weighs the loss in ownership of the very phenomenon of narcotrafficking. The above listed attributes – participation as honorable work (*trabajar*), the possibility for independent participation without the necessity of membership or lasting affiliation, and the availability of narcotrafficking as a tool for economic empowerment – that underpinned the golden age now seem to have withered away and to have been altogether transformed into their extreme opposites. To Don José, to whom violence and the presence of ‘death’ had supposed inevitable components of being *metido*, today’s narcos do not deserve to be designated as such. Nor does what they do qualify as *trabajar*:

⁴³ As discussed in Chapter 4, the label LCT veiled a fragmented organizational structure composed by an array of local strongmen with a considerable amount of discretion over their respective chunks of the territory.

⁴⁴ One of Gómez’ nicknames.

⁴⁵ One of Moreno’s nicknames.

‘there are just no honest people anymore... for about the last five or six years [i.e. since 2006, 2007] it’s gotten really bad... these *narquillos* [diminutive for narcos, here used pejoratively to underline his disgust] don’t even work anymore... it’s a risky work anyhow, but now... there is something wrong with those people... just for killing you, they kill you... ’

As much as with a loss in values and rules of honor (similarly observed in other parts of Mexico, see Campbell, 2009:12; Serrano, 2012:147), the rise of LFM as a violently propelled agent of aggregation and centralization over illicit activities is associated with the cancelation of narcotrafficking as a viable vehicle for economic empowerment for the many. As of the time of fieldwork, LCT had come to impose a central regulatory regime over the formerly loosely coupled market for Marihuana. If not taken over altogether by members of the group, licenses were given out for a limited number of growers and exporters in exchange for quantity-dependent taxation. Compliance with rules such as obligatory tax marks to be placed on packages destined for shipment out of the region was enforced, for instance, at checkpoints set up at exit points (and manned, according to informants, by LCT but also by state police). Transgressions entailed, in a first instance, a penalty fee and, in a second instance, corporal punishment reaching up to execution. Prices paid to producers were moreover being established in a monopolistic fashion and had hit historic lows. A former grower lamented the result: ‘A lot of peasants, local people, *gente bien jodida pues* [‘fucked people thus’, indicating poverty]... they prefer not to cultivate anymore.’

As of the time of fieldwork, the field of Michoacán organized crime had effectively been cleared of independent participants. Access to narcotrafficking as an alternative pathway to modernity and economic empowerment for the many had effectively become monopolized by the few. Narcos do not only not ‘work’ anymore but, as an array of

informants would state, do not let others ‘work’ either. Against this backdrop, it might seem paradoxical that the allure to become *parte de* is perhaps now stronger than ever. Yet, the interplay between a persistent lack of licit alternatives (see e.g. Universal, 2014; for a general take at the correlation between a lack in opportunities and non-state armed actor recruitment see Humphreys/Weinstein, 2007; Weinstein, 2007:97ff.) and the out-in-the-openness with which *it* manifests itself acts as a key reproductional force of the very phenomenon of organized crime. In the same vein, it constituted a formidable recruitment tool for LCT. In contrast to the past when income generated through narcotrafficking surfaced more subtly through investments into land, businesses, and housing, organized crime was now on display as an unmissable fixture of everyday life. As an informant from one of the communities surrounding Apatzingán reflected,

‘there have always been narcos but less directly [sic]... they wouldn’t pass on the street with their barrels of liquids for the kitchens they have [i.e. barrels of precursor substances used in methamphetamine laboratories]... before, as I told you, yes, they were narcos but *calladitos* [diminutive for silent], just packing up their *mota* and so on...’

As LFM pushed for territorial colonization, the presence of at least some of its members became permanent in all local communities (see Chapter 5). This did not fail to produce an effect, especially on youngsters. These *muchachos* (‘boys’), as leading members such as Gómez and *El Inge* paternally (or paternalistically?) referred to them in interviews, made up the bulk of LCT’s members, thus underlining the changed profile of those integrating *el narco* in Michoacán. An array of informants reported that children as young as thirteen were being integrated through an escalating recruitment process. Younger members were first given the task of running simple errands: ‘go and buy me some beer and keep the change’, as one mother preoccupied for her fourteen-year-old son’s incipient involvement illustrated. After some time, greater responsibility frequently came by being equipped with

a two-way-radio. In some cases, the *halcón's* paraphernalia finally gave way to those of a *sicario*: Child soldiers in Tierra Caliente, a much-lamented occurrence throughout these times.

Whatever the channel, at the beginning stands an approximation to group and phenomenon enabled through the physical presence of LCT and thus the immediate display of insignia that attract and fascinate. Julio, in his mid-twenties and from a rancho close to Apatzingán, comes from what he describes as a 'divided family'. His parents divorced as his father '*andaba muy mal* [was on the wrong path]', which is to say that he was not only '*bien mujerito* [sleeping around]' but moreover involved with *ellos*. 'And still, he just wouldn't leave us in peace...' His brother, still close to the father, told his mother that if she would not reunite with him, he would join LCT:

'So he starts to hang out with those people... to see what they were doing... the guns, and the money, and the women... so he went into hiding... and we realized what was going on, they already had him well *azotado* ['whipped', as in under control], all armed and all that... he was sixteen... a very ugly feeling, I feel like my brother is already *sangre mala* ['bad blood', as in evil] because this is how they taught him to be... and after that he tells me that he has already killed people... it was the first thing they had to do out there, kill somebody, that is...'

Julio himself was also approached, albeit with a direct offer to occupy a more prestigious (and thus better paid) position:

'One they call *El Barrito* comes to my place one day and tells me "take your stuff and come to Morelia with me as an accountant"... and he tosses some packs of money over to me, nothing but bills of 500 [pesos], the first pay, it was like 15,000... and I was already contemplating how I'd have all the finest clothes and so on... but no, I told them to go fuck themselves [he rectifies that he expressed it differently]... it's like they get you with the money but once you're in...'

Una vez que entras, ya no sales. Once you're in, you don't get out anymore. Common knowledge amongst locals and a harsh contrast to the golden age's free entry and exit, being a Templar implies not only an exclusive commitment but furthermore one for life. As LCT's official wording – contained in its fifty-three-item-strong booklet of behavioral codes that was handed out in vast numbers to local civilians and to me personally by Alejandro, the twenty-something-year-old *sicario* who had driven me to my first meeting with Gómez ('grab as many as you want') – had it: 'Any element that is accepted to form part of the group of the Knights Templar of Michoacán does so for their entire life, he will not be able to abandon the cause' (Code #4). The *Código de Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán* ('Code of The Knights Templar of Michoacán', see Image 4.1) moreover leaves no doubt as to the consequences violations entail. New recruits swear, as the fifth code specifies, an oath:

'Juramento Templario

Juro delante de todos, vivir y morir con honor.

Juro combatir la injusticia y socorrer a mi prójimo. Juro, igual en el combate como en la paz, que ningún caballero será considerado por mi como enemigo.

Juro fidelidad al temple y esforzarme por perpetuarlo.

Juro respeto a las damas, veneración a las madres, protección a los niños y a los ancianos, asistencia a los necesitados.

Juro respetar la fe de otros y buscar más la verdad que la gloria, el honor que los honores.

Si, por desgracia yo traicionara mi juramento, ruego ser ejecutado por la orden como un traidor.'

'Templar Oath

I swear in front of everybody, to live and die with honor.

I swear to combat injustice and to come to the aid of my neighbor.

I swear, in battle and in peace alike, that no knight will be considered an enemy.

I swear fidelity to the temple and to make efforts to perpetuate it.

I swear respect for women, veneration of mothers, protection of children and the elderly, assistance to the needy.

I swear to respect the faith of others and to seek truth over glory, honor over honors.

If in disgrace I come to betray my oath, I beg to be executed by the order as a traitor.'

In real-life, 'desertion' – the term used by LCT and, again, sedimented in locals' parlance – plays out in ways well detached from the evoked world of honor and absolute loyalty. Moreover, both individuals' decisions to leave the group as well as the subsequent application of the label 'traitor' stands by no means always in direct relation to the 'cause' or, more broadly speaking, the organization's functioning and goals. Frequently – and reflecting the mobilization of the label LCT for particular interests (see Chapter 5) – interpersonal and seemingly banal conflicts occupy prime importance in this context. For Julio's brother, neither being overly '*mujerito*' nor wanting to leave his wife for another girl might have constituted major issues. Wanting to leave the daughter of *EL Negro* and thus of a mid-ranking member of LCT, in turn, was one. When he 'preemptively' abandoned the group, *El Negro* and his men chased him down. As Julio narrates it,

'they had already taken him... had him tied up on the back of one of the pick-up trucks they use... he later told me how they said to him "*tu puta madre* [roughly and mildly: you son of a bitch], you'll end exactly like your cousin", because we also have a cousin *desaparecido*⁴⁶... and we had heard that he was buried alive... so they are taking my brother tied up but out of pure luck they run into some soldiers and they take him... when that happened we had him hidden in our house but he couldn't be there anymore because one of *El Negro's* sisters would come and investigate (sic) where we were living... so they wanted to *chingarselo* ['fuck him', as in kill him] and he had to go away... we then had him for a while [in a city close by] and we never said anything, but what if... the life of all the others, of my cousins, of my uncles, was at risk'

'Did the rest of your family receive threats then?', I enquired.

'They [the military] took my mom to Morelia for two days... because they had detained three guys that were going to kill him [the brother]... what they wanted was for my brother to come forward to make a statement... he stayed hidden... and my mom went and they threatened my mom too... and

⁴⁶ *Desaparecido* translates as 'disappeared'. In Latin America, it originally evokes those taken and killed during the region's military dictatorships but whose deaths were never officially (or only later) confirmed. In contemporary Mexico, the meaning has shifted to indicate those vanished during the country's 'drug-fuelled conflict'. Estimations speak of 20,000 disappearances over the past decade (see Newsweek Noticias, 2015).

well, until now they haven't bothered us anymore... My mom had to leave because... they wouldn't let her in peace anymore... a cousin of mine that was also in prison... I supported him and sent him clothing and so on... he gets out and joins them [LCT] again, and this is what he said to my face. I told him: "Hey how are you?" "Well, here I am, working, looking for, you know who... we want to know where those who desert are because we want to kill them"... he told me that because of my brother, and I tell him how messed up I thought that was and now we don't even greet each other anymore... and now my family is more destroyed than ever, it's such an ugly feeling... I don't feel well at all anymore, I'm practically all alone now because my mom had to leave as well... I'm still in touch with her but it's not the same... on the weekends I stay alone and I cry.'

The tight regime of control over the lives of those who join its ranks (and, by extension, of those close to them) goes hand in hand with a high degree of stratification within LCT. The way the group's proceeds are distributed stands in stark contrast to both the golden age's effect of broad economic empowerment as well as its promise as a central motivation to become a member. Access to the material fruits of the profession is limited to what I refer to as the narcoelite. To those, that is, occupying mid- and top-level positions within LCT as a centralized accumulating body. Half way into our first conversation, a chatty and seemingly hyperactive Gómez once again deviated from the official line (Moreno would, as I make reference to some of Gómez' statements in a later conversation complained that 'that one talks too much'). In contradiction to the *código's* prohibition of members consuming illicit drugs (Code # 38 states that 'anti-doping tests' will periodically be conducted), this self-designated *narco de corazón* ("narco by heart") promised to be frank with me:

'What am I going to tell you... I'm not going to lie: I do like *la coca* [cocaine] and I do like women... sometimes they bring me twenty or thirty women for me to have fun... and some of them charge 15,000 pesos! Way too much... but then again, I have suitcases of money laying around and I can't even spend it...'

Conditions for the bulk of lower ranking members is, in contrast, precarious in every way possible. Their monthly *saldo* ('wage', sic), as Tito told me, lies somewhere around 5000 pesos (ca. 215 GBP as of March 13th 2015) – hardly enough to live a narco's stereotypical 'lush life' (a term borrowed from Hobbs, 2013). Rather, scarcity seems to govern the everyday life of regular *Caballeros*, perceived by informants to be 'just as miserable as us' and even to look 'starved'. As a mother of an underage *sicario* reflected on the conditions of the cell LCT has installed in her community,

'el que manda [the one who commands, another term frequently used in lieu of *jefe de plaza*], only he sleeps, the boys don't... it's a real shame... they are always up and on guard, they barely give them enough water to drink... and if one falls asleep, they tie him up⁴⁷, they punish him... they don't eat until the jefe has eaten... they treat them real ugly thus...'

But then again, a *Caballero* is in it for reasons nobler than material gains and is expected to neither question hierarchy nor privileges. As the *Código* specifies: 'A Knight ought not to seek positions of enrichment within the Order. He will be satisfied with those posts that he shall be entrusted with to serve it best' (Code #25); 'A Templar shall not judge anybody inside or outside the Order for his possessions or his social position' (Code #26); 'For the Knights Templar of Michoacán, discipline is constant and obedience is always respected: he [the member] comes and goes according to the signals given by whomever possesses authority' (#28).

⁴⁷ *Amarrar* is a standard practice of punishment applied by LCT both to its own members as well as to civilians as part of its production as a guardian of social order (see Chapter 4). It usually implies designated perpetrators being tied to objects such as trees for hours or days, thus exposing them to the regard of others.

Conclusion

Over the previous pages, I have laid the necessary groundwork for the line of argumentation I present in the following chapters. In particular, I have provided a critical reexamination of the history of Michoacán drug trafficking and organized crime. Rather than a more comprehensive, all-encompassing history than currently available, which would have gone beyond the scope of this thesis, I have revisited the emergence and trajectory of the phenomenon from an angle congruent with the core interest of this thesis: approaching the interaction between criminal organizations and civilian populations and deciphering the ensuing effects. True to my general methodological approach to rely as little as possible on categories and containers prefabricated from afar and through a normatively biased officialist perspective, I have done so by relying as extensively as possible on insights, memories, and experiences of actual protagonists in the trade: traffickers themselves as well as members of civilian populations with which the latter are intrinsically interwoven with and without of which they have emerged. These depictions describe the mutation of a phenomenon that has become ever more deeply engrained in the local culture and society and that has begun its trajectory as an illegal, yet considered to be largely harm-free way of gaining extra income in a region historically characterized by high rates of socio-economic marginalization. The proliferation of locals' involvement in narco-trafficking and the 'normality' it thereby attained is, as I have shown, set against the backdrop of macrostructural political as well as economic changes both within the legal arena (e.g. the neo-liberalization of the Mexican economy and agriculture) and the illegal arena (e.g. the growth and increasing financial and political power of international drug markets). From this stage of growth onwards, and at least partly enabled by simultaneous changes in the Mexican political regime which brought about a pluralization of the power

structure and thereby difficulties for the state to keep drug traffickers at bay and regulate disputes amongst them, the phenomenon moreover experienced an accentuation of the quality and quantity of the violence involved. This came accompanied by an imminent trend towards more rigid forms of organization, which pushed independent participants out and led to a greater stratification of power and material gains. My historical overview reaches up to the emergence of *La Familia Michoacana* and thus the beginning of the contemporary (as defined by the time of fieldwork in 2012) apogee of this mutation in the sense that it had come to transcend its original sphere of action, taken up a more prominent and interventionist role within society that, as of late, has undeniably become political.

Reflecting the history of Michoacán organized crime through the eyes of local actors can by itself be considered fruitful insofar as it adds a new dimension as well as new aspects and, through the personal proximity that characterizes informants' accounts, greater texture. However, the importance of understanding how evaluations are formed and through which type of encounters, past and current, and perhaps even involvement with the changing phenomenon and the respective actors that populate, make, and are associated with it goes far beyond this aspect. For, as I demonstrate in the following chapter, local civilians' opinions, evaluations, and reflections – both of organized crime as well as the wider socio-economic and political environment and, in this context, the state – constitute a force without which the direction the phenomenon was given under LFM's and later LCT's agency cannot be properly understood. LCT demonstrated an awareness of these critical evaluations by civilians – stemming not least from the all-permeating shape organized crime had attained as a result of its spillover – as well as of the fact that these could ultimately lead to a proactive resistance against its claim of territorial supremacy and the

group itself. This recognition, I argue, pushed LCT to pursue its project of alternative governance in the first place and established the obtention of legitimacy – or, simply put, favorable evaluations – as a prime organizational goal. It furthermore constituted the basis in reflection of which this goal was translated into correspondingly designed practices to obtain legitimacy, key examples of which I analyze below by drawing on the voices of both civilians and contemporary members of LCT. Before I do so, I recall some key concepts in the contemporary landscape of social order and sovereignty and provide some basic reflections on legitimacy. This serves to situate LCT’s agency within a broader context and a wider population of non-state actors involved in the provision of governance in Mexico and Latin America today. I then provide in-depth insights into LCT’s project of alternative governance, which I understand as an enacted narrative geared at the generation of legitimacy. Finally, I bring in the experiences and voices of local civilians as the immediate recipients as well as social audiences evaluating LCT’s performance and adherence to its own proclaimed identity.

Chapter 5: LCT's project of alternative governance

*Oh all mighty Lord
Liberate us of all sins
Give me blessed protection
Through San Nazario*

*Protector of the poorest
Knight of the People
San Nazario, give us life
Oh sacred eternal senor*

*Sacred light of the night
Defender of the sick
San Nazario, our saint
Forever I turn myself over to you*

*Glory to God the father
I dedicate you my rosary
Give us health and more work
Abundance in our hands
That our people shall be blessed
I ask you, San Nazario*

Rosary to San Nazario

A few days into my fieldwork in Tierra Caliente, I learned that participants in self-empowerment seminars roam Apatzingán's streets in butterfly costumes and hand out 'free hugs' to passing pedestrians. What would certainly have seemed curious to me in a city such as London, here seemed outright bizarre. For one, it further added to my confusion with regards to an everyday banality that overtly contradicts the state of emergency I had expected to find. More striking though was the fact that the sponsors of these seminars were the very same as those that would, to paraphrase Don José, kill you just for the heck of it. The same ones, that is, that burst into domestic as well as world media attention and thus collective imaginations in 2006 when twenty of its *sicarios* entered a brothel and strip club in another Michoacán city and tossed five severed heads

onto the floor (see Roque Madríz, 2006). The same ones, not least, whose monopolization of and imposition of a violent and excluding *modus operandi* onto narco-trafficking-as-pathway-to-modernity had entailed condemning evaluations and comments by local civilians (see Chapter 4). As perplexing as this may seem, against this backdrop, the assertion of voluntary participation in and indeed positive experiences exist and are derived from such seminars organized and financed by LCT. One woman, in her mid-forties, stated how *El Profe* – she used another of Gómez’s nicknames stemming from his past as a teacher – paid a Catholic priest originally from Tierra Caliente to come down from Chicago to act as one amongst various individuals giving her and others *orientaciones*: The latter, as she specified, included

‘a lot of testimonies... very beautiful things actually... of what happened in his family, that his brother had a serious heart problem because he was drinking a lot... and the doctors only gave him only two months to live... and Delfino [the priest’s name] took him to church and tells him: “there, you’ll talk to God and offer him something so he cures you”... and him: “Lord, if you cure me, I will always talk about your word and I will go to a lot of places to predicate your word and I’ll last as long as you want me to”... and he [Delfino] says that this was ten years ago and he’s still predicating...’ ‘So he comes every year?’ ‘Yes, and it’s really beautiful because he teaches you to get close to God, which is good because God is good and God helps one to *sanarse* [to heal or to cure, as in: to live an improved, moral life]...’

The material handed to me by LCT a few weeks later added further elements to what was beginning to present itself as a magic (narco-)realism *terracalentano*. We had already been sent back the same morning, a hoped-for encounter with the person Gómez had referred to as his *patrón* postponed. Back again in the community later the same day, we waited in front of the local *jefe de plaza*’s house. He seemed grim signaling little interest in our presence, let alone a readiness to interact. Perhaps this was, I speculated, due to our arrival earlier that day. It had prompted his wife to chase him out of bed after what seemed to have been a rough night, at least judging from the way he looked as he stumbled out of the

front door: shirtless, proudly bellied, the loose camouflage pants so low as to barely veil the missing underwear, and the 9mm handgun provisionally tugged away in the back of his pants. Even so, we were being entertained by the group of young *sicarios* who had, as the sun had started to set, gotten out a guitar and begun to sing love songs. The ice-cooled beer I was offered, in contrast, I turned down, wanting to keep my senses as sharp as possible. The envoy, who arrived after about two hours, bore polite excuses. The *patrón* had been called away to attend an urgent matter and would consequently not be available to receive us. He had, however, sent his greetings as well as an USB-stick, a booklet, and a book. Material that, as he stated, 'shows how he thinks' and that was to help me 'better prepare myself' for a future meeting.

We hid the items amongst two high stashes of documents in our car's trunk. Successfully, albeit tensely⁴⁸, we made it through a navy-checkpoint⁴⁹ ('What are doing you here?' '*Paseando na' más* [just visiting]...') and back home, we eagerly explored the stuff we had been given, finding a preview of the latest round of propaganda material, released soon after and of the sort central to LCT's striving for legitimacy ever since its rise. It included a copy of Moreno's autobiography, portrayed as a *post mortem* publication and titled '*Me dicen: "El Más Loco" – Diario de un idealista*' ('They call me: "The Craziest One" – Diary of an idealist', henceforth Moreno, 2012) after one of his nicknames. The supposedly defunct author here laid out his version of Michoacán's recent history as well as his and his group's (desired) place in it. It offered by far the best and densest crystallization of the group's discursive self-portrayal and illuminated the ideological building blocks it was construed

⁴⁸ Given the efforts undertaken and arrests made in this context by federal state actors to get Moreno's autobiography off the street as soon as it had been handed out, our nervousness seems all the more justified in retrospect.

⁴⁹ Here and in other stages of Calderón's 'war on drugs', the Mexican navy has been deployed in the country's interior.

of. Below, due to its outstanding importance, I dedicate significant space to portraying the core narrative it reproduced. Doing so establishes the basis for my discussion of the ways this narrative played out on the ground as well as of its reception and evaluation by local civilians.

As a 'social movement', Moreno writes in *'El Más Loco'*, the group's *raison d'être* consists in uniting 'all the isolated social struggles developing in Mexico and other countries... to make one sole, powerful, and inexorable social earthquake which would once and for all liberate all the peoples of the world' (Moreno, 2012: 68). Ambitious claims such as these – or, for that matter, the placement of Moreno's picture right next to that of Jesus Christ (see Image 5.1) – have underpinned the swift and general dismissal of LCT's self-production as a benevolent actor inspired by the highest moral standards as a poor and transparent attempt to veil a purebred predator: 'one of the most bizarre and deadly cartels in the world' (Grayson, 2010:vii) or, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration, 'one of the world's most vicious and violent drug and criminal networks' (DEA, 2015). And again, when measured against local civilians' evaluations as reflected in Chapter 4, little doubt seems to remain with regards to the fact that narco-trafficking as embodied by LCT has lost what Malkin diagnosed, a decade earlier, as a 'cultural struggle over [its] meaning'. Narco-traffickers would, she argued, ultimately only subsist within local society if they successfully:

'[generated] a status for themselves that can counteract the messages by the government and other media... that stress the illegality of narcotics production and attempt to construct narco-traffickers as a group that can endanger national development and progress' (2001:101)

In the same vein, the treatment of legitimacy generation of criminal organizations as counterintuitive and therefore as a non-subject within the corresponding literature (see

Chapter 1) might seem justified at first sight. The more so when it comes to Mexican organized crime and not least its Michoacán variant. After all, those leading a group now claiming to constitute a force of good were amongst the protagonists that pushed the phenomenon into its oppressive, hyperviolent form emblemizing a new dimension of social disorder in the region.



Image 5.1: Cover page 'Code of The Knights Templar of Michoacán', own scan.
The quote reads: 'This fight is for your people for my people, for ourselves and for our future generations'

The erosion of state governance and the demand for social order

What the above outlined characterizations fail to accurately grasp is that it is precisely this escalation that entails an ever greater demand for *some* solution to social order – or at least the promise of a solution. This is by no means limited to Tierra Caliente but supposes a dynamic central to contemporary Mexico, Latin America, and the ‘global south’ more generally. As noted in Chapter 4, anti-statist (neoliberal) reforms advanced in great intensity from the 1980s have fundamentally put in question ‘traditional’ nation-states’ role as guarantors of order and, for that matter, the embodiment of (dreams of) progress. Furthermore confronted with too-virulent-to-control forces and flows of globalization – including but not limited to organized crime as a phenomenon propelled to greater prominence in this context (see e.g. Berdal/Serrano, 2002) – their governmental capacity has become eroded (see Gledhill, 1995; Snyder, 1999). The failure of Latin America’s late-twentieth century wave of democratization to deliver on its own promises (e.g. Huntington, 1993) and to materialize as more than just nominal versions of it has been a widely lamented outcome, not least in light of region-wide increases in social inequality and violence (see Agüero/Stark, 1998; Méndez et al., 1999; Hagopian/Mainwaring, 2005; Arias/Goldstein, 2010).

This ‘deregulation of monopolies over the legitimate means of force, of moral orders, of the protection of persons and property... [and the] unraveling of law and order’ (Comaroff/Comaroff, 2006:1) cannot, however, be equated to the absence of order *per se*. As ‘the means and ends of the liberal democratic state are refracted, deflected, and dispersed into the murkier reaches of the private sector’ (ibid.:16), they resurface in the hands of lynch mobs, vigilantes, private security firms, paramilitaries, youth gangs, as well as ‘classical’ criminal organizations (see Koonings/Kruijt, 2004; Comaroff/Comaroff, 2006;

Arias/Goldstein, 2010; Clunan/Trinkunas, 2010). As an aggregate outcome and self-perpetuating driving force stands the 'pluralization of regulatory authority' (Roitman, 2005) in that the designated core functions of the nation-state such as the provision of security and welfare are increasingly assumed by non-state entities (see e.g. Reno, 1995, 2000; Comaroff/Comaroff, 2006; Litzinger, 2006; Baylouny, 2010). Contemporary Latin America is no exception. Here, too, a true kaleidoscope of actors – situated everywhere and anywhere on a blurry licit-illicit-continuum and differing greatly in spatial extension, organizational structure, and duration – is involved in the reshuffling of rule and governance. The contours of the 'great' structural changes reshaping Latin America have, in synthesis, been principally outlined. Davis (2009, 2010) pertinently captures the resulting state of affairs as one of 'fragmented sovereignty'. However, and leading back to the (perceived) methodological dilemma of getting close enough to armed non-state actors to produce much needed first-hand empirical data, questions relating to 'the origins and nature of alternative authority and governance structures in contested spaces' (Clunan, 2010: 3) remain severely underexplored. The same is true for the formation of new 'imagined communities' on the sub-national level, which goes hand in hand with this development (see Davis, 2010).

