

Murder and politics in twentieth century Mexico

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On February 25, 2010, in a meeting with businessmen in Mérida, president Felipe Calderón accused the Mexican media of giving free advertising to the criminal organizations by publicizing their deeds and criticizing the country “como deporte.” By contrast, he complained, the government had to pay thousands of pesos to publish its message on the front pages. He was probably annoyed at the fact that he had been accused of protecting the Sinaloa cartel and its leader at large, the Joaquín “el Chapo” Guzmán, an accusation that days earlier Calderón had to contradict explicitly. The 108 comments below the report of the Mérida speech in the electronic edition of *El Universal* covered a range of opinions, some quite rough, but mostly made light of the government’s concern about perceptions of crime, against the reality of increasing violence around the country and the likely victory of the PRI in the next elections. While the number of drug-trafficking murders continues to mount and the intervention of the Army continue to prove its futility, Mexican government officials increasingly define the problem as one of perceptions rather than realities, arguing that Mexican murder rates are lower than those of countries with a better press, like Brazil.¹

Is the Mexican government taking the linguistic turn? Can we expect Calderón to argue next that crime is a cultural construct? Unfortunately, the problem is not only textual. Criminal organizations and corrupt officials also care about perceptions and the media, and the evidence of that is the number of journalists murdered in the last years.

The argument of this paper is that murder is one of the central themes in the public sphere in contemporary Mexico. We think of murder as an act of violence from which detectives extract an explanation and, when they can, a suspect. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, however, the public gave criminal violence a clear political meaning, and gave the detective and the *pistolero* a visible role in perceptions of crime. Some murders were harder to explain, and in others detectives faced an almost impossible task. Rather than finding the truth, they were ordered to extract an explanation from suspects; and if they could not, they could be asked to close the case through the *ley fuga*.

This lack of explanations is clear today in many drug-related killings that remain unsolved. According to a police officer in Culiacán, Sinaloa, as soon as local detectives see any sign that a homicide is connected to the cartels they close the investigation. Recent academic and official reports confirm this.² The novels by Elmer Mendoza, a writer from the same city, use this fact to give new intensity and verisimilitude to his narratives. His homicide detectives, in *Balas de plata* and other novels, are robbed of the very questions they are trying to answer by the more powerful narcotics agents. The causes and responsibility for the thousand of homicides whose media coverage annoys Calderón remain clouded by suspicions of corruption and internal business disputes among gangs. In order to understand this, I will discuss some of actors, practices and interpretations from an earlier era in the history of crime in Mexico. I propose that

the languages and interpretations that give murder such an important role are not new and must be understood in a broader context.

Such is the need for explanations that the rise in crime since the 1990s has generated a cottage industry of consultants, think-tanks, research projects and bloggers. Karl Marx foresaw this phenomenon in the *Economic Manuscripts*: "A criminal produces crimes," he wrote. "The criminal produces not only crimes but also criminal law, and with this also the professor who gives lectures on criminal law and in addition to this the inevitable compendium in which this same professor throws his lectures onto the general market as 'commodities.' . . . This," added Marx, "brings with it augmentation of national wealth."³ Today's scholars and consultants offer consumable advice to federal and local governments, which in turn pay for the "commodities." As an academic discipline, criminology in Mexico is dominated by jurists, political scientists and a few sociologists. The result is the predominance of policy-oriented perspectives that never look at evidence older than the ten or so years available in surveys or online statistical databases. The questions raised by contemporary levels of violence seem so urgent that audiences have no reason to consider the relevance of the past: it has never been so bad, we hear; memory only provides a golden age to contrast against the present.

I believe, however, that historians are well suited to try to extract the broader political implications of murder, in part because, unfortunately, they have little stake in the "augmentation of national wealth." A historical approach shows that homicide in twentieth-century Mexico has been a key theme in the relationship between civil society and the state, in the definition of victim's rights and authorities' obligations, and in public discussions about justice and transgression.

Murder is also a communicative act, intended to be received and decoded by an audience.⁴ It is not only an instrument for other criminal goals or a public-health problem. What do killers intend to say? How should their act be interpreted? When people talk about murder, and also when they commit it, they engage in critical exchanges with the state. Famous and common homicides create a field of public discussion, engage audiences, and transform the rules for participation in the public sphere: not only the educated and powerful can speak for public opinion; victims and criminals become the object of attention of the press.

