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El norte chiquito: From 'dirty wars' to drug wars in the Guerrero hotlands

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Abstract:

Mexico's so-called "War on Drugs" began as a war on poor people. This article locates the roots of Mexico's current drug-related violence in a longer history of state terror and violence enacted against social movements and rural communities. The article traces this history by grounding it locally in the guerrerense municipality of Coyuca de Catalán. *Keywords*: Mexico, Guerrero, dirty wars, drug wars, state formation, drug trafficking.

Resumen: El norte chiquito: De "guerras sucias" a guerras de drogas en Tierra Caliente de Guerrero

La mal llamada "guerra contra las drogas" en México empezó como una guerra contra los pobres. Este articulo ubica las raíces de la violencia en el México contemporáneo dentro una historia de terrorismo de estado y violencia durante los 1970s. Para desenredar estas raíces, el artículo ofrece una perspectiva histórica y local basada en el municipio guerrerense de Coyuca de Catalán. *Palabras clave*: México, Guerrero, guerra sucia, guerra de drogas, formación de estado, tráfico de drogas.

> [En Guerrero] el campo muere y los campesinos emigran a las ciudades y al norte, o son lanzados a la siembra de mariguana y amapola, el norte chiquito (Gloria Arena Agis, ex-guerrilla leader, in Jiménez Martínez del Campo, 2008).

Introduction

In his essay on popular struggles in coastal Guerrero, anthropologist Armando Bartra invoked the figure of Ouroboros to question the utility (or perhaps futility) of narrating the history of a region "que se muerde la cola" (Bartra, 1996: 195). Having completed the study in the aftermath of the 1995 Aguas Blancas massacre, in which state police acting upon orders given by the governor Rubén Figueroa Alcocer ambushed and killed more than a dozen *campesinos*,

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he queried, "is it worth noting that, as I write these lines, the mountains are full of soldiers and once again rumors abound about wandering insurgents" (Bartra, 1996: 196). I shared a similar sentiment when in 2009, as I finished a doctoral dissertation on the 1970s guerrilla movements led by schoolteachers Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez, those wandering insurgents (re)emerged publicly in the form of the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo Insurgente (ERPI) – an offshoot from the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (EPR) guerrillas that brought Bartra's 1996 essay to a close. ERPI's leader in Guerrero, Ramiro, led a small unit in the Tierra Caliente region that ambushed military units responsible for terrorizing highland peasant communities ostensibly under the cover of counternarcotics operations. In an interview with US journalist John Gibler, the 34-year-old veteran of armed struggle and political activism revealed a configuration of local-regional power that made Tierra Caliente the country's leading producer of opium poppies and heroin: Caciques, narcoparamilitaries, police, and the military. Shortly after the interview, after claiming that the military and the Mexican state collaborated with the Sinaloa cartel to eliminate rivals and conduct antiguerrilla operations, narco gunslingers killed Ramiro (Gibler, 2009). Thus, a history that devours its own tail.

This essay explores why this historical self-devouring continues from a local perspective, grounded in Coyuca de Catalán, a Tierra Caliente municipality, that experienced the Ramiro-led guerrilla struggles against narcoparamilitaries and soldiers during the summer of 2009. The second largest municipality in Guerrero, delimited by the Sierra Madre del Sur to the southwest and the fertile valleys of the Río Balsas basin to the north bordering Michoacán, Coyuca de Catalán had previously witnessed the convergence of the sort of counternarcotic and counterinsurgent violence that resulted in the death of Ramiro.

In the late 1960s, as the guerrilla movements led by Cabañas and Vázquez began to take shape, soldiers arrived publicly looking for *amapoleros* [opium poppy growers] and *gavillas* [bandit gangs], and providing medical care for poor communities. Secretly, as revealed in a declassified military report from April 1969, they hunted "groups that can be considered rural guerrillas due to their radical ideology, armament, training and attempts to indoctrinate campesinos with extreme leftist ideas."[1] In the ensuing Mexican Dirty War, which began in Coyuca de Catalán with the detention and disappearance of schoolteacher Epifanio Avilés Rojas in 1969, military units and state police working with local cacique clans violently eliminated the guerrilla threat.[2]

All the while, the production of opium poppies increased exponentially throughout the 1970s. The same families who cooperated with the counterinsurgency would go on to occupy important political and police positions in Guerrero as the state became a fiefdom of the Sinaloa Cartel in the late 1980s and 1990s with the help of collaborating state and federal judiciary police. By 2015, the municipality constituted the single largest producer of opium poppies and heroin in a state that produced the largest amount of heroin in Mexico, only second to Afghanistan, globally (Pintor, 2016). Guerrero, the *norte chiquito*

as EPRI leader Gloria Arenas Agis termed the state in relation to northern Mexican states that historically led the way in heroin production, had become *el norte grande*.