Remarks on alternative governance and legitimacy

In this chapter, I provide insights into LCT as one particular non-state actor-driven project of alternative governance. Before I do so, a few basic remarks with regards to my use of the term 'alternative governance' are in order. Its main attribute – 'alternative' – must be treated with caution so as not to prove analytically distorting. Most importantly, on-the-ground realities do not support the popular notion that the constitution of spaces in which

armed non-state actors come to assume functions stereotypically associated with 'the' state⁵⁰ follows a recipe of supplantation, exclusivity, and opposition. While 'the' state's governing capacity has indeed been reduced, this does not simply leave a 'vacuum' (Davis, 2010:10). Nothing is further from the truth. 'The' state is latently present and remains a force, on the one hand, to be reckoned with. On the other hand, however, 'it' *can* also constitute a rich source of unexpected opportunities and resources for non-state armed actors such as LCT. Already due to the fact that the convergence between state and non-state elements supposed a *sine qua non* feature of LCT's project of survival *qua* governance (in Chapter 6, I provide a detailed examination of state-organized crime-interactions), 'alternative' cannot be read as following Paoli's recipe of organized crime's existence and actions 'against' and 'without the state' (2002: 64, 65). The assertion, then, of territories simply 'abandoned by the State' (Maldonado, 2012:8) and correspondingly up for easy non-state colonization falls short. Moreover, the malperformance of state actors in providing governance or in merely 'impersonating' themselves by simulating adherence to, as well as the mere possibility to, fulfill their legally stipulated roles (see Comaroff/Comaroff, 2006:16) supposes a historical constant to local civilian populations only further accentuated as of late. The same is true for dubious engagements between those situated on either extreme of 'the law', which undermines the pertinence of the frequently employed term 'parallel states' (see Arias, 2006). 'Alternative', then, indicates a deviation from a far-from-materialized ideal in which 'the' state acts and is perceived as the champion of social order and legality. By these standards, the empirical state itself becomes an alternative project of governance. There are, as Comaroff and Comaroff would have it (2006), nothing *but* counterfeits.

⁵⁰ So as to avoid the tacit reproduction of the impertinent assumption of state as monolith capable of 'doing or intending things' (Smart, 1999:105) *qua* the use language, when referring to 'it' in the singular form, I do so in parenthesis.

The latter points provide important clues as to the possibility for an actor such as LCT to portray itself as a guardian of social order. Still, they only partly help to clarify the above stated paradox that the representatives of the contemporary shape of Michoacán organized crime, on which those statements reproduced in Chapter 4 shed an unfavorable light, could claim legitimacy. The underlying confusion stems, as I argue, from a misconception of legitimacy that is both state-centric and absolute. The former insofar as legitimacy tends to be depicted as a binary quality, one that an actor either has or has not: The latter in accordance with the view that ownership and representation of social order can ultimately only rest in the hands of no actor other than its stereotypical champion, the nation-state. Both assumptions prove overly rigid for approaching a setting such as the one in focus here. Apart from the fact that, as I have outlined, governance and claims of legitimacy have become dispersed to rest within an actor population highly varied and prominently including non-state actors, this overlooks the fact that legitimacy is a state never fully realized. Reflections here on Wallerstein's case (1974:142) that, throughout history, governments and other regimes of social control have been endured rather than coming anywhere close to being supported by heart. From this perspective, the aim for those that (claim the right to) govern consists in obtaining a minimum degree of legitimacy. One that is conducive to, if not fostering outright support, preserving power by evading adverse mobilization or even overt opposition.

As a '*sine qua non* for easy access to resources... and long term survival' (Brown, 1998: 35; for an overview of the relevant literature in organizational sociology see Deephouse/Suchman, 2008), such a minimum degree of legitimacy is dependent upon an organization's 'cultural support' (see Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Meyer and Scott, 1983). Phrased differently: An organization's existence must make sense in a given period of time

and within a given socio-cultural setting. It must *appear* aligned with or at the very least as not overtly contradicting prevalent norms, values, and worldviews. A contravention can undermine an organization's prospects of permanence. For whether or not it is perceived as conforming to a given setting's expectations determines whether support is granted or denied by the sources of legitimacy, i.e. relevant social audiences. Consensus prevails that legitimacy cancels interference with the organization and its activities (see Deephouse/Suchman, 2008: 57). The contrary entails 'comments and attacks', i.e. a hostile mobilization (Pfeffer/Salancik, 1978). What is essential to keep in mind here is that legitimacy cannot be misread as an objective quality that could be externally established by applying criteria such as Western ideals of democracy. As Pansters (2012:23) observes, in absence of such a thing as an 'absolute source of legitimacy... the actual ascription of (il)legitimacy [is done] by specific members of a community.' The power to grant or deny legitimacy rests, then, entirely with specific social audiences and their subjective, time-, space-, and case-bound evaluations. The latter depend, in turn, on more than just the ways in which an organization's existence adds to their material benefit. Ceremonial commitment – through discourse and the symbolic enactment of discursive claims alike – can be just as effective. Phrased differently: what matters is perceptions, and not solely performance. This, in turn, enables organizations to strategically relate to norms, values, and worldviews prevalent within a given environment and to thereby increase their legitimacy (relative to that of other entities). One way of doing so – and to keep in mind in light of the following elaborations – is to become 'identified with symbols, values, or institutions which have a strong base of social legitimacy' (Dowling/Pfeffer, 1975: 127).

Approaching LCT as narrative

Against this backdrop, the question of whether LCT is one thing or another – good/bad; legitimate/illegitimate; moral/immoral – appears both misformulated and misleading. As laid out above, legitimacy is not a matter of an absolute quality but of degrees, which, in turn, arise out of perceptions. The latter decide how available resources are mobilized and/or demobilized for or against the group. The duality of control over extant resources as a task crucial to survival arises, against this backdrop, as a communicational challenge. Moreover, the binary approach inherently carries the image of criminal organizations as monolithic entities (an ascription of identity akin to that applied to ‘the’ state, see above), characterized by *a* coherent identity, harmonic interests and capable of unified, concerted action towards the outside through frictionless hierarchy. There is little doubt that LCT does qualify as an organization in the sense that it does show membership, training, codes of conduct, more or less standardized remuneration, division of labor (accountants *v sicarios*, e.g.), and coordination of activities (e.g. in the context of establishing relations with state officials), amongst other features. The existence of an organizational construct as such does, however, not sustain the existence of an actor in itself capable of actions or intentions. Any organization is necessarily characterized by complexity, contradiction, divergence, and friction. Phrased differently: behind the façade of an officially conveyed organizational culture – the core narrative via which legitimacy and the right to exist is sought (see Meyer/Rowan, 1977) – there are *always* sub-cultures (see Jermier et al., 1991). This is no different for LCT. It, too, is composed of an array of factions, cells, and individuals that act under, are empowered, and kept together by the same label. Simultaneously, however, they show significant differences in the ways in which they employ and represent

it in concrete practice, not least so in the shape of divergent behavioral patterns towards specific local civilian populations.

A more fruitful take than one that attempts to ascribe to LCT the quality of a unitary actor with a clearly delineated identity consists, I argue, in approaching LCT as narrative. Geared at fostering a minimum degree of legitimacy, I understand the latter as composed of a discursive component that interacts with a component of palpable practice. To begin with, this allows me to circumnavigate the never-ending and unfruitful discussion about the 'true nature' of organized crime (organization or not?) without compromising on analytical accuracy. Simply phrased: I ask what the narrative claims, what it is meant to do, which actors, acts, and interactions it effectively empowers on the ground, and what effects on both ends of corresponding interactions result. I hereby hope to capture as best possible the complexity of LCT as organizational construct held together by said narrative and its interactions with local civilian populations from the perspectives of the protagonists situated on *both* sides – and thus *without* recurrence to the common normative bias in shape of a value judgment about the 'genuineness' of LCT. I unpack LCT as narrative by addressing three distinct analytical levels. First, I introduce LCT's 'official narrative' by portraying its stated aims and claims, building blocks, as well as underlying motivations. Second, I address the palpable, understood as the set of material practices derived from said official account, and examine how the translation of the discursive into practice oscillated, on the ground, between congruence and contradiction. Third, I portray how locals' experiences underpin their evaluations of the group, thus unveiling the narrative's effectiveness and perceived shortcomings.

LCT's self-narrative: Criminal distinction and (narco-)social engineering

Considered from LCT's perspective, the achievement of a minimum degree of legitimacy is conditional upon the construction of a narrative conducive to its perception as meriting, if not outright support for, then tolerance of its existence and actions. Both need (to appear) to *make sense* within the setting in question. The name of the game here is distinction and communion. Distinction from threatening and amoral others, construed as enemies of local society and LCT alike. Distinction, too, from *itself* insofar as it seeks to position itself within a class of actors entirely different from the one it is normally placed in by default. The pursuit of said project of alternative governance follows, as I argue, this logic. In assuming and claiming functions other than those stereotypically associated with criminal actors, LCT sought to change the parameters as well as the very subject of evaluation. Correspondingly, Moreno rejects the group's labeling as a 'drug cartel or any other type of delinquent group' as unfounded propaganda:

'Without remembering the exact moment, date, or reasons, the yellow press at the service of the government started the smear campaign saying that the group I was leading was a bunch of narcotraffickers and they start to attack us in forms and to burn us before the eyes of society. They implicate us in narcotrafficking activities and soon we were already being persecuted as if we were rabid dogs. The news... were so venomous that it would appear that in my person all the riders of the apocalypse were coming together... We, faced with the brutal and ruinous official infamy, had to go into hiding, obligated by the circumstance, not because we were guilty... What I wanted to do was realize a humanitarian and generous work, and in return, the government and some media exhibit me... as a dangerous narco, initiating a cruel and relentless persecution against me in the entire country, but fundamentally in my beloved state of Michoacán.' (Moreno, 2012:65-66)

Communion in the sense that the introduction of the category of the threatening other is mirrored by the suggestion of a shared socio-cultural identity, history, lived experiences, and worldview – all of which unite LCT and the local in quasi-natural symbiosis. Telling, in

this vein, is the use of the first-person plural throughout Moreno's autobiography. Contents are introduced through assertions such as 'As we all know...' and 'We, the ones that... were born poor, suffered...' (ibid.:7). To the same effect, the label *La Familia Michoacana*: 'I decided to give it this name since already by definition family is a concept that refers to a homogenous group, to a same social class, to a culture, tradition, same blood, same lineage, same interests, and equal objectives and goals' (ibid.:65). Though published at a relatively late stage of the group's lifespan, 'They call me: The craziest one' reads like a blueprint of LCT's discursive positioning. Herein, Moreno stylizes himself as a self-made man having overcome great hardship, morally empowered, destined for greater things, and thus fit to lead the reformation of local society. Below, I present excerpts representative of the discursive techniques and building blocks applied by LCT. Collected and/or observed during fieldwork, these were furthermore widely diffused through an array of additional carriers such as flyers, banners hung in public places, booklets, and newspaper ads.

Moreno's passion as metaphor for the rightful existence of LCT

Moreno describes the conditions in which he was brought up in one of the *ranchos* surrounding Apatzingán as just like those facing anybody else that falls into the category of 'us', the rural poor: 'My family and I lived a poverty so cruel and humiliating that we were all dressed in rags... when we ate fried beans it was a luxury... just hunger and excessive work. On top of everything, my mother... would beat us'. Even so, 'with hope, I naively thought to myself that when I would be big and earn money... I would eat like the rich: bread rolls, cocas [Coca Cola] and *carnitas de puerco* [specialty dish made of pork]' (ibid.:8). Finally, and following one alternative pathway to economic empowerment, 'like any poor without hope' he decided to go '*p'al norte* [to the North, i.e. the USA]' (ibid.:30). Despite the

extreme hardship, he remained strong-willed and relentless in the pursuit of his dreams. For a limited period, he unwittingly and innocently slipped into illicit activities ('A kid growing up in a situation so adverse... only he is to blame for having temporarily chosen the path of illegality?', *ibid.*:8-9). Instead of in cash, a job is remunerated in the form of a pound of marihuana: 'Since I was not made to be afraid, as I had not come so far to behave like a coward, I immediately went to the park to sell my marihuana' (*ibid.*:38). His true entrepreneurial skills, however, were to be developed through licit, honest businesses activities.

These successes notwithstanding, fate haunted him. With an array of family members losing their lives, 'it seemed like my family was marked by destiny to die young and under tragic and unexpected circumstances. Like the Kennedy family of the United States, with all due respect and distance'⁵¹ (*ibid.*:55). Troubled, he developed, as he considers in retrospect, dangerous vices: 'these were the most critical epochs that dragged me into an almost suicidal alcoholism' (*ibid.*:52). 'Even worse: I picked fights with whomever and whenever I could. I was fighting for diversion and out of *desmadre* [here, roughly, for the joy of creating chaos]. Over time, I changed fists for pistols...' Following an array of near-death experiences such as an almost fatal beating, he vowed to change his life but failed to do so by himself: 'In spite of my good will and effort to overcome myself and an orderly life, the vice of alcohol... I became aware that I had fallen into the dark and sinister labyrinth of worlds of fantasy and easy pleasures' (*ibid.*:45). He sought help from a wise, elder, respected man who invited him to an Alcoholics Anonymous group. This led to participation in a number of further self-empowerment seminars of Christian-charismatic

⁵¹ Similarly ambitious analogies to prominent historical figures, including Latin American revolutionary heroes such as Ernesto Guevara are introduced in a similar way throughout the book. Though explicitly distancing himself from any intention of claiming an equal place in history, they nevertheless leave little doubt with regards to a claimed higher calling.

orientation and, generally speaking, a spiritual calling that he satisfied through intense lecture. 'Cured', he '[realized] the importance of the human being and life itself' (ibid.:54). Acting on 'the call of God' and the 'vocation for serving the *prójimo* [biblical neighbor] (ibid.:47)', he started to provide financial support to churches, did good by giving to the poor, constructed churches and clinics, distributed 'thousands and thousands of bibles' since 'they brought to their readers a message of love and an oasis of peace', and contracted inspirational speakers 'at a high cost' (ibid.:47-48). 'Across the country', he moreover sponsored seminars such as those that had 'saved him' (and whose participants were giving out free hugs as of the time of fieldwork) as well as rehabilitation programs for addicts: 'Not for my own benefit, but for the good of the fatherland' (ibid.). Here, the same altruistic pathos that underpins LCT's discourse is also clearly apparent.

His striving to 'combat the true scourges of humanity: ignorance, injustice and lying' culminated in the creation of LFM as a body to 'make society egalitarian [sic] and end injustices and... renovate the legal structures maintaining the poor... [in] misery and the rich well defended in their immense wealth.' The envisioned endgame consisted in 'uniting all the isolated social struggles developing in Mexico and other countries... to make one sole, powerful, and inexorable social earthquake that would once and for all liberate all the peoples of the world' (ibid.: 68-69). Reflecting the latent revolutionary and, here, overtly Marxist undertone, he introduced the voice of a high-ranking politician who offered his support after stating that "'the objective and subjective conditions were given and that was the reason of so much violent uproar of inconformity in the southeast of the country⁵²..." and realizing that '[Moreno] appeared... in charge of realizing a profound change in Mexico'

⁵² A clear reference to the southeastern state of Chiapas that saw, in 1994, the emergence of the so-called *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* ('Zapatista Army of National Liberation'). Its actions, claims of indigenous liberation, and skillfully communicated anti-neoliberal discourse earned it wide popularity nationally as well as internationally (see de Vos, 2002).

(ibid.:68). However, as a condition to dedicate the needed energy to the pursuit of 'ideals of progress, liberty, and security' '[his] people [michoacanos]' were 'so longing for' (ibid.:71), a more immediate matter had to be attended to: 'My state was being subjugated, robbed, and humiliated by a dangerous group of professional delinquents... whose cruelty was incomparable in the annals of narcoviolence... [and whose] savagery... was so that they devastated and imposed terror' (ibid.:71). What follows was a 'bloody battle' in which good triumphed over evil and moral superiority as well as the suitability of LFM as a protector of the local is put to the test:

'We achieved a rapid victory, for the difference between the two groups... was clear... While they were a bunch of drunks and drug addicts... our elements neither drank nor took drugs and rarely was there anybody who smoked... In synthesis, while our *muchachos* were healthy and idealist and were plainly prepared and disciplined, all that the enemies knew how to do was stealing from peaceful people, rape women... kill at close range, drink like pigs.' (ibid.: 75)

Although *Los Zetas* surfaced as the prime embodiment of the dark 'other' that renders LFM's existence necessary, it shared the category with an ultraconservative, corrupt, and abusive elite represented by Calderón's *Partido Acción Nacional* ('National Action Party', PAN). The latter was accused of employing a captured state⁵³ to victimize and abuse innocent civilians under the pretext of 'national security' [sic], of refusing to create order (despite offers to collaborate to this end by LFM), and of actively colluding with *Los Zetas*.⁵⁴ In light of this 'inquisition-like' campaign against LFM and Moreno personally, he retreated to Tierra Caliente's *cerros* to lead a guerilla-like resistance from here (see ibid.:77-82). In

⁵³ The possibility for a criminal organization to accuse a presidential administration of state capture (see Hellman et al., 2000 for an overview of the concept) alone speaks loudly of realities that drastically depart from Western ideals. In many ways, they leave a field in which taken-for-granted relations between good/evil, legal/illegal, and state/non-state *are* many times turned upside down and *can* moreover be turned upside down to underpin and empower forms of criminal agency that defy and yet leverage on such binary representations (I provide an in-depth discussion of the matter in Chapter 6).

⁵⁴ Public accusations by criminal organizations that the federal government was favoring certain actors over others were common during Calderón's presidency.

the book's epilogue, he introduces voices of family members and comrades-in-arms, mourning their loss and praising his deeds. They furthermore act as witnesses of the 'cowardly and despicable' attack by the Federal Police that led to his 'death'⁵⁵:

'when I turned around... I saw him [Moreno] rapidly firing crashing bursts towards the fearsome apparatuses [helicopters of the Federal Police]... when we counted our losses, we discovered with unprecedented pain and anguish that *Chayo* had been killed by the shellfire ripping him to pieces' (ibid.:90)

His 'death', a final heroic act of self-sacrifice for a cause worth dying for 'since we would die with the honor with which Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa⁵⁶, Che Guevara died... like so many others who understood that it was preferable to die fighting than to live on one's knees⁵⁷' (ibid.:70). The latter, too, being the basis for his auto-sanctification as *San Nazario*. Reinvented as a patron saint⁵⁸ – consider the rosary cited at the beginning of this chapter, handed out in brochures to encourage locals to ask for his protection at shrines set up throughout Tierra Caliente and equipped with statues modeled after Moreno (see Image 5.2) – he provides the densest expression of LCT's discourse as well as its translation into artifacts as carriers. 'People need', as the living saint told me during our encounter, 'a place to believe.'

⁵⁵ I here refer to his 'first death' in late 2010, the staging of which I discuss in Chapter 6.

⁵⁶ The two most heroized figures of the Mexican revolution.

⁵⁷ *Prefiero morir de pie que vivir de rodillas* ('I would rather to die on my feet than live on my knees') is attributed to Zapata and is one of the phrases most common amongst left-wing/revolutionary groups in Latin America (see Anderson/Stransky, 1979:281).

⁵⁸ As opposed to my prior characterization of San Nazario as a 'narcosaint' (see Ernst, 2014) similar to those venerated by narcotraffickers in Latin America (see Edberg, 2001), it would be more pertinent to speak of a patron saint. For, while a narcosaint is a patron saint for narcotraffickers, San Nazario is a narcotrafficker come saint for a wider population.

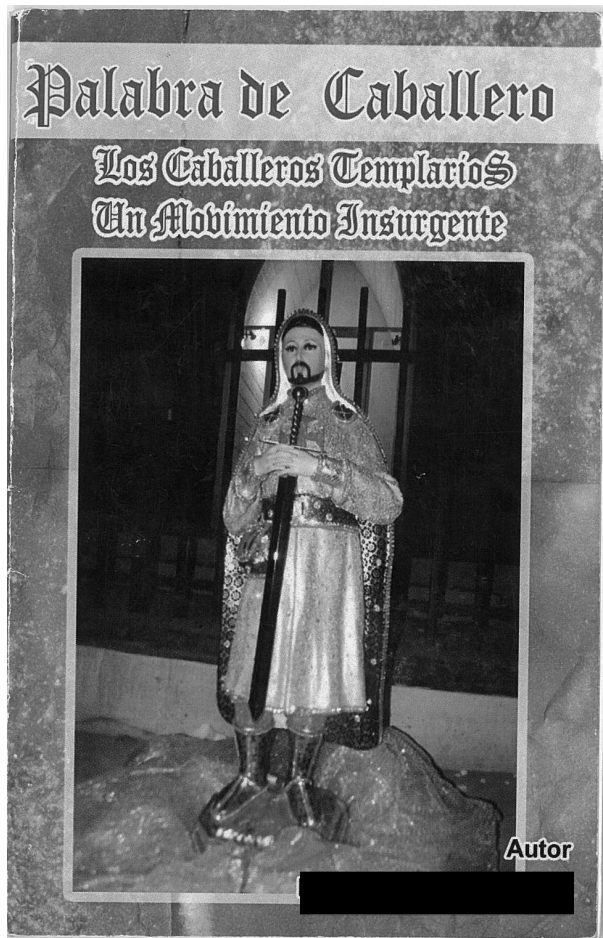


Image 5.2: Cover page of propaganda booklet released by LCT in 2012 and authored by a local journalist (name blacked out).

The claiming of a more perfect ownership of social order

Dramatized as passion, Moreno's narrative of his own life and 'death' serves as a metaphor for the necessity of LCT's existence. It unveils, in a compressed fashion, the same reflexive exercise that provides LCT's legitimizing discourse in general with its argumentative backbone.⁵⁹ Its core message is, albeit embellished, straightforward: LCT organically arises

⁵⁹ As I discuss in Chapter 6, this principle of environmental responsiveness – in essence: that capacity to 'read' and relate to the extant in ways conducive to the group's performance and survival – furthermore becomes clear in LCT's interactions with state actors as well as in its relating to structures of community organization. A similar observation, in the case of Rio de Janeiro, is provided by Arias (2009: 196): 'More than just filling in space left by the government, illegal networks appropriate existing state and societal

out of the local experience as the only available and moreover only pertinent solution for social order. It signals, to this end, that it is equipped with a comprehension of locals' needs and problems more profound than any outside actor could ever achieve. Crucially, the hardship facing locals is nothing abstract to LCT's leaders and members. It is a lived reality, and, as such, underpins the assertion of a shared identity *qua* communion in suffering. On one hand, this is to lend legitimacy to the group's analysis of Michoacán's problem-laden state of affairs (insecurity, violence, poverty). On the other hand, it introduces the basis from which the mandate for its interventionist and regulatory agenda is derived. For, rather than remaining inert in the face of adversity, it takes action – and moreover possesses the necessary knowledge, experience, dedication, and moral integrity. Thus elevated to a position of exceptionality *vis-à-vis* 'regular' locals, this justifies the exercise of power towards its own communities. The improvement of local society is as much a matter of setting up a bulwark against forces of destruction pushing in from the outside as one of internal reform. A matter of, to recite the term employed by members of LCT in interviews I conducted with them, 'curing' individuals whose deviant and amoral behavior negatively affects local society as a whole. Moreno's self-empowerment, achieved by overcoming great obstacles, here serves to project a promise of replication on the collective level *qua* LCT as a carrier construed for this purpose alone.

In forging a common identity as the basis for its motivation to act as a bulwark against outside threats as well as a spearhead for societal change, LCT provides a prime example for the construction of new forms of allegiance and political communities in the Global South's liquefied landscape of social order and sovereignty (see Davis, 2009). The latter's

resources and power and use them to establish protected areas in which traffickers can engage in illegal activities. More than parallel 'states' or 'polities,' drug trafficking in Rio represents an expression of transformed state and social power at the local level.'

characteristic flux encompasses, in this vein, far more than merely the erosion of the classical nation-state's territorial dimensions. It concerns the pillars of the 'old order' altogether. Likewise, '[m]oral and legal spaces' (Pansters, 2012:19) open up for non-state armed actors to pursue and strategically leverage alternative forms of moral entrepreneurship. Just like the state itself, the 'big ideas' that underpinned modernist dreams of societal progress and that, not least, provided the myth of the state as the stereotypical champion of law, order, morality, and progress do not simply vanish. Much to the contrary, as Comaroff and Comaroff underline, '[the global south's] polities are by no means "lawless"' (2006: 19). As is expressed not least in the cropping up of the abovementioned kaleidoscope of non-state actors (claiming to be) pursuing corresponding projects, there is a veritable fetish for law and order. So much so, it would appear, that 'even their outlaw cultures are infused with the spirit of the law' (2006:20). Under liquefaction, then, 'big ideas' – democracy, justice, law, legality, human rights, to name but a few – do not go away. They remain tools to mobilize that are arguably more powerful than ever before. At the same time, however, they are imperfectly occupied and represented by 'the' state. Thus decoupled from 'it', 'big ideas' become susceptible to trans-legal circulation, residementation, and appropriation. That such big ideas' 'instrumental discursive use' (Arias/Goldstein, 2010:17ff.) has increasingly become a possibility for non-state actors shines through prominently in Paley's examination of the use of the term 'democracy' (2002). So as to pertinently capture big ideas as 'contemporary... forms of enacting power', she calls for an analytical turn towards 'local meanings, circulating discourses, multiple contestations, and changing forms of power... [which] is rare in the scholarly literature' (ibid.:469). While her analysis remains within the confines of the licit, the argument that actors 'differently situated in relations of power' (ibid.:471)

'strategically and selectively appropriate and transform transnationally circulating discourses' (ibid.:485) is of even greater explanatory value when extended to the illicit.

LCT's narrative of itself (within the local) speaks loudly of the above outlined dynamic and, in this vein, of the career of Michoacán organized crime from side-phenomenon of modernity to one whose protagonist claims not only centrality but moreover ownership of progress *per se*. Rather than just 'crime as a factor in the reorganization of social space' (Bobeá, 2010:164), what becomes apparent here is a concentrated social force that emerges out of the field of criminal organizing to proactively seek to intervene in and restructure key processes within societal spheres far beyond its original confines. Given this spillover, the division between the licit and the illicit, the criminal and the legal, respectively, seem more porous than ever (see in this context my elaborations on the performativity of the licit-illicit-divide). Providing testimony to the same effect, LCT's construct of legitimacy creation and identity construction transcends the confines of 'classical' criminal mores. Such 'fictive kinship ties' are seen as construed in direct negative reflection of official law and as geared towards providing illegal groups with 'islands of cohesion and solidarity' (Paoli, 2002:85) in an environment rendered hostile by the constant threat of law enforcement (see e.g. Paoli, 2002:67ff. on Sicilian organized crime and Humphrey, 1999 on Russian organized crime). Or, to invoke Sykes and Matza (1957), as underworld-specific techniques of neutralization. As I have made clear, like any organization LCT strives for the creation of conditions favoring its survival. Yet, rather than relying on such a thing as an 'outlaw identity', it effectively claims *more perfect* ownership of the very same ideas, norms, and values embodied in Mexican legal code and *to be* materialized by the state. These elements, recycled rather than outright rejected, become eclectically arranged alongside additional discursive building blocks taken from further

ideological currents such as the Latin American revolutionary left and Charismatic/Evangelical Christianity, from whose language and imagery the prominently employed discursive element of ‘curing’ seems to have been borrowed. Positively connoted on a wide basis, they promise the conferral of legitimacy as much as a visible proximity to or even endorsement by actors already seen to embody such ideas can.⁶⁰ The result stands nothing short of a proclaimed project of (narco-)social engineering. The latter is, as I argue, ultimately geared at creating an island of security for the group *qua* (the promise of) the creation of a wider island of security and certainty for local civilian populations.