Impunity, a prevalent fact, has fueled the interest of diverse audiences, turning them into a critical public. This public can judge the performance of institutions with apparent unanimity, given the clear moral value of homicide. Discussions about homicide are open to everyone and based on a shared agreement about "reality" and morality.⁵ This politicization of crime began around the 1930s and was clearly established by the 1950s. Even as the post-revolutionary regime increased its supervision over the mainstream media, murder became the object of open debates about the limits of the rule of law. I will try to support this looking at a few famous cases and the recently opened Mexico City police archives.

The most famous case is that of Francisco "Goyo" Cárdenas, who strangled and buried four women in his Mexico City house in 1942. Everyone knew and discussed the story: housewives and female prisoners wrote to newspapers and the president demanding protection and justice; congressmen proposed the reinstatement of the death penalty; police detectives gave their own views; reporters treated Cárdenas like a celebrity. Eventually, the authority of psychiatrists, doctors and criminologists prevailed over that of judges and Cárdenas was declared

mentally unfit to stand trial, in spite of his intelligence and education.⁶ He was never convicted but was only released from prison in 1976, receiving applause in Congress as an example of a regenerated criminal.

The reason for the celebrity of the case was not only the gruesome nature of the crimes but Cárdenas's willingness to describe them and provide ample information about his life, his relationship with the victims, and just about any theme. Journalists interviewed him at length in his cell, with the authorization of the judge.⁷ By contrast, other multiple killers of the time deserved little attention or expertise. That was the case, for example, of "La descuartizadora de la colonia Roma," Felicitas Sánchez Aguillón, accused of killing several children, including her own, and disposing of their dismembered bodies in trash cans and empty lots. In 1941 she was arrested and accused of illegal burial, then released, and committed suicide two months later.⁸ Detective work on cases where the victims were prostitutes or when young women disappeared was a low priority, and female investigators were put in charge.⁹ Cárdenas, in fact, was discovered and arrested by agent Ana María Dorantes, although her bosses took all the credit.¹⁰ There was recognition to be gained from the case, because Cárdenas was an articulate murdered who explained his crimes.

Another example of a murder that came with explanations was that of Ema Martínez. On March 6, 1959, she shot and killed senator Rafael Altamirano. She did it at his office, in front of multiple witnesses, and was arrested on the spot. She immediately began to make statements to the press. With tears in her eyes she claimed "He sank me... He finished my life and left me in the streets!" The scandal she caused made front pages for a few days and then died out, just as most crime stories in Mexican newspapers did once a suspect had been arrested.

Even if brief, the murder and subsequent scandal represented Martínez's successful attempt to uncover corruption in the federal bureaucracy. She told reporters that she had been a victim of the sexual debauchery reigning in the Federal Pensions Office (Dirección de Pensiones), where she had been Altamirano's secretary four years ago. Ema declared that she had been coerced into having a relationship with Altamirano. When they broke up, she was fired. According to Martínez, Altamirano had her detained by agents of the Federal Bureau of Security (Dirección Federal de Seguridad) and taken to a psychiatrist's clinic to be declared mentally ill. The Pensions' Office refused to return her savings to her. A subordinate of Altamirano, licenciado Rafael Aréchiga, brought Ema to his own apartment, drugged her, and took pictures of her in "inconvenient positions." These pictures, she claimed, circulated among her female co-workers. She sued Aréchiga and Altamirano for defamation but the case was dismissed. Fearing for her security, she had to leave for Chiapas, the state where she was born, and then to Guatemala. She returned to Mexico City in 1959 to finally collect her money, which she used to buy the .25-caliber gun she fired on Altamirano's back.

Ema Martínez's decision to kill the senator was, in her words, an attempt to clear her name and stop the innuendo. After her arrest she refused to claim that she was mentally ill or had acted in self-defense. She simply gave interviews to the press to lay out her accusations. Her claims fueled comments about the corruption reigning among bureaucrats. Altamirano became an example of politicians who moved from obscure jobs to elected office because of their personal connections, and who used their positions to enrich themselves and have sexual adventures at the expense of female subalterns. The implication was so subversive that the judge in charge of the

case stopped Martínez's interviews with reporters. President López Mateos, just in case, did not attend Altamirano's wake at the Senate.

