

The War on Drugs in Mexico: a failed state?

ADAM DAVID MORTON

ABSTRACT *This article focuses on the continued attractiveness of ‘failed state’ strategic thinking that stretches across policy-making and academic circles and links it to the issue of the War on Drugs in Mexico. It does so in order to challenge, if not reject, caricatured representations of ‘failed states’. Moreover, it offers an alternative understanding of the War on Drugs and issues of state crisis in Mexico. Rather than assume that state power is rooted within clear and immobile boundaries, it is more fruitful to rethink transformations in state space that cannot be isolated from underlying historical patterns of development and political economy. A political economy approach to state space is therefore better able to draw attention to the twin geopolitical processes shaping the War on Drugs in Mexico: (1) the geographic restructuring of the trade in cocaine and (2) the coeval onset and consolidation of neoliberalism.*

You can count on em to kill one another off like this on a regular basis. But I expect some cartel will take it over sooner or later and they’ll wind up just dealin with the Mexican Government.

Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*

Anticipating much of the background and the challenges facing customs special agents and border patrol forces in the prelude to the current ‘war on drugs’ in Mexico, Cormac McCarthy’s *No Country for Old Men* captures one of the central facets of the changing landscape of the reproduction of violence along the US–Mexico border. This is the degree of conviviality that existed between the political apparatus in Mexico, combining municipal, state and federal government officials and police forces, and the *narcotraficantes*—known as the *pax narcotica*—during decades of rule under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The contemporary issues swirling around and shaping the current levels of violence linked to the drugs war are startling: from a total of 1600 murders linked to organised crime in 2005, deaths rose to 2200 in 2006 and on to a total of some 47 515 according to estimates (April 2012). The present drug cartel conflict, initiated since President Felipe Calderón took office in 2006, has led to the deployment of

Adam David Morton is at the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ), University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK. Email: Adam.Morton@nottingham.ac.uk.

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50 000 Mexican troops and federal police in the field and 10 000 troops alone in Ciudad Juárez, known as 'Mexico's murder capital', with the violence reaching cities such as Torreón, Michoacán, Monterrey and even Cuernavaca. In 2008 the passage of the Mérida Initiative witnessed the announced funnelling of \$1.4 billion in US aid over three years to quell the rise in drug-related violence.

Reflecting on this contemporary upsurge of violence, both quantitatively and qualitatively in its macabre level, could lead to the conclusion that Mexico is hurtling towards 'failed state' status. Indeed, state politicians in Mexico have consistently and frequently been compelled to rebuff Mexico's status as one of Latin America's latest 'failed states'. Lacking diplomatic acumen the US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton affirmed in September 2010 that drug traffickers in Mexico were 'in some cases, morphing into or making common cause with what we could consider an insurgency in Mexico and in Central America'.¹ The subsequent analogy that she drew was that of resemblance to the Colombia of 20 years ago, where 18 000 insurgents linked to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) have in the past controlled up to 40% of the country. The FARC became embroiled in conflict with 20 000 paramilitaries, prominently the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), and the Colombian state, bolstered by the USA's spending some \$5 billion under Plan Colombia since 1999, a counter-insurgency programme sold as an anti-drugs scheme. In riposte to the notion that Mexico is joining the ranks of 'failed state' status, figures such as Patricia Espinosa, Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Affairs, have consistently and bluntly maintained that, quite simply, 'Mexico is not a failed state', with any notion that there is an emergent 'Plan Mexico' developing in US foreign policy rejected. Yet, according to Laura Carlsen of the Americas Policy Program, 'Clinton's comments reveal the strong currents within government that seek to deepen US involvement in the Mexican drug war'.²

This article challenges two main issues: 1) the continued attractiveness of 'failed state' strategic thinking that stretches across policy-making and academic circles, particularly in the USA but also beyond; and 2) the notion that state crisis in Mexico can be understood in abstraction from the underlying historical patterns of development, isolated from the political economy and the social relations constituting Mexican society. Addressing these twin themes will aid in refraining from the caricatured representations of 'failed state' status in Mexico and elsewhere in postcolonial contexts, as well as turn the attention towards recognising more important historical, regional and geopolitical conditions shaping the contours of the restructuring of the state in Mexico.

