

Book Review

– *The two faces of fear: Violence and fear in the Mexican metropolis*, by Ana Villarreal. Oxford University Press, 2024

Mexico has long been a transshipment point for illegal narcotics between South America and the United States. Clashes among drug cartels over territory and trafficking routes have caused insecurity and violence in parts of Mexico for decades, especially along the U.S. border. When Felipe Calderón became president in 2006, he declared a “war on drug traffickers” and deployed thousands of federal troops to combat the cartels. Over the next decade, violence in Mexico dramatically escalated, with tens of thousands of people killed or disappeared. Violence also became more generalised throughout the country, impacting areas that had previously been relatively peaceful. One of the areas that experienced a sudden rise in violence was Monterrey, the capital of Nuevo León and a centre for business and commerce in Northeast Mexico.

In this book, Ana Villarreal examines how violence and fear impacted the everyday lives of Monterrey’s residents. Villarreal’s research is based on 154 interviews that she conducted mostly between 2011 and 2014 with a wide range of individuals from throughout the metropolitan area. Having grown up, attended school, and worked in Monterrey, Villarreal has extensive knowledge of the city and a broad social network upon which to draw. Without question, the residents of Monterrey had reason to fear for their safety. At the time of this research, the city was experiencing a sharp rise in homicides, abductions, extortions, carjackings, and armed robbery. While much of this violence was perpetrated by the cartels and their affiliated paramilitaries, police and military forces also committed widespread abuses with little regard for civilian populations.

Villarreal examines how the fear that gripped Monterrey impacted how people engaged with each other and their urban environments. Daily routines were disrupted and transformed. People relocated residence, work, and leisure, rescheduled activities, adopted self-imposed curfews, and recalibrated status-markers. Villarreal is especially effective in describing both the similarities and differences in the self-protection strategies of people across different economic classes and racial groups. Villarreal also demonstrates how people in more affluent areas of Monterrey were able to deploy far greater resources to safeguard

their way of life than people in less affluent areas. She focuses particularly on San Pedro Garza García, the wealthiest of the nine municipalities that make up the metropolitan area. Villarreal shows how San Pedro was able to leverage public resources to obtain much higher levels of security than other areas of the city. The business elite partnered with the state government to create a new civil defence force to patrol the municipality. San Pedro became a “defended city,” increasingly “disembedded” from the rest of the metropolitan area. Because poorer municipalities were not able to access the same level of public resources, their residents were far more vulnerable to criminal and state violence. As the residents in one area were protected, residents in other areas became more vulnerable. Young men residing in marginalised areas were at the greatest risk, since they were targeted by both the cartels and the security forces.

Villarreal also highlights the broader societal impact of fear and violence. Privileged communities, she argues, regrouped and reconcentrated their resources. Businesses, shopping centres, restaurants, and nightclubs of San Pedro all thrived, while other areas of Monterrey declined. The metropolitan area became increasingly unequal. As Villarreal notes, “when one municipality is defended, the rest of the metropolis – its most marginalised sectors especially – is further disadvantaged” (p. 11).

The differential impact of fear and violence underscores Villarreal’s central argument. The “two faces of fear,” she contends, reflect how fear simultaneously isolates and concentrates people and resources. Fear certainly isolates people who curtail their activities and retreat into fortified perimeters. At the same time, fear concentrates people within their social class. As Villarreal puts it, fear accelerates “the spatial concentration of urban wealth at a city level, regrouping the privileged and reconcentrating their resources” (p. 63). Fear thus has a polarising impact on social relations and structures, exacerbating class, racial, and spatial inequalities.

Many of the people that Villarreal interviewed lived in San Pedro. This is the municipality that she knows best and where her social network largely resides. Although Villarreal also interviewed people from other municipalities, her description of how violence and fear impacted daily life in these areas is more limited. Differences among the various municipalities might have also been more fully examined. A more nuanced description of variation among the eight municipalities outside of San Pedro would have provided a more complete picture of societal changes occurring throughout the metropolitan area. The interviewees also raised some concerns. People appear to have been selected randomly, with many being relatives, friends, former classmates, neighbours, and acquaintances. Because Villarreal did not employ a standard survey method, the interviews conducted and the narratives uncovered cannot be considered representative of the people of Monterrey as a whole. The book does include a methodological appendix which addresses some of the challenges that inevitably arise with this type of ethnographic fieldwork.

Despite these concerns, *The two faces of fear* offers compelling insight into how people respond to increased violence and fear. Villareal's ability to link these responses to greater class, racial, and spatial inequalities constitutes a significant contribution to the study of urban Latin America at a time of heightened insecurity and societal disruption.

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