If we look closely at the press coverage of Ema's case we can see how murder offered opportunities to present a critical, yet ostensibly apolitical, view of the regime. *El Universal*, ran the story without much sympathy toward Martínez. The newspaper rarely had more than one page devoted to police news and was not critical of the regime. Its commercial success came from the classified ads section and social news. Yet the reporters in the police section faithfully reproduced and confirmed Ema's statements. Editors suggested that other bureaucrats were involved in the scandals of the Pensions Office and criticized the judge for limiting access to the suspect after she had promised to name other politicians.

La Prensa, the newspaper with the highest circulation in the country for many years, had a very different tone in its coverage of the case. *La Prensa* centered on police news, running gruesome photos and large, sensational headlines on the front and back pages. It gave Ema Martínez extensive coverage. Although, as usual, it condemned the killer, *La Prensa* embraced the narrative she put forward. Editorials and caricatures denounced the corruption and immorality that her case exposed. In doing so, the newspaper amplified a story that was critical of the government yet acceptable in the context of police news, where events were defined by private passion rather than public conflict.

Police stories allowed for a great level of detail in describing the lives of upper-class victims or suspects who would otherwise be protected from the public eye, blurring the borders between public and private in a way that was not possible elsewhere in the media. Ema Martínez knew this. Her crime was not perfect in that she was caught, but it worked as it allowed her to put her story in front of public opinion.

This is paradoxical if we remember that the post-revolutionary regime controlled the press with little violence, relying instead on public funds spent on advertising, loans to companies or individuals, its monopoly over imported paper, and envelopes thick with cash, distributed every month to reporters. Since the government of Lázaro Cárdenas, the government centralized the distribution of information to reporters, providing detailed press releases and guaranteeing the loyalty of reporters through their sources through the purchase of advertisement.¹¹ While Ema's case unfolded, López Mateos's government repressed the independent railroad workers' union, arresting thousands, breaking into union and Communist Party offices, and sentencing leaders to lengthy prison terms. Both *El Universal* and *La Prensa* reproduced the government's anticommunist rhetoric against railroad workers, as such moments demanded "national unity." But they continued reporting sensational crimes, reproducing the words of suspects, and hinting at immorality at the higher echelons of the regime.¹²

Police news was popular and influential because it had pragmatic, engaged readers. It was a guide to navigate the dangers of everyday life, from domestic violence to street delinquency, from brutal policemen to corrupt judges. Studies of crime and punishment in Latin America show that the police and judiciary have long been the agents of the most frequent and direct relationships between citizens and the state. This did not change in the twentieth century. People dealt with government representatives through the roles of victims or suspects. In Mexico, this constant game (who got caught and who did not, who became a helpless victim, and who was able to retaliate) frames the reading of police news and the exercise of citizenship.

These cases were only two among many scandalous stories that since the 1920s brought together multiple voices (psychiatrists, policemen, suspects, women) and had a deep impact on public culture. Murders, recounted and photographed in gory detail, and the deep exploration of criminals minds, created a common sense of the facts of reality—something rarely available in other areas of public life. Not all murders were the object of such detailed stories and explanations, however. Many, the majority in fact, remained unsolved, barely reported in the press; they were part of everyday life because they did not involve famous victims or suspects.

The usual practices of murder in Mexico changed dramatically during the twentieth century. Street corner brawls were the most visible form of homicidal violence early in the century. Firearms became increasingly common, instead of knives and blunt objects. After the Revolution, when many former revolutionaries came to official positions, the pistolero came to be associated with homicides without explanations and justice. The pistolero was the bodyguard and enforcer for a politician or a criminal (when they were not the same person); he was close to if not a member of the police, an expert in violence always beyond the reach of justice. Pistoleros mixed the criminal with the political: they were used against opposition or independent union leaders or students. This constituted a kind of artisanal use of violence, relatively private in that pistoleros responded to their bosses rather than to any state policy. Yet it was a highly visible form of violence that, in front of public opinion, expressed the limited monopoly of legitimate violence exercised by the Mexican state.¹³

In this context, Goyo Cárdenas was exceptional because, in the view of Lic. Alfonso Langel, leader of the lawyers' union, he was "not [the] butcher [who] can kill with great calmness, . . . as is the best defined type of the born criminal . . . the pistolero." The latter was a born criminal whose "role is to kill . . . when his boss tells him to eliminate certain person, they go and with great tranquility do it; and they repeat the crime when they are ordered again."¹⁴