The history of Coyuca de Catalán since the 1960s thus reveals one of the many birth places of the contemporary so-called "war on drugs," alongside the Sinaloa highlands and the hotlands of Michoacán as Adèle Blazquez and Romain Le Cour Grandmasion respectively demonstrate in this special issue. The *guerrerense* version emerged historically at the intersection of political repression, counterinsurgency, and authoritarianism. State counterinsurgent terror in the 1970s not only destroyed radical political opponents and disciplined restive peasant communities. It also created a network of military officials, police forces, spy agents, politicians and caciques who used their political power (and the impunity they enjoyed) to become key players in the political economy of narcotics. Such terror and networks, enmeshing narcoeconomic power with political power, also helped shape a model of sovereign power that, in the neoliberal 1980s and 1990s, increasingly resembled "a low intensity paramilitary order predicated on the private interests of the oligarchies" (Williams, 2011: 191). Adopting a local historical perspective facilitates tracing the types of violence, alliances, and expressions of political power that made possible the narcotics industry in a place like Coyuca de Catalán. Indeed, as I argue, the *caciquismo* that long characterized political and social life in the state played a facilitating, generative role. To borrow a quote from Wil Pansters (2012: 3), the same "gray zone of violence and coercion" that made and remade the postrevolutionary state at the local and regional level throughout much of the twentieth century enabled its twenty-first century version.

"A labyrinth of mountains which has few equals"[3]

In Guerrero, journalist José Natividad Rosales wrote decades ago, "God provided mountains and *mañas* [astuteness], humans created poverty and neglect" (Natividad Rosales, 1974, 17). This combustible correlation of factors, the journalist argued, generated a long tradition of popular insurrection dating back to the wars of independence of the early nineteenth century and persisted through the schoolteacher-led guerrilla movements of the 1970s. The Sierra Madre del Sur that cuts across the state provided "a natural refuge" for rebels and revolutionaries; "society provides the motivation" (Natividad Rosales, 1974: 18). But if the highlands spatially and historically constituted a sort of rebel autonomy for Natividad Rosales, a competing historical narrative – one suffused with the logic of centralizing state power and capital – tends to view both the mountains and its people as hindrances in realizing the full economic and political potential of a region usually conceptualized as frontier hinterlands. Governors since the late nineteenth century have constantly characterized the state as ungovernable, thereby undermining its potential untapped economic resources and wealth. Since the late nineteenth century, foreign and na-

tional observers regularly signaled Tierra Caliente as the prime example of such undeveloped economic potential. With its rich mineral resources, extensive highland forests, and the fertile soils of the Río Balsas basin, only instability and lack of transportation networks prevented the region from becoming "the richest state in the Republic of Mexico" (*The Mexican mining journal*, 1909: 28).

Contrary to elite and popular representations of *guerrerenses* as an ungovernable people culturally or climatologically inclined to constant states of "anarchy" (as a government spy agent reported in the early 1960s), it is the local manifestations of political and economic power – caciques, political bosses all too willing to rule through force and violence – that have long challenged state-making designs emanating from Mexico City and regional social democratic movements from below.[4] Indeed, the state was founded in 1849 as a sort of giveaway to powerful Jacobin caciques like Juan Álvarez and Nicolás Bravo, who led popular armies in the independence wars and against the US invasion in 1846 (Illades, 2000: 41-42; Leal, 1972: 31). Subsequent internal struggles between the two leaders – Álvarez representing coastal Guerrero and Bravo representing the inland central region headquartered in the capital city of Chilpancingo – set the general geographic parameters for cacique infighting that proved consistent throughout the liberal reform era and the Porfiriato. The 1910 revolution introduced a new set of caciques aligned with the victorious constitutionalist factions, like the Figueroa family (based in the north of Guerrero near Iguala and Taxco), while some older clans managed to weather both revolution and the agrarian reform efforts of the 1930s initiated regionally by ex-Zapatista governor Adrián Castrejón (1929-1933) and nationally by populist president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) (Jacobs, 1982: 136-137). In Coyuca de Catalán, peasant testimonies recall the Pérez and Brugada families as Porfirian-era landed elites that demonstrated tenacious *antiagrarista* persistence (Bustamante Álvarez & Ravelo Lecuona, 1998: 25).

Yet to petition for land in 1920s-1930s Guerrero represented a dangerous gesture in a region that had experienced low-intensity class warfare between landless peasant communities and oligarchic landed elites for nearly two decades. "An individual who takes a risk and petitions for land starts to smell like a dead person," a Tierra Caliente peasant commented in 1924" (Bustamante Álvarez, León López & Terrazas Mata, 2000: 55). Coyuca de Catalán represented one of the bloodiest theaters, home to the most violent and belligerent antiagrarian elites of the hotlands region. The Chávez, Gómez, Pérez, Pineda and Brugada families owned large amounts of land dedicated to cattle ranching and the production of maize and sesame carried out mostly by sharecropping peasants (Bustamante Álvarez, 1996: 106-107, 131-133). An absentee landowner, in the form of the American-owned Guerrero Land and Timber company, owned the largest tract of land in the municipality (Mason Hart, 2002: 381). Using paramilitary white guards, gunslingers and some sympathetic military officers, these families waged antiagrarian crusades throughout the 1930s

against communities already benefiting from *ejido* grants and those in the process of petitioning. Peasant leaders like Vicente Bedolla – killed in a Coyuca de Catalán bullring along with seven others in 1935 – died at the hands of *anti-agraristas* who were active throughout the 1930s (Bustamante Álvarez, 1996: 125-126; Jacobs, 1982: 131-132). In a 1936 letter sent to president Cárdenas, seven *ejidos* described the constellation of *antiagrarista* terror they faced: At least seven *defensas rurales* [peasant militiamen][5] working for landed elites and accused of several murders; a district judge; the head of military units stationed in the district; and the presidents of neighboring municipalities in San Miguel Totolapan and Zirándaro. The small community of El Ídolo had yet to receive land in 1939 when they wrote to the president lamenting that their *agrarista* efforts had led only to nine fruitless years of demands and the death of fourteen *compañeros*, killed by landed elites (Bustamante Álvarez, 1996: 131-132; Rath, 2013: 35-38).