A pathology of 'failed state' theory

Present across a host of global governance institutions has been a policy-making consensus linked to the threat posed by 'failed states' and new security, development and humanitarian challenges. Hilary Benn, onetime Secretary for International Development in the UK, stated that 'weak states

present a challenge to our system of global governance. For the international system to work, it depends on strong states . . . that are able to deliver services to their populations, to represent their citizens, to control activities on their territory, and to uphold international norms, treaties, and agreements'. By contrast, 'weak and failing states provide a breeding ground for international crime', harbouring terrorists and threatening the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals with the spread of HIV/AIDS, refugee flows, and poverty.³

This stance of highlighting the perfusion of warlords, criminals, drug barons and terrorists within 'failed states' became a central policy-making concern within UK and US institutions, for example the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Ministry of Defence (MOD), and the Department for International Development (DFID) have supported the view of 'failed states' as a pathological deviance from the putative norms of Western statehood. Emerging out of the former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's Strategy Unit was a focus on Countries at Risk of Instability (CRI) that included 'fragile states' in conditions of crisis. Policy documents have highlighted the breakdown of political, economic, and social institutions; the loss of territorial control; civil unrest; mass population displacement; and violent internal conflict in states as diverse as Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire.⁴ The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has similarly produced a 'Fragile States Strategy' focusing on the problems of governance and civil conflict arising from poor state capacity and effectiveness.⁵

Meanwhile, the US Secretary of Defense has stated that 'dealing with fractured or failing states is, in many ways, the main security challenge of our time'.⁶ During the Iraq occupation the George W Bush administration also launched the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilisation (S/CRS) in 2004 in order to address state 'failure'. In a manifesto-like statement key intellectuals of statecraft—Stephen Krasner and Carlos Pascual—stated with little sophistication that 'elements of state weakness constitute structural threats akin to dead leaves that accumulate in a forest. No one knows what spark will ignite them, or when'.⁷ Whilst their document extolled the virtues of enabling more market economies through the balancing of 'supply side' governance and the 'demand side' of civil society politics, others regarded the construction of S/CRS and the building of interagency partnerships across nongovernmental organisations, think tanks, private firms and universities rather differently. Naomi Klein summarised S/CRS as instrumental in building 'preemptive reconstruction' following the U.S.-sponsored right to conduct 'preemptive destruction'.⁸

Overall this policy-making approach represents a pathological view of conditions in postcolonial states as one of deviance, aberration and breakdown of the norms of Western statehood demanding intervention. This is perhaps most starkly demonstrated in Robert Kaplan's vision of the 'coming anarchy' in West Africa, something regarded as a predicament that will soon confront the rest of the world.

The coming upheaval, in which foreign embassies are shut down, states collapse, and contact with the outside world takes place through dangerous, disease-ridden coastal trading posts, will loom large in the century we are entering.

Hence a reversion 'to the Africa of the Victorian atlas. It consists now of a series of coastal trading posts . . . and an interior that, owing to violence, and disease, is again becoming . . . "blank" and "unexplored"'.⁹ Similarly, Samuel Huntington referred to 'a global breakdown of law and order, failed states and increasing anarchy in many parts of the world' yielding to a 'global Dark Ages' descending on humanity. The threat here is characterised as a resurgence of non-Western power generating conflictual, civilisational fault-lines. For the supposition is that 'the crescent-shaped Islamic bloc . . . from the bulge of Africa to central Asia . . . has bloody borders' and 'bloody innards'.¹⁰ In the similar opinion of Francis Fukuyama,