As practices changed, the codes to interpret murder have also changed. Early in the twentieth century, a knife fight between two men, provided that certain basic rules were followed, expressed the honor of both rivals. Guns modified the codes of violence, as they made it harder to express equality or adherence to honorable forms. But few people owned guns, so their use for homicide was not random or arbitrary. The dapper pistolero of the mid century used his revolver to demonstrate his political clout, without any pretense of fair play. Some of them bragged about the power of their employers. The gun in the waist was part of the outfit, a symbol of power they flaunted like a badge.¹⁵ They dressed in a clearly identifiable way. Dr. Joaquín Maass Patiño had a traffic incident with one man in 1948 but decided to let it go because the man in the other car was "tall and slender, with thin black moustache, dressed with turn-up cuff blue jeans, texan hat and white shirt, so he seemed to me the body-guard pistolero of a politician."¹⁶ The man was, in fact, on his way to a job.

The Servicio Secreto files in Mexico City and the presidential archives at the National Archives contain many anonymous letters denouncing suspects with a dark past. Citizens writing to the President saw pistoleros as "well-situated abnormal, inveterate assassins," about whom little could be done because of their political clout. One premise of these letters was the men who pulled the trigger were seldom the actual culprits or intellectual authors. Luis Saldívar Martínez wrote from the Tlaxcala prison to president Miguel Alemán in 1948 stating that he had been lead

to kill Aurelio León Álvarez, but that the responsibility resided on “los intelectuales Eustaquio Sanchez y Baltazar Maldonado.” In what can be read both as an accusation or a quote from philosopher ideas out of Antonio Caso, Saldívar Martínez added: “para usted no será desconocido que hay muchos intelectuales que se Valen de elementos materiales para quitarse el que les estorba en sus Ideales” [you will very well know that there are many intellectuals who employ material elements to get rid of those who obstruct their ideals].¹⁷

The archives suggest that there was, at least in the middle decades of the century, an active demand for the services of “elementos materiales.” They could be paid 10,000 pesos or more for pulling the trigger, although the middle men could bag up to ten times that much. In the case of movie industry union leader Alfonso Mascarúa, the intermediary Alejandro Ponce de León hired Alfonso Trujeque García, a former boxer that had a reputation as a mean street fighter. Trujeque asked for two thousand but was offered ten thousand. José Antonio Arredondo had refused to take 20,000 for the same job, explaining to the Ponce de León, that “ni cuando estuve muy jodido lo hice menos ahora que no tengo necesidad” [if I did not do it when I was poor, I am not going to do it now].¹⁸

Hired guns could be part of networks of family or friendship before becoming stable pistoleros, ready to do any job that was needed. Loyalty was the key virtue. Marciano Armenta, accused of ordering the murder of senator Mauro Angulo in 1948, bragged that he would never be incriminated, even if they arrested one of his men, because “mis muchachos hacen lo que yo ordeno pues tengo jentes diciplinada y todo trabajamos de acuerdo” [my boys do what I order because they are disciplined people and we all work in coordination]. The man under custody, added Angulo, “es muy hombre y ademas sabe nuestro codigo, pues en nuestra familia ‘el que habla o confiesa y pone en peligro la vida de nosotros se muere’ ” [is too much of a man and he knows our code, because in our family whoever speaks or confesses and endangers our lives dies].¹⁹ In fact, crimes committed by pistoleros were seldom satisfactorily solved. Given the weakness of the justice system to assign blame and provide good explanations, it seemed logical, from the point of view of the public, to explain any murder as the product of hired guns.

The missing link between mysteries and crimes were detectives. Although there were many of them, and several private schools taught forensic science, mid-century detectives never achieved the cultural and legal authority they had in other countries. Famous real-life sleuths like Valente Quintana or apt criminologists like Alfonso Quirós Cuarón were exceptional, and they were often considered corrupt anyway. Regular police detectives were far from this glamorous prototype: they had little education or prestige.²⁰