The least bad solution: On the ground pragmatism

‘That kind of stuff you have to ask our patrón, he knows more about that.’ *El Inge* referred my questions concerning ideology to Moreno: ‘You’ll have the chance to ask him all that.’ I felt, initially, frustrated as I seemed unable to harvest statements as deep as I had hoped for. In retrospect, however, it seems that the agency behind the highly ambitious claims as laid out in ‘They call me the craziest one’ effectively resided with its author, Moreno. This earns him Gómez’s respect (‘*Está bien cabrón* [He’s a badass]’) but also the mockery of this former school teacher: ‘He never went to school and he hardly knows how to write... sometimes he thinks he employs all his words and terms right but I have to correct him [he

⁶⁰ During my fieldwork in Tierra Caliente, I became witness to various attempts of LCT to coopt Diego and thereby his organization, left-leaning to revolutionary in orientation and, as pointed out in Chapter 3, immensely popular amongst dwellers of local communities. During back alley meetings I assisted in as well as during the meetings with Gómez and *El Inge*, large sums of money were offered ‘in order for them to work well’. Intriguingly, the above described discursive building blocks here surface again. LCT’s representatives stress not only Moreno’s admiration for Diego and his ‘valuable work’ but moreover that both leaders ‘have so much in common’, share the same ideals, and ‘should have met a long time ago.’ A textbook like attempt to confer legitimacy (consider, again, the above included quote from Dowling/Pfeffer, 1975) *qua* association with or endorsement by an actor already considered legitimate by many. Moreover, said duality in control over locally rooted resources here becomes expressed again in that Diego and his organization exercise sway over locals’ opinions and hold significant power to (de-) mobilize them (Diego: ‘We move a lot of people’).

leans forward to me to reenact a corresponding situation]: ‘*ya la cagaste* [you screwed up]” [breaks out in laughter].’ Also telling in terms of a degree of intragroup ideological conviction and indoctrination lower than claimed by LCT’s leaders themselves, was *El Inge*’s vague response to my question about which precise religious current Moreno and the group adhere to: ‘He was first catholic and then he became... how do you say... *cristiano* [evangelical] when he had drug problems... and then he became interested in all kinds of spiritual things, like Buddhism and masonry and so on...’ To *El Inge*, fostering the support of local civilian populations boils down to the more pragmatic motivation of being perceived as ‘*de lo peor lo menos malo*’ (‘Of the worse, the least bad’). Similarly, in Gómez’s statements, the goal of a duality of control over local social capital comes through prominently and pragmatically; as does the means to achieve it. ‘So why do you put such emphasis on constructing good relations with civil society and the civilian population?’, I asked. ‘If I treated them badly, they would put a bullet in me, they would betray/report me [*me delatarían*]... ’ Judging from the ease with which he scanned and reciprocates the greetings of the drivers of the ten or so cars that passed the intersection of a dirt and a paved road at which we stood in plain sight during our second meeting, the recipe seemed, here at least, to work. ‘It’s like if you have a family, a wife... you treat her badly and they [sic] won’t respect you, she’ll leave you or, just the same, put a bullet in you... without the support of the people, without them protecting us, we would have never lasted this long.’ Summing up, he once again deviated from Moreno’s official account:

‘we are a necessary evil... like the prostitutes: if there weren’t any prostitutes, how much rape would there be? Just the same, we *are* delinquents, but not just common delinquents... for example: I do sell *coca* but the kind that is good quality... and if I didn’t do it, somebody else would, and at a far worse quality like the one they sell in other places.’

Rather than an epic battle between good and evil, as Moreno described it, the argument as to why LCT is preferable to *Los Zetas* is voiced pragmatically (and under the admission that business did play a role in their constitution as LCT's archenemy and thus an important point of reflection for its identity construction): 'The problem with them starts in 2005 when they wouldn't turn back over the port [Lázaro Cárdenas, see Chapter 4] that we had lent to them [sic] for two years... and the port is very important because *allá llega la droga* [this is where the drugs get in].' But apart from that, *El Inge* continued,

'do you know how *Los Zetas* operate? They go to a community, get all the drug addicts, the *rateros* [from *rata*, or rat: low life criminals] together, and when they got like ten *cabrónes* they tell them: 'Okay, let's see gentlemen, we'll give you a gun, a rifle, do what you will with it, just give us fifty percent.'

Or, as Gómez summarized after providing a similar depiction: 'Who can seriously want *Los Zetas* to get in here?'

'I sent him to the front for two months since he screwed up...' As our conversation began to unfold during our second encounter, Gómez called over one of the young *sicarios* who had kept a respectful distance from their boss and myself. He walked over, shook my hand, and silently stood by, visibly uncomfortable with his head lowered, as his fate was discussed: 'I sent him and another one to buy chemicals for a kitchen [methamphetamine laboratory] I have over there, and I told them to go buy with a certain contact... but they went and bought it from somebody else.' All the way back, as Gómez elaborated, the traffic police followed them. They finally decided to stop, get out of their car, and kill the policeman. As 'there was no necessity for that, to assassinate [sic] him', a punishment becomes necessary. Its form: two months duty on the 'front' (sic), i.e. where confrontations with illicit competitors were the strongest at the time. Had they been killed during their

detachment then 'justice would have been done.' If not, they would be allowed to work 'normally' again. The one standing right next to us made it, supposedly having finished his sentence the very day of the meeting. The other one, I was told, was less fortunate. Perhaps he became one of the thousands who have perished in Michoacán and elsewhere across Mexico over the past decade but whose deaths were not and most likely never will be officially recorded. Grounds for Gómez to argue that the body count the country's 'war on drugs' has officially racked up – 60,000, as of the time of our conversation – was far too low. For, as he stated, 'me alone, I kill like three or four a week, and they don't appear in the statistics.' 'And then their mothers ask themselves where their sons are', my gatekeeper swiftly remarked, once again providing me with an unwanted adrenaline rush. He ignored the statement as such. Yet, he calmly took up the lead and shifted the conversation to matters of good vs. evil:

'There are so many perspectives on this fundamental question... I like to keep it simple, if not, you go crazy... But one thing is clear to me: if the question is killing forty-nine for fifty to survive, I kill the forty-nine. But I am not like *El Señor de los Cielos*⁶¹ either. He would have a *dedo* [informant] in a group of a hundred and he would lock them up for a day for them to identify the *dedo*. So after the day they asked him if he had already found the *dedo*. "Yes", he said. Because he had killed all of them.'

Gómez, in contrast, stressed that he kills only 'those who deserve it.' The same is true, when judged from the content of messages released for public attention, for LCT in general. Emblematic, in this vein, is that one some of its *sicarios* left at the above described the scene besides five severed heads which stated that the group 'does not kill for money, does not kill women, does not kill innocents, only those that deserve to die, die' (see Roque Madríz, 2006).

⁶¹ 'Lord of the skies', nickname of Amado Carrillo Fuentes, one of Mexico's mythical drug traffickers and head of the so-called Juárez Cartel in the 1990s.

On the ground practices

Territorial penetration and the rules of the new order

The right to establish categories of the justifiably killable – and accordingly, who becomes killable under which circumstances – sits at the heart of LCT's proclaimed sovereignty over its *terracalentana* subjects. A clear reflection here, thus, of Mbembé's observation that 'the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides... in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die' (2003:11). That LCT's elevation over the local as a master over life and death, just as an accompanying set of drastic measures of social control, supposes a necessity for it to fulfill its mandate to protect and reform local society was, in this vein, left blatantly clear to civilians over the course of the group's colonization of the local from 2006 onwards. As *El Inge* explains: 'We invite them [local civilians] to *reuniones* ('reunions, meetings'), to explain our goals, so they understand and don't fear us.' These *reuniones*⁶² suppose the first and unmistakable indication of a new form of order, convened shortly after a physical presence is established in communities: 'when they took the *rancho*... from one day to the other, they came and installed themselves under those trees over there [points to the spot] and they told all the people to gather...' In local informants' accounts of their assistance herein, too, the wording employed by LCT's *jefes de plaza* is reproduced: 'They said that they had to be here to establish order [*poner orden*], to protect us because the *contras* want to *meterse* ['get in', as in infiltrate]' Yet, already during this 'first contact', the uneasy combination of 'terror and generosity' (though in the present case, it appears more pertinent to speak of 'terror and (the ceremonial enactment of) benevolence'), as Hansen (2005:112) captures the 'inherent ambivalence of any form of authority', that

⁶² According to local civilian informants, members of the private sectors such as avocado growers I interviewed, and members of LCT, *reuniones* were moreover held with a wide array of local actors, including but not limited to local businesses.

would characterize LCT's pattern of control over the local in general, shines through. As another informant stated: 'You go because you [have to] go... they invite you once, they invite you twice... and the third time...' – her daughter completed the sentence – 'they take you by force.' Her mother nodded and continued:

'there in [name of community omitted] they convened a *reunión*... and they told us to go, but we finally didn't, so *el que cuida allá*⁶³ came and told us to come... and then at the *reunión*, you can't leave until they tell you to... because they had us well surrounded... as long as you don't open your mouth, you're safe... but speaking out, *hay chicharrón* ['there are pork cracklings', as in "there will a mess, you will be killed"].'

Chicharrón moreover, as was made explicit, awaits those that dare to collaborate with the *contras*, thus losing their status of locals' protectedness via association with the outside enemy.

Beyond the material: 'Curing' local society and minds

During this initial phase of colonization, LCT underlined its benevolent character by displaying generosity. As has been documented in further cases across Mexico and the Americas (see Felbab-Brown, 2010:13ff.; see Weinstein, 2007 for an overview of a wider population of non-state armed actors), punctual material contributions are made to local civilians. As one informant remembers,

'*El Tío* ['The Uncle', the local *jefe de plaza* and one of LCT's leaders] would have a big pan of food [prepared] every Sunday... and send his people to get all the elderly persons and give them to eat, a real meal with meat... and the 10th of May [Mother's Day] a feast and a party was made for all the moms... and then *El Tío* shows up and boom... a thousand [pesos] for each one... for

⁶³ 'The one who looks after/takes care there', an alternative term for *jefe de plaza* employed by LCT and sedimented in locals' parlance.

Children's Day, he brings them lots of toys and he organizes a party with a clown and everything...'

Similarly, locals' statements were laden with references to measures such as the construction of schools and clinics, the provision of subsidized groceries (Gómez was said to have set up a supermarket in Morelia in which products were offered at prices below market value), the co-financing of popular housing projects, the covering of medical bills and the organization of ambulance services, as well as the handing over of agricultural machinery. Yet, as mentioned above, LCT's ambition – and corresponding degree of societal penetration – goes well beyond materially manipulating populations into loyalty and recruitment (see Davis, 2010:8-9).

'I gave that to them.' Moreno directed my attention to the small, one-storied school building in the proximity of which we had sat down and engaged in a conversation:

'We used to give away things all the time. But we don't do that kind of thing anymore. It just spoiled them. They would just get drunk off the money we gave them. We want them to realize what's important. We want them to learn to help themselves. We want to educate them... it's like they say: Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; show him how to catch fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.'

Gómez, on another occasion, specified that in order to '*curar* and create conscience... we go to communities and we assemble all the *rateros* and the drug addicts and we give them *pláticas* [chats], we even use psychologists to give them *pláticas*... we put them in seminars...' Seminars, thus, of the sort one informant's sixteen-year-old son participated in:

'He was spending all of his time on the street... he was drinking all the time, he was on the wrong path, that is... and they locked him up a couple of times⁶⁴ for longer times and then they put him to work... they gave him

⁶⁴ According to local informants as well as official documents I obtained during fieldwork (SSPF/Grupo Primas/0007632), LFM ran drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers in various locations in Michoacán that

courses with psychologists and everything... they do exercises of self-reflection, they make them open up and tell their life stories... they make them see that they have to *convivir* [coexist in harmony] with their families... that they must behave well at home... and when they get vacations [sic] they have to go home to their families and they punish them if they do something else, if they drink and hang out with the girls... *el señor* ['the gentleman', here: the *jefe de plaza*] really cares about them...'

In a number of communities and, again, during the initial push of LCT's territorial penetration, such 'seminars' did not merely serve to 'cure' those having gone astray and, for that matter, their subsequent integration into the group's ranks. In these large-scale events, the ambition of (narco-)social engineering as well as the application of practices borrowed from the type of evangelical-charismatic self-empowerment seminars Moreno had himself participated in here find their clearest and densest expression. The same is true for the latent oscillation between terror and generosity characteristic of LCT's behavior towards local civilian populations. They moreover point to a confidence and freedom of spatial presence by the group that would be rendered impossible in later stages of its lifespan due to the changed dynamics of territorial cohabitation with state actors (I focus on these in Chapter 6). Entire communities, as Benjamín, a young man of about twenty-two years, tells me as he recounts his personal experience in participating in one such seminar, were driven off in busloads to a facility called *Albergue Gratitud* ('Shelter/Refuge Gratitude'). Situated about a ten minutes' drive from the city center of Morelia, Michoacán's state capital, Google maps lists it under 'Treatment and Therapy for Alcoholics' and shows a large warehouse-like building. According to Benjamín, the seminar lasted three days:

were used for the purpose described here. In a similar vein, further organizational proxies serving straightforward operational goals alongside other goals such as legitimacy creation were created (and given legal status as non-profit organizations) under names such as 'Construyendo un Mejor Michoacán' ('Constructing a better Michoacán') and 'Jóvenes Arte y Cultura de Tierra Caliente' ('Youngsters Art and Culture of Tierra Caliente', see Fernández, 2014).

‘The first day they give us really nasty food, as if you were a drug addict... and we all had to shave our heads and we all have to introduce ourselves and so on... the second day, they gave us exercises of self-empowerment... actually, we read two books, one called *Una Vida con Propósito* and the other one *Un liderazgo con Propósito*⁶⁵... and the third day they were showing us videos... we were in a dark room and there was nothing but the screen and you had to be there if you wanted or not.’

‘What type of videos?’, I enquired.

‘Videos of violence... *como ellos chingan a la gente* [how they fuck people up]... how they torture them and all that... until midnight, at midnight they showed us the last one, but an uglier one... even uglier... how they drag them with chains... and [hesitates and swallows, visibly moved]... how they cut their heads off... and the first one was confused... because... how they combined that of God and the evilness they were doing... [as he described his experience, his voice became shaky and his speech approaches unintelligibility]... so how they cut off the head, they grab him [the victim] here [points to his hair]... they had them blindfolded... and then the head [shows how head was held up]... that showed us that in order not to do anything... *mal* [wrong/evil]... if not it would happen to us...’

‘They explicitly said that?’

‘Yeah, just like that... It was like five videos... first how they dragged them, how they burned them in acid and then how they decapitated them... that is, it depends... what they did to them depended on what they had done... and when they burned them in acid it was... because they had done something ugly, some treason or so...’

‘And still, they talked about God?’

‘Yes, they turned it all upside down... they made us get up at five in the morning to pray... and then the videos of the massacres... and then, the last day, they took us all to the *Palacio del Arte*⁶⁶ to a celebration... all the

⁶⁵ Both books are written by the US-American evangelical-charismatic pastor Rick Warren, founder of a Californian ‘megachurch’ and ‘arguably the most influential evangelical pastor in America [the USA]’ (The Economist, 2005). The first mentioned book, titled ‘A purpose-driven life’ (2002) in its original, has sold over 20m copies (Economist, 2005). Including chapters on subjects such as ‘The making of a leader’, ‘How a leader organizes a project’, and ‘How a leader confronts those that oppose him’, these publications bear, in tone and content, a striking resemblance to Moreno’s autobiography as well as to the discursive construct advanced by the group in general, the detailed exploration of which lies beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁶⁶ ‘Palace of Art’, one of Morelia’s main event venues, located in a central area of town.

*pastores*⁶⁷ were there... super elegant, they were wearing suits and all... and all of us bold, eating *mole* [Mexican specialty] that they gave us as farewell...'

'Those that don't listen': LCT's quasi-judicial system

Since 'not everybody can be cured' (Gómez), *castigos* ('punishments') constitute an inevitable component of LCT's regime of social control to produce results. As Tito explained to me during our second meeting, *castigos* are necessary as 'the institutions just don't work. For instance, if a rapist is apprehended by the police or the PGR⁶⁸, he'll be let go again and will be a danger again for society... and somebody needs to make sure that does not happen.' *Pláticas* such as those described above form the first of a three-step, escalating punishment process in which he has admittedly participated. I asked what happens if *transgresores* – 'transgressors', one of the terms used by LCT in this context – 'insist'. 'If they offend [*sic*] again, we punish them.' 'How does the punishment work?' 'We apprehend them and 'paddlings' are applied [on the behind], about thirty... with a paddle made out of mango wood [about eighty centimeters long, as he indicated with his hands, and similar to the one shown in Image 5.3].' 'And what happens if they keep on transgressing?' 'Well, they don't.' 'So you never had to apply a stronger punishment?' Tito is a poster boy for the ideal, unconditionally loyal LCT *muchacho*. He had previously stated that Moreno's readings bring him nightly inspiration and stressed, time and again, his admiration for LCT's leaders. After all, it was them who 'saved me and gave me another chance... after [*Los Zetas*, to whom he was previously affiliated] left me to die like a dog.' He only wavered in his official posture when I asked him for a second time if he was not afraid, with his expressing

⁶⁷ Note, again, the sedimentation of terminology advanced by LCT in locals' parlance ('pastors' was initially used by the group to refer to members of its leadership).

⁶⁸ The *Procuraduría General de la República*, the General Prosecutor's Office, has proper policing powers in Mexico.

concern that he might become perceived as a snitch if he told me too much, which in itself was telling as for the tensions between LCT's discourse and on-the-ground realities. Correspondingly, he denied involvement in measures beyond 'milder' forms of corporal punishment.

In Gómez's words, in contrast, the irreformable *ratero* as the internal enemy also enters the category of the justifiably killable: 'sometimes they don't listen and have to die.' In Tito's account, LCT's regime of social control appears as a quasi-judicial system: governed by fairness (for providing the chance to reform) and reason (for only addressing those posing an imminent threat to society); based on clear rules, with a punishment catalogue, reminiscent of Benjamín's comments on the contents of the videos shown to him and asserted to exist by an array of informants; and procedurally standardized, with three steps escalating up to a death sentence only pronounceable after corresponding deliberations by LCT's highest organ, composed of its twelve highest leaders⁶⁹.

⁶⁹ During our conversation, Moreno proudly showed me an opaque silver ring adorned with LCT's insignia. Only those integrating the group's highest circle wear the ring. He moreover underlined that the contravention of this exclusive right carries, again, a death sentence.



Image 5.3: Paddle used for corporal punishment.
Courtesy of anonymized journalistic source.

On-the-ground social control: Depth, deviation, and the spectacle of punishment

On the ground, the procedural is frequently abandoned and *castigos* applied without prior *pláticas*. As an informant from a rancho close to Apatzingán told me,

‘right over there by my house, a man who was going [in his car] with his son and his wife, they dragged him out of the car by his neck... just because he had run over a speed bump... she was screaming “don’t take him, don’t take him”... and that was that... the child was crying so loud, and they put him into the *camioneta* and they took him... the wife got back into her car but she couldn’t drive anymore because she was crying so much.’

'So what happened afterwards?', I asked. '*Ya no supimos*', she responds, indicating that the man's fate remained unclear to her. A similar case arose in an interview with another informant:

'A young man, he had come back from the USA... real messy, drunk and wanting to fight... so they went to him and told him: "here, we do things differently", and they take off his shirt and they tie him [*amarran*] to a tree, and like that they kept him for the whole day and the night... his family went to say "what's up" [*to the jefe de plaza*] but no chance...'

LCT's insertion into the local as a force of law and order departs significantly from the quasi-judicial system invoked by Tito and existing to curtail grave *transgresiones* such as rape, burglary, kidnapping-for-ransom, and drug dealing on the local level. It addresses, as informants across the board recounted, a number of more 'banal' forms of disorderly behavior. Reaching from traffic violations and public drunkenness to noisy behavior (e.g. informants reported a ban on music after certain hours), the perhaps most emblematic, albeit seemingly surreal example in this context was provided by an informant from Holanda, a community in the very heartland of Moreno's chunk of the territory:

'In Holanda they even killed the donkeys... all the people had donkeys... roaming the streets... so they let them know that they didn't want donkeys in the street... because they would come to your house and eat your plants...' I can't help but speculate that they gave a *plática* to the donkeys. 'Well, no [laughs]... they talked to the owners and if not... boom boom [imitates shots being fired]... so there are no more donkeys... they eliminated them all.'

Apart from the public sphere, LCT's regime of social control reaches deep into the private. Intra-family conflicts are intervened in and thus LCT's moral agenda, and specifically its proclaimed role as a protector of women, enacted. Accounts of husbands being forced to stay in relationships ('You *will* work to make this work...'), to pay alimony to or even sign

over (real estate) property in cases of separation or divorce were, in this vein, as frequent as threats and physical punishments against alleged wife-beaters.

Murder-as-text (see Chapter 4) has been staged by LCT not solely for 'market-related purposes' but moreover to underpin its role as a guardian of social order.⁷⁰ One example is the abduction of an alleged rapist from a police convoy who was, the following day, found crucified on a street sign, his genitals cut off and stuffed into his mouth and a warning to other rapists – '*eso me pasó por violador* [this happened to me for [being a] rapist]' – attached to his chest with ice picks (see Image 5.4). As a prelude to these displays, as it were, stands the spectacle of punishment. As opposed to the discretion invoked by Tito, the latter is part and parcel of LCT's presence in the local and supposes a core practice via which its mandate to 'clean society' (thus the content of one message released in this context, see Rivera, 2010) is enacted. *Amarrar*, the practice of tying individuals to objects and thereby publicly exposing them, here constitutes a milder example. Frequent, along these lines, are practices such as the one described by one informant: 'For instance, when a *muchacho* offends and steals something or so... in a *camioneta* they drive him around in a plastic bag, they kick him... pour cold water on him and drive him back and forth through the *rancho*.' Nothing short of torture, punishments are also applied behind closed doors with designated perpetrators being locked up, blindfolded, for days or weeks, threatened with decapitation and dismemberment, and subjected to beatings as well as mock executions.

⁷⁰ This adds, I argue, a thus far underestimated layer to the default reduction of the violence exercised by Mexican criminal organizations to the function of intimidating state and non-state actors as well as civilians (see e.g. Campbell, 2009:27-29; Reuter, 2009). For, while the element of terror is well present, it is once again amended by the signaled protection of local civilians.



Image 5.4: Murder as text for 'non-market-related purposes', Michoacán, 2012.
Source: Mexico News (2012).

LCT evaluated by local civilians

As cruel and incommensurable these measures appear, they do not fail to produce palpable results. Across the board, informants agreed that delinquency such as robbery and assault, previously a major nuisance and factor of public insecurity, was now altogether absent. As an *apatzingense* schoolteacher phrased it,

'they finished off all the fucking *rateros*, that one can't deny... in the part of town where I work they would steal your socks without taking off the shoes... now I can leave the door unlocked at night again, before that would not have been possible... my daughter had a scooter, and we put it down there [inside the house, on the ground floor] and they stole it... in my school, they broke in and took the electricity cables... it was really grave with the *rateros*...'

During the conversation, another woman who was present jumped in and added that ‘there used to be a lot of rape, but not anymore... because that’s even more penalized [sic]...’ ‘So it’s true that they protect women?’, I inquired. ‘Yes, because if you, as a man, hit the wife [sic], if she goes and complains to them... *te levantan* [‘they pick you up’, a term usually used to refer to abductions committed by criminal organizations]...’ Apart from outcomes produced, the underlying violent means are condoned and even overtly welcomed by some, thus suggesting the partial functionality of LCT’s self-narrative as a necessity:

‘A lot of women benefited... and they also won’t allow that other persons abuse you... you go to them and [tell them that] this and that guy treated me badly and they go and talk to him: “either you behave or we’ll give you a paddling”... so he calms down... they hit them really ugly... also the drunks, they put them into rehabilitation... they do good things, a lot of good things... there were a lot of people of whom [people] said that they were crazy for using drugs... and they are controlled! Now the *rancho* is really clean [sic]...’

In the same vein, the ‘procedural fairness’ of LCT’s punishment process as well as the underlying rules are not necessarily welcomed *per se*, but accepted as facts locals can reasonably be accepted to comply with: ‘Well, it’s the law that they have... and if you know and still keep on doing what you’re doing, well...’ Similarly, a man who counts ‘reformed’ *rateros* amongst his friends (‘one has one’s acquaintances’), did not necessarily agree with ‘the form in which they eliminate them.’ Yet: ‘they do give them their chance to work well [honestly] and you have to think before you steal... it’s like me with my son, if he doesn’t behave, I’ll cut off his Sky [subscription] for a month... and my acquaintances tell me that thanks to *ellos* they stopped fucking around.’

Such positive reflections cannot, however, be equated to the uncritical acceptance of LCT, let alone its ambitious discursive formulations as most clearly represented in Moreno’s autobiography (see above). The latter, in fact, is a subject of ridicule by some. To give one

example: The night my gatekeeper and I enjoyed a post-fieldwork-day scotch in a semi-open-air karaoke bar overlooking Apatzingán from one of its hills. A full-hearted interpretation of a *corrido* (popular Mexican folk song) was first amended by the high-pitched sound of a scooter being driven by twice. It was fully interrupted as the two youngsters responsible for the noise swiftly made their way up the stairs to the bar and began handing out the latest round of LCT's propaganda material to everybody present. I looked at the CD, given to me with a mischievous grin (the *muchachos* seem to have fun carrying out this 'operation'): The cover read 'Hymn of Los Caballeros Templarios de Michoacán' and displayed the group's insignia. Right after they had disappeared, 'popular demand' forced the DJ to effect a change in music. The military-style marching song praising LCT in the usual fashion is reason enough for a group of men to start marching in obvious mockery. Similarly, as we drove to Guanajuatillo, the rancho where my encounter with Moreno would take place about two hours later and passed one of the shrines dedicated to *San Nazario*, I asked two of my co-passengers what they thought of this creation. '*Ya se pasaron* [They have gone over the top]', they responded. Another informant joked, to the same effect, that she sometimes considers asking him for a miracle, which then prompted her sister to tell her not to waste her time and just go and ask Moreno himself for a better chance to make the miracle happen.

Local civilians do not, so much is clear, easily buy into LCT's official narrative of a benevolent and, for that matter, revolutionarily-driven guardian of society. Reflections of outright legitimacy are largely absent from locals' accounts and statements. Yet, even those that generally maintain a critical posture towards LCT and stress that it is important to them for me to understand the existence of *abusos* ('abuses') such as the recruitment of child soldiers and arbitrary violence weigh off benefits and disadvantages. In this vein, a

typical answer to my question as to how things have changed since LCT took the respective *rancho* reads as follows: 'on one hand yes, on the other hand no. Because before there were a lot of *matoncillos* [diminutive for *matón*, 'violent thug'] and they cleaned them all out... until now we are alright, that is: if you don't mess with them, they don't mess with you... the only bad thing is that you're not as free anymore as you were before.' 'Not as free anymore' refers, in these and further informants' depictions, to a loss of voice: 'you can't talk more than what you should talk. If you know something... you better shut up...' It moreover means loss in ownership of traditional institutions of community organization. As mentioned above and reflective of the described principle of reflexiveness, LCT's occupation of the local did not translate into a colonization in the sense of eradicating the old and putting something entirely new in its place. Rather, extant structures were left in place and related to in ways deemed to be conducive to the achievement of the group's goals and, ultimately, its permanence.

Inserted into this dynamic is the *fiesta del pueblo*. This annual celebration commemorates communities' date of foundation. It is the main annual social event in their calendar. Being in charge of organizing this event brought (financial) burden to those chosen by the community assembly. Yet, it also supposed a privilege and acted, to the community as a whole, as a key reproductional institution of its identity. Before, as one informant puts it,

'we would pay for the entry and all that, but we'd have fun... now... they make big *fiestas*, beautiful ones... with famous bands and all that... they tell you to drink as much as we want, eat as much as we want... everything is for free, but it's theirs now and we don't enjoy ourselves as much anymore.'