Weak or failing states commit human rights abuses, provoke humanitarian disasters, drive massive waves of immigration, and attack their neighbours. Since September 11, it also has been clear that they shelter international terrorists who can do significant damage to the United States and other developed countries.¹¹

Finally, the prevalence of warlords, disorder, and anomic behaviour has been regarded by Robert Rotberg as the primary causal factor behind the proliferation of 'failed states'. The leadership faults of figures such as Siakka Stevens (Sierra Leone), Mobutu Sese Seko (Zaire), Siad Barre (Somalia), or Charles Taylor (Liberia) have therefore been condemned. Again the analysis is an internalist account of a general 'process of decay', of 'shadowy insurgents', of states that exist merely as 'black holes', or of 'dark energy' and 'forces of entropy' that cast gloom over previous semblances of order.¹²

In studies on Latin America this trend has been followed most notably with parallel analysis of the failure of the state in Colombia to conform to the standard ideal-typical prerequisites of a modern state. The latter are commonly defined according to a threadbare theory of the state based on Max Weber's assertion that the state must 'successfully uphold the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order'.¹³ Based on a selective reconstruction of the history of modern state formation in Colombia, revolving around *La Violencia* (1948–58) and then the National Front period (1958–74), succeeded by abortive state-building administrations up to that of Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002–10), the assumption has been that a historically weak state would degenerate into a 'failed state'. Basic functions would be ceded to right-wing paramilitary organisations such as the AUC in various regions, notably the mid-Magdalena Valley, including the municipality of Puerto Boyacá, in the north of Antioquia especially around the region of Urabá, and in the department of Córdoba in the areas surrounding the municipality of Valencia and in the coca-growing lowlands east of the Andean range, including the Orinoco and Amazon basins and the *zona de despeje* (demilitarised zone) that was ceded at one time to the FARC,

consisting of five municipalities in the departments of Meta and Caquetá and comprising 42 000 km².¹⁴ The predominant tendency has been to assert the universality of the state defined in terms of technical capacity, which is regarded as absent in Colombia.

Lacking a national identity and a strong centralised state, Colombia has been a living portrait of the premodern, or pre-Leviathan, dog-eat-dog world of violent chaos... Hence the 1980s witnessed the amplification of dark forces present in the country since the early 1800s.¹⁵

A more inclusive political economy focus would better encompass the historical patterns of land ownership in Colombia, marking state formation processes linked to the *encomienda* system of agricultural production; the movement of landless Colombians to sparsely populated areas in the Amazon basin in Caquetá in the 1960s; and the geopolitics of coca production affecting contemporary state formation in the country and its specific dynamic of violence.¹⁶

Overall, within the above representations of deviance, aberration and breakdown, there is a significant signalling function within the metaphors: of darkness, emptiness, blankness, decay, black holes and shadows. Indeed, much of the analysis is reminiscent of the similar signalling function of such terms in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1902), in which Charlie Marlow considers the 'black clouds' and 'overcast sky' at 'the heart of an immense darkness' of empire.¹⁷ There is, then, a view of postcolonial states that is imbued with the imperial representations of the past based on a discursive economy that renews a focus on the postcolonial world as a site of danger and darkness, anarchy and disorder.

It is this pathology that has recently been evident in considerations of the social crisis revolving around the war on drugs in Mexico. In 2008 the US Joint Forces Command stated:

Weak and failing states will remain a condition of the global environment over the next quarter of a century. Such countries will continue to present strategic and operational planners serious challenges, with human suffering on a scale so large that it almost invariably spreads throughout the region, and in some cases possesses the potential to project trouble throughout the globalised world.