One result of this is the limited development of detective fiction in Mexico. The dumb street cops who antagonize poor and thievish detective Péter Pérez in the short stories by José Martínez De la Vega are a good depiction of common views. Rather than a detective, Péter Pérez was a harmless observer of the miseries of everyday life. Also in the 1940s, detective Máximo Roldán (acronym of *ladrón*) in the short stories of Antonio Helú was a criminal turned detective, and in Rodolfo Usigli’s *Ensayo de un crimen* inspector Herrera was a corrupt policeman who became a private investigator.²¹ The graphic image of the detective in comics and in movies is closer to that of the pistolero than to the cerebral investigator of the classic detective novels. Valente El Detective, in Juan Reyes Beiker comic strips, is an example.²² The widespread

perception of the police as inept and corrupt was not compatible with the classics of the genre of murder or mystery novel. Even if we look at pulp fiction or Raymond Chandler's novels we find detectives that, however cynical about justice, see their job as an obligation of honor.

Real life police detectives in Mexico were not guides to the truth but more often the ones who prevented it from ever emerging. The archives of the Mexico City Servicio Secreto document the police work that caused such distrust among the public. Real-life Mexican detectives had little concern about method. Gathering evidence from the crime scene was not a priority. In a few cases physical evidence could yield results, as in the case of senator Angulo. Agents were proud to inform the press that "por los medios científicos modernos" [through modern scientific methods] it was possible to ascertain that the same gun had killed another Tlaxcalan politician months earlier.²³ The report of the motorcycle patrolmen arriving at the scene of another murder stated that, although the body was still there, they believed the shells left by the killers had already been collected by judicial agents. The multiplicity of police agencies diluted responsibilities and made explanations less convincing. The Ministerio Público agents were in charge of preparing indictments yet the Servicio Secreto of the Police Department, among other agencies, also conducted investigations.

Police detectives often cited newspaper reports as their source for the facts of a case. They referred to information that "was known" publicly or among unspecified circles. In the case of Angulo, investigators discarded at the outset passion or economic motivations, citing public knowledge about politics in the state of Tlaxcala.²⁴ A military commander in Veracruz reported to his superiors that he decided to look for Angulo's murderers because he read that they might have hidden in his region.²⁵ Detectives, witnesses, even suspects read the police news carefully as it contained essential information: the names of those involved, links with previous cases, political battles within unions, state or local governments and cacicazgos.

Once suspects were identified, police detectives subjected them to hard interrogations. The documents do not speak of torture (which as we know can be defined in many ways) but some *amparos* presented by suspects' lawyers and relatives do. The wife of Alejandro Ponce de León denounced the authorities for "salvajes torturas físicas y morales" [savage physical and moral torture]. The police replied to the judge denying the charges in a standard form used to reject such requests; yet the final report of the Secret Service stated that Ponce de León had provided information after "severos interrogatorios" [severe interrogation].²⁶ Confessions constituted sufficient evidence to close a case, thus also explaining the lack of interest for physical evidence. Failure to confess could have dire consequences. Several cases in the Servicio Secreto archives document the death of suspects during investigations. There was a long tradition in the use of *ley fuga* since the nineteenth century. Killing the suspect before the end of a case prevented additional information about "intelectuales" to become public, providing some form of closure to the story but leaving many questions unanswered. The *ley fuga* was also defended as a means of direct justice. Yet, even if the practice was sanctioned by custom, it was illegal. Servicio Secreto agents went to great lengths to explain the circumstances in which suspects died in the course of investigations even as they failed to confirm the suspicions against their victims.

Santiago Rodríguez Silva was the suspect of killing three women in a barbershop in Tacubaya in 1934. He was the boyfriend of one of them, was an army deserter, had penal antecedents, used a false name, and circumstantial evidence incriminated him. Yet he refused to

confess. He underwent long interrogations, and eventually admitted to killing the women only in self-defense—although he did not get to sign any confession. He was taken to the crime scene to reconstruct the events, a common practice during investigations that, if anything else, yielded pictures in which suspects incriminated themselves by reenacting the crimes, holding the gun or grabbing the neck of a stand-in for the victim.²⁷ But things took a different course in the Tacubaya barbershop. In a letter to the press accounting for the subsequent events, the chief of police of the Federal District explained that the reconstruction was performed at 11 pm in order to avoid hostile crowds. As with previous interrogations, the procedure failed to extract from the suspect a convincing account of the events. Not surprisingly, however, there were razor blades all over the place. The chief informed that, “unfortunately,” in a moment of distraction, Rodríguez Silva grabbed one and swung at an agent. He was shot to death in self defense by another agent, and the case was closed.²⁸

Was Rodríguez Silva killed because he tried to attack five armed police officers with a razor blade, because he would not confess or because, in the minds of the public and the police, he had committed an atrocious crime? The distinction was not too important: he had it coming. By explaining to public opinion the causes and circumstances of suspects’ deaths, authorities were also explaining the original crime.