Locals' opinions regarding this particular transformation are, again, split: 'on one hand, it limits our liberty... since you don't decide anymore... but a lot of people also say: "how great is it that they give to us."'

The lamented loss of ownership furthermore acquires a territorial dimension. Beyond a general caution in movement induced through (the likelihood of) confrontations, this finds its clearest expression in the changed meaning of *el cerro*. Traditionally, as outlined in Chapter 4, a place for illicit activities to crop up, *el cerro* nevertheless remained accessible for locals to hunt or to simply be with nature. At the time of fieldwork, *el cerro* had mutated into the mythicized emblem of LCT's power. Constituting the very heart of its territory, it is off limits for locals. Unless one is 'called to *el cerro*' (sic). What really goes on 'up there' is but a matter of speculation, tales, and assertions: *En el cerro* is where they take their recruits and make them fight each other to death, with bare hands; *en el cerro* is where they have 'people with a Central American accent' who train LCT's soldiers in warfare; *en el cerro* is where they perform rituals and eat their opponents' hearts. What seems certain, solely, is that great power resides here and can be activated from *el cerro*. What Tierra Caliente is to outsiders, *el cerro* is to locals: a black hole whose aura of myth, uncertainty, and danger provides LCT with a powerful signal of strength.

Certainty, albeit of a different kind, is also what lets local informants hesitate and, again, weigh off pros and cons when asked whether they, if given the choice, would want LCT to go or stay: 'Well, I don't know, the problem is that one doesn't know what comes afterwards... I'm afraid of what's going on with the *contras*... I've heard that *Los Zetas* are really bad... them [LCT] I've already known for a while... a known evil is better than an unknown good...' In absence of feasible alternatives for social order and amidst conditions perceived as uncertain and threatening, LCT's self-narrative as *de lo peor lo menos malo* seems at least partly effective. This becomes expressed, not least, in the absence of opinions that I frequently found. This pragmatic tolerance – the posture I most frequently

encountered amongst informants – thus supports the goal of guaranteeing the inertia of locals as well as the non-mobilization of social capital in favor of hostile entities. A much greater threat to the effectiveness of LCT's self-narrative than violence *per se* and the general loss of freedom – both features emerge as tolerable to a surprising degree in locals' accounts – comes in the form of its own members' overly obvious departures from its officially held norms and codes of conduct. To what degree this is perceived to be the case largely depends on who is in charge in a given community. Some are referred to as 'good people', others as utmost abusive. As one informant summarized: '*Todo depende de quien manda* [It all depends on who leads/ is jefe de plaza].' Locals stressed, in this context, an increase in *abusos* over time and drew a correlation to changes in local leadership, with outsiders installed after original *jefes de plaza*, frequently 'sons' of the respective communities, were arrested or killed.

With kinship ties thus less of a factor, the employment of the label LCT as a personalistic tool of power whose coercive potential is activated arbitrarily in the interest of those directly bearing it, their families, or those fortunate to have some *influyente* (a contact with influence) becomes more overt and frequent. It enables, to cite but one example frequently lamented by informants, the concentration of great extensions of land in the hands of few local strongmen. It moreover, as already mentioned above, acts as an element modifying and aggravating the dynamics of everyday conflicts, or enabling their occurrence altogether. One example in this context is a minor traffic accident, in which one informant's brother was involved and which turned sour as the other party involved had an *influyente*:

'He was going fast as he wanted to get our uncle to the hospital... and he hit a *camioneta* just a little bit on the side... so one of the girls in the *camioneta* goes and calls the police... and they come but it's [LCT's] people... it was a *patrulla fantasma* [ghost patrol, see also Chapter 6]... so they kick him and

push him [the brother]... they asked for his driver's license: 'now we know where you live and we'll kill your whole family'... so he asked for forgiveness...'

Inserted into this dynamic, too, the reappropriation of LCT's punishment process as described by Julio, the informant introduced in Chapter 4:

'The wife of the one who's [in charge] there now... she had somebody make flyers with the names of all the girls in the *rancho* that, according to her, were like whores... she was jealous, that is... on the flyers they were all listed and they put what they would do to them... In one occasion, there was a dance in [name of community] and one of those girls danced with her husband... and she was drunk already and gave her a real ugly kicking... and because she was the wife of that one [the *jefe de plaza*], she had the option to do that... she left her super beaten... in front of everybody, and nobody said anything... after a week they went for her again... beat her and used pepper spray on her... they cut her [in the face] and cut her hair and uploaded a picture on Facebook: "this is what happens to all the whores".'

Such incidences, alongside the abandonment of most of the practices that initially suggested greater adherence to its proclaimed ambitions of (narco-) social engineering, end up undermining LCT's goal of (criminal) distinction. Telling, in this vein, is the comment I received from one of my informants. After she had described *abusos* observed in her community, I asked whether she thought that they are worse than the federal police, usually the one actor receiving most criticism and expressions of, to put it mildly, animosity. 'Well, they're almost the same already...'

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided insights into Tierra Caliente under 'Templar rule', identifying patterns of territorial and social control that go well beyond those associated with 'traditional' (Mexican) organized crime. I have argued that they amount to a veritable

project of alternative governance. This situates LCT amongst an increasing number of non-state armed actors that are taking up functions of governance across the Global South, including Mexico. My analysis of specific practices of governance as well as of the mechanisms underlying their design helps to tackle the still largely pendent task of going beyond the principal recognition of spaces in which non-state armed actors exert significant influence and to empirically explore ‘the origins and nature of alternative authority and governance structures in contested spaces’ (Clunan, 2010: 3). These findings question and contradict a number of fallacies built into the discursive-theoretical construction of such spaces and of the actors populating them. For one, I have shown that the attempt to obtain legitimacy cannot, as is often done, easily be dismissed as a negligible and obvious attempt to launder violent imposition. What is and what is not bearable, acceptable, or even legitimate to specific social audiences is established through complex interactions that are not bound by official and/or externally construed categories of legality and morality. And while violence is, beyond doubt, important, it is by far not the only technique of territorial and social control LCT relies on. I have indeed demonstrated that the obtention of legitimacy is to be considered an organizational goal in its own right. This is because it has indubitably motivated and shaped LCT’s actions and the relations between the group and local civilian populations. These appear not as drastically unidirectional as asserted by default but as infused with a greater element of negotiated power.

These insights suggest that this specific case of the (re)constitution of sovereignty through a non-state armed actor follows an organizationally specific as well as local-specific logic. In spite of arising out of many of the same structural conditions as similar cases across the Global South, the way this specific actor relates to and in fact leverages and even plays with

them proves automatic arguments simplistic and underlines the importance of agency in producing specific organizational outcomes and in shaping the lives of affected populations. This furthermore underlines that social realities are not only more complex in the region itself than usually suggested, but that the same is true for what goes on within the 'bowels' of LCT. LCT, more than a well-oiled hierarchical machine, appears as an organizational label that seeks to both produce and signal coherence and unity while simultaneously hiding and empowering an array of different attitudes, practices, actors, and impacts. This, alongside the outstanding relevance of legitimacy in bringing about real-life outcomes, should be kept in mind as essential to the group's eventual downfall, which I discuss in the conclusion to this thesis.

While valuable and necessary to achieve an understanding of LCT's project of alternative governance, the interactional and (organizationally as well as spatially) internal dimensions analyzed in this chapter alone do not suffice to tackle the underlying question of how, seemingly in spite of all odds, the group managed to survive. Nor does it by itself sufficiently speak to grander theoretical questions relating to dynamics of social (dis-)order under the wider trend of liquefaction and the herewith entangled protagonism of non-state armed actors. For no such project of governance and, for that matter, form of sovereignty can exist independently from all else, in a vacuum. It is thus necessary to take into account relations with other existing projects and actors. An all-encompassing approach addressing all of LCT's external relations goes beyond the scope of this thesis and will have to form the stuff of future research. My elaborations in the following chapter are therefore limited to the most pressing external relation LCT had to contend with so as to stay afloat: those with the state. Empirically, the state surfaces in ways that far transcend its stereotypically and yet still dominantly ascribed role (within the so-called 'war on

drugs’). I argue that LCT did not define its project of alternative governance and could in fact not have done so in fundamental opposition to ‘the’ state. Much to the contrary, the Mexican state proved empirically rogue and more of an asset than a threat to LCT in many ways. After reflecting upon some of the main fallacies built into default accounts on non-state armed actors and organized crime, I go on to provide a nuanced account of how correspondingly more complex and varied state-organized crime-interactions played out in the present case. These contradict prevalent binaries, which I summarize under the term licit-illicit-divide. These depictions, in turn, provide theoretical feedback for discussions on issues such as failed as well as parallel states and on how to conceptualize the new topography of sovereignties (see above and my literature review in chapter 2). I recall main items of the respective debates throughout the chapter as well as in its conclusion and return to situating my own findings against them in the conclusion to this thesis.

Chapter 6: Shared sovereignty, trans-legal order, and state-organized crime-interactions in Michoacán

The licit-illicit-divide

In December 2010, President Felipe Calderón Hinojosa announced what at the time was the greatest victory in Mexico's contemporary 'war on drugs'. Federal forces had killed Nazario Moreno González, founder and head of *La Familia Michoacana*. Providing a much-needed argument to counter the failure of his administration's defining policy, the militarized fights against organized crime, Calderón emphatically highlighted that Moreno's death meant nothing less than a 'brutal strike' against LFM (see *Informador*, 2010). 'One of the most bizarre and deadly cartels in the world' (Grayson, 2010: vii) had, as the DEA's chief of operations seconded before a sub-committee of the US House of Representatives, been virtually 'liquidated' (cited in: Lara Klahr, 2012). Notwithstanding the fact that his body had not been recovered and the general attorney's office's reluctance to speak of definite proof, intercepted radio communications by Gómez, now officially the group's leader, seemed to support Moreno's death as fact (*Informador*, 2013). Two years later, I penetrated deep into LCT's core operational territory of Tierra Caliente in Michoacán. What was to unfold before my eyes provided, time and again, testimony against the group's seemingly inevitable extinction – and that of its leader. Locals would declare that Moreno was still 'wandering the hills [of Tierra Caliente]' and that he had even been seen 'floating above his bunk'. My initial suspicions towards such supernatural affirmations, however, soon evaporated. Moreno and I crossed paths at a rural community's school graduation dance. Curious about what this *güero* ('whitey') might be up to in 'his community', he had one of his men summon me: 'The *patrón* [boss] wants to see you'. My companions, as nervous as I was, wished me luck. I entered the circle of

heavily armed *sicarios* surrounding him, and walked up to his table. He invited me to take a seat and stretched out his hand: 'I am *Chayo*'. I responded that I couldn't help but notice and we engaged in conversation.

The staging of Moreno's 'first' death – a co-production of LCT *and* higher-level state actors, as I explain in greater depth below – represents a spectacular contradiction to dominant accounts of state-organized crime-interactions and, more widely speaking, of the way the licit relates to the illicit. Yet, it is not the only one. Two monolithic blocks – the modern nation state as the stereotypical champion of law, legality, and (moral) order and nihilistic forces of illegality and disorder – are seen to confront each other in existential antagonism. This imagery surfaces, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, in the debate on Mexico's 'war on drugs'. Serrano (2012:142) speaks of a 'direct confrontation' between state and criminal organizations. Akin to Knight's (2012:134) assertion that the latter are 'confronting the state head-on', she sees them as 'clearly on the warpath' (Serrano, 2012:153). Sullivan and Elkus even claim that 'an army of drug cartels has launched a vicious criminal insurgency against the Mexican state' (2008:1). Similarly drastic in tone is the U.S. Military's Joint Forces Command 2008 threat evaluation: '[Mexico's] government, its politicians, police, and judicial infrastructure are all under sustained assault... by criminal gangs and drug cartels' (cited in Rieff, 2011). Sediments here, thus, of building blocks common to contemporary sensemaking on non-state armed actors as well as on organized crime. The former are, in this vein, asserted as thriving under conditions of (violently induced) state absence and to subsequently producing 'governance voids', 'ungoverned spaces' or even 'failed states' (for critical accounts see Davis, 2009/2010; Kenny/Serrano, 2012; Morton, 2012). The latter, in turn, are said to *have* to operate

'against the state' and furthermore 'without the state' (Paoli, 2002:64, 65) so as to evade 'the law' as a quasi-natural existential threat to those standing outside of it.

Much of what I encountered in the field provides circumstantial support for the licit-illicit divide, the invoked iron division between upper- and underworld as outlined above. Displaying a bellicose readiness corresponding to Calderón's proclaimed fight conducted with neither 'truce nor mercy for the enemies of Mexico' (see *Emol*, 2007), military helicopters relentlessly hovered over Apatzingán, LCT's stronghold and my temporary home in the field. *Ranas* – or 'frogs', as local parlance designates the military's Humvees – roamed its streets. Entry into the city had itself become an obstacle course due to the *cordón sanitaire* composed of checkpoints manned by Federal Police (*Policía Federal*, PF), Military (see Image 6.1), and Navy. LCT's leaders, too, signaled their claim of territorial supremacy. Michoacán, they had reiterated in countless communiqués, is rightfully theirs. As he received me in front of the middle-of-nowhere cemetery described in Chapter 3, Gómez was similarly blatant. For our next meeting, I would be taken to the group's training grounds: 'I'll put a thousand well-armed men in front of you so you see how fucking strong we are.' Strength reflected, it would appear, in events such as the guerrilla-style ambushing and killing of a high-ranking naval officer (see Chouza, 2013) and the apprehension of twelve members of the Federal Police whose charred bodies were left in a pile beside an overland road (see Castillo, 2009). Though media reports, as *El Inge* emphasizes, clearly downplay the true number of casualties suffered above all by the PF; 'Over there alone', he told me as he points to a nearby location, 'we killed fifty of them.'



Image 6.1: Search at military checkpoint, Tierra Caliente, Michoacán, 2015.
Own photograph.

The liquefaction of social order as a double-edged sword for illicit actors

Prima facie, these vignettes comply with the licit-illicit-divide's hypothesis of the exclusivity of ownership of territory, law, and order. The same is true for its extension of supplantation (as one block expands, the other must recede or dissolve). The more so as the coming-into-existence of projects of alternative governance invokes contention with 'the' state in its very core arenas of action (see e.g. Koonings/Kruijt, 2004). Such binary rigidity, however, obscures on-the-ground complexities. It is crucial, I contend, to recognize that the liquefied landscape of sovereignties as outlined in Chapter 5 presents itself as a double-edged sword for non-state armed actors. Condition for and result of their existence, it affords them with increased opportunities and action space. The mutation of Michoacán organized crime and its constitution as a phenomenon that spills over into spheres other than that of the criminal provides a prime example here, as does the particular shape LCT's

agency has taken in this context (see Chapter 5). Simultaneously, however, the possibility for sustained control over a given (social) space appears severely constrained. Forms of social order produced in this 'mare magnum of anomie' (Paoli, 2002:85) are frequently as short-lived as the actors carrying them. In the cutthroat world of Mexican organized crime and its evident trend towards organizational atomization (see e.g. Reuter, 2009), this existential challenge seems further intensified. Counterintuitively, it is here that the limits of coercion are demonstrated most clearly. With its means dispersed amongst a wide and diverse population of state as well as non-state actors, brute force appears as a necessary and yet insufficient tool to secure long-term survival. Violence – just like displays of strength that suggest high violent potential – becomes less of an all-defining 'name of the game' in regard to state-organized crime-interactions and acquires a 'defensive' quality (Davis, 2009:232). Indeed, as Lessing (2012) argues, its overuse entails costs such as unwanted attention by law enforcement and makes it more of a bargaining instrument geared at delineating and sustaining zones of non-interference.

What this calls for in analytical terms is to allow for the possibility of an element of negotiation, convergence, and accommodation greater than the emphasis on imposition, dissolution, and fragmentation would suggest. The challenge becomes to unpack how particular actors' potential access to vital resources and opportunities for permanence is anchored in interactional patterns transcending the spectacular, externally perceptible, and violent. Any such approach to the new topography of sovereignties must factor in the state. For it does not simply vanish and leave the field for easy non-state colonization. Nothing is further from the truth. In the present case, too, 'it' is latently present, both in its abstract-ideal projection as 'the very embodiment of reified legality' (Heyman/Smart,

1999:11) as well as in shape of those real-world actors claiming its representation, occupying and enacting its structures. At which point the historically ‘incestuous relationship’ between Mexican organized crime and the Mexican state apparatus (Knight, 2012:120, see also Watt/Zepeda, 2012) serves to emphasize that ideal projection and empirical reality must not be confused with one another (see Heyman/Smart, 1999). Though largely taken for granted, there is nothing to suggest that states are naturally ‘bound by law’ (Spinoza, 1951 [1883]: 311, cited in: Rodgers, 2006:326) or that their actions are magically geared at championing legality (worth mentioning here also Cohen’s 2001 examination of the relationship between Western nation states and state crime) – nor does the assumption of ‘the’ state as monolithic hold. ‘States are’, as Smart highlights, ‘internally complex and composed of many agents’ and therefore it is ‘inappropriate to refer to states doing or intending things’ (1999:104). What follows is the necessity to disaggregate ‘the’ state.

The licit-illicit-divide as functional myth

The line of argumentation I develop against this backdrop is anchored in the observation that state and law did not primarily enter LCT’s strategic considerations as ‘natural’ threats as a positive reading would have it (see Heyman/Smart, 1999). To the contrary, LCT recognized and leveraged upon the plural and empirically deformed configuration of the Mexican nation state as a rich pool of actionable opportunities and resources. In particular, it *differentially* positioned itself towards its fragments as well as its foundational and sustaining myth. The translation of (potential) threats into assets presents itself as a key outcome, thus transcending the commonly asserted mix of evasion, corruption, and confrontation available to illicit actors in dealing with ‘the law’ (Bailey/Taylor, 2009). This

chapter's principal contribution consists, against this backdrop, of identifying dynamics proper to three distinct state-organized crime-interactional arenas, each of prime importance for shaping the present case. First, I reveal that LCT showed no interest in dismantling lower (municipal) and mid-level (federated state) state structures. The group did not only deliberately leave these in place but even actively invested in their reproduction. These 'rogue state fragments', as I refer to them, nominally remain part of the state apparatus but become entirely decoupled from their legal mandate. They came to serve LCT as external, yet *de facto* organizational assets, valuable for an array of tasks precisely due to their sustained legal façade.

The aforementioned highlights, once again, LCT's basic strategic orientation of reflexiveness, i.e. to *insert* itself into given settings by relating to and leveraging extant structures and actors to its advantage. It differs, in this vein, from groups such as *Los Zetas* whose mode of territorial expansion rests on more unvarnished forms of (violent) imposition, leaving entire areas in the Mexican North-East without municipal police forces (see Estrada, 2010). Second, and adding to the argument developed in Chapter 5, I show how the gap between imagined ideal and empirical reality of state and law served LCT in justifying its existence as the least bad solution for (local) social order. The highlighting of state actors' malperformance in the provision of governance constitutes a building block central to this discursive construct. Of equal importance was the declaration of solidarity with local society against certain higher-level state actors. The PF, in particular, epitomizes the contradictory and adverse effects of the 'war on drugs' that surface in this context and provide groups such as LCT with actionable opportunities. Designed under Calderón as a tool to wage the 'war', the PF became widely perceived as an abusive outside aggressor.

Serving LCT to forge a shared 'victim identity' and strengthen bonds with local society, the PF in particular occupies a centrality in its striving for distinction.

The dynamics proper to the two outlined interactional arenas highlight LCT's relating to state and law as principally neutral (sets of) resources, mobilizable to the advantage of actors of either legal status. Far from being doomed to operate 'against' or 'without the state' (Paoli, cited above), LCT did so *qua* state and law as an 'indeterminate system of meanings manipulated in actual social practice' (Heyman/Smart, 1999: 11; see also Campbell, 1993; Arias, 2006/2009). Revealing anything but an interest to dismantle or to even overthrow, its actions back up Briquet and Favarel-Garrigues' (2010:4) observation that criminal actors tend to be 'satisfied with the existing rules of the political and economic game... [as] their familiarity with "the system" allows them to detect opportunities that enable them to develop their activities'. What is more: Under conditions of liquefaction and environmental uncertainty as 'the "constitutional" setting in which participants... operate' (Serrano, 2012:143), 'the' state remains the only thing *close* to a superstructure promising predictability. Those acting under its roof moreover bind resources such as financial assets, coercive potential, as well as appropriable symbols and 'organizational shells' of value as rogue state fragments. They moreover serve as mimicable blueprints for the creation of counterfeits (of the counterfeits), for instance in the shape of *patrullas fantasma* (see Chapter 5). These, as informants expressed, allowed LCT to produce a veiled presence in areas with higher-level state actor presence such as Apatzingán. Were they to cease to exist, the logic of and the mere possibility for creating counterfeits would arguably be undermined. Their continued existence translates into the existence of clearly identifiable structures that can be related to and, not least, (attempted to be) controlled.

Access to the fruits of 'the' state as a pool of trans-legally activatable resources is, however, no free lunch. Contenders are manifold in contemporary Mexico. Here, as aforementioned, the twentieth century's one-party-system's mediating and regulating capacities over the illicit have become eroded. Disaggregated the 'state-sponsored protection racket' (Snyder/Duran, 2009) under which Mexican organized crime was shaped and emerged in the first place, state-criminal-collaborations now appear as parallel, precariously constructed houses of cards (see Flores Pérez, 2009:137-227; Rios, 2013). Yet, despite a manifest lack in coercive effectiveness – showcased by the 'disaster' (Kenny/Serrano, 2012:2) of the militarized fight against Mexico's criminal organizations – higher-level state actors are still in the position to cause significant damage to particular actors (and individuals) by mobilizing their coercive potential. From LCT's perspective, what emerges is a dual challenge: To realize, on one hand, its *vested interest in sustaining 'the' state* (in its rogue configuration) with the latter as the condition to keep on populating and manipulating the interstices between ideal and empirical law, to engage in interactions concealed by and yet transcending the licit-illicit divide; and to prevent, on the other hand, a hostile mobilization, be it directly by state actors or by illicit competitors. Reflections here again of the duality of control over extant resources as organizational goal and condition for organizational permanence. Successfully addressing both presupposes, I argue, the ability to constitute a viable interactional partner for higher-level state-actors. Corruption is certainly important in this context, but insufficient if considered alone. More fundamentally, a successful and not merely ephemeral accommodation with capable (i.e. higher-level) state actors hinges on the capacity to help the latter 'impersonate' themselves (Comaroff/Comaroff, 2006:16). To *co-enact*, in other words, 'the very possibility of [state] governance' (ibid.: 21) when options are realistically constrained to the 'management of ungoverned spaces' (Clunan/Trinkunas, 2010:20). The reproduction of the state's

legitimate symbolic façade as ‘the very embodiment of reified legality’ (Heyman/Smart, 1999:11) becomes a potential interface of convergence between those labeled licit and illicit, respectively. For the former, ‘the righteousness of law, the claim to be the essence of order and morality’ (ibid.: 12) constitutes the very basis from which its right to exist is derived. Not least, ‘the livelihoods of the millions of bureaucrats who make up the state’ (Clunan/Trinkunas, 2010: 27) depends on it. Simultaneously, it veils the ‘dark side of the state’ (Gledhill, 1995) and is thus constitutional to trans-legally inhabitable ‘gray zones’ (Auyero, 2007; see also Reno, 1995, 2000).

Therefore, the licit-illicit-divide reemerges as a highly functional myth. A myth, however, that requires investments so as to maintain its accommodating qualities. What guides my reflections on the third interactional arena is the question of how and to what extent it performed as a trans-legally binding and enabling substance. As I argue, LCT and higher-level state actors such as the military engaged in a (tacitly) agreed upon live-and-let-live equilibrium of non-interference, acted out under conditions of territorial co-existence. The military proved accommodating insofar as both sides could satisfy their respective needs under the conjointly reproduced umbrella of the licit-illicit-divide. LCT, for its part, demonstrated a manifest capacity to produce *signals* required by higher-level state actors to simulate commitment to legally stipulated behavioral norms towards relevant, i.e. external social audiences. In turn for this ceremonial service to the (punctual) reproduction of the state’s symbolic façade, LCT was by and large left to exercise social control over local civilian populations. Effective access to lower and mid-level state structures as rogue state fragments completed the package. Rather than merely fragmented and pluralized, then, *sovereignty* in itself becomes a non-exclusive and trans-legally empowering commodity. As a conjointly carried and reproduced counterfeit, it remains part and parcel of the layered

and interwoven production of *sovereignties* that here took the shape of a shared venture rather than that of a (territorial) zero-sum game.

Cohabitation and aggression in the counterfeit edifice of sovereignty

Compartmentalizing and sharing the territory

‘So, are there any of these left in your country?’ *El Inge* showed me pictures of his old-timer Mercedes on his cell-phone. My negative response – ‘not that I know, it looks pretty exclusive’ – seemed to satisfy him. Seated in front of a rural corner shop and surrounded by the group of *sicarios* he travels with, we became engaged in small talk. I occasionally attempted to steer the conversation to items of interest by carefully injecting allusions. The actual reason for our encounter was a different one, though. The result of a months-long process outlined in Chapter 3, I had finally succeeded in negotiating my way into the depths of Tierra Caliente. Almost, that is. For the time being, we remained in the last of the various zones that provide LCT’s leaders with a security buffer. Despite all claims of total territorial dominion, the possibility even for those who, at a given time, successfully create spaces of security, the latter prove porous. The informational supremacy LCT so jealously strives for appears constrained. Interrupting our conversation, one of *El Inge*’s men rushed over and, visibly excited, presented to him a copy of the day’s *nota roja* newspaper. He opened the third page, which showed a dismembered body, dumped on some sidewalk. ‘*Será ese* [‘Do you think that’s him]?’ he asked. *El Inge* responded: ‘Well might be.’ Both laughed and he walked off again.

In the same vein, unexpected incursions and attacks by certain state as well as non-state actors constantly take place. Correspondingly, an array of security measures accompanied my meetings with LCT's leaders. On the way to one meeting, for instance, we received a final phone call with instructions and are moreover warned 'not to engage with anybody... for our own protection' since, as I was told almost apologetically, '*hay mucho gobierno*' ('There is a lot of government'). However, this was not a cause, as I point out below, for immediate worry. Nonetheless, care had to be taken as plain-clothed members of the *Estado Mayor Presidencial* (the 'Presidential Guard', an elite unit of the Mexican armed forces in charge of protecting the president) were rumored to have 'infiltrated' the region. LCT's leaders showing themselves openly in Tierra Caliente's urban areas – Finnegan (2010) reproduces assertions of locals that Moreno used to ride his horse on Apatzingán's central plaza – is now a thing of the past. That Tierra Caliente's arterial roads and main urban areas are now, by and large, the exclusive stage for state actors to showcase their presence in the form described above (also see Image 6.2) does not, however, translate into LCT's absence. Rather, it is clearly present through rogue state fragments, *patrullas fantasma* – or, as a local informant put it: 'that which is government but is not' – as well as through members hiding behind civilian façades such as Tito's taxi. The latter, though, only an effective cover for those ill-informed or selectively ignorant for plain-clothed elements form such a fixture of everyday life that their *absence* appears abnormal rather than their *presence*. But there is one example here in the taxi serving to *halconear* ('spy') on the military base just two blocks down a road in Apatzingán. One afternoon, the spot where 'it is always stationed', without ever bothering to vary location or cover, became suddenly vacant leading to confusion amongst my informants. Its reappearance later the same day was received with near-relief: 'You see? I told you...'



Image 6.2: Military deployment in Tierra Caliente, Michoacán, 2006.
Courtesy of anonymized source.