As a result of such elite-sponsored terror, Cárdenas expropriated some of the lands owned by the most violent families in Coyuca de Catalán by late 1939. Yet the caciques survived agrarian reform by using a combination of continued terror, the courts, and the control of municipal and state-level offices to maintain political and economic power. Political power in Tierra Caliente remained "unaffected by agrarian reform […] it redistributed lands but not regional political power" (Bustamante Álvarez, 1996: 138). By 1944-1945, after the cooptation of peasant organizations like the Liga de comunidades agrarias and key leaders (Castrejón for instance was appointed military zone commander) and the sidelining of agrarian-minded politicians, Guerrero had experienced a "successful landowner restoration" (Gillingham, 2009: 181). In Coyuca de Catalán, fiercely antiagrarian elites like Luis Brugada and Luis Wences García[6] would serve as municipal presidents during the 1940s and 1950s during the governorship of an adroit and capable governor, General Baltasar Leyva Mancilla (1945-1951), who managed to successfully negotiate both national and state-level political rivalries (Gillingham, 2006: 353). Despite several minor uprisings in the late 1940s, like the violence provoked by the federal government's decision to shoot and kill foot-and-mouth infected cattle – Tierra Caliente was, in the words of historian Paul Gillingham, "the richest cattle country in the state" –, the governor managed to establish a fragile PRI hegemony at the time of his departure (Gillingham, 2021: 77-83). By the mid-1950s caciques, particularly those belonging to Leyva Mancilla's *camarilla* and the Figueroa family, were in charge once again (Gillingham, 2009: 188-189). Those in power, it seems, also have their *mañas*.

Green gold and Dirty War, 1960-1982

> En el campo guerrerense el que pega manda, y el que manda tiene que pegar, cuando menos de vez en cuando, para que no se le salgan del guacal. (Bartra, 2000: 16)

In the 1960s Tierra Caliente experienced a gold rush prompted by two different manifestations of green gold: one federally supported, stimulated by industrial demands for oil products, both licit, and illicit, enticed by a booming transnational drug economy centered in the United States. Both *ajonjolí* (sesame) and marijuana production accentuated processes of agricultural commercialization and modernization stimulated largely by economic and political forces beyond the region. Though peasant had grown sesame in Tierra Caliente since the 1840s, World War II and foreign demand for Mexican industrial oils encouraged the *ajonjolinización* of the regional agricultural economy. By the end of the 1940s, 65-70 percent of agricultural land in Tierra Caliente was used for the cultivation of sesame, a rate that continued to increase by the 1960s. Guerrero would lead the nation in production from 1940 to 1970 (Bustamante Álvarez, 1996: 186-193).

What, then, became of those caciques who lost lands during the 1930s? They benefitted the most from this sesame boom having repositioned themselves as a rural commercial bourgeoisie. Having retained local political offices while allied with key regional cacique camarillas led by Leyva Mancilla or the Figueroas, these caciques moved to monopolize access to credit, markets, and new transportation networks expanded during the 1940s. They even indirectly recovered some lost land through the leasing of ejido lands from peasant communities in order to produce sesame with the use of the latest green revolution technology (fertilizer, machinery, and improved seed stock) that massively increased yields – not to mention the federally-funded expansion of irrigation networks and reservoirs via the Río Balsas Commission (1960-1978) that generally favored large scale agribusiness production (Bustamante Álvarez, 1996, 195). Previous peasant-shaped production strategies that balanced sesame and maize production – "se come del maíz y se vive del ajonjolí" as a popular regional saying described the phenomenon – gave way to a commercialized system that favored the caciques who owned capital and controlled markets and credit. As merchants, they "bought cheap from peasant and then sold at the highest market prices" (Bustamante Álvarez, 1996: 191-195, 202)[7]. By the mid-1960s in the midst of the green gold bonanza, impoverished peasant *ejidatarios* also faced coercive pressure from Banrural, the parastatal rural credit bank that conditioned the availability of credit to the continued production of sesame. Other agrarian state institutions threatened communities with the loss of *ejidal* lands if they stopped producing the crop. Caught in a system that forced them to produce a commodity for which they obtained minimal returns, peasant began to supplement their sesame harvests with seasonal labor migrations to other Mexican agricultural zones from November to May (Bustamante Álvarez, 1996: 196-198).[8] Anecdotal evidence suggest that some peasant turned to the other green gold, grown in the mountains interspersed within maize and bean plants, using more potent marijuana seeds brought in by northern Mexican and American smugglers (Kamstra, 1970: 8-20; Grillo, 2011: 38-43).[9]

To maintain an inequitable regional agricultural economy that pauperized *ejidatarios* and their communities, caciques once again employed paramilitary gunslingers, an expanded state police that included mounted and motorized forces, and they collaborated closely with locally stationed military units. Throughout the 1960s, as popular political protests targeted despotic state governors and challenged PRI rule in Guerrero through electoral means, peasant mobilized to confront the political and economic domination of caciques at the local level. Through independent union organizing and direct action, peasant challenged a creeping *neolatifundismo* that allowed landed elites to take over the most fertile lands through technically illegal means, organize sharecropping-like production, and pay meager prices for sesame. Yet the quotidian use of violence and coercion by caciques and their military allies facilitated the reproduction of this form of rural domination. In 1965, for instance, "gunslingers on the payroll of caciques" massacred eighteen Tierra Caliente peasant over land tenure conflicts (Mayo, 2006: 51).