The ley fuga was applied to the alleged assassins of senator Mauro Angulo. Their arrest in 1948 resulted from a combination of actual detective work (tracing the car and gun used in the murder) with established interrogation methods (as documented by reports and amparos). Being a political case, the Servicio Secreto agents, with the collaboration of the state of Tlaxcala prosecutors, went so far as bring together the main suspect, Marciano Armenta, the remaining Tlaxcala senator, Gerzayn Ugarte, the state’s governor, Rafael Avila, the owner of a brothel in Apizaco, Eustaquio Sánchez, and other local authorities. According to agents’ report, Armenta challenged them to get any of his men to confess, and maintained his innocence. Armenta and two suspected accomplices were then taken from Mexico City to the state of Veracruz to continue the investigation—even though they had not been charged and their lawyers had presented amparos because they feared for their safety. The car with the suspects and the agents stopped in a lonely and foggy area so the suspects could attend to their bodily needs and stretch, but they tried to run and the three of them were shot. The agent in charge explained that he had to do it since Armenta was a wealthy man and his escape would have caused suspicion.

The event was broadly covered in the local and national news. *Excélsior* came just short of praising the use of ley fuga, but others were less scrupulous and justified it as a way to deal with reluctant suspects and as a legitimate resource in the absence of the death penalty. Another Secret Service agent sent days later from Mexico City surveyed Veracruzano public opinion and found widespread support for the shooting of the suspects. Even governor Adolfo Ruiz Cortines congratulated the agency saying that “está muy de acuerdo con los sucesos y manifiesta que ojalá así se acabe con la era de terror que esos sujetos habían implantado en el Estado y también nos manifestó que la opinión toda esta conforme con lo sucedido” [he wholeheartedly agrees with the events and states that he wishes that would be the way to end the era of terror that those subjects have imposed on the state, and he also told us that public opinion agreed with what had happened].²⁹

Instead of investigating the homicide of Angulo's killers, the Secret Service agent investigated its reception among the public; rather than condemning it, the governor praised it. Murder created a field of public discourse, a space of debate that was open to diverse voices and not dominated by one particular authoritative perspective--not even that of the law. In fact, the discussion of homicide was inherently critical of state institutions and agents. Through press, literature, radio, it attracted broad audiences and gave them a political voice.

The current violence constitutes a new era in the practice of murder and its political impact. Less individualistic and more efficient *sicarios*, usually working for organized crime, represent the militarization and privatization of the old pistolero. The gang called Zetas is the best example: its founders were trained as part of an elite Mexican army unit at the School of the Americas; they still recruit new members from the army, sometimes advertising with banners in the streets; they kill with overwhelming use of force and little concern about police obstruction. Drug lords have become so dependent on this and other professionals that they might be losing control.

Since the beginnings of their large-scale transnational business, in the first half of the twentieth century, drug traffickers tried to isolate their commercial operations from violence, which they saw as a cost that could be kept at a minimum. Bribes were always preferred to outright violence. Some groups, like the Arellano Félix clan in Tijuana, began to introduce careless violence in minor transactions in the 1980s. Such lack of discipline, plus the more aggressive yet still disoriented enforcement by the state in the last decade, has given the experts in violence a power of their own: the Zetas began selling their services to the Gulf cartel, in Tamaulipas, but now engage in other activities such as kidnapping, robbery, contract killings, and human trafficking, both in Mexico and in other Latin American countries.

The many drug-related killings of recent months come with an explanation. In spite of their high numbers, they are not uncontrolled or meaningless violence. Murder has become instead the expression of organization. Professional killings have developed new codes meant to be interpreted in specific ways: the message is now conveyed by the violence inflicted on bodies (mutilations, usually decapitation) or the method to dispose of them (wrapped in blankets, inside a trunk or a barrel). Such are the consequences of failing to pay debts or show respect to those who control a territory. In some cases the crime scene is assembled to convey the message: a note on the body or the killing of relatives of the main target. Mark Lacey, from the *New York Times*, writes on Sep. 25: "When Mexican homicide investigators pull up at the scene of the latest drug-related slaughter, they go through a mental checklist: How many corpses? What sort of wounds? And, finally, where is the note scrawled by the killers?"³⁰ Murder is the most effective medium to reach diverse audiences: trade partners or competitors, law enforcement agencies, and the general public.