Two worst case scenarios were starkly considered to be within the orbit of rapid and sudden collapse by the Joint Force: Pakistan and Mexico. In terms of state failure in the latter it was declared that 'any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone'.¹⁸ It was noted in *The Economist* that 'the spectre of state failure is haunting hitherto calm locations' and that 'in the case of Mexico, it is hard to deny that governance is failing at some levels'.¹⁹ The Calderón administration recently received intense scrutiny in a set of released WikiLeaks cables that highlighted how the USA viewed the 'institutional weakness' of the Mexican state, the failure of its counter-narcotics

organisations and strategy, official corruption and inter-agency rivalry.²⁰ One cable linked to the US Embassy in Mexico stated that in Mexico ‘the civilian population in some urban areas along the border remains bunkered down’ as a result of the drugs war and the expansion of cartel violence.²¹ In 2009 the revelation emerged that Mexico’s Secretary of National Defense (SEDENA), Guillermo Galván, had raised the possibility of invoking Article 29 of the Mexican Constitution, to ‘permit the President to declare a state of exception in specific areas of crisis and give the military greater juridical scope’ to manoeuvre on the counter-narcotics fight.²² In 2011, as reported in the Mexican daily newspaper *La Jornada*, the US Under Secretary of the Army, Joseph Westphal referred to Mexico’s drug cartels as ‘a form of insurgency’ and suggested that the USA might have to send troops over the border to Mexico in an attempt to prevent the cartels from taking over the country.²³ Despite Westphal’s subsequent retraction and the prominent resignation of Carlos Pascual as US Ambassador to Mexico (2009–11) over recent diplomatic controversies (note he was earlier a key intellectual of statecraft as the Director of S/CRS from 2004 to 2006), the general discourse of ‘state failure’ still lingers. Even when policy recommendations fall short of making a ‘failed state’ classification of Mexico, a similar internalist account of the origins of organised crime, drug violence and corruption is endorsed, such as in the report by the Council on Foreign Relations highlighting the threats posed by Mexico.²⁴

Overall it is the caricature of Mexico, based on the abstraction of the ‘failed state’ discourse removed from the historical development of particular forms of state, and isolated from the political economy and geopolitical dynamics structuring postcolonial state forms, that has to be rejected.²⁵ It is a form of analysis that is increasingly becoming disseminated, as present in works such as George Grayson’s *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?*,²⁶ while the USA also flies unarmed drones across Mexico to gather intelligence on drug traffickers in agreement with Mexico’s National Security Council.²⁷ As the Mexican historian Enrique Krauze has stated regarding the creeping misconception that Mexico is on the point of becoming a ‘failed state’, ‘let’s leave caricatures where they belong, in the hands of cartoonists’, and certainly not in the forefront of state policy making or strategic thought linked to the academy.²⁸

The transformation of state space in Mexico

Rather than assume that the territorial jurisdiction of state space is rooted within clear and immobile boundaries, a more fruitful alternative approach to understanding state territorial organisation is to begin by recognising divergent spatial sites of power constituting state forms. States are not simply fixed and unchanging entities but experience continual structural shifts in the geographical restructuring of space. A simple sojourn through the modern history of state formation in Mexico would highlight the changing configurations of capital and state territorial organisation, whether through the Mexican War of Independence (1810–21) against the Spanish colonial

government; the USA's annexation and war in 1846–48; the occupation of Veracruz by Spanish, British and French forces in 1861; the installation by the French of Emperor Maximilian in 1863; or the occupation by US troops of Veracruz in 1914 during the Mexican Revolution of 1910–20. Focusing on the social content of a statement attributed to Porfirio Díaz, 'Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States', might enable one to begin thinking more productively about the reconfiguration of state space through differential local, national and regional, as well as geopolitical, vectors. In sum, one needs to be more acutely aware of the spatiality of state power and how state space is not only historically variable but also socially produced through a matrix of power relations.