In highland communities with access to forestry resources, both in Tierra Caliente and the neighboring Costa Grande region, caciques like Melchor Ortega used white guards and military units to terrorize *ejidos* that protested illegal logging. The constant presence of military soldiers, accused of ransacking homes and torturing peasant men by hanging them from trees to the point of fainting, became, in the words of one Costa Grande peasant, "something common and ordinary" (Gómezjara, 1979: 167).[10] By the time a military general entered Tierra Caliente in late 1965, charged with conducting counternarcotics operations, he encountered a peasant population enraged by the constant humiliation and violence practiced by a network of corrupt judges, state police, and military officials who had been "converted into servants of the caciques." The violence that made Guerrero infamous, he argued, originated from politically-connected caciques who divided the state into personal "zones of influence." The general Salvador Rangel Medina also provided a warning that there would be an eruption of peasant violence as vengeance against injustice and the "humiliation endured for generations" (Veledíaz, 2010: 226-227).

By 1968 the general's warning proved prophetic when two different guerrilla groups led by schoolteachers Genaro Vázquez and Lucio Cabañas began recruiting and operating in the Sierra Madre del Sur highlands. After a decade of massacres and everyday forms of violence carried out by caciques – in the midst of booming marijuana demand from the United States – dozens of rural communities in the Costa Grande and Tierra Caliente regions supported (to varying degrees) guerrilla movements that began as armed self-defense against cacique gunmen and their allied state police forces. As a region crucial both for its geographical location – in linking the Tierra Caliente valleys to the Costa Grande highlands and coastline – and site of oppositional political activism throughout the 1960s, Coyuca de Catalán early on captured the attention of both guerrillas and counterinsurgent military officials.[11] The Vázquez-led Asociación Cívica Revolucionaria Nacional (ACNR, National Revolutionary Civic

Association), in particular, enjoyed the support of several families and schoolteachers in the municipality. Prior efforts to organize sesame producers in an independent peasant union during the mid-1960s – and anti-PRI electoral campaign organizing in the early 1960s – also provided a potential base of popular support for the incipient armed group (Aviña, 2014: 118; *El Sur de Acapulco*, November 2004).[12] When an urban cell of the ACNR "expropriated" a Mexico City bank in early 1969, intelligence obtained through the torture of two captured guerrillas led secret police agents and military officials to Coyuca de Catalán and the Antúnez and Galarza families.[13] On 19 May 1969, Major Antonio López Rivera detained schoolteacher Epifanio Avilés Rojas and Jorge Manuel Torres Cedillo in the small town of Las Cruces. More than a week later, military units picked up Santos Galarza Millán. All faced accusations of having participated in the bank robbery and suffered torture. After boarding a military plane from Chilpancingo to Mexico City, Avilés Rojas was never seen again (Femospp, 2006: 35-36).[14] He is the first known disappeared victim of the Dirty War *a la mexicana* – a war of disappearances that began in Coyuca de Catalán.

The Dirty War and the Montúfar family

A month after the capture of Avilés Rojas in Las Cruces, a different sort of conflict erupted in the nearby community of La Iguana – one with future ramifications for Coyuca de Catalán. A bloody internal struggle over *ejidal* land ownership led a number of La Iguana residents to entirely abandon their village, as they described in a letter sent to the Secretariat of National Defense. The villagers feared "the increasing power amassed by groups of gunslingers, some of whom are relatives of the current governor of Guerrero [Caritino Maldonado, 1969-1971, part of the Leyva Mancilla *camarilla*] and include Juan, Bonifacio and José Montúfar Ochoa, José Montúfar Maldonado […] the delinquents remain free because their mother Siria Ochoa says she is cousins with [the governor]" (González Ruiz et al., Comverdad, Anexo, 2014: 186-192).[15] These men from the nearby community of El Pozo possessed a longer, dark history of committing violence against local *ejidatarios* and rival caciques. The peasant letter described a series of murders dating back to 1961 and a 1968 attack on La Iguana during which the Montúfar gunslingers used dynamite to raze homes. After receiving the letter, the military dispatched the locally stationed lieutenant coronel to check the veracity of the campesino claims – a military officer the people from La Iguana accused as "controlled by the Gómez Montúfar family" (González Ruiz et al., Comverdad, Anexo, 2014: 186-192). Unsurprisingly, their demand for protection and the right to form a unit of peasant militiamen in the community went unheeded.