The relationship between drug traffickers and journalists demonstrates the importance of these messages. Criminals use both money and threats to influence coverage and thus create the impression of control or, alternatively, of their rivals' weakness. Murder is used against those who refuse to follow orders, and Mexico is today one of the most dangerous countries for journalists. Orders from the criminals can include covering a murder with ample visual resources, or not covering it at all. In one case, a journalist was ordered by two rival gangs, under threat of life, to do both things about a body dropped next to a highway.

Police investigation of these and other murders is ineffectual. Public opinion sees detectives, prosecutors and judges as corrupt or weak—and evidence to the contrary is only anecdotal. A murdered cop or journalist is always thought to have been associated with criminals. Impunity remains the most common consequence of murder, as in Mendoza's novels. But the political consequences go beyond literature. The growth of the violence related to the drug business now poses a challenge to the legitimacy of the state, or at least to the perception of Calderón's impartiality.

We should not think that this is a new trend. The evidence of public debates about homicide is available, but scholars have not been very good at reading the second section of newspapers. Criminals, however, have continued to produce narratives, adapting to the rules of new media, now including video, movies and the internet. Their narratives could come in the form of romantic stories about honor, as in the case of Ema Martínez, or as mere press releases, as in the drug cartels' executions. As the president has recognized, we fail to read them at our own peril.

Notes

¹ “FCH se lanza contra medios y los que hablan mal del país,” *El Universal*, 26 Feb. 2010, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/661783.html>.

² “Muertes del narco ya no se investigan. Miles de casos quedan en un limbo entre autoridades locales y federales,” *El Universal*, 23 Feb. 2009, <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/primera/32540.html>.

³ (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/economic/ch33.htm>)

⁴ The thesis is advanced in Diego Gambetta, *Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁵ See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books Distributed by MIT Press, 2002). Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1991). On unanimity as a trait of politicized public spheres in Spanish America François-Xavier Guerra, *Modernidad e independencias: Ensayos sobre las revoluciones hispánicas*, 3a ed., Colecciones MAPFRE 1492 (Madrid, Mexico City: Editorial MAPFRE; Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000), 271. On politics and crime narratives in contemporary Mexico see Robert Buffington and Pablo Piccato, "Introduction," in *Mexican Crime Stories: Case Studies, Causes Célèbres, and Other True-to-Life Adventures in the Social Construction of Deviance*, ed. Robert Buffington and Pablo Piccato (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, Forthcoming).

⁶ See Everard Kidder Meade, "Anatomies of Justice and Chaos: Capital Punishment and the Public in Mexico, 1917-1945," PhD Diss, University of Chicago, 2005. Experts and lay people joined in a true “interpretive feast,” to use Carlos Monsiváis apt words. Monsiváis, *Los mil y un velorios*, 26. Meade, "Anatomies of Justice". See Reinalda Salgado, Cuernavaca, a MAC, 8.sep. 1942, AGN MAC, -541/630. The telegram was added to the investigation proceedings and excerpted by *Novedades*, 2 Oct. 1942, p. 9. Prisoners expressed their views in *El Universal Gráfico*, 25.sep.1942, p. 3.

⁷ *El Universal Gráfico*, 19.sep.1942, p. 1.

⁸ Luna, Nota roja, 57; *La prensa*, 9 y 29.abr. y 17.jun.1941.

⁹ For a man who killed a prostitute he exploited out of jealousy, *Novedades*, 1 Oct. 1942, p. 8.

¹⁰ *El Universal Gráfico*, 11.sep.1942, p. 1, 3; *Ultimas Noticias*, 11.sep.1942, p. 1; *Ultimas Noticias*, 15.sep.1942, p. 1.

¹¹ Arno Buckholder, *Secuencia*.