Deviating from the main routes and pushing deeper into Tierra Caliente via its smaller capillaries, smaller overland and ultimately dirt roads, we entered a zone of transition. On the road that led us away from Apatzingán and towards our meeting with *El Inge* in the deserted, dusty countryside surrounding the city, we wound our way through military and navy checkpoints. Just five miles on, we encountered their shadowy reflections. First, *halcones* appeared on the side of the road. The entrance to the village itself, the indicated meeting point, was guarded by two men who I had already spotted as our vehicle approached. Both in their early twenties, their kit consisted of baseball caps, sunglasses, AR 15 rifles, 9mm handguns, and joints. They inhaled deeply from the latter as they verified that we were indeed expected. Before letting us through, there was time for small talk and I was asked to say something in German. ‘I see, so this is what German sounds like. Okay then, they’re waiting for you already...’ We were told to await further instructions at a close-by house. Here, a *sicario*’s mother provided us with the anecdotes corresponding to

the portraits depicting the stages of her son's growing-up that were hung on the wall. She served us the inevitable dose of Nescafé, and repositioned the fan in order for the *güero* 'not to die because of the heat'.

Waiting forms an integral part of such territorial incursions. It highlights the role of territorial non-exclusivity as an indispensable element of trans-legal cohabitation. By and large – excluding, to a certain degree, *el cerro* as the very heart of the group's territory – zones of control appear as temporary, flexible, meandering. Support here, thus, for Hönke and Müller's call that 'thinking about the postcolonial condition... implies moving beyond the static analytics of 'bounded units' and fixed territorial spaces' (2012:386). To be taken into account, in this context, the flexibility with which defensible space is established according to needs and, as it were, travels with LCT's leaders. Already on our way into Guanajuatillo, the *rancho* celebrating its pupils that day and the lieu of my encounter with Moreno, heavily armed *sicarios* had been positioned at the exact spot where paved road had given way to dirt road, about three miles from the *rancho* itself. Prior to Moreno's arrival at the school dance, the largely female crowd was gradually augmented by armed men. I first began to notice handguns tucked away in the back of jeans. Around half an hour before Moreno's convoy of seven black *camionetas* and SUVs rolled in, they were added to by men carrying semi-automatic rifles with mounted grenade launchers, a telltale sign of the proximity of somebody higher up. An impressive display, too, the all-encompassing darkness through which we made our way back after the interview being punctured by the lights of a number of LCT's vehicles – I counted about twenty – positioned on the dirt roads connecting the surrounding *ranchos*.

Indicative, in the same vein, was the moment the largely unintelligible traffic *El Inge's*

sicarios' two-way radios uninterruptedly spat out prompted one of them to come over and whisper something in his ear. He nodded and, addressing me once again, excused himself for the inconvenience. A military convoy would soon pass through and I was to stay put and wait for our conversation to continue. Calmly, they gathered their things and took off. Shortly after, a military Humvee and two troop carriers rolled by and to my relief the soldiers showed no interest in my out-of-place presence. Ten minutes had passed when the crew returned. On this occasion and, it seems, discerning a pattern through the accounts of informants inhabiting communities colonized by the group, LCT and the military take turns in making the conjointly counterfeited edifice of sovereignty work for them. Social control – the substantial, effective side of sovereignty, as it were – over communities such as Alba'sⁱ appear as exclusively exercised by LCT (see also Chapter 5). As she told me:

‘There is nothing you can do without him [LCT's *jefe de plaza* or local tenant] knowing or without his approval... he decides who enters the community and who doesn't, which merchants get to sell and which don't... there is now only one shop left, the one of his wife, the other two have closed down... and he has taken a lot of the good land... and you can't just go and collect corn or something anymore... because if you do everybody knows that he will punish you...’

I asked whether the observation ‘*hay mucho gobierno*’ applies to her community, too: ‘lately, yes... *pasan por allá* [they drive/stop by], you see them more frequently...’ ‘Does that provoke confrontations?’ ‘No, no, no... they [LCT members] just go into hiding [outside of the community] but after fifteen minutes or so the soldiers are gone and they're back again...’ The military's turn to enact sovereignty appears, in such instances, limited to the ceremonial commitment to materialize it in its (illusionary) Weberian sense⁷¹. This respect

⁷¹ In his original formulation of 1919 – still dominant insofar as it underpins the previously criticized monolithic conception of state – Weber firmly couples sovereignty to the state, defining the latter as a ‘human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’ (for a copy of the text see ARC, 2011).

for each other's access to the symbolic and effective fruits of sovereignty, respectively, also arises as a lesson-to-be-learned in another informant's account. The owner of an avocado plantation asked for protection from the local military commander after he heard shots being fired on his property. Instead of the desired support, he received a visit by LCT's *jefe de plaza* who warned him not to disrespect his authority again.

Respect the green ones... and hit the blue ones with all you've got: LCT vis-à-vis higher-level state actors

The 'Joint Operation Michoacán' (*Operación Conjunta Michoacán*), under which more than 5000 troops (mostly military) were deployed to the state (*Crónica*, 12.12.2006), was meant to set a precedent for the viability for Calderón's 'war on drugs'. Following its initiation in 2006, LCT's relationship with the military was, according to Gómez and *El Inge*, 'more problematic'. By the time I had been driven to the first meeting with Gómez aboard one of *El Inge's* convoy's vehicles, however, things had changed. One of the first things I enquired about was whether the nearby military presence worried him, a question not least motivated by the undesirable scenario of being surprised in the company of a declared enemy of the Mexican and US-American states. I should not, I was told, be worried as an agreement had been reached: '*Ya hay convenio.*' Insufficient intelligence, commonly blamed for the ineffectiveness of the military's anti organized crime operations in Michoacán (see e.g. Felbab-Brown, 2009:27), here occupies secondary importance. Virtually any local I asked casually identified communities and infrastructure central to LCT such as methamphetamine laboratories and marihuana sites. As noted in the introduction and underlined in the previous chapters, organized crime had, in Michoacán, become anything but a discrete phenomenon to anybody with even the slightest idea of the local: '*Pues sí, por*

allá andan, roughly translatable as ‘Well yeah, that’s where they do what they do’. Locals state it as a fact almost too obvious to mention.

The US government, too, had to realize that on-the-ground realities of this particular scenario of the ‘war on drugs’ differed from what the provision of hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of ‘security assistance’ had meant to produce (for an overview over the corresponding programs, see Arteaga, 2009). In cables released by Wikileaks, high-ranking diplomats complain about a Mexican military safeguarding its ‘traditional low-profile approach’ and unwilling ‘to act on good intelligence’ (US Embassy Mexico, 2009). Reflecting Davis’ observation that, in Latin America, ‘more often than not... illicit activities persist with the tacit support of the police and military, who often prioritize the protection of their own institutional sovereignty... rather than the protection of citizens’ (2010: 37), it seemed unwilling to assume the costs of its designated lead role in Calderón’s all-out-battle. The more so after its legitimacy – historically derived from its image as a protector against outside threats that does not act against its own people (see Camp, 1992) – came under fire due to reported human rights abuses. The military’s uncomfortable position between two irreconcilable pressures – obeying the supreme commander of the armed forces and protecting its image – played out in LCT’s favor. Telling, in this light, was the military’s reluctance to go ‘all-in’ during confrontations. According to a soldier involved, superiors had told his unit that ‘the war on drug trafficking was a fight amongst brothers’ and that they should ‘not forget that [they] all are Mexicans’. Accordingly, units were ordered ‘not to intervene in matters that could risk their lives’ and would hide until the worst was over. In turn, as intercepted radio communications suggest, members of LCT received orders not to ‘shoot at *los verdes* [the green ones, i.e. the military], they are friends. *Los azules* [‘the blue ones’, the PF], hit them with all you got’ (cited in: Historias del Narco, 2013).

Traces of LCT's differential positioning towards particular fragments of the state moreover surface in Gómez's statements:

'Our issue is not with the military. It's with *los azules*. They are just a political instrument of Calderón... who started all this because he has a personal problem with us⁷² and not with other groups who receive much less attention... when we can, *agarramos* [we grab] *federales* and kill them.'

While the military appears, generally speaking, as a counterpart that LCT can work with, the PF occupies the position of an archenemy amongst state actors and is thus, just like its non-state counterparts, up for extermination. Gómez admits, however, that the threat posed by the PF, by force alone, could not be successfully fenced off in the long run: '*Los Zetas*, them we can handle, but those of the PFP⁷³ not for much longer.' It is here that a complementary approach comes into play: the forging of a victim identity common to both LCT and local society. It forms, as already alluded to in Chapter 5, an integral part of LCT's wider discursive construct as a guardian of the local. Vis-à-vis the PF, too, the desired effect consists of mutual protection: 'We protect them and they protect us, for instance when they march on the street against the presence of the Federal Police... against the violence...' (*El Inge*). Demonstrations against the presence of federal forces on the grounds of human rights abuses have rightfully been portrayed as organized by LCT (see e.g. Ferrer/Martínez, 2010) – partly so, that is, for some seem to also participate voluntarily. Once again providing testimony to the principle of environmental reflexiveness, local society's mistrust and even outright hostility towards the central state and particularly the PF affords LCT a schism it can leverage with. That 'there are a lot of people with *brincas*

⁷² At a different point in the interview, he claimed that in 2006, they kidnapped a cousin of Calderón's who had been known for his abusive business practices. This then started, according to Gómez, '*la bronca personal*' ('the personal mess/issue').

⁷³ The term he uses stands for *Policia Federal Preventiva*, the predecessor organization to Calderón's PF.

[issues] with the PFP and the PAN' – as Gómez synthesizes – underlies, in this sense, the attempt to mobilize social capital to its advantage.

To provide one example here: The group's turn to local civilians for support against federal state presence as well as for them to feed the informational system via which it seeks to sustain territorial supremacy. Via cell phone and Blackberry, messages are sent out to civil society proxies. These messages, which an informant showed me and of which I took photographs, call on them to activate local populations in light of the presence of plain-clothed elements of the Navy and *Estado Mayor Presidencial*. Details of what to watch out for (types of vehicles and license plates) are included alongside the call to report any suspicious movement. Moreover, proxies are called upon to denounce any rights violations that might occur through official channels and to tell local civilians to do the same. Here, LCT's recognition of the plural configuration shines through yet again, as does the activation of one state fragment to undermine others. Excerpts of these messages read as follows:

'The state of Michoacán is a house that won't allow that you will be mistreated, molested and even our families raped [sic]. We have to be prepared to conserve our character and honor. The government wants to provoke so we react with violence... I invite you to transmit peace... don't forget that if God is with us, who against [sic]... Pass this to the whole society, especially the civilians, I need them to film them [state elements]... so they have proof that they are robbing and beating society. In a while I give you the number of human rights [sic, the number of the Mexico's National Human Rights Commission, transmitted in the following message] so you call them and tell them what is happening.'

Caballeros v federales: Forging a shared victim identity

Nowhere, perhaps, does the depth of the divorced relationship between local society and federal government find a clearer expression than within the narrow confines of the classroom in which I meet local fifth graders. It resembled a warehouse rather than the space of knowledge transmission it is supposed to serve as. The roof, albeit high, barely provided shelter against the extreme heat so characteristic of the region. The dust, a defining feature of Apatzingán's desert-like environment, had relentlessly penetrated between doors and windows and underlined the futility of recent efforts to keep the room clean. Teaching materials were stacked in apparent disorder in one of the corners. Apart from math, geography, and Spanish, I spotted national history books and borrowed a copy. It praised, as expected, the continuity between Mexico's struggle for independence and revolution and the cementation of this heroic spirit in the institutions of the Mexican state. It is, after all, no coincidence that the party that ruled the country uninterrupted for more than seven decades until the year 2000 labeled itself *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* – Revolutionary Institutional Party. The founding fathers, as it were, of the grand project of the Mexican nation-state – Zapata, Villa, and Michoacán's very own Lázaro Cárdenas – have found their deserved representation. From the walls, they stared down on the students. A tellingly thick layer of dust, however, covered the books' officially sanctioned accounts. The dust immediately stuck to my sweaty palms. The only other things that adorned the bare and crumbling walls were twenty or so student drawings. These, too, underlined that a competing account of contemporary history breathed within these walls. From afar, my outdated glasses blurrily suggest a colorful cheerfulness that caused me to reminisce about some of my first pieces of 'artwork' of blooming cherry trees my classmates and I produced in elementary school. The realities local children grow up under, I was yet again brutally

reminded of as I approached the drawings, are radically different. The seemingly gay, red coloration stemmed from lines and pools of blood running from gunned down bodies, observed by the children in reality and transformed into these drawings (one of which is shown in Image 6.3). Tellingly, the role of the aggressor was clear in the drawings: It was the little men with the PF's typical dark blue uniforms that do the shooting and killing. During the break, the schoolyard became the stage for the *apatzingense* version of cops and robbers. In *caballeros v federales*, the latter are the bad guys. Such perceptions are not merely a matter of play: Some hands shot up when the teacher asked who wanted to become *parte de* when grown up. One, his mother later told me, was already running errands for LCT.

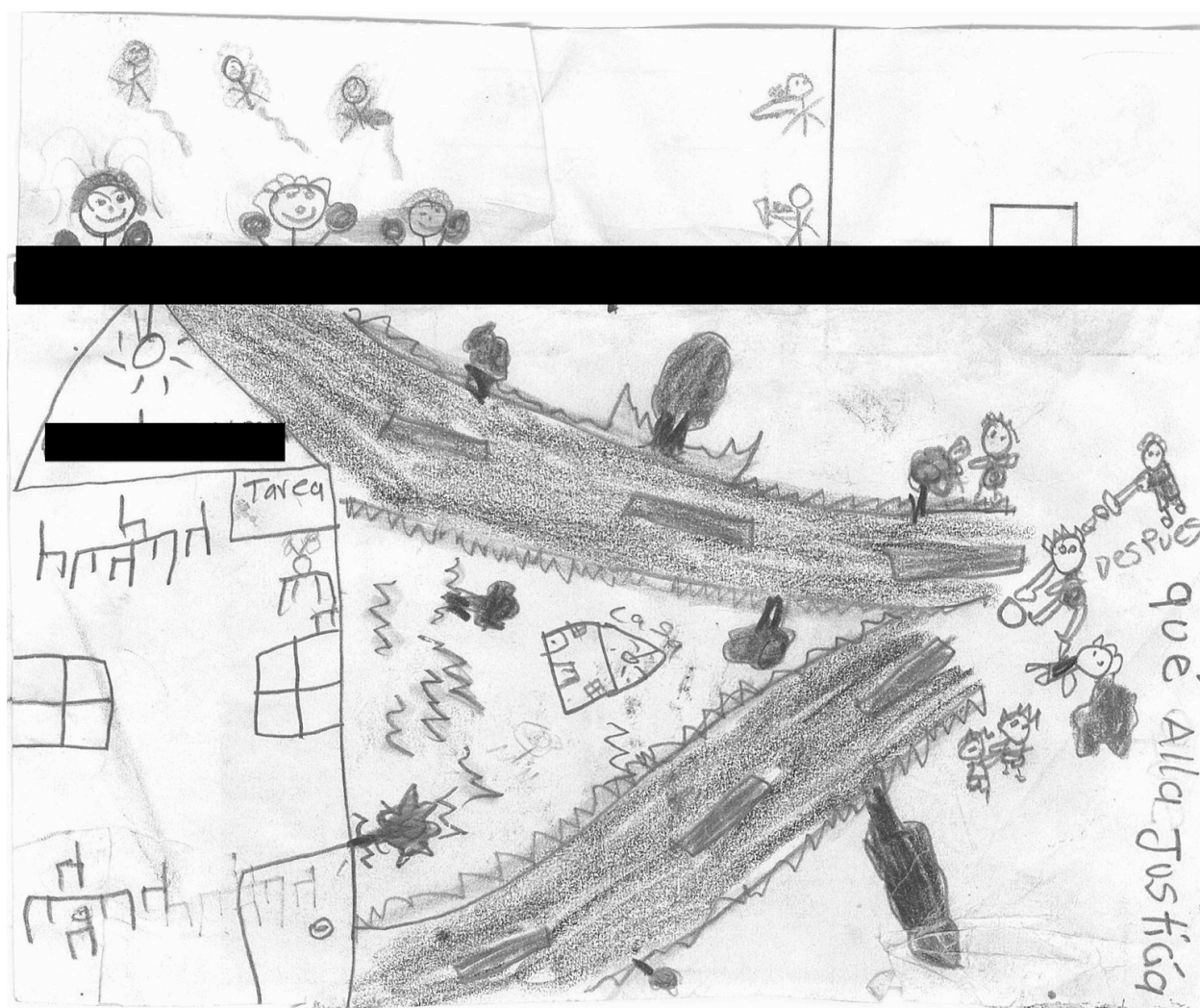


Image 6.3: Student drawing (name of student and of school blacked out), April 2012, Apatzingán, Michoacán.

As a historical constant (see Chapter 4), locals' feeling of stigmatization as a 'dangerous population' had been further increased as of the time of fieldwork. Complaints such as that 'they [the federal government] treat us all like criminals while we have nothing to do with it' relates experiences such as being stopped and harassed 'just for having Michoacán license plates.' In the same vein, the PF was reflected upon as a foreign intruder (the cluster of swearwords adorning corresponding statements is here omitted): 'They just showed up one day... took the whole street... and wouldn't even let me leave for work anymore.' Just as frequent were accounts of outright human rights abuses committed under the umbrella of the 'war on drugs' (for a general overview of the issue see Estévez, 2012; for Michoacán specifically see Ballinas, 2007). 'Over there in [name of community]', one local informant told me, 'a lot of *azules* come to steal... they even stole a crowbar and, the houses that had good doors, they used it to force them open... and we say: "look at that, the government, and one would suppose that they are supposed to protect."' However, the situation has improved somewhat 'ever since they [LCT] killed a bunch of them.' Violence also forms part of locals' experiences with higher-level state actors. As one informant recalled, he was out on the street with his family when two military units appeared. Close by was a parked *camioneta*, 'all dirty from the Sierra's soil'. He continued:

'They called us over and wanted to know whose *camioneta* it was... they were very aggressive... I told them I didn't know, that I just own a bicycle but he insisted it was ours... they pointed their guns at us and even told me they were going to come see me again... that I was going to die. My children were there, they were really shocked...'

Similar, the experience of another informant's son:

'he was coming home from work... he had a cell phone and was listening to music... when he walked by the checkpoint they grabbed him and beat him... they accused him of working for organized crime [sic] and forced him to give them his cell phone: "let's see what numbers you have there."'

Such encounters lend direct support to LCT's self-portrayal as *de lo peor lo menos malo* and its goal of distinction.

The measures implemented in the name of the 'war on drugs' produce adverse effects in further widening the preexisting schism between local populations and federal government. The real-life-enactment of the divergence between ideal and empirical law provides, in outcome, LCT with a populatable interstice and draws local populations to its side. Telling, in this sense, that an array of locals would identify the federal government as the main party responsible for the deteriorated security situation: "They say they're after the criminals and they send so many [troops], just the other day I was watching TV and saw that one [pejorative, indicating Calderón] talking. And where does it take us? Just the same... where is the security?" "Would you say you trust them [LCT] more?", I asked.

'Well, let me put it like this... it's not that much about trust... but before, when there wasn't that much *gobierno*, it was better... there weren't that many deaths... and there was more work... and we never had an aggression by *ellos*, by the persons they [the government] call organized crime, in fact I call them all organized crime, the government itself... today it's like you watch out more for the *federales* than for *ellos*.'

Telling, too, that even informants like Julio who had been, as he stated, traumatized due to the effects LCT's insertion into the local had had on his family, agree with others' responses to my question as to which actor represents the lesser evil. Posed in a group discussion in which he was present, one participant responded immediately with: "If I had to choose, here the fucking Templars, and there the fucking government... which one do you want to haven taken out? I'd say a thousand times the government..." The others swiftly backed her up.

Convergence between federal government and LCT

The officially sanctioned production of San Nazario

The diversely assembled moral landscape – on its head only if one departs from the normalcy of the licit-illicit-divide and its assumed exclusivity of the ownership of morality – occupies center stage in the co-production of Moreno's death. While Calderón's administration hereby countered the notion that the militarized fight against organized crime had failed, LCT also leveraged on the event. As the group's leaders told me, the apparent success put an end to an offensive carried out by the PF – and by the PF alone, as local military commanders felt compelled to stress (Ferrer/Martínez, 2010b). Moreover, LCT took its strategy of social legitimacy creation to the next level. It elevated, as described in Chapter 5, Moreno to the status of saint and equated the event to additional proof of an aggression facing both the group and local society as a whole. Moreno's death was originally diffused as fact by LCT itself, as Gómez and *El Inge* told me. Knowing perfectly well that state forces were intercepting radio communications – the reason for a number of codes being normally employed in lieu of clear text – LCT itself spread the news amongst its members. The only source confirming Moreno's death was thus LCT itself. Nevertheless, the federal government was quick to announce the apparent success as certainty, prompting viral media diffusion. LCT as well as the federal government both fed media reporting by each releasing a photograph that supposedly showed Moreno's gunned-down body. In spite of the PGR's reluctance to confirm Moreno's death – it stated that it was 'rather certain that that person did die in the past events' (see Vanguardia, 2010) – the presidency stuck to the official narrative as did the vast majority of media. Ultimately, the staging of Moreno's death represented a mutually beneficial – at least so in the short term –

co-production carried by both sides, providing an intriguing insight behind the rhetorical façade of the ‘war on drugs’.

The co-production of rogue state fragments

The school dance entered its most intense phase in the background and members of the community came up to the table time and again to pay their respects to Moreno, to express their joy of seeing him for the first time in a while, or to make fun of the living saint’s apparent weight gain. In the meantime, the essential rule for physical integrity in *Tierra Caliente templaria* – ‘as long as you don’t open your mouth, you’re safe, [if not] there will be *chicharrón*’ – kept on popping up in my mind. For the better part of a quarter of an hour, Diego had been bombarding Moreno with accusations of hypocrisy, questioning his status as a ‘true revolutionary.’ His reaction wavered between barely hidden impatience and annoyance. He finally put a stop to the tirade by paternalistically patting his cheek and pulling his ear:

‘If you have three *monitos* [diminutive for playing pieces]: You know that one will not win, you know about the other one that you cannot [support it], and about the other one [sic] you know that it will win. Which one do you bet on... if you know that one is one-hundred percent with *El Chapo* [Joaquín Guzmán Loera aka *El Chapo*, then Mexico’s most wanted trafficker and head of the (then) allied Sinaloa Cartel] and the other is with *Los Zetas*?’

Moreno unveiled the basic motivation for his group’s intervention in the ongoing electoral process on the federated state level. Favoring a specific political party – a *monito* – followed yet again a pragmatic reasoning. The ‘intervention of organized crime [sic] in the electoral process of unprecedented magnitude’ – as a high-ranking federal public servant involved in overseeing the 2012 elections would later put it to me –was an open secret in Michoacán. Concretely, as local informants described it,

‘they called a general *reunión*, they went to all the houses and gave us flyers: “there and there we expect you at that and that time” ... [at the *reunión*] they told us that we all had to vote for the PRI [in the federated state and municipal elections⁷⁴], and if not... obligated, if we didn’t march straight [sic]... and well, we all did...’

To that end, rural populations situated within Moreno’s chunk of the territory were moreover transported to polling stations. To make sure the ‘right’ votes were cast, ‘favors’ were called in:

‘Now that there are the campaigns for president of Mexico⁷⁵ [sic]... here in Apatzingán they’re going around. And *it is* the PRI. It has to be the PRI... They don’t even give you money anymore⁷⁶, it’s just an order. Because the people, they [LCT] have them *comprometida* [obliged/bound] already. Because sometimes there are people that don’t have money, somebody gets sick or something... so they go to them and they help them... but what happens afterwards? “We want this and you better remember that *you* asked us for a favor and now it’s our turn... that’s how they do it... and a lot of people say: “you know what? I better don’t vote”, but the *señor [jefe de plaza]* says: “it’s not what you want, you have to vote!”’

The data introduced above suggest anything but an interest on LCT’s part to dismantle ‘the’ state, as the rhetoric of this group as part of a criminal-insurgent actor population would have it. To the contrary, it proactively engaged in the reproduction of the lower reaches of the state apparatus. Again, a (tacit) convergence of interests between federal government and LCT becomes clear. The fact that elections took place – and were not cancelled by LCT – allowed, as mentioned above, ‘the’ state to ‘impersonate’ itself (Comaroff/Comaroff,

⁷⁴ Federated state and municipal elections took place on November 13th 2011. The PRI took the state governorship from its principal competitor and incumbent, the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (Party of the Democratic Revolution, PRD). LCT had, according to Moreno and Gómez, supported the PRD in the 2007 elections. This claim is supported by the contents of the mentioned judicial documents (PGR SIEDO, 2009), which accuse the PRD’s governor’s brother (still at large) of acting as liaison between Gómez and the governor. Similar accusations have been made against the PRI’s governor’s son (indicted in 2015, see Informador, 2015) and himself (see Informador, 2013). His deputy has been accused of direct membership in LCT and remains under indictment (see Vicenteño, 2014).

⁷⁵ Presidential elections took place on July 1st 2012 and saw the PRI’s victory under manifold accusations of electoral fraud (see Miroff/Booth, 2012; Sheinbaum/Ímaz, 2012).

⁷⁶ Vote buying, through direct financial and/or some other material ‘compensation’ (handing out food and kitchenware, e.g.), supposes a regular occurrence during elections in Mexico (see Díaz-Cayeros et al., 2012; Ugalde/Rivera, 2013).

2006:16). Here, it complied with the federal government's interest in signaling the existence of an electoral democracy (towards the international sphere), key to the sustention of its legitimate and legal symbolic façade. On other occasions, Gómez would 'give them a meth lab every once in a while' so as to support state actors' need to signal the will to (re-)establish territorial supremacy (read: sovereignty) and, inserted into this logic, the effectiveness of the 'war on drugs' as a policy designed to this end. The federal government, in turn, also allowed elections to be held in Tierra Caliente, thereby allowing for the production of the very functionaries that would come to directly represent LCT's interests and operate under the group's command. These structures' 'capture' was an open secret. Moreno's claim that they 'put [sic, as in: install] all the municipal presidents as well as some state-level functionaries' coincides, in this vein, with locals' observation of the complete decoupling of a legally stipulated mandate and *de facto* conduct: 'the police... whatever *ellos* say, they do... they simulate that they work for the state, but here they're at the command of *ellos*.' Notwithstanding, the federal government did not dismantle municipal and federated state-level structures, thereby effectively providing LCT with a rich pool of *de facto* organizational assets made up of rogue state fragments. What developed here was, then, much more than just the 'neutralization of the law' through the usual mixture of evasion, corruption, or confrontation (see e.g. Andreas, 1998:161-162; Bailey/Taylor, 2009; McDonald, 2005:115). Indeed, and reflecting once again the necessity to achieve a duality of control over extant resources so as to guarantee survival, in my conversations LCT's leaders, the possibility that such structures would actually be used for enforcing the law did not surface at any point as an incentive to gain control over them. Rather, as *El Inge* put it, doing so is meant to prevent their transformation into proxies to other illicit interests: 'we install the municipal police because we don't want others to get

in there [sic].’ In such references, the lowest layer of the state apparatus thus appears as a free-floating set of assets, principally up for grabs.