Yet the story, as read from the military archives, possesses a bit more complexity. The archives also contain letters written by Siria Ochoa Maldonado de Montúfar and her sons in December 1968 and June 1970, respectively, in

which they present themselves as the aggrieved victims (González Ruiz et al., Comverdad, Anexo, 2014: 115, 189).[16] The letters decry the violence committed by a cacique from La Iguana – Reynaldo Gómez Ochoa, his two daughters and at least ten hired guns – in order to rob fourteen *ejidatarios* of their lands and livestock. Ochoa's sons describe a local political network, including General Salvador González Pérez, "a dirty and arbitrary man," corrupted by the *cacique* from La Iguana. Once the cacique forced the fourteen *ejidatarios* to flee the village, he "enclosed the [*ejidal*] lands, destroyed the homes of the fleeing peasant, created paddocks; the best *ejidal* lands he rented to his gunmen." The letter complains that military officials sent to investigate their claims proved susceptible to the corrupting influences of Gómez Ochoa and his daughters. Indeed, the investigating military official cited above "told us to pack up and leave because he will expel us at all costs since he is siding" with the cacique's daughters who had taken over in their father's absence. The writers conclude by asking the state governor for protection and that an outside, nonpartisan military unit be sent to protect them from the bandits (González Ruiz et al., Comverdad, Anexo, 2014: 190-192).

As seen, this sort of localized, inter- and intra-family violent conflict over land dates back to the 1920s. Yet these conflicts gained new significance and new dimensions in the context of counterinsurgency, dirty wars, and counter-narcotics operations that characterized the state after 1968. In response to the guerrillas, PRI leaders like President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) and Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) ordered thousands of soldiers into Guerrero to wage counterinsurgency campaigns that systematically terrorized peasant communities as a way to sap popular support from the guerrillas. At the same time, US demand for Mexican mota and heroin – the latter prompted by Turkish government crackdowns on opium poppy production and the closing down of French heroin laboratories by the early 1970s – resulted in the proliferation of marijuana and opium poppies in the *guerrerense* highlands. This narcotics boom in production allowed PRI and military leaders to publicly present counterinsurgency campaigns as strictly antidrug and anticrime in nature while denying the existence of peasant guerrillas and the terror required to separate them from their base of support.

Though military units sent into Guerrero, backed by thousands of state police and spy agents, did conduct counter-narcotics operations, they ultimately confronted a thorny issue first identified by General Rangel Medina back in late 1965: Some locally stationed military units and judicial state police collaborated with peasant drug farmers and narcotraffickers, particularly in highland communities, to protect them against outside military groups sent to locate and destroy drugs (Veledíaz, 2010: 225-228). Some reports even point to narcomilitary collaboration for the purpose of locating and exterminating guerrilla fighters (Veledíaz, 2010: 370-377; Osorno, 2011: 76-78).[17] When asked to compare the praxis of antidrug operations to antiguerrilla campaigns, a military veteran of these operations neatly summarized official thinking: "We had a

mentality that we did not have beef with the marijuana growers; but we had to fuck up the guerrillas" (Flores Pérez, 2009: 177).

During the military-led hot phase of the counterinsurgent state of exception created in Guerrero from 1968-1975 some cacique families managed to solidify their positions by making alliances with the militar and state police forces sent to crush the guerrillas and destroy drug plants (Snyder, 2001: 197-133). It appears that the Montúfar was one such family. Though I lost the archival trail of the cacique from La Iguana, it does seem that he left the region for some time beginning in the late 1960s. Meanwhile the Montúfar family would consolidate their *caciquil* power in the region. In the mid-1970s, they befriended a military officer who cemented this particular configuration of a cacique-army-police alliance in Coyuca de Catalán: Major Antonio López Rivera, the soldier who detained the disappeared Avilés Rojas in 1969. During a military operation in 1974 in the community of La Papaya, in which soldiers allegedly executed three peasants and killed two more in an ensuing firefight, José Montúfar saved a wounded Lieutenant Colonel López Rivera and took him to his home in El Pozo. Peasants who observed or were aware of the massacre point to that incident as the beginning of a long relationship between the military officer (promoted to colonel after the operation) and the Montúfar family. After 1974, the family "served as *madrinas* and *orejas* of the military, providing intelligence on the region. That is why they are identified as the repressors of people who think differently from the government or the PRI" (Gutiérrez, 2002a).[18] In addition to cultivating relationships with state security apparatuses, the Montúfar family would also look to the regional political arena and establish a link with arguably the most powerful *cacicazgo* in the state: the Figueroa family from Huitzuco.

Rubén Figueroa Figueroa – federal senator, head of the Río Balsas Commission, leader of the powerful national truckers' union and *compadre* of President Echeverría – became governor of Guerrero in 1975 (to 1982). His kidnapping by PDLP guerrillas in mid-1974, and subsequent rescue by the Mexican military in September of that year, contributed to his gubernatorial appointment. By the time he took office, the PDLP had suffered serious military defeats, including the death of its leader Lucio Cabañas in December 1974, but cadres remained in the mountains. Urban guerrillas in Acapulco and other guerrerense cities remained operational too. Figueroa thus assumed office with a violent revanchism that targeted for extermination both remaining armed insurgents and the expression of political dissidence most vociferously expressed from the state university in Chilpancingo. Independent unions and *ejido* coalitions would also suffer his wrath. Appointing military officers who participated in the brutal counterinsurgency against the ACNR and PDLP to key leadership positions in various state police corporations – Major Mario Acosta Chaparro, for instance, would become the head of all state police by 1977-1978— Figueroa ruled violently backed by police and death squad forces (*El Sur de Acapulco*, July 2004).