¹² Histories of the press in the twentieth century, like *Tiempo de saber* by Carlos Monsiváis and Julio Scherer García, stress presidential control, corrupt self-censorship, and the heroism of a few journalists. They see the growth of large newspapers like *Excélsior* or *El Universal* as chapters in the history of an authoritarian regime, and lament the absence of any true expression of public opinion until the 1990s. This interpretation is focused on the first section of morning “national” newspapers. They barely mention the police section, the second edition of the main newspapers, and publications focused on crime news, like *Alarma!* and *La Prensa*.

¹³ See Benjamin T. Smith, *Pistoleros and Popular Movements : The Politics of State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Últimas Noticias, 22.sep.1942, p. 1. [no es el tipo de criminal que mata por matar, como se encuentra uno frecuentemente. Un carnicero es susceptible de matar con toda tranquilidad, y como tipo neto del criminal nato tenemos al pistolero, pongamos por ejemplo. Su función es la de asesinar y cuando su jefe les dice que eliminen a determinada persona, van y con toda tranquilidad lo hacen; y luego vuelven a repetir el crimen cuando se les ordena otra vez]

¹⁵ Lic. Javier Torres Pérez, Mexico DF, a presidente, 28 Ago. 1958, AGN, ARC, 541/1003; Jorge Vélez to president Alemán, Port Isabel, 26 Sep. 1948, AGN, MAV, 541/50.

¹⁶ AHDF, JP, ISSS, c. 10, exp. 65, 1948, asesinato senador mauro angulo hernández, 24 fotos, 239 p. f. 125.

¹⁷ AHDF, JP, ISSS, c. 10, exp. 65, 1948, asesinato senador mauro angulo hernández, f. 1.

¹⁸ AHDF, JP, ISSS, c. 11, exp. 75, 1954, asesinato alfonso mascarua alonso por sindicato cinematografistas, 232 p. “tiene fama de pendenciero y maldito, que a los que les pegaba en pleitos callejeros los golpeaba contra el suelo, sabiendo que anteriormente había cometido un homicidio”.

¹⁹ AHDF, JP, ISSS, c. 10, exp. 65, 1948, asesinato senador mauro angulo hernández, 24 fotos, 239 p. F. 124-129.

²⁰ One, for example, disguised himself as a shoe shiner to infiltrate a group of ex convicts who were planning a robbery. *Novedades*, 11 Oct. 1942, p. 10.

²¹ Martínez de la Vega’s brief narratives, characterized by parody and social criticism rather than mystery, appeared first in the police section. The hero of Antonio Helú’s stories is a murderer forced by circumstances to become a detective. Antonio Helú, *La obligación de asesinar* (Mexico City: CNCA, 1991). Stavans, *Antihéroes*, 90-93, 108. On Valente Quintana as “detective arquetípico”, Monsiváis, *Los mil y un velorios*, 20. Stavans agrees with this, characterizing Mexican detective fiction as derivative and of poor quality. Police and judiciary lack legitimacy, politics dominates, and “en un constante clima de agitación y frágil equilibrio civil, el surgimiento de un detective privado se dificulta porque la frontera entre el bien y el mal carece de concreción y oscila con el clima del momento,” forcing the use of foreign models of detectives. Stavans, *Antihéroes*, 155-157, 67, 69, but see 79-83 on famous detectives.

- ²² Novedades, 2 Oct. 1942, p. 4; Aventuras del detective Peter Perez, Plaza y Valdez, 1987.
- ²³ AHDF, JP, ISSS, c. 10, exp. 65, 1948, asesinato senador mauro angulo hernández, 24 fotos, 239 p.
- ²⁴ AHDF, JP, ISSS, c. 10, exp. 65, 1948, asesinato senador mauro angulo hernández, 24 fotos, 239 p.
- ²⁵ AHDF, JP, ISSS, c. 10, exp. 65, 1948, asesinato senador mauro angulo hernández, 24 fotos, 239 p.
- ²⁶ AHDF, JP, ISSS, c. 11, exp. 75, 1954, asesinato alfonso mascarua alonso por sindicato cinematografistas, 232 p.
- ²⁷ [photos lerner]
- ²⁸ AHDF, JP, ISSS, caja 3, exp. 20, N/522/1204
- ²⁹ AHDF, JP, ISSS, c. 10, exp. 65, 1948, asesinato senador mauro angulo hernández, 24 fotos, 239 p.
- ³⁰ http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/25/world/americas/25mexico.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=crime%20mexico%20drugs&st=cse&oref=slogin.