The lower reaches of the state: Rogue state fragments as de facto operational assets

Beyond the aspect of demobilization, the prosecutorial documents I obtained during fieldwork (PGR SIEDO, 2009) detail that rogue state fragments were activated as *de facto* organizational assets in a number of ways. But one indication here is the experience of two Mexican journalists who produced a reportage on Marihuana production in Tierra Caliente. As they told me, they first negotiated the terms of their access with a local mayor. Once this step was successfully completed, they were taken to a plantation in one of the municipal police’s patrol cars (see Image 6.4). To begin with, rogue state fragments were employed to obtain state-internal information, most crucially on movements and operations by federal forces. State elements served, in this context, as inconspicuous lookouts to monitor security-relevant movements – as *halcones* in pigeons’ clothing, as it were. According to Gómez, a call to Michoacán’s state attorney – another playing piece – would suffice to have elements of the judicial state police positioned in strategic spots such as entry points to certain areas. He mimicked a corresponding conversation: ‘You, put some patrol cars there and some there for me [sic].’ The utilization of lower and mid-level state fragments to undermine higher-level state actors’ operations speaks of the simultaneousness of practices applied by LCT towards different state segments. The notion of ‘the state’ as a cohesive entity characterized by (and for that matter, capable of) unified action is hereby undermined. Some fragments of the state are employed as assets to counter the actions of others. This also became clear as LCT pro-actively utilized rogue state fragments for a further array of operational tasks. During the group’s foundational phase in 2005, for

instance, assassinations of those opposing its claim of regional supremacy were ordered by Moreno and carried out by state officials. In a similar vein, individuals were apprehended and handed over to LCT by 'state officials', including Michoacán's specialized anti-kidnapping unit. The violent capacity of the state turned to an alternative use.



Image 6.4: Rogue state fragments, Tierra Caliente, Michoacán, 2011.
Courtesy of Eduardo Loza.

Similarly, official vehicles were used for transporting merchandise as well as bulk cash. One reason for doing so, according to the protected witnesses on whose testimonies the mentioned document is based, consists in mitigating the risk of being stopped and searched – and thus of suffering (economic) losses. Co-opting state agents and agencies in the mentioned ways moreover provided access to schooled personnel and to the weaponry – including semi-automatic rifles and higher calibers weapons – (municipal) police forces are equipped with. In addition, LCT was hereby enabled to feed on state resources passed

down from the federal to the municipal level. This took the form, as *El Inge* clarified, of having public contractors overcharge and extracting a certain percentage. State resources available to municipal state structures were therefore dug into so that LCT effectively taxed the state. In the same vein and as mentioned in Chapter 5 nominal holders were installed for agricultural estates effectively controlled by leading members of LCT, thus enabling access to agricultural subsidies. Furthermore, operations of the aforementioned sort were not constrained to market-related purposes but were also used in support of the aforementioned quasi-judicial system, with some of the designated perpetrators punished up to death by LCT previously apprehended and then handed over by state officials.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that, contrary to common imagery, organized criminal and non-state armed actors do not necessarily thrive under state absence nor do they necessarily strive to bring about a situation in which ‘the’ state is absent. I have done so by first disaggregating the state, drawing both on critical theoretical arguments as well as my own data to show how the notion of ‘the’ state as a legally committed monolith proves simplistic. In the analyzed scenario, different actors act through and enact state in diverse ways, which are neither necessarily legal nor coordinated. As a result a principal pliability of law, state, and state actors emerges. This, in turn, signifies that for actors standing outside of the law such as LCT the presence of the state per se does not translate into the existential threat to be battled head-on or evaded clandestinely as it is usually made out to be. To the contrary, the uncoordinated and in many ways outright rogue existence and presence of the state proved advantageous to LCT in a number of ways. This led to a seemingly paradox situation in which LCT did not only not show an interest in dismantling

the state altogether but moreover acted on a vested interest to keep said structures in place. Doing so provided it, as I have laid out, with an array of actionable resources and moreover with the possibility to populate interstices opened and subsequently widened by its malfunctioning. In light of these findings, the notion of the 'war on drugs' as a battle good vs. evil does not hold and recalling the necessity to transcend and puncture official and institutional surfaces as well as narratives as the stuff of research seems all the more pertinent.

Apart from revealing the simplicity of many of the binaries that inform sensemaking on (Mexican) organized crime and which I have summarized under the term 'licit-illicit-divide', the data presented moreover hint to recipes of social order creation 'under liquefaction' more complex than that of state sovereignty being crippled through non-state-carried counter-projects. What can rather be observed is the emergence of multi-layered forms of sovereignty that can neither be spatially nor temporarily differentiated and that see different actors simultaneously exercising control over the same populations and territories. In this scenario, the state is neither absent nor has it 'failed' altogether. Indeed, it is latently present and performs in a multitude of ways, many of which might seem counterintuitive or even nonsensical when sticking to a Weberian perspective. All of the above holds important repercussions for the debate about how the role of state and non-state in the reshuffling of social order in the Global South is conceptualized and key items of which I have touched upon throughout this thesis and particularly this chapter. In the following conclusion to this thesis, I return to these leads and discuss how my findings speak to the respective concepts, ideas, and points of discussions. In particular, I reflect upon matters of state formation, parallel states, and sovereignty.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

LCT's demise and a new alternative (dis)order

My fieldwork period coincided with the peak of LCT's dominion over Tierra Caliente as well as its zenith as an organization. As the data related in chapters 4 - 6 reveal, there seemed to be no doubt in regards to its standing as *el poder fáctico* (the *de facto* power) over the local domain. Indeed, civilians, journalists, actors of the private sector, civil society groups, the leaders, and not least government functionaries – virtually anybody I interacted with inside as well as outside of Tierra Caliente – presented this to me as a taken-for-granted fact. LCT's leaders themselves, during my encounters and conversations with them, mirrored this assessment. On more than one occasion I was told that 'Here, we are government' or 'Here, we are the law'. Their confidence in asserting control was so great that there seemed little doubt with regards to the group's prospects for survival. The challenge posed by enemy non-state armed actors such as their archenemy Los Zetas or by the more recent contender for supremacy over Michoacán, the so-called *Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG), had been mastered. The internal struggle that had split *La Familia Michoacana* and given birth to *Los Caballeros Templarios* had been decided in favor of the faction headed by Moreno and Gómez. Moreover, after six years of opposition and personal animosity towards President Felipe Calderón's *Partido Acción Nacional* and specifically his Federal Police, the political climate was showing signs of improvement. Supporting the return to power of the 'playing piece' *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, as Moreno had explained it during our interview (see Chapter 6), promised quieter times. With other state actors such as the military, arrangements that had been reached were securing, not least, access to the lower reaches of the state as a pool of resources crucial for sustaining territorial supremacy vis-a-vis competing actors and interests. Finally, civilian

populations seemed if not necessarily proactively supportive of the group then sufficiently inert and thus seemed not to pose a threat to LCT's continued existence. All in all, and returning to the underlying question of how non-state armed actors perceive and manage challenges to their survival, LCT had managed to relate to, intervene in, and shape relevant environments successfully.

Its demise, unfolding in increasing virulence from 2013 on, appears swift and unexpected against this backdrop and the situation could, as of the time of writing these concluding remarks in December 2015, not differ more drastically from the one I found while in the field from 2011 to 2012. Just as other members before and after him, Gómez was arrested in February 2015 and presented to the public as Mexico's fallen enemy of the state number one. Moreno, another one of my informants and the group's leader, was hunted down and killed in March 2014.⁷⁷ Over the previous months, LCT had started to lose control over parts of its territory as so-called *grupos de autodefensa* (self-defense groups) formed throughout Michoacán (for an overview see Asfura-Heim/Espach, 2013). These armed groups claimed to owe their existence to *abusos* committed by LCT, examples of which I have addressed in Chapter 5, as well as the government's collusion with the group and its unwillingness and/or incapacity to provide protection or act against it. Initially, and adding another point of convergence between them to those described in Chapter 6, both LCT and the federal government stressed the illegitimacy as well as the criminal background and agenda of these groups. The presidential administration of Enrique Peña Nieto, which had entered office in late 2012, showed great reluctance to permit the emergence of yet another layer of non-state armed actors and thus a third-order territorial fragmentation.

⁷⁷ As opposed to his 'first death', the staging of which I have described in Chapter 5, this time concrete evidence including Moreno's body and DNA analyses were presented (see Informador, 2014). My local informants, too, support its veracity.

Peña Nieto's presidency had been shaped by the attempt to change the narrative from Mexico as on the brink of collapse to an emerging economic powerhouse. Accordingly, security issues were being downplayed and preferably muted altogether (see e.g. Hope 2013). The existence of these self-defense groups and their critical discourse towards the government's inertia and collusion supposed a threat to this narrative U-turn. In addition to labeling these groups a challenge to rule of law and the Mexican state's monopoly of force that would not be tolerated, high-ranking functionaries were explicitly questioning the integrity and background of these groups, suggesting that they might simply be proxies to other criminal organizations, namely the CJNG. Tellingly, these claims coincided perfectly with those propagated by LCT itself and the stability of the *status quo* seemed alluring to both parties. While additional troops were deployed to Tierra Caliente to 'restore law and order', they were heavily criticized by locals for refusing to act on intelligence provided to them about strategic locations of LCT and the whereabouts of its leaders (see Gil Olmos, 2013). When transcending a purely cosmetic or, again, ceremonial nature (see Chapter 6) at all, members of self-defense groups were being arrested under organized crime and illegal weapons charges.

More decisive steps were, as I argue, only taken after the production of what Schneider and Schneider (1999) have called a 'historical moment of transparency', i.e. a situation in which 'it becomes possible to see the weaving together of illegal and legal within states and societies that is usually obscured by the reification of the 'law''. Unprecedented national and international media attention to Michoacán's self-defense groups led to a rupture in the aura of silence and impenetrability surrounding the region. Apatzingán – the place where I had been the only *güero* for miles during my fieldwork – appeared, a researcher in the field at the time told me, as swamped with journalists as Baghdad was after the US

invasion in 2003. The voices now carried outside of the region and amplified by media world-wide were not limited to the identification of one evil – LCT – but advanced a more complex problem analysis: that of the state’s complicity and inertia. This supposed a significant threat to the state’s symbolic façade and thus to prior organized crime-state-arrangements, which had been constituted and sustained through the veil hereby provided. Hence, for LCT the true menace represented by the self-defense groups was not chiefly militaristic but rather symbolic in nature as it harbored the potential to activate the state against it. Continued reporting on *abusos* and on the authorities’ collusion made LCT’s ‘brand’ unviable – not only vis-à-vis local civilian populations but also relevant state actors, with the undermined ability to produce signals in support of the state’s symbolic façade questioning its place within the extant trans-legal arrangement. From the perspective of higher-level state actors, this ultimately rendered a reshuffling of the local actor set necessary. In an exceptionally blatant manifestation of the transitivity between legal and illegal as well as of the porousness of the state’s boundaries, the officially proclaimed plan to disarm all *autodefensa* groups was abandoned and replaced with their absorption into the institutional state body. *Autodefensa* members were now being equipped with arms, uniforms, and the label of *Fuerza Rural*, a police body synthetically created and inserted into the void left by the completely resolved municipal police (see Muedano, 2014).

The conditions under which the transition from Templar to post-Templar ‘era’ was produced as well as the current situation in the region add a longitudinal element and thus explanatory potency to the deciphering of dynamics of social (dis)order creation in Tierra Caliente and beyond. Hence, while the following reflections on key concepts discussed in the literature review and other chapters are mostly informed by the data and findings presented throughout the main body of this thesis, whenever pertinent I draw on

additional data collected during a two-month back-to-back fieldwork stay in and around Apatzingán for a news magazine assignment in June and July 2015.

Continuity in Post-Templar Tierra Caliente

Many initially showed outright enthusiasm for the ‘movement’ – hence the self-designation by *autodefensa* members with whom I spent time with in 2015 – as an exceptional citizen-led exercise in confronting organized crime. This proved far too optimistic and moreover misinformed. While national and international voices clung to this romanticizing narrative for longer, local informants of mine emphasized from the outset that no such thing as a radical break with the past had occurred. Telling here is the emphatic and rather poetical message, written in March 2014, by one informant with whom I had stayed in touch via social media. To my query as to degree to which he perceived change after a large *autodefensa* convoy had ‘taken’ Apatzingán, he responded:

‘What sadness I felt today... crossing the avenue... a caravan of pick-up trucks with armed civilians... I could see them well... young guys with expressions of vulgar fascination... older ones with a touch of arrogance and triumphalism... holding up *autodefensa* signs... I felt like crying, not because I’m very sentimental but because it made me mad... I thought that we don’t deserve this... they’ll fool those who live elsewhere with their show, but not us... damn government, damn Peña Nieto... there is no restitution of the rule of law, no reparation of the social fabric, no fight against organized crime... everything is a lie, everything is a farce... the only thing that’s real is that they gave us a new master.’

Much in the same vein, continuity is what I found during my return to Tierra Caliente. Rather than a successful exercise in ‘taking back the territory’ from organized criminal actors and in re-establishing ‘law and order’ – each a rhetorical center pieces of the central government’s intervention – the prevailing constellation pointed to little more than a

precarious kitting out of the state's symbolic façade behind which a moderately reshuffled set of actors is creating a new arrangement of alternative governance. By no means is, in other words, all new under the *terracalentana* sun. To begin with, LCT in its previous shape might have been dismantled and the most visible parts of its structures taken out of the picture. As already mentioned, the handful of leaders that had experienced media exposure and thus become LCT's public symbols has been killed or arrested. Yet, as I have shown in Chapters 5 and 6, LCT should not be misrepresented as a top-heavy, hierarchically structured monolith depending on a strict and universally respected leadership. For, at least as much as an organizational construct, LCT is to be seen as a label that imperfectly (albeit for an extended period of time) created coherence between a number of local strongmen with their own 'jurisdictions'.

One of the contributions of this thesis consists, in this vein, in complicating default narratives of criminal organizations and 'cartels' in presenting concrete evidence that these are, similarly to the state, internally complex and plurally configured. The misrepresentation to the contrary helped the central government to sell the weakening of an organizational label as the disappearance of the coercive potential aggregated under it. Yet, the realization of more complex organizational realities that only become conceivable once one establishes a certain proximity and gains privileged insights are crucial to decipher the current state of affairs in the region as well as its unfolding. It appears, in this light, little surprising that post-Templar Tierra Caliente is built on former LCT's former blocks. In their vast majority, these succeeded in different ways in retaining their sub-regional dominion in full and secure their future as part of new arrangements and coalitions. Some switched sides and put on *autodefensa* t-shirts, paying lip service to the 'movement' whilst continuing their involvement in illicit activities. One local strongman – a

former member of LCT's second layer of command and now a local autodefensa/Fuerza Rural leader – declined my interview requests, having a messenger explain to me his desire for 'tranquility' and that he 'just [wanted] to cook [crystal meth]'. Others, without officially switching sides, simply lay low until the dust settles. To my question of which of the main *autodefensa* leaders were narcos, I received a blatant and telling answer by a key advisor who was then *comandante* of Apatzingán's *autodefensas-come-Fuerza Rural*: 'What do you want me to tell you? They all are.' My latest stay in the city coincided, moreover, with a clear demonstration of who, in spite of the generally lower profile these local strongmen were keeping at the time, was calling the shots. The same *comandante* – with and around whom I spent a considerable amount of time and who many locals took to be the *jefe de plaza* of the CJNG, a charge he as well as his inner circle refuted as baseless – was replaced by the decision of two former LCT strongmen controlling territory to the east and west of the city, respectively. Informants who assisted the gathering during which the change was announced told me that questioning the installation of a direct proxy to the strongmen's interests in the *comandante's* stead was not an option, already as the weapons placed on the table to emphasize the demand corresponded to a general superiority in means of violence.

The centrality of the state

The above outlined continuity in terms of those non-state armed actors that call the shots in the region underlines, yet again, how the Weberian ideal of state as based on the its monopoly of violence and territorial and populational control is perhaps unattainable generally. It certainly is far from materialized in contemporary Tierra Caliente where, apart from the power held by actors such as the abovementioned, those remnants of LCT that

have clung on to the label still control significant patches of territory. Judging from these as well as findings by further authors, social order in Latin America and the Global South without non-state armed actor involvement seems unthinkable. But, and this is crucial for approaching state failure and the hypothesis of parallel states and thus two key items of the contemporary debate discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2, this is just as true the other way around (more on the matter below). That is, while I agree with Das' observation that the state as such cannot be represented as an, let alone *the*, 'order-generating mechanism' (2004: 248), it still seems latently present in the creation of (dis)order. The current scenario in Tierra Caliente, amongst other things embellished by non-state armed actors, is frequently misread as a sign for state failure as well as for its 'absence' and the central government's decision to intervene as a desperate attempt to change this. Yet, both assertions depart from a fundamental fallacy: the non-distinction between the ideal and empirical reality of law and state. I have addressed the matter in Chapters 2 and 6 by drawing on insights provided by authors such as Heyman, Smart, the Comaroffs, Das and Pool, and Favarel-Garrigues and Briquet, whose volume critically revisits the matter by reexamining state-organized crime-relations in particular. Incorporating the insight that the state never lives up to its ideal, must always remain incomplete, and that those carrying and employing its name are neither naturally committed to lawful behavior nor act in monolith-like concert helps to turn the attention to the state's real-life performance.

What I have, by applying this perspective to the case of LCT and Tierra Caliente, found is a state that does perform in many ways and for many – only that some if not most of these ways and the interests hereby served are non-ideal (read: criminal). They are thus easily overlooked or read as signs of failure if one sticks to a positive approach. To begin with and

as discussed in Chapter 6, the project of alternative governance described in Chapter 5 was not primarily construed in opposition to or in absence of the state but on the basis of what I have referred to as LCT's differential positioning to the state, which translated into the activation of the state – its myth, its actionable resources, its shortcomings – to the group's advantage. One clear example I have described in this context is the appropriation of the lower reaches of the state and their redirection as external, yet de facto organizational assets. Higher-level state actors, including the military, were also far from absent in the region, but showed a willingness to engage in mutually beneficial forms of accommodation to a degree even greater than the presidential administration of Felipe Calderón. However, the state surfaces in ways more active and powerful than that of a 'playing piece', as Moreno referred to political parties as he explained the how and why of his intervention into the electoral process (Chapter 6). There is, as noted above, contemporary forms of order that cannot be accounted for without examining the role of the state. LCT's significant weakening and disintegration provides a clear example in this context. For it only developed real momentum after the central government resorted to more drastic measures against the group, which included arming and actively collaborating with *autodefensa* groups. Local informants told me that this ensued joint 'cleansing' operations against LCT and suspected collaborators, with convoys made up of Federal Police, military, and *autodefensas* 'sweeping' through communities situated within LCT's core operational territory.

The state's decisive role in bringing LCT down helps to critically revisit the narrative of the state's decay and its asserted marginality and even helplessness vis-à-vis non-state armed actors. It might not be able to bring about a form of order coming anywhere close to the Weberian ideal. Theoretically and empirically, everything seems to suggest this to be the

case, but it is still to be reckoned with. In the present case, for instance, it has shown that its coercive capacity can be effectively activated. To elevate its capacity to the 'management' of 'ungoverned spaces', as Clunan and Trinkunas speculate (2010:20), might be farfetched. At least when judging from the scenario here in question – which might differ from other scenarios and thus calls for the production of corresponding data through future research – (re)shaping specific scenarios and deciding the fate of specific individuals and organizational arrangements appears well within its reach. This moreover suggests that the state remains central to contemporary conflict dynamics in Mexico and beyond, chiefly as a field of pliable and cooptable processes, actors, and resources access to which can decide over participating entities' survival as well as relative competitiveness and contention over access to which is something conflict gravitates towards.

The (de)activation of the state in the present case followed, as I have argued, a recipe more complex than just the usual mixture of violence, corruption, and evasion. In this context, I have provided important insights into the mechanisms at play. Specifically, I have shown that legitimacy is of prime importance in this context as a technique to justify the exercise of power and control over civilian populations as well as the extraction of resources. And to mitigate, in this context, critical voices that can lead to contrary and even violent reactions by those social audiences that evaluate the organization's material and socio-cultural performance (recall here my conceptual remarks on the place-, time-, and audience-bound constitution of legitimacy in Chapter 5). The recent developments outlined above and triggered by just such a lack in legitimacy have proven both my conceptual preoccupation as well as LCT's leaders' strategic preoccupation with the matter to be correct. Legitimacy moreover affects access to and action by the state in two different ways. A lack of it ensures effects akin to those triggered by an overly great reliance on violence, an observation made

by Lessing (2012) and touched upon in Chapter 6. It warrants state and media attention and lets the state's symbolic façade as the veil for trans-legally inhabitable spaces crumble. It can, in case of persistent public pressure, force the state's hand. Who attracts negative attention by the public and consequently the state appears all the more relevant for particular groups' survival if one accepts the premise of limited state capacity. As the role of legitimacy has thus far largely been overlooked, my own findings add important nuances to the understanding of what drives state-organized crime-interactions and herewith entangled conflict dynamics. However, future research would ideally contribute data on additional cases, thereby opening up opportunities for comparisons across cases, settings, and time. These would ideally focus on the question of whether the role of legitimacy warrants similar importance in (de)activating the state elsewhere or whether other mechanisms can be identified.

Non-state armed actors as state makers

One important finding of this thesis consists, as I have discussed above, in revealing state-organized crime-interactions of great complexity. Not least, they contradict the simplistic notion of 'state failure' and the 'absence' of the state, the induction of which has not surfaced as a goal of LCT. Akin to its insertion into local society, characterized not primarily by an eradication and subsequent replacement of the old but rather by a skillful relating to extant structures and actors (Chapter 5), sustaining the state in its rogue, multiple configuration allowed LCT to relate to it in ways conducive to the obtention of resources. This, in turn, can be thought of as having enhanced its performance and chances for survival. This once again emphasizes that those binaries I have summarized under the term licit-illicit-divide do not withstand a reality check. The fact alone that an entire layer of the

state apparatus was effectively surrendered to a criminal actor lets the boundaries of the state appear, to say the least, permeated and the dividing line between legal and illegal by no means as clear-cut as the rhetoric underpinning the 'war on drugs' would have it. Adding the fact that LCT not only had a vested interest in the sustention of the state but also acted on it has important repercussions for the debate on how, as it were, the state is still a thing in spite of widespread assertions of its inevitable decay. A key contribution of this thesis consists, against this backdrop, in the identification of novel and unexpected modes and mechanisms of state making (or perhaps better: state sustention) under conditions of liquefaction. This might seem paradoxical at first sight as after all, it is precisely the existence and actions of actors such as LCT that are often portrayed as symptomatic of and causal to the decay of the state. Yet, the data I have gathered points to just such unexpected sites and mechanisms of state making, thus reflecting arguments advanced by authors such as Das and Poole and the Comaroffs, whose works I have discussed earlier in this thesis (see Chapter 2).

As I have shown, LCT has effectively 'made state' in the sense that it has, amongst other things, organized elections and left the lower reaches of the state in place. Not least, it has supported higher-level state actors in theatrically enacting the myth of the state as the champion of legality and civilization, for instance by 'giving up' methamphetamine laboratories, and thereby helping to keep from ripping all the way open the very stuff the modern nation-state derives its right to exist from. All of this departs, of course, drastically from the Weberian ideal of the state and its role within social order. In actual social practice, however, the latter proves, as Das (2004) would have it, 'metaphysical' and the seeming paradoxes of state making and sustention vanish once one ventures into 'the dirty undergrowth of local politics' (Knight, 1997:108). In identifying a criminal organization as

a *de facto* state maker and sustainer, my argument also expands on Arias and Goldstein's case that Latin America's violence and (nominally) democratic systems are not mutually exclusive but symbiotic.

In its paradoxical positioning towards and relation to the state – perfect symbolic antagonist and real-life pillar at the same time – LCT stands in historical continuity to those private (and partly criminal) entities Western nation-states relied on in cementing their dominion over the South's colonies. The same is true for Peru's *gamonales* and Mexico's *caciques*, the examples of which I have discussed in Chapter 2. The latter – recall here Das' portrayal of the former and Knight and Pansters' of the latter – embody the paradoxes of the state that become most visible in its margins insofar as they are state and non-state at the same time. They stand, in other words, both outside and inside of the state body and their actions serve personal and public interests alike. In this understanding, however, the boundaries between state and non-state remain prominent. Indeed, Das and Poole's discussion of the margins of the state focuses strongly on processes and actors that still, in spite of all contradictions and porousness, have the label 'state' applied to them, which would lead to a theoretical positioning of LCT in the non-state sphere. However, this changes if one departs from a more radical revision of the very concept of state. As discussed in Chapter 2, one such approach has been advanced by Trouillot who abandons the widely taken-for-granted equation of state to government and argues that states are truly identifiable through specific processes and effects of populational ordering and control and not through formal institutions. Government can, from this perspective, be state, but state can never be only government.

LCT's practices of alternative governance, which I have analyzed in detail in Chapter 5, fit well within Trouillot's frame of state processes and effects. This, in turn, would mean nothing less than LCT being state (but not government). This finding is moreover consistent with one of the key features and symptoms of liquefaction, the reallocation of functions of governance, violence, and social control in the hand of private actors. Trouillot refutes this backdrop, the narrative of state decay, and argues instead that '[s]tate power is being redeployed', and 'state effects are appearing in new sites' (2001:132). This reflects the case of LCT and Tierra Caliente and I principally agree with his statement that 'in almost all cases, this move is one away from national sites to infra-, supra-, or transnational ones' (ibid.). Yet, I also deem it crucial not to lose sight of 'old sites', something which becomes clear not least in light of the continued centrality of state actors in shaping social order and conflict dynamics as laid out above. Old sites, it would appear, are far from being abandoned, although their operational logic might undergo changes insofar as they become populated and employed for other actors and interests.

LCT as a parallel state?

Depending on what understanding of state one works with, LCT can be considered either in complex relation to the state, part of it, an employer and/or benefiter of state power, or even state in its own right. Nothing suggests, however, that LCT can or should be classified as a 'parallel state', as a popular assessment discussed in Chapter 2 would have it. As I have shown in this thesis and already reflected upon above, this does not form part of LCT's interest or strategic orientation. Moreover, the history of Mexican organized crime as a phenomenon constituted not apart from or against the state but under its auspices contradicts the notion. Worth recalling is also that, in its empirically rogue and pliable

shape, law and state provide criminal actors such as LCT with known structural surroundings that harbor rich opportunities, including not least a degree of predictability in otherwise highly volatile surroundings. This makes them, to again point out Briquet and Favarel-Garrigues' contribution to the matter, 'satisfied with the existing rules of the political and economic game' (2010:4). As opposed to a discrete structure that would be construed in opposition to or apart from the (existing) state construct, non-state armed actors and state actors populate and operate through many of the same sites, as the interactions between LCT and different segments of the Mexican state underline. What I have depicted as trans-legally inhabited zones resembles the networks of Brazilian politicians, drug traffickers, and civil society actors analyzed by Arias. Here, too, the theme is interwovenness and not separation or opposition. The argument brought forward by Arias that the 'parallel state' characterization falls short because 'illegal networks appropriate existing state and societal resources and power' (2006:322) is similarly reflected in the case of LCT. In particular, as I have shown, LCT has fed on the very same pool of resources as the state, activating anything from material state structures to the state's ideological *Unterbau* in its interest. This, too, speaks of how 'the means and ends of the liberal democratic state are refracted, deflected, and dispersed into the murkier reaches of the private sector' (Comaroff/Comaroff, 2006:16) and do not just vanish. That they resurface in paradoxical ways – in the present case to empower a criminal organization – underlines that they, just as state structures and actors themselves, are susceptible to reappropriation and counterfeiting.