At the same time, despite increased military counternarcotic operations throughout the mid and late 1970s as part of Operations Trizo and Condor, local narcotraffickers continued to collaborate with certain military, police, and political officials. This, in part, likely explains the continued increase and expansion of opium poppy production in the region until 1979-1980 (Britto, 2010: 159-177; Craig, 1980: 691-701). If anything, such militarized counternarcotics operations likely had the effect of removing small-scale growers and traffickers while encouraging the centralization and professionalization of stronger, politically-connected players in the business (Kamstra, 1974: 184-199). Moreover, as Richard B. Craig noted in his 1980 evaluation of Operation Condor, poor peasant growers rather than the traffickers or their allies, represented the main target, and, accordingly they were the ones who suffered systematic human rights violations. Are "local and regional caciques and politicians so untouchables," Craig questioned, "that even Mexico City dare not challenge or remove them for fear of igniting drug-related scandals at the highest levels of government?" If government claims that the operations destroyed 90 percent of the poppy and marijuana fields nationwide proved factual, why "[is there still] a massive military presence in the countryside […] could the real motive be to 'depistolize' the field, to prevent today's Pedro Chávez from becoming tomorrow's Lucio Cabañas" (Craig, 1980: 698).

In Figueroa's Guerrero, the counterinsurgent impulse that Craig located at the core of counternarcotics operations at times expressed itself in the form of repressive practices previously used on suspected guerrillas. While military-police death squads coerced some narcotraffickers to fall in line and collaborate, the more recalcitrant ones experienced death and disappearance.[19] Figueroa's head of Acapulco police chosen from military ranks, Lieutenant Colonel Luis Aguirre Ramírez, and his state Attorney General, Carlos Ulises Acosta Víquez (*El Sur de Acapulco*, February 2003), publicly flaunted their friendship with known narcotraffickers. Rumors surrounding illegal enrichment began to hound Major Acosta Chaparro. Some began to whisper that the military counterinsurgent expert owned opium poppy farms, located in the very mountains that once sheltered the PDLP (Padgett, 2015: 29-32). In late 1981, a local Acapulco tabloid alleged that the military man known for his *mano dura* tactics, was *compadre* with a corrupt unauthorized [*pirata*] taxi leader "recently freed despite having been detained by military authorities in possession of drugs, weapons and ammunition."[20]

During the governorship of Figueroa, the military gradually wound down the scale of its counterinsurgency campaigns while still maintaining a significant presence. Military officers brought in by the governor to assume police duties took over the antiguerrilla struggle and conducted a more localized Dirty War throughout Figueroa's tenure – a Dirty War that included the use of "death flights:" dumping individuals tagged as subversives from airplanes into the Pacific Ocean. The repressive network developed by Figueroa, Acosta Chaparro, and Colonel Francisco Quirós Hermosillo in the late 1970s would go on to

exercise influence in Guerrero throughout the 1980s and 1990s even as the Huitzuco cacique witnessed political rivals ascend to the governorship. Dirty War military officers like Major Juventino Sánchez Gaytán served as head of state judicial police in Guerrero during the 1980s and in early 1990s Morelos (*El Sur de Acapulco*, April 2004). His brother-in-law Captain Francisco Barquín Alonso, leader of a shadowy death squad in the late 1970s and accused of trafficking marijuana using Air Force planes in 1979, went to work in Tlaxcala (Medellín, 2005; Padgett, 2015: 32). Major José Agustín Montiel López, a close ally of Quirós Hermosillo and Sánchez Gaytán, served as head of state prisons in the late 1980s and early 1990s (and eventually took over as head of Morelos police in the early 2000s) (Aponte, 2004, Aranda, 2004; Padgett, 2014). His brother Luis Montiel López, a school of the Americas graduate (1962) and military academy classmate of Quirós Hermosillo, became an influential general who emerged as a serious candidate to head the Secretariat of National Defense under Vicente Fox (2000-2006) (Martínez, 1995; *Proceso*, 2004).

This shadowy power network, responsible for disappearing hundreds of people during the 1970s and violently repressing popular organizations and opposition political parties during the 1980s, were, at the same time, working to foster the drug trade in Guerrero and beyond. From collaborating with local Costa Grande drug traffickers like Enrique Villalva and Adolfo Serna Aguilar, they would, by the 1990s, provide protection to the Ciudad Juárez Cartel (Acosta Chaparro & Quirós Hermosillo) and powerful Sinaloa traffickers like Juan José Esparragoza (Montiel López) (Bartley & Bartley, 2015: 368; Bowden & Molloy, 2014). As Guerrero's narcotics production slowed in the face of competition from Colombia and Asia by 1980 (McCoy, 2003: 395-405), cocaine smuggled in from Colombia gradually emerged as the most profitable drug for the next two decades. Thus, the state of Guerrero became prized for its long Pacific coastline and the port of Acapulco, in addition to featuring still surviving marijuana and opium poppy farms. When a new generation of Sinaloan traffickers came calling in the late 1980s and early 1990s, those who took advantage of the Guadalajara Cartel's breakup after the execution of DEA Agent Kiki Camarena in 1985, encountered a ready-made political and police infrastructure willing to collaborate. And by the time traffickers like Beltrán Levyas and the Zambadas arrived, they found a facilitating cacique structure that had learned since the early 1950s the advantages of working with outside state intervention to solidify local authority and power (Gillingham, 2009: 186-189; Pansters, 2005: 361-362, 375-376).