The lack of evidence for and theoretical soundness of the parallel state argument does not mean, however, that a shift in power has not taken place. The precise nature of the Mexican case remains to be explored in greater depth through future research. Default accounts

depart, as mentioned, from Astorga's work to invoke something akin to total state control over organized crime, which, chiefly through the electoral democratization of the formal political regime, gives way to incoordination, atomization, chaos, and violence. This seems simplistic insofar as it does little to explore the micro-dynamics of, simply put, 'who used whom' and thus to what interests the state was activated in particular cases and constellations and how. Such a critical revision lies outside of the scope of this thesis. Much in the literature as well as the findings presented in this thesis suggests such a tendency. LCT provides, in this vein, a clear example for the more prominent role assumed by non-state armed actors in territorial control and governance. If this still holds after stress-testing the apparent novelty of the state being pushed back by contrasting it with historically continuous forms of alternative governance as for instance embodied by *caciques* is a question certainly worth exploring. Yet, even if it does would not mean that the parallel state argument is supported. It would rather, as both state and non-state elements essentially operate within a shared structure and share a pool of resources, signify a relative shift in power relations. This could then be read as a reconfiguration or even enlargement of 'gray zones', to again invoke Auyero's designation of those zones in which legal and illegal as well as state and non-state intersect in ways non-compliant with the myth of state and yet empirically manifest and normal (see Chapter 2).

Multi-layered and shared sovereignties

While the feeding on a shared pool of resources might still be dismissed as one-sidedly parasitical feeding and/or the perversion of the state qua capture – and from a normative perspective it might well be deemed just that – the parallel state argument truly folds in light of how different projects and forms of sovereignty co-exist. As I have discussed at

various points in this thesis, the Weberian notion of state has become rejected as outdated and in need of an overhaul, which appears all the more pressing in light of the liquefaction of social order and the different positioning and role of the 'traditional' nation-state in this context. Just as the conception of state itself, sovereignty as the state's monopoly of coercion within its territorial confines has been criticized as overly static. Koonings and Kruijt's work (2004) highlights that this is often done in reference to the Global South's trend towards the pluralization of violence. Approaches critical of Weberian 'metaphysics' (Das) reflect these realities by focusing on what Hansen and Steputat call '*de facto* sovereignty', which draws on Agamben to boil sovereignty down to the possibility to kill with impunity as its essence. Exploring the latter requires transcending formal and institutional surfaces and looking for the ways and sites in which real-life sovereignty is formed and exercised. This is an investigative agenda authors such as Mbembé and Hansen and Steputat (see Chapter 2) have called for and to which I have made a contribution, specifically but not exclusively through the analysis of justifications and practices of alternative governance that include the production of killable individuals and groups (*rateros*).

The idea of a multitude of sovereignties (plural) that are more limited spatially, socially, and temporally, that exist in parallel, and that somehow interact with each other has become more widely accepted (although it is still far from dominant throughout the social sciences). Yet, as noted, how these new sovereignties are formed and how they relate to one another remains underexplored. One of the core contributions of this thesis consists, in this vein, in demonstrating the commonly underestimated degree to which these sovereignties are entangled. They cannot, I argue, be thought of as discrete or in any way autonomous entities. The latter assumption still lingers on even in critical accounts, albeit

perhaps only tacitly. But one example here is Arias' work (2006), in which he speaks of 'localised sovereignty'. Similarly, Davis' concept of 'fragmented sovereignty' (2010) seems to suggest that sovereignty itself has been broken up into parts, which in themselves once again resemble their 'mother structure' to the degree that they reproduce it in miniature. While future research will have to produce data on additional cases to question their generalizability, my findings provide critical reflection of this imagery. As concerns the present case specifically, I have shown that parallel existing forms of sovereignty overlap in a number of ways: spatially and temporarily as LCT and higher-level state actors shared and cohabit the same territory and during the same time and socially as the very same population is subjected to practices of control and coercion by LCT as well as its state counterparts.

From this perspective, sovereignties appear as principally multi-layered. It moreover suggests its multi-dimensionality as the seeming unity of sovereignty is broken wide open and its different facets – spatiality, temporality, sociality – become sharable and, crucially, commodifiable. The latter provided the basis for state and non-state armed actors to co-inhabit what I have termed a trans-legal order. Concretely, what emerged was a tit-for-tat constellation in which LCT invested in the state's symbolic façade as the stereotypical champion of legal, social, and moral order, in exchange for which it was granted control over local populations. This amounts to the *de facto* and conscious surrendering of functions and fruits of sovereignty to a non-state armed actor and could easily be understood as the central government's (tacit) complicity in letting LCT's leaders reign over life and death. Worth mentioning further is that the ways in which sovereignty is shared has not changed in any significant way since LCT's downfall. Killing with impunity was, as I was told by informants across the board, part and parcel of a transition to a new

arrangement of alternative governance in which, as noted above, non-state armed actors were directly supported by the central government, for instance through weapons. But one example here is the commander of an *autodefensa* group, which by the time of the interview has been absorbed into the Fuerza Rural and thus the institutional body of the state, who stated that he alone had killed about forty people. These acts of killing were, as the above-cited advisor explained, once again based on the self-imposed criterion of whether individuals apprehended were found to themselves have killed as members of LCT.

A new language for new forms of (dis)order?

The degree to which on-the-ground realities such as those I have analyzed contradict the binary notions contained in the licit-illicit-divide has raised suggestions that the corresponding heuristic labels – state v non-state and licit v illicit, for instance – should be abandoned altogether or, at the very least, replaced with drastically different concepts (see e.g. Davis, 2010 and Watt/Zepeda, 2012:6). These calls have merit. For the ‘language of the state’ matters, as Das and Poole rightly observe (2004:5). It pre-establishes the ‘tropes of social order, rationality, authority, and even externality for defining [the] subject’ of social scientists. Dominant conceptualizations of the state act, when measured against the complexity of social realities such as those analyzed in this thesis, as an intellectual iron cage that does little to illuminate and a lot to obscure. But, on the other hand, it is precisely this obscuring performance that is vital for the constitution and sustention of the mentioned ‘gray zones’ (Auyero). Actual social practice that underpins the convergence between actors populating either of the licit-illicit-divide’s extremes, then, contradicts them as much as it is enabled by them. And as long as they retain this functionality,

throwing them out altogether would mean going over the top and prove analytically counterproductive. Take the example of sovereignty. The shift away from its metaphysical understanding towards a search for and analysis of its *de facto* forms is of course needed. But as long as the former occurs as a tool, influence, and reference in the production of the latter, neither can be granted intellectual superiority. 'Big ideas', for one, come prominently into play here. Beyond their continued use by state actors, they have come to increasingly serve non-state actors in general (see Paley, 2002) as well as their violent sub-species (see Arias/Goldstein, 2010:17ff.) as tools for power and legitimation. LCT is perhaps *the* most blatant example in the Latin American context. And while Das (2004:248) criticizes Hansen (2001) for his focus on state spectacle and myth, stating that doing so 'fails to address the issue of how the practice of sovereignty itself operates, especially so in relation to the production of "killable bodies" (Agamben 1998)', I believe that this is precisely the interaction and mutual shaping between both levels that should more clearly and more widely be adopted as an analytical priority (successful exercises of this type have been presented by Gledhill, 1999/2001).

This requires efforts to disentangle both levels, a task that is far from complete (and the feasibility of which can be questioned). In transcending façades of the formal and the institutional, the critical works I have discussed go a long way. In some ways, however, they remain – and perhaps must do so – derivative. Consider, for instance, Janet Roitman's work on the Chad basin. She argues that, by establishing themselves within new and illicit economies in a parasitical fashion and tax into their own pockets while some proceeds flow into state coffers, corrupt state agents end up reconfiguring 'state power' and that 'the state thus benefits' (2004: 215). Apart from reproducing a monolithic image of 'the' state, this highlights how vast or even non-existent the boundaries are from such a perspective. If

such behavior qualifies within the conceptual confines of the state, when does state cease to be state? The critique of the state as iron cage seems to paradoxically reproduce it. Granted, in my elaborations on the case of LCT as well as in those theoretical arguments I have subscribed to, the state surfaces as latently present and, even in the margins, central. But it does raise the question of whether it is possible at all to step out of the 'shadow of the state' in which 'more than ever before men now live' (Trouillot, 2001:125), of whether it is possible for us to conceive order beyond the analytical confines established through language historically bound to it. Here, I can only ask, not provide answers.

What seems, in light of the above, most pressing it to examine whether accounts on the production of social order (in the Global South) sufficiently disentangle the mythical from the empirical and whether they adequately account for the effects produced by the interplay between the two. This task is far more than just an item of scholarly debate. For the licit-illicit-divide as functional myth empowers practices of great social harm by actors situated on either end of it. I have described some of these by reproducing the voices and experiences of the local civilians of Tierra Caliente and thus of a fragment of a vast world-wide population most immediately confronted with the adverse effects of the distortion of the public interest through self-interested trans-legal dealings between state and violent non-state actors. In this vein, I believe that researchers have a responsibility to help unveil its reproductive and performative mechanisms and critically reflect upon them. Subsequently, scholarship that follows incentives to act as 'apologists' for state power (Tilly, 1985) and uncritically reproduces said binaries should be scrutinized more rigidly. Paradigmatic sensemaking on organized crime, as dangerously close to state interests and inserted into the production of moral panics (see here my discussion of the corresponding literature in Chapter 1) as the rhetoric of state failure and national security, is especially

susceptible. Though indubitably pressing and spectacular in co-producing harmful international legislation such as the prohibition of and the 'war' on drugs, these mechanisms frequently appear in subtler forms. But one example here is when the Mexican ambassador to the UK gave a speech at a UK university and students, myself included, were explicitly instructed beforehand *not* to critically reflect upon the poorly veiled aim of marketing the exclusive narrative of Mexico as a land of economic progress and multicultural diversity. This degrades the critical potential and obligation of higher education to an element serving the theatrics of state power and ultimately aids and abets the routine victimization of vulnerable populations in Tierra Caliente and beyond.

References

- Adams TM (2011) *Chronic Violence and Its Reproduction: Perverse Trends in Social Relations, Citizenship and Democracy in Latin America*: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
- Adler P (1990) Requirements for inductive analysis. In: Wiebel W (ed.) *The collection and interpretation of data from hidden populations*. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, National Institute on Drug Abuse, 44–58.
- Adler PA (1985) *Wheeling and dealing: An Ethnography of an Upper-Level Drug Dealing and Smuggling Community*, New York. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Agamben G (1998) *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Agüero F and Stark J (1998) *Fault lines of democracy in post-transition Latin America*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Aguilar Valenzuela R (2011) El Cártel de los Amezcua. *El Economista* (Mexico-City), 22 August; available at: <http://eleconomista.com.mx/columnas/columna-especial-politica/2011/08/22/cartel-amezcua> (accessed: 4 November 2015).
- Allum F and Gilmour S (2012) *Routledge handbook of transnational organized crime*. London: Routledge.
- Andreas P (1998) The political economy of narco-corruption in Mexico. *CURRENT HISTORY-NEW YORK THEN PHILADELPHIA*- 97: 160–165.
- Arias E (2006) *Drugs & democracy in Rio de Janeiro: trafficking, social networks, & public security*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Arias ED (2009) The dynamics of criminal governance: networks and social order in Rio de Janeiro. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 38(02): 293–325.
- Arias ED and Goldstein DM (2010) *Violent Democracies in Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Arlacchi P (1986) *Mafia business: the mafia ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. London: Verso.
- Arteaga Botello N (2009) Decapitaciones y mutilaciones en el México contemporáneo. *Espacio abierto: cuaderno venezolano de sociología* 18(3): 463–486.
- Arteaga Botello N (2009) The mérida initiative: security-surveillance harmonization in Latin America. *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* (87): 103–110.
- Asad T (2004) Where are the margins of the state? In: Das V and Poole D (eds) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 279–288.
- Asfura-Heim P and Espach R (2013) The Rise of Mexico's Self-Defense Forces. *Foreign Affairs*, 11 June; available at: <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139462/patricio-asfura-heim-and-ralph-h-espach/the-rise-of-mexicos-self-defense-forces>(accessed 19 November 2013).
- Astorga L (1996) *El siglo de las drogas: el narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio* [The century of drugs: narcotrafficking, from the Porfirio Díaz' rule to the new Millenium]. México D.F.: Plaza & Janés.
- Astorga L and Shirk D (2010) Drug Trafficking Organizations and Counter-Drug Strategies in the U.S.-Mexican Context. San Diego, Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies UC San Diego; available at: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8j647429#page-1> (accessed 28 November 2013).
- Athens L (1984) Scientific criteria for evaluating qualitative studies. *Studies in symbolic interaction* 5: 259–268.
- Atkinson R and Flint J (2001) Accessing hidden and hard-to-reach populations: Snowball research strategies. *Social research update* 33(1): 1–4.
- Auyero J (2007) *Routine politics and violence in Argentina: The gray zone of state power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baer W (1972) Import substitution and industrialization in Latin America: experiences and interpretations. *Latin American Research Review* 7(1): 95–122.
- Bailey J and Taylor MM (2009) Evade, corrupt, or confront? Organized crime and the state in Brazil and Mexico. *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 1(2): 3–29.

- Ballinas V (2007) *CNDH: graves abusos de militares en Michoacán* [National Human Rights Commission: grave abuses my military in Michoacán]. La Jornada (Mexico-City), 16 May; available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2007/05/16/index.php?section=politica&article=003n1pol> (accessed 15 August 2013).
- Bauman Z (2006) *Liquid fear*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman Z (2000) *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman Z (2007) *Liquid times: Living in an age of uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Baylouny A (2010) Authority outside the State: Non-state Actors and New Institutions in the Middle East. In: Clunan AL and Trinkunas HA (eds) *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 136–152.
- Beittel J (2013) Mexico's drug trafficking organizations: Source and scope of the violence. *United States Congressional Research Service Report* 7-5700.
- Belousov K, Horlick-Jones T, Bloor M, Gilinskiy Y, Golbert V, Kostikovskiy Y, et al. (2007) Any port in a storm: fieldwork difficulties in dangerous and crisis-ridden settings. *Qualitative Research* 7(2): 155–175.
- Berdal M and Serrano M (2002) *Transnational organized crime and international security: business as usual?* Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Berdal M (2005) Beyond greed and grievance—and not too soon.... *Review of International Studies* 31(04): 687-698.
- Blaikie N (2009) *Designing social research: The logic of anticipation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Block AA and Chambliss WJ (1981) *Organizing crime*. New York: Elsevier.
- Blok A (2008) Reflections on the Sicilian Mafia: Peripheries and Their Impact on Centres. In: Siegel D and Nelen H (eds) *Organized Crime: Culture, Markets, and Policies*. New York: Springer, 7–13.
- Blumer H (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bobea L (2010) Organized Violence, Disorganized State. In: Arias ED and Goldstein DM (eds) *Violent Democracies in Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 161–200.
- Botello N (2009) Decapitaciones y mutilaciones en el México contemporáneo. *Espacio Abierto Cuaderno Venezolano de Sociología* 18(3): 463–486.
- Bourgois P (1989) Crack in Spanish Harlem: Culture and economy in the inner city. *Anthropology Today* 5(4): 6–11.
- Bourgois P (2003) *In search of respect: Selling crack in El Barrio*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brewer J (2000) *Ethnography*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Briquet J and Favarel-Garrigues G (2010) *Organized crime and states: the hidden face of politics*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brown AD (1998) Narrative, politics and legitimacy in an IT implimentation. *Journal of Management Studies* 35(1): 35–58.
- Bulmer M (1986) *The Chicago school of sociology: Institutionalization, diversity, and the rise of sociological research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Burawoy M (1991) *Ethnography unbound: Power and resistance in the modern metropolis*. Berkeley: Univ of California Press.
- Burchill G, Gordon C, and Miller P (1991) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Burgess RG (2002) *In the field: An introduction to field research*. New York: Routledge.
- Caldeira do Rio TP (2000) *City of walls: crime, segregation, and citizenship in São Paulo*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Calderón M (2001) Lázaro Cárdenas del Río en la cuenca Tepalcatepec-Balsas. In: Zárate Hernández JE (ed.) *La Tierra Caliente de Michoacán*. Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán; Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, 233–265.
- Calderón Hinojosa F (2006), Presidential Inauguration speech, available at: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/391513.html> (accessed 11 November 2012).
- Camp RA (1992) *Generals in the Palacio: the military in modern Mexico*: Oxford University Press.
- Camp RA (1999) *Politics in Mexico: the decline of authoritarianism*: Oxford University Press, USA.

- Campbell H (2009) *Drug war zone: frontline dispatches from the streets of El Paso and Juárez*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Carrión, L. (2014), Templarios controlaron aguacate [Templars controlled avocado]. *El Universal* (Mexico-City), 8 April; available at: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion-mexico/2014/templarios-controlaron-aguacate-1001644.html> (accessed 14 April 2014).
- Castillo G (2009) Miembros de La Familia mataron a los 12 policías federales: SSP [Members of La Familia killed the 12 Federal Police: Secretariat of Public Security]. *La Jornada* (Mexico-City), 15 July; available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2009/07/15/politica/005n1pol> (accessed 19 November 2013).
- Chambliss W (1975) On the paucity of original research on organized crime: A footnote to Galliher and Cain. *The American Sociologist*: 36–39.
- Chambliss WJ (1988) *On the take: From petty crooks to presidents*: Indiana University Press Bloomington.
- Chambliss WJ, Michalowski R and Kramer R (2014) *State crime in the global age*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Chouza P (2013) Asesinados un vicealmirante y su escolta en el Estado mexicano de Michoacán [Assassinated a vice-admiral and his escort in the Mexican state of Michoacán]. *El País* (Madrid), 29 July; available at: http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2013/07/29/actualidad/1375058077_835933.html (accessed 30 July 2013).
- Clunan AL (2010) Ungoverned Spaces? The Need for Reevaluation. In: Clunan AL and Trinkunas HA (eds) *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 3–13.
- Clunan AL and Trinkunas HA (2010) *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- CNN Mexico (2013) 'El gobierno federal y de Michoacán llaman a grupos de autodefensa a dejarlas armas' [The federal government and the government of Michoacán call upon autodefense groups to give up arms], CNN Mexico, 21 August; available at: <http://blogs.cnnmexico.com/ultimas-noticias/2013/08/21/el-gobierno-federal-y-de-michoacan-llaman-a-grupos-de-autodefensa-a-dejar-las-armas/> (accessed 22 August 2013).
- Cohen S (2013) *States of denial: Knowing about atrocities and suffering*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Collier S (2009) Topologies of Power: Foucault's Analysis of Political Government Beyond 'Governmentality'. *Theory, Culture and Society* 26 (6): 78–108.
- Comaroff J and Comaroff J (2006) *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Comaroff J and Comaroff J (2006) Introduction. In: Comaroff J and Comaroff J (eds) *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Coronil F (1997) *The magical state: Nature, money, and modernity in Venezuela*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cressey D (1969) *Theft of the nation: The structure and operations of organized crime in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Crónica de Hoy* (Mexico City) (2006) Anuncia gabinete de seguridad operativo conjunto Michoacán [The security cabinet announces Joint Operation Michoacán]. *La Crónica de Hoy*, 20 August; available at: <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2006/275855.html> (accessed 13 August 2013).
- Das V (2004) The signature of the state: the paradox of illegibility. In: Das V and Poole D (eds) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 225–252.
- Das V and Poole D (2004) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Das V and Poole D (2004b) State and its margins: comparative ethnographies. In: Das V and Poole D (eds) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 3–33.
- Davis DE (2009) Non-state armed actors, new imagined communities, and shifting patterns of sovereignty and insecurity in the modern world. *Contemporary Security Policy* 30(2): 221–245.

- Davis DE (2010) Irregular armed forces, shifting patterns of commitment, and fragmented sovereignty in the developing world. *Theory and Society* 39(3-4): 397–413.
- Davis DE (2010b) The Political and Economic Origins of Violence and Insecurity in Contemporary Latin America: Past Trajectories and Future Prospects. In: Arias ED and Goldstein DM (eds) *Violent Democracies in Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 35–62.
- DEA (2013) Press Release: ‘13 Linked to Mexican Mafia and La Familia Indicted after Investigation Reveals Plot to Join Forces to Expand Drug Cartel’s Presence in U.S.’. 6 August; available at: <http://www.dea.gov/divisions/la/2013/la080613.shtml> (accessed 3 February 2015).
- DEA (2015) DEA Statement on the Mexico Arrest of Knights Templar Cartel Leader “La Tuta”. 27 February; available at: <http://www.dea.gov/divisions/hq/2015/hq022715.shtml> (accessed: 18 February 2015).
- Deephouse DL and Suchman M (2008) Legitimacy in organizational institutionalism. In: Greenwood R, Oliver C, Sahlin K and Suddaby R (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*. London: Sage, 49–77.
- Denzin NK (1970) *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Diaz-Cayeros A, Estévez F and Magaloni B (2008) *Strategies of vote buying: Poverty, democracy and social transfers in Mexico*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Political Science, Stanford University.
- DiMaggio PJ and Powell WW (1983) The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review* 48(2): 147–160.
- DiMaggio P (1997) Culture and cognition. *Annual Review of Sociology* 23: 263–287.
- Dorn N and Levi M (2005) *Literature review on upper level drug trafficking*. Home Office Online Report 22/05.
- Dowling J and Pfeffer J (1975) Organizational legitimacy: Social values and organizational behavior. *Pacific sociological review*: 122–136.
- Eccarius-Kelly V (2012) Surreptitious Lifelines: A Structural Analysis of the FARC and the PKK. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24(2): 235–258.
- Economist (2005) Saving Africa, the conservative way. *The Economist* (London), 30 January; available at: <http://www.economist.com/node/4127543> (accessed: 4 March 2015).
- Edberg MC (2001) Drug Traffickers as Social Bandits Culture and Drug Trafficking in Northern Mexico and the Border Region. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 17(3): 259–277.
- Emol (2007) Presidente mexicano promete lucha sin cuartel contra narcotráfico. Emol, 10 February; available at: <http://www.emol.com/noticias/internacional/2007/02/10/245462/presidente-mexicano-promete-lucha-sin-cuartel-contranarcotrafico.html> (accessed 20 April 2013).
- Ernst F (2014) Seeking a place in history – Nazario Moreno’s Narco Messiah. *InSight Crime – Organized Crime in the Americas*, 13 March; available at: <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/seeking-a-place-in-history-nazario-moreno-narco-messiah> (accessed 20 April 2014).
- Estévez A (2012) La violencia en México como crisis de derechos humanos: las dinámicas violatorias de un conflicto inédito. *Revista Semestral do Departamento e do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Sociologia da UFSCar* 2(1): 21.
- Estrada J (2010) ‘La inseguridad deja sin policía municipal a 12 localidades de Nuevo León’ [The insecurity leaves 12 municipalities in Nuevo León without municipal police], CNN Mexico, 7 December; available at: <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2010/12/07/la-inseguridad-deja-sin-policia-municipal-a-12-localidades-de-nuevo-leon> (accessed 6 August 2013).
- Faugier J and Sargeant M (1997) Sampling hard to reach populations. *Journal of advanced nursing* 26(4): 790–797.
- Felbab-Brown V (2009) *Shooting up: Counterinsurgency and the war on drugs*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Felbab-Brown V (2009) *The violent drug market in Mexico and lessons from Colombia: Policy Paper 12*: Brookings Institution.
- Fernández, J (2014) ¿Qué pena con la realidad! *Excelsior* (Mexico-City), 21 July; available at:

- <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/opinion/jorge-fernandez-menendez/2014/07/21/971965> (accessed 4 October 2014).
- Ferrer E and Ernesto M (2010) Marcha en Apatzingán exige la salida de las fuerzas federales. *La Jornada Michoacán* (Mexico City), 11 December; available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/12/11/politica/005n2pol> (accessed 3 January 2015).
- Ferrer E and Ernesto M (2010b) Intensifican el cerco en Apatzingán para dar con líderes de *La Familia*. *La Jornada Michoacán* (Mexico City), 7 December; available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2010/12/13/politica/007n1pol> (accessed: 3 January 2015).
- Fijnaut C and Paoli L (2004) *Organised Crime in Europe: Concepts, Patterns and Control Policies in the European Union and Beyond*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Finckenauer JO (2005) Problems of Definition: What is organized crime? *Trends in Organized Crime* 8(3): 63–83.
- Finnegan W (2010) Silver or Lead. *The New Yorker*, 31 May.
- Fiskesjö M (2012) Outlaws, barbarians, slaves: Critical reflections on Agamben's homo sacer. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2(1): 161–180.
- Fitzpatrick P (2001) Bare sovereignty: Homo Sacer and the insistence of law. *Theory & Event*, 5(2): 67–81.
- Flores Pérez CA (2009) *El Estado en crisis: crimen organizado y política. Desafíos para la consolidación democrática* [The State in crisis: organized crime and politics. Challenges for the democratic consolidation]. Mexico City: Publicaciones de la Casa Chata.
- Forst B and Manning PK (1999) *The privatization of policing: Two views*. Georgetown: Georgetown University Press.
- Foucault M (1980) *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault M (1980) The confessions of the Flesh. In: Foucault M (ed.) *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 194–228.
- Foucault M (1991) Governmentality. In: Burchill G, Gordon C, and Miller P (eds) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 87–104.
- Foucault M (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics, Lectures at the Collège De France 1978–1979*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gambetta D (1993) *The Sicilian Mafia: the business of private protection*: Harvard University Press.
- Geertz C (1973) *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic books.
- Geffray C (2001) Introduction: drug trafficking and the state. *International Social Science Journal* 53(169): 421–426.
- Giddens A (1985) *The nation-state and violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gill P (2006) Organized Crime. In: McLaughlin E and Muncie J (eds) *The Sage dictionary of criminology*. London: Sage, 300–302.
- Gil Olmos J (2013) Envían dos mil agentes para enfrentar crisis en Michoacán [2000 agents are sent to confront the crisis in Michoacán]. *Proceso* (Mexico-City), 25 July; available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=348358> (accessed 25 August 2013).
- Gledhill J (1999) Official masks and shadow powers: towards an anthropology of the dark side of the state. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*: 199–251.
- Gledhill J (2000) *Power and its disguises: anthropological perspectives on politics*. London [etc.]: Pluto Press.
- Goffman E (1959) *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City: Double Day.
- Goldsmith A (2003) Fear, fumbling and frustration Reflections on doing criminological fieldwork in Colombia. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 3(1): 103–125.
- Goldstein DM (2003) 'In our own hands': Lynching, justice, and the law in Bolivia. *American Ethnologist* 30(1): 22–43.
- González y González L (2001) Introducción: La Tierra Caliente. In: Zárate Hernández JE (ed.) *La Tierra Caliente de Michoacán*. Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán; Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, 17–64.
- Gootenberg P (1999) *Cocaine: Global Histories*. London: Routledge.