A long conclusion: Persistent *caciques*

They call him *el señor del sombrero*. A wealthy landed elite and livestock rancher, Rogaciano Alba Álvarez served a number of terms as municipal president in Petatlán, a coastal municipality that shares a mountainous, forest-filled

border with Coyuca de Catalán. An ardent PRI militant and *compadre* of Rubén Figueroa Alcocer – son of Rubén Figueroa – he also helped organize the Unión Ganadera Regional del Estado de Guerrero (UGREG) in the early 1990s (*Proceso*, 2010). Thus publicly he led the life of a typical *cacique guerrerense al mas puro estilo tradicional* by controlling local PRI politics, consolidating rancher support, and managing PRI-linked *campesino* organizations. Less visible was his position as a Sinaloa Federation-linked narcotrafficker in control of "opium poppy and heroin production in the mountains of Petatlán, surrounded by his gunslingers" and protected by soldiers from the nineteenth (Petatlán) and fortieth (Ciudad Altamirano) battalions (Arguello Cabrera, 2016: 70, 128). When his *compadre*, Figueroa Alcocer, became governor of Guerrero in 1993, and allowed Boise Cascade Company to set up logging operations in Petatlán and Coyuca de Catalán, *el señor del sombrero* used his paramilitaries to attack an environmentalist *campesino* group organized to resist, by legal means, the massive deforestation perpetrated by the US company. At the state level, many independent peasant organizations faced persecution at the hands of state police – now advised and receiving active collaboration from General Mario Acosta Chaparro and a small group of trusted Dirty War-era torturers dubbed Group Tiger (Gutiérrez, 1996).

Though the Mexican Senate removed Figueroa Alcocer from power in 1996 after the Aguas Blancas massacre, the repression of peasants continued unabated. By the late 1990s, a mix of cacique gunslingers, military, police and narcos engaged in the violent repression, including assassinations, of members of the Organización de Campesinos Ecologistas de la Sierra de Petatlán y Coyuca de Catalán (OCESP). Cacique allies in the legal system facilitated the arrest and imprisonment of two prominent OCESP leaders on charges of narco-trafficking and illegal possession of weapons in 1999 (Rodríguez Cabrera, 2007). Digna Ochoa, the Mexico City-based human rights lawyer who took up the case of the imprisoned peasants, mysteriously died in late 2001. Soon thereafter, the Committee of Political Prisoners in Acapulco published a letter identifying Alba Álvarez as the head of a narcoparamilitary group, protected by powerful PRI politicians and the military, who was responsible for the assassination of Ochoa. A recent trip to the sierra by Ochoa to visit highland communities suffering constant paramilitary attacks had "bothered and inconvenienced" the cacique. The spokesperson for the political prisoners, a young peasant named Omar Guerrero Solís, stated: "they want us to remain in prison for many years and for campesinos to abandon their lands so that we are unable to prevent the exploitation of the forests […] Digna Ochoa was going to help us" (Gutiérrez, 2002b). Years later Guerrero Solís would be known by his guerrilla *nom-de-guerre*, Ramiro.

By the time Ramiro and his ERPI guerrillas traveled through Coyuca de Catalán and the neighboring municipalities of Ajuchitlán and San Miguel Totolapán in 2008-2009, Alba Álvarez was on the run. In the aftermath of the Sinaloan civil war that began in 2008, pitting Chapo Guzmán and Mayo Zam-

bada against the Beltrán Levya brothers, *el señor del sombrero* chose to remain with the former and suffered devastating attacks from the latter. Beltrán-Levya gunmen tried to assassinate him in 2008 and executed three of his children that same year (Osorno, 2011: 78-80). In contrast, the Montúfar family continued to cement their political and economic power in Coyuca de Catalán as loyal PRI militants who attacked communities affiliated with opposition political parties like the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and/or guerrilla groups like the ERPI. At some point they also purportedly began participating in the *maña*, as *guerrerenses* refer to the narcotics business (Arguello Cabrera, 2016: 224).[21] Peasants who suffered attacks from the family alleged that they made a fortune from "cattle rustling and the trafficking of drugs, specifically cocaine and marijuana" – lucrative activities helped by the Montúfar alliances with the military, politicians, and state police in Tierra Caliente (Gutiérrez, 2002a).

Indeed, Ramiro alleges that during his first capture in 2001 when transported to the Coyuca de Catalán jail, "Abel Montúfar, a well-known hired killer [in the region]" and the brother of "Erik Montúfar [a Guerrero state police official] were there and apparently in charge." That family, Ramiro concluded, "has been both feared and hated in Tierra Caliente because they have the support of the state. Erik Montúfar is deeply embedded in state power and thus they let them go" (Gibler, 2009; CNDH, 2002). At the time of the ERPI leader's death, Erik Montúfar served as state director of the Policía Investigadora Ministerial after a prior stint as commander of the judicial state police. Several years later, his brother Abel, the "well-known hired killer" was elected as mayor of Coyuca de Catalán. The history and the present of this *norte chiquito* – the leading producer of heroin in the country for much of the early twenty-first century – reveals that in the Tierra Caliente the political and economic power "tiene nombre y apellidos, rostros y mañas" (Bartra, 2000: 16). And this power, after the illusory democratic transition post-2000 and subsequent "war against the Cartels," stubbornly and violently persists.

* * *

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Notes

1 Archivo General de la Nación [AGN], Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales [IPS], box 549, file 3, 1-4.