- Grajales J (2011) The rifle and the title: paramilitary violence, land grab and land control in Colombia. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38(4): 771-792.
- Grayson G (2010) *Mexico: narco-violence and a failed state?* New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Grayson G (2011) *La Familia Drug Cartel: Implications for US-Mexican Security*. Carlisle Barracks: SSI.
- Grayson GW and Logan S (2012) *The Executioner's Men: Los Zetas, Rogue Soldiers, Criminal Entrepreneurs, and the Shadow State They Created*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Greenwood R, Oliver C, Sahlin K and Suddaby R (2008) *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*. London: Sage.
- Guerrero Gutiérrez E (2014) La dictadura criminal. *Nexos* (Mexico City), 1 April; available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=20026> (accessed 3 November 2014).
- Hagopian F and Mainwaring SP (2005) *The third wave of democratization in Latin America: advances and setbacks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hammersley M (1992) *What's wrong with ethnography?* London: Routledge.
- Hammersley M and Atkinson P (2007) *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Hansen TB (2005) Sovereigns beyond the state: on legality and authority in urban India. In: Hansen TB and Stepputat F (eds) *Sovereign bodies: Citizens, migrants, and states in the postcolonial world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 169-191.
- Hansen TB and Stepputat F (2005) *Sovereign bodies: Citizens, migrants, and states in the postcolonial world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hampton J (1986) *Hobbes and the social contract tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harvey D (2005) *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hellman J, Jones G and Kaufmann D (2000) *Seize the state, seize the day: State capture, corruption and influence in transition: Policy Research Working Paper 2444*.
- Heyman J (1999) *States and illegal practices*. Oxford: Berg.
- Heyman, J and Smart A (1999). States and illegal practices: An overview. In: Heyman J (ed) *States and illegal practices*. Oxford: Berg, 1-24.
- Historias del Narco (2013). 'Mi decepción del Ejército, Experiencia de un soldado en Michoacán' [My disappointment about the Military, a soldier's experience in Michoacán], *Historias del Narco*, 5 August; available at: <http://www.historiasdelnarco.com/2013/08/mi-decepcion-del-ejercito-experiencia.html> (accessed 6 August 2013).
- Hill PB (2006) *The Japanese Mafia: Yakuza, Law, and the State: Yakuza, Law, and the State*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hobbs D (1988) *Doing the Business: entrepreneurship, the working class, and detectives in the East End of London*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hobbs D and Wright R (2006) *The SAGE Handbook of Fieldwork*. London: Sage.
- Hobbs D (2013) *Lush life: Constructing organized crime in the UK*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hönke J and Müller MM (2012). Governing (in) security in a postcolonial world: Transnational entanglements and the worldliness of 'local' practice. *Security Dialogue*, 43(5), 383-401.
- Hope A (2013) Menos ruido, misma furia [Less noise, same fury]. *Nexos* (Mexico-City), 1 July; available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?P=leerarticulo&Article=2204214> (accessed 19 November 2013).
- Howell N (2007) Human hazards of fieldwork. In: Robben AC and Sluka JA (eds) *Ethnographic fieldwork: an anthropological reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 234-244.
- Huggins MK (1991) *Vigilantism and the state in modern Latin America: essays on extralegal violence*. New York: Praeger.
- Huggins MK (2000). Urban violence and police privatization in Brazil: Blended invisibility. *Social Justice* 27(2): 113-134.
- Huggins MK (2014) Modern institutionalized torture as state-organized crime. In: Chambliss WJ, Michalowski R and Kramer R (eds) *State crime in the global age*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 83-102.
- Humphrey C (1999) Russian protection rackets and the appropriation of law and order. In: Heyman J (ed) *States and illegal practices*. Oxford: Berg, 199-232.

- Humphreys M and Weinstein JM (2007) Demobilization and reintegration. *Journal of conflict resolution* 51(4): 531–567.
- Huntington SP (1993) *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma press.
- Hurrell A (1998) Security in Latin America. *International Affairs* 74(3): 529-546.
- Informador (Mexico-City) (2010) La PGR evita confirmar la muerte de "El Chayo" [The PGR avoids confirming the death of "El Chayo"]. *El Informador*, 16 December ; available at: <http://www.informador.com.mx/mexico/2010/256917/6/la-pgr-evita-confirmar-la-muerte-de-el-chayo.htm> (accessed 15 August 2013).
- Informador (2013) Acusan que regreso de Fausto Vallejo se negoció con el narco. *Informador* (Guadalajara), 30 October; available at: <http://www.informador.com.mx/mexico/2013/494198/6/acusan-que-regreso-de-fausto-vallejo-se-negocio-con-el-narco.htm> (accessed 3 September 2014).
- Informador (2014) La Segob confirma muerte de 'El Chayo' en Michoacán. *Informador* (Guadalajara), 9 March; available at: <http://www.informador.com.mx/mexico/2014/517095/6/la-segob-confirma-muerte-de-el-chayo-en-michoacan.htm> (accessed 1 April 2015).
- Informador (2015) Otorgan amparo al hijo de Fausto Vallejo. *Informador* (Guadalajara), 9 April; available at: <http://www.informador.com.mx/mexico/2013/494198/6/acusan-que-regreso-de-fausto-vallejo-se-negocio-con-el-narco.htm> (accessed 10 April 2015).
- Ingvaldsen K and Lundgren Sørli V (2009) *Organised Crime: Norms, Markets, Regulation and Research*. Oslo: Unipub.
- Jacobs BA (2006) The Case for Dangerous Fieldwork. In: Hobbs D and Wright R (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Fieldwork*. London: Sage, 157–168.
- Janvry A de (1981) *The agrarian question and reformism in Latin America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jermier JM, Slocum Jr JW, Fry LW and Gaines J (1991) Organizational subcultures in a soft bureaucracy: Resistance behind the myth and facade of an official culture. *Organization science* 2(2): 170–194.
- Joas H and Knöbl W (2013) *War in social thought: Hobbes to the present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jornada Michoacán* (Mexico-City) (2013) Capturan a Agustín Villanueva, líder de la policía comunitaria de Aquila [Augustín Villanueva, leader of the community police of Aquila, is captured]. *La Jornada Michoacán*, 14 August ;available at: <http://www.lajornadamichoacan.com.mx/2013/08/14/capturan-a-lider-de-la-policia-comunitaria-de-aquila-cuenta-con-orden-de-aprehension/> (accessed 25 August 2013).
- Kaldor M (2013) *New and old wars: Organised violence in a global era*: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kaplan DE and Dubro A (2012) *Yakuza: Japan's criminal underworld*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kenny P, Serrano M and Sotomayor AC (2013) *Mexico's security failure: collapse into criminal violence*. New York: Routledge.
- King RD and Wincup E (2008) *Doing research on crime and justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Knight A (1997) Habitus and Homicide: Political Culture in Revolutionary Mexico. In: Pansters WG (ed.) *Citizens of the pyramid: Essays on Mexican political culture*. Amsterdam: Thela, 107-129.
- Knight A (2012) Narcoviolence and the State in Modern Mexico. In: Pansters W (ed.) *Violence, coercion, and state-making in twentieth-century Mexico: The other half of the centaur*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 115–134.
- Knight A and Pansters WG (2005) *Caciquismo in twentieth-century Mexico*. London: Institute of Latin American Studies.
- Knight B (2014) Oberndorf: the tiny German town that armed the world. *The Guardian* (London), 25 February; available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/25/oberndorf-german-town-armed-world-heckler-kock> (accessed 25 June 2014).

- Kramer R (2014) From Guernica to Hiroshima to Baghdad: The Normalization of the Terror Bombing of Civilians. In: Chambliss WJ, Michalowski R and Kramer R (eds) *State crime in the global age*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 118-133.
- Koonings K and Kruijt D (1999) *Societies of fear: The legacy of civil war, violence and terror in Latin America*. London, New York: Zed Books.
- Koonings K and Kruijt D (2004) *Armed actors: organised violence and state failure in Latin America*. London, New York: Zed Books.
- Kostelnik J and Skarbek D (2013) The governance institutions of a drug trafficking organization. *Public Choice* 156(1-2): 95-103.
- Krauthausen C and Sarmiento LF (1991) *Cocaína & Co. Un mercado ilegal por dentro*. Bogotá: Tercer Mundo Editores.
- Kühl S (2011) *Organisationen: eine sehr kurze Einführung*: Springer DE.
- Kuhn TS (1962) *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lampe K von (2009) The study of organised crime: An assessment of the state of affairs. In: Ingvaldsen K and Lundgren Sørli V (eds) *Organised Crime: Norms, Markets, Regulation and Research*. Oslo: Unipub, 165-211.
- Lara Klahr M (2012) La Muerte Mediática de Nazario Moreno [Themediaticdeath of Nazario Moreno]. *El Universal Domingo* (Mexico-City), 16 December ;available at: <http://www.domingoeluniversal.mx/historias/detalle/La+muerte+medi%C3%A1tica+de+Nazario+Moreno-1158> (accessed 25 August 2013).
- "La Tuta" líder de Los Caballeros Templarios envía mensaje en redes sociales (2013) YouTube video, added by Grillonautas2 [online]; available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCGJpwPpPBI> (accessed 26 November 2013).
- LeCompte MD and Goetz JP (1982) Problems of reliability and validity in ethnographic research. *Review of educational research* 52(1): 31-60.
- Lessing, B. (2012). *The Logic of Violence in Criminal War: Cartel-State Conflict in Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil*. PhD Thesis. University of California, Berkeley.
- Levi M (2007) Organised Crime and Terrorism. In: Maguire M, Morgan R and Reiner R (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 771-809.
- Lipsky M (1979) *Street level bureaucracy*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lincoln YS and Guba EG (1985) *Naturalist inquiry*.
- Litzinger RA (2006) Contested sovereignties and the critical ecosystem partnership fund. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 29(1): 66-87.
- Madison DS (2011) *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Magaloni B (2006) *Voting for autocracy: Hegemonic party survival and its demise in Mexico*: Cambridge University Press New York.
- Maguire M, Morgan R and Reiner R (2007) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Maldonado S (2010) *Los márgenes del Estado mexicano: Territorios ilegales, desarrollo y violencia en Michoacán* [Themargins of theMexicanState: IllegalTerritories, development, and violence in Michoacán]. Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán.
- Maldonado S (2012) Drogas, violencia y militarización en el México rural. El caso de Michoacán. *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 47(1): 5-39.
- Malkin V (2001) Narcotrafficking, migration, and modernity in rural Mexico. *Latin American Perspectives* 28(4): 101.
- Mandel R (2001) The privatization of security. *Armed Forces & Society* 28(1): 129-151.
- Mainwaring S and Scully TR (1995) *Building democratic institutions: Party systems in Latin America*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- March JG (1978) Bounded rationality, ambiguity, and the engineering of choice. *The Bell Journal of Economics*: 587-608.
- Mark D (2001) *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. London: Zed Books.
- Martin C (2012) Categorization of Narcomessages in Mexico: An Appraisal of the Attempts to Influence Public Perception and Policy Actions. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35(1): 76-93.

- Martin C (2012) Categorization of Narcomessages in Mexico: An Appraisal of the Attempts to Influence Public Perception and Policy Actions. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35(1): 76–93.
- Mbembé JA (2001) *On the postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mbembe JA (2003) Necropolitics. *Public culture* 15(1): 11–40.
- McDonald JH (2005) The Narcoeconomy and Small-town, Rural Mexico. *Human Organization* 64(2): 115–125.
- McLaughlin E and Muncie J (2012) *The Sage dictionary of criminology*. London: Sage.
- Mena F and Hobbs D (2010) Narcophobia: drugs prohibition and the generation of human rights abuses. *Trends in Organized Crime* 13(1): 60–74.
- Méndez JE, O'Donnell GA and Pinheiro PSdMS (1999) *The (un) rule of law and the underprivileged in Latin America*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Mercille J (2011) Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony? The political economy of the 'war on drugs' in Mexico. *Third World Quarterly* 32(9): 1637–1653.
- Merton RK (1938) Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review* 3(5): 672–682.
- Meyer JW and Rowan B (1977) Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony. *The American Journal of Sociology* 83(2): 340–363.
- Meyer JW and Scott WR (1983) Centralization and the legitimacy problems of local government. In: Meyer JW and Scott WR (eds) *Organizational environments: Ritual and rationality*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 199–215.
- Meyer JW and Scott WR (1983) *Organizational environments: Ritual and rationality*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Meyer JW (2000) Globalization: sources and effects on national states and societies. *International Sociology* 15(2): 233–248.
- Mexico News (2012), Vengadores Anónimos crucifican a violador en Michoacán [Anonymous Avengers crucify rapist in Michoacán]. Mexico-News, 8 September; available at: <http://www.mx-news.com/2012/09/vengadores-anonimos-crucifican-violador.html> (accessed 3 July 2013).
- Milhaupt CJ and West MD (2000) The dark side of private ordering: an institutional and empirical analysis of organized crime. *The University of Chicago Law Review* 76(1): 41–98.
- Miroff N and Booth W (2012) Mexico's presidential election tainted by claims of vote-buying. *Washington Post* (Washington DC), 4 July 2012; available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/mexicos-presidential-election-tainted-by-claims-of-vote-buying/2012/07/04/gIQAHQtzNW_story.html (3 March 2015).
- Mitchell JC (1983) Case and situation analysis1. *The sociological review* 31(2): 187–211.
- Molzahn C, Ríos V and Shirk DA (2012) Drug violence in Mexico: Data and analysis through 2011. San Diego, University of San Diego Trans-Border Institute; available at: <http://justiceinmexico.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/2012-tbi-drugviolence.pdf> (accessed 23 November 2013).
- Montes Vega OA (2011) *Héroes pioneros, padres y patronos. Construcción de la cultura política en los pueblos de Medio Balsas (Tierra Caliente de Michoacán y Guerrero)*. Zamora; Mexico City: El Colegio de Michoacán; Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- Moore SF (2000) *Law as process: an anthropological approach*. London: Routledge.
- Moreno N (2012) *Me llaman 'El Más Loco'* [They call me the 'Craziest One']. S.l.: s.n..
- Morton AD (2012) The War on Drugs in Mexico: a failed state? *Third World Quarterly* 33(9): 1631–1645.
- Muedano M (2014) Oficializan Fuerzas Rurales. *El Universal* (Mexico-City), 11 May; available at: <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion-mexico/2014/impreso/michoacan-oficializan-fuerza-rural-estatal-215451.html> (accessed 1 June 2014).
- Musah AF (2002) Privatization of security, arms proliferation and the process of state collapse in Africa. *Development and Change* 33(5): 911–933.
- Nájar A (2005) Los cárteles se renuevan, La nueva geografía del narco. *La Jornada* (Mexico-City), 24 July; available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/07/24/mas-najar.html> (accessed 14 December 2014).

- Newsweek Noticias (2015) Sin rastro: 20 mil muertos en diez años de guerra contra el narco. 13 April; available at: <http://nwnoticias.com/#!/noticias/sin-rastro> (accessed 13 April 2015).
- New York Times (2009) Senate Confirmation Hearing: Hillary Clinton. *The New York Times*, 13 January; available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/13/us/politics/13textclinton.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed 20 August 2013).
- Nordstrom C (2000) Shadows and sovereigns. *Theory, Culture & Society* 17(4): 35-54.
- O'Hear A (1996) *Verstehen and humane understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ortiz Escamilla J (2011) *La transformación de los paisajes culturales en la cuenca del Tepalcatepec*. Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán.
- Osorno DE (2012) *La guerra de los Zetas*. México D.F.: Grijalbo.
- Ovalle LP (2005) Las fronteras de la "narcocultura". *La frontera interpretada* 117.
- Paley J (2002) Toward an anthropology of democracy. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 469-496.
- Pansters WG (1997) *Citizens of the pyramid: Essays on Mexican political culture*. Amsterdam: Thela.
- Pansters W (2012) *Violence, coercion, and state-making in twentieth-century Mexico: The other half of the centaur*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Pansters W and Ouweneel A (1989) *Region, state and capitalism in Mexico: nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. Amsterdam: CEDLA.
- Paoli L (undated) *Researching Organised Crime*.
- Paoli L (2002) The paradoxes of organized crime. *Crime, Law and Social Change* 37(1): 51-97.
- Paoli L (2003) *Mafia Borderhoods. Organized Crime, Italian Style*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Paoli L and Fijnaut C (2004) General Introduction. In: Fijnaut C and Paoli L (eds) *Organised Crime in Europe: Concepts, Patterns and Control Policies in the European Union and Beyond*. Dordrecht: Springer, 1-18.
- Paoli L and Fijnaut C (2004) Introduction to Part 1: The History of the Concept. In: Fijnaut C and Paoli L (eds) *Organised Crime in Europe: Concepts, Patterns and Control Policies in the European Union and Beyond*. Dordrecht: Springer, 21-46.
- Passas N (2000) Global anomie, dysnomie, and economic crime: Hidden consequences of neoliberalism and globalization in Russia and around the world. *Social Justice* 27(2): 16-44.
- Pfeffer J and Salancik G (1978) *The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Proceso (2003) Desde 1996 se sabía de la presencia del cártel del Milenio. *Proceso* (Mexico City), 30 August; available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=255644> (accessed: 4 November 2013).
- Proceso (2013) Ligan a gobernador interino de Michoacán con Los Templarios [The interim governor of Michoacán to the Templars]. *Proceso* (Mexico-City), 30 July; available at: <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=348801> (accessed 19 November 2013).
- Procuraduría General de La República – Subprocuraduría de Investigación Especializada en Delincuencia Organizada (PGR SIEDO) (2009) *Averiguación Previa PGR/SIEDO/UEIDCS/205/2009*.
- Ramirez MD (1989) *Mexico's economic crisis: its origins and consequences*. Santa Barbara: Praeger Publishers.
- Ravelo R (2008) *Los capos. Las narco-rutas de México*. México DF: Debolsillo.
- Rawlinson P (2008) Mission impossible? Researching organized crime. In: King RD and Wincup E (eds) *Doing research on crime and justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 291-313.
- Rendón OHP, Chávez JCLN and Arévalos EA (2013) Historia de la Migración en Michoacán. *CIMEXUS* 2(1): 53-66.
- Reno W (1995) *Corruption and state politics in Sierra Leone*. Cambridge: University Press Cambridge.
- Reporters Without Boundaries (2013) Mexico Country Report June 2013; available at: <http://en.rsf.org/report-mexico,184.html> (accessed 5 March 2015).
- Reno W (2000) Clandestine Economies, Violence, and States in Africa. *Journal of International Affairs* 53(2):433-59.

- Reuter P (1983) *Disorganized crime: Illegal markets and the Mafia*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Reuter P (2009) Systemic violence in drug markets. *Crime, Law and Social Change* 52(3): 275–284.
- Rieff D (2011) The struggle for Mexico. *The New Republic* (Washington DC), 17 March; available at: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/world/magazine/85337/mexico-calderon-clinton-obama-drug-cartels> (accessed 20 August 2013).
- Rincón O (2009) Narco. estética y narco. cultura en Narco. lombia. *Nueva sociedad*(222): 147–163.
- Ríos V and Dudley S (2013) La marca zeta. *Nexos* (Mexico-City), 1 September; available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=15461> (accessed: 27 November 2013).
- Rios V (2013) Why did Mexico become so violent? A self-reinforcing violent equilibrium caused by competition and enforcement. *Trends in Organized Crime* 16(2): 138–155.
- Rivera R (2010) “La Familia” castiga y exhibe a ladrones. *El Universal*, 30 January.
- Robben AC and Sluka JA (2007) *Ethnographic fieldwork: an anthropological reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rodgers D (2006) The State as a Gang Conceptualizing the Governmentality of Violence in Contemporary Nicaragua. *Critique of Anthropology* 26(3): 315–330.
- Rodgers D (2007) Joining the gang and becoming a broder: the violence of ethnography in contemporary Nicaragua. *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 26(4): 444-461.
- Roitman JL (2004) Productivity in the margins: The reconstitution of state power in the Chad Basin. In: Das V and Poole D (eds) *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 191-224.
- Roitman JL (2005) *Fiscal disobedience: An anthropology of economic regulation in Central Africa*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Roque Madrí I (2006) Suman 13 degollados en Michoacán. *Crónica* (Mexico-City), 7 September; available at: <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2006/260009.html> (accessed 13 November 2012).
- Sampson H and Thomas M (2003) *Lone Researchers at Sea: Gender, Risk and Responsibility*. *Qualitative Research* 3(2): 165–89.
- Scheper-Hughes N (2004) Parts unknown undercover ethnography of the organs-trafficking underworld. *Ethnography* 5(1): 29–73.
- Schneider J and Schneider P (1999) Is Transparency Possible? The Political-Economic and Epistemological Implications of Cold War Conspiracies and Subterfuge in Italy. In: Heyman J (ed) *States and illegal practices*. Oxford: Berg, 169-198.
- Schutz A (1962) *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Seidman I (2012) *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education & the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College.
- Serrano M and Toro M (2002) From drug trafficking to transnational organized crime in Latin America. In: Berdal M and Serrano M (eds) *Transnational organized crime and international security: business as usual?* Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 155–182.
- Serrano M (2012) States of Violence: State Crime Relations in Mexico. In: Pansters W (ed.) *Violence, coercion, and state-making in twentieth-century Mexico: The other half of the centaur*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 135–159.
- Sheinbaum C and Ímaz C (2012) El fraude electoral en favor del PRI: un monstruo de dinero con mil cabezas. *La Jornada* (Mexico-City), 10 July 2012; available at: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2012/07/10/opinion/013a1pol> (accessed 1 April 2015).
- Shortland A and Varese F (2015) State-Building, Informal Governance and Organised Crime: The Case of Somali Piracy. *Political Studies*.
- Siegel D and Nelen H (2008) Introduction. In: Siegel D and Nelen H (eds) *Organized Crime: Culture, Markets, and Policies*. New York: Springer, 1–3.
- Siegel D and Nelen H (2008) *Organized Crime: Culture, Markets, and Policies*. New York: Springer.
- Simon HA (1972) Theories of bounded rationality. *Decision and organization* 1: 161–176.
- Simon HA (1991) Bounded rationality and organizational learning. *Organization science* 2(1): 125–134.

- Simpson B (2006) 'You don't do fieldwork, fieldwork does you': Between Subjectivation and Objectivation in Anthropological Fieldwork. In: Hobbs D and Wright R (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Fieldwork*. London: Sage, 125–137.
- Sklansky DA (2006). Private police and democracy. *American Criminal Law Review* 43(89): 1-17.
- Sluka JA (1990) Participant observation in violent social contexts. *Human Organization* 49(2): 114–126.
- Small ML (2009) How many cases do I need?'On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research. *Ethnography* 10(1): 5–38.
- Smart A (1999) Predatory rule and illegal economic practices. In: Heyman J (ed) *States and illegal practices*. FgoldsOxford: Berg, 99-128.
- Smith D (1999) *Zygmunt Bauman: prophet of postmodernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Snyder R and Duran-Martinez A (2009) Does illegality breed violence? Drug trafficking and state-sponsored protection rackets. *Crime, Law and Social Change* 52(3): 253–273.
- Spradley JP (1979) *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Stanford L (1994) The Privatization of Mexico's Ejidal Sector: Examining Local Impacts, Strategies, and Ideologies. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 23(2-3): 97–119.
- Stavenhagen R (1970) *Agrarian problems and peasant movements in Latin America*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Stransky TF (1979) *Liberation Theologies in North America and Europe*: Paulist Press.
- Suchman MC (1995) Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of management review* 20(3): 571–610.
- Sullivan JP and Elkus A (2008) State of Siege: Mexico's Criminal Insurgency. *Small Wars Journal* 12.
- Sykes G and Matza D (1957) Techniques of neutralization: A theory of delinquency. *American Sociological Review* 22(6): 664–670.
- Taussig MT (1997) *The magic of the state*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Thiebaut V (2011) La transformación de los paisajes en la microcuenca del Río Buenavista, Michoacán. In: Ortiz Escamilla J (ed.) *La transformación de los paisajes culturales en la cuenca del Tepalcatepec*. Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 375–438.
- Thiesenhusen WC (1989) *Searching for agrarian reform in Latin America*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Thompson JD and McEwen WJ (1958) Organizational goals and environment: Goal-setting as an interaction process. *American Sociological Review*: 23–31.
- Thoumi FE (2003) *Illegal Drugs, economy and society in the Andes*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Thoumi FE (2005) The numbers game: let's all guess the size of the illegal drug industry. *Journal of Drug Issues* 35(1): 185–200.
- Ugalde L and Loret de Mola G (2013) Clientelismo electoral y la compra del voto en México. *Nexos en Línea* (Mexico-City), 21 June; available at: <http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=18989> (accessed 7 March 2014).
- Ungar M (2007) The privatization of citizen security in Latin America: from elite guards to neighborhood vigilantes. *Social Justice* 34 (3/4): 20-37.
- US Embassy Mexico (2009) Mexican Navy operation nets drug kingpin Arturo Beltran Leyva. Available at: <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/12/09MEXICO3573.html> (accessed 5 August 2013).
- Vanguardia* (Mexico-City) (2010) PGR no confirma la muerte de El Chayo [PGR doesnotconfirmdeath of El Chayo]. *Vanguardia*, 15 December; available at: <http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/XStatic/vanguardia/template/nota.aspx?id=611774> (accessed 22 August 2012).
- Vicenteño D (2013) PGR: Cártel de Jalisco arma a grupos de autodefensa [PGR: The Jalisco Cartel armsautodefensagroups]. *Excelsior* (Mexico-City), 8 March; available at: <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/2013/03/08/887952> (accessed: 25 August 2013).
- Vicenteño D (2014) Consignan a exgobernador de Michoacán; José Jesús Reyna, al penal del Altiplano [Ex governor of Michoacán, José Jesús Reyna, is assigned to Altiplano prison]. *Excelsior*

- (Mexico-City), 7 May; available at:
<http://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2014/05/07/957964> (accessed 5 June 2014).
- van Dijk M (2007) Discussing definitions of organised crime: word play in academic and political discourse. *HUMSEC Journal* 1(1): 65–90.
- van Duyne PC, Lampe K von, Passas N, Adamoli S and Vermeulen G (2002) *Upperworld and underworld in cross-border crime*. Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publishers.
- van Duyne PC and Nelemans MD (2012) Transnational organized crime: thinking in and out of Plato's cave. In: Allum F and Gilmour S (eds) *Routledge handbook of transnational organized crime*. London: Routledge, 36–51.
- van Duyne PC (1996) Organized crime, corruption and power. *Crime, Law and Social Change* 26(3): 201–238.
- Varese F (1994) Is Sicily the future of Russia? Private protection and the rise of the Russian Mafia. *European Journal of Sociology* 35(02): 224–258.
- Varese F (1997) The Transition to the Market and Corruption in Post-socialist Russia. *Political Studies* 45(3): 579–596.
- Volkov V (2002) *Violent entrepreneurs: The use of force in the making of Russian capitalism*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Wallerstein I (1974) The modern world-system I: Capitalist agriculture and the origins of the European world-economy in the sixteenth century (studies in social discontinuity). *New York: Academic*.
- Walsh Sanderson SR (1984) *Land Reform in Mexico: 1910—1980*. Orlando: Academic Press.
- Warren R (2002) *The purpose-driven life: what on earth am I here for?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Watt P and Zepeda R (2012) *Drug war Mexico: Politics, neoliberalism and violence in the new narcoeconomy*: Zed Books.
- Weber C (1995) *Simulating sovereignty: Intervention, the state and symbolic exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weinstein JM (2007) *Inside rebellion: The politics of insurgent violence*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiebel W (1990) *The collection and interpretation of data from hidden populations*. Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, National Institute on Drug Abuse.
- Williams P (2010) Here Be Dragons: Dangerous Spaces and International Security. In: Clunan AL and Trinkunas HA (eds) *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 34–54.
- Willis GD (2015) *The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil*: Univ of California Press.
- Woodiwiss M (2001) *Organized crime and American power*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Yuchtman E and Seashore SE (1967) A system resource approach to organizational effectiveness. *American Sociological Review* 32(6): 891–903.
- Zaitch D (2002) *Trafficking Cocaine: Colombian Drug Entrepreneurs in the Netherlands*. The Hague: Kluwer Law International.
- Zárata Hernández JE (2001) *La Tierra Caliente de Michoacán*. Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán; Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán.
-