2 Dirty war here refers to the practice of political, counterinsurgent violence used by the Mexican state against a myriad of student, peasant, and guerrilla (rural and urban) movements from the early 1960s to 1982. While standard narratives tend to cite the October 1968 student massacre in Mexico City as the beginning of this cycle of state terror, recent research based on regional case studies emphasize earlier starting points and the processual intensification of state terror throughout the 1970s: A preparatory phase from 1946-1962 that included massacres and everyday forms of violence in provincial cities and the countryside; electoral violence in early 1960s Guerrero that radicalized some popular movements to create armed self-defense groups; and the 1965 guerrilla attempt to take over the Ciudad Madera military base in Chihuahua. Avilés Rojas' 1969 detainment-disappearance inaugurated the most violent phase of the Mexican Dirty War that lasted until 1982. Estimates range between 1,200-3,000 disappearances from the late 1960s to 1982 (Cedillo & Calderón, 2012).

3 Niven, 1909, 37-38.

4 AGN, Dirección Federal de Seguridad [DFS] 100-10-1, file 7, 104.

5 As historian Thom Rath shows, the postrevolutionary state institutionalized the use of these peasant militias in 1929, armed and trained by the army, for the maintenance of peace and order in rural communities. Additional duties included serving as army guides, collecting intelligence, and functioning as a sort of rural police force. These militias often sided with powerful local interests against agrarian peasant communities.

6 His brother, schoolteacher Nicolas Wences García, served as a federal *diputado* during the 1950s and as Director of the state college. Nicolas' relationship with Leyva Mancilla likely helped him avoid legal troubles when he faced multiple accusations of murder.

7 Quotes from Spanish have been translated into English by the author.

8 This *ajonjolí* boom during the 1960s and 1970s, Bustamante Álvarez argues, generated much wealth for the cacique minority that controlled markets and "conditions of production." At the same time, this model of development produced the "proletarianization" of peasants that led to their pauperization and encouraged constant migrations.

9 AGN, IPS, box 1028, file 1, 12.

10 AGN, Secretaría de Defensa Nacional [SDN], box 74, file 229, 388-390. The use of hanging by local military units was also reported in early 1967 by 19 peasants in the mountainous Costa Grande municipality of Coahuayutla. AGN, SDN, box 81, file 244, 114-115.

11 AGN, IPS, box 549, file 3, 25 de abril, Estado de Guerrero; IPS box 549, file 3, 28 de abril, Estado de Guerrero, Información de Acapulco; box 550, file 1, 30 de abril, Estado de Guerrero; box 550, file 1, 23 de diciembre 1969, Estado de Guerrero.

12 The local ACNR supporter, José Martínez, was a Zapatista veteran of the 1910 revolution and had worked alongside Vázquez since the early 1960s. From 1966-68 Martínez

participated with the Consejo de Autodefensa (CAP), an umbrella organization formed by Vázquez's comrades that brought together peasant unions independent of PRI control. Peasant producers of sesame, coffee, and copra formed part of the CAP. The leader of the *ajonjolí* union, Bernardo Reyes Félix, was detained and disappeared in Acapulco in September 1972, allegedly by Wilfrido Castro (then head of the Acapulco judicial police and accused of dozens of additional disappearances). AGN, DFS 100-10-1-67, file 26, 30-33; and, AGN, SDN box 121, file 370, 131.

13 According to the head of the Mexican military in 1969, General Marcelino García Barragán, the lieutenant in charge of the military unit stationed in Coyuca de Catalán had "strong connections" to the Antúnez and Galarza families. AGN, IPS, box 549, file 3, 28 de abril, Estado de Guerrero, Información de Acapulco.

14 AGN, DFS 100-10-16-2-70, file 2, 315. The first two detained ACNR guerrillas, Florentino Jaimes Hernández (Avilés Rojas' brother-in-law) and Juan Galarza Antúnez, were captured immediately after the bank robbery on 19 April 1969. Police officers beat Galarza Antunez to death.

15 See AGN, SDN collection, box 77, file 232.

16 Siria Ochoa's letter prompted a military investigation that seemingly proved the veracity of her claims. A military unit sent after the cacique failed to locate him "because he had left Guerrero."

17 AGN, IPS, box 1182A, file 1, 443-444. Smith (2013) describes similar antiguerrilla alliances between narcos and military forces in 1970s Sinaloa.

18 In November 1980, the Ministry of Agrarian reform officially ratified the ejidal rights over La Iguana to the Montúfar Ochoa and Montúfar Maldonado families and other allied families. *Diario Oficial de la Federación*, 17 November 1980: http://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=4861355&fecha=17/11/1980&print=true

19 AGN, DFS, Versión Pública [hereafter VP], Rubén Figueroa Figueroa, file 2, 137 (100-10-1-76, L.63).

20 AGN, DFS, VP, Mario Acosta Chaparro, File 1, 5-10, 64-65 (012-025, file 41). For the *mano dura* assessment see Secretaría de Protección y Vialidad del D.F. (23 November 1984), AGN, DFS, VP, "Mario Acosta Chaparro," File 1, 88-91 (009-038, file 6).

21 An assortment of disaffected PRI militants and leftists formed the PRD after the 1988 elections to challenge the PRI from the left. Throughout the 1990s, the PRD organized heavily in Guerrero, achieving high levels of popular support while suffering blood repression and assassinations. The party eventually won the governorship in 2005.

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