This point is somewhat lost on President Felipe Calderón when exclaiming: 'To say that Mexico is a failed state is absolutely false. I have not lost any part, any single part, of Mexican territory. Colombia lost [territory] during several decades . . . and even today huge parts of its territory [are] in the hands of the criminals, or the guerrillas, or some combination of drug traffickers and guerrillas. But in Mexico, all the territory is in the hands of the Mexican authorities.'²⁹ For what this statement overlooks is that the territorial state is itself a multiscalar form encompassing national, subnational, regional and geopolitical scales and that there are certain hierarchies that make up the production of space and state power. Total control over state space is therefore a chimera: certain power relations will establish and alter a hierarchy of constantly restructured spaces constituting the modern state. While the state may play a central role in producing territorial organisation through spatial integration, it is also subject to competing pressures of differentiation dividing geographical space. 'The modern state', according to Henri Lefebvre, 'promotes and imposes itself as the stable centre—definitely—of (national) societies and spaces', but it is equally confronted with counter-spaces aimed at thwarting state strategies and class interests claiming national identity.³⁰ Similarly, the anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz places emphasis on the state as an 'ordered space for capital' and the articulation of class domination through different spatial logics, including the need to rethink local and regional spaces in constituting national space.³¹ Put differently, it is necessary to remain aware of the 'nested hierarchical structures of organisation' inscribing, constituting, producing and challenging state space.³² As Alan Knight has outlined, it is not possible to capture the totality of the Mexican state because of its large, complex and shifting relational identity that has taken contrasting forms over time and space.³³ A thumbnail sketch of the uneven geographical development redefining modern state space in Mexico in the 20th century could, then, easily emphasise, among others, the significance of:

1. the entrenchment of nationally scaled forms of territorial organisation linked to the consolidation of capitalism and the subsequent state and class interests of import substitution industrialisation (ISI) during the 1940s and 1950s;
2. the more recent pursuit of alternative scalar fixes for capital through the spatial mobility of transnational production in the form of *maquiladora*

- production, or the re-scaling of capital accumulation processes through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA);
3. the changing hierarchies of the urban system in Mexico that in 1960, formerly concentrated around three dominant cities (Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey), then shifted from the dominance of one metropolis (Mexico City) to the consolidation of a polycentric concentration across various city forms (Monterrey, Torreón, Chihuahua, Tampico, Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez), alongside further conglomeration in the Mexico City megalopolis with various urban centres (Puebla, Toluca, Querétaro);
 4. challenges at the subnational scale in Mexico inscribing *una geografía revuelta* (a ‘scrambled geography’) in the country through the contestation of the spatial organisation of state power at the local scale, whether in the instances of radical revolt by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas, which also called for a social mobilisation across Mexico on 7 and 8 May 2011 to ‘End Calderón’s War’ alongside the mobilisation of the ‘Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity’ linked to the poet Javier Sicilia,³⁴ or the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO) in Oaxaca that has called into question the spatial hierarchisation of power across local, regional and state levels.

The contradictions of state space in Mexico are therefore best presented through an entwining or imbrication of spatial scales that are nested within territorial spaces, variable over time, and contain new uneven geographies of state power as well as spaces of contention.³⁵

The drugs war in Mexico can thus be understood within such spatial terms linked to at least two prominent geopolitical factors. First, in terms of the geographic restructuring of the cocaine commodity chain, understood through a wider historical lens; second, in terms of the coeval and in some ways interlinked process of neoliberal restructuring accompanied by the death throes of the PRI state. In the 1980s some 80% of the cocaine supply going to the USA passed through Dade County in Florida; but, by the 1990s, 90% of this supply arrived across the US–Mexican border. This shift is marked by figures linked to the global drugs trade. The United Nations 2010 *World Drug Report* estimated that the global cocaine and opiates markets generate roughly \$153 billion per annum, while drug trafficking in Mexico has a turnover in the region of \$30 billion a year.³⁶ Mexico is the largest foreign supplier of marijuana and methamphetamines to the USA and is accountable for about 70% to 90% of the cocaine entering the country. The Mexican federal government estimates that drug traffickers earned \$132 billion between 2006 and 2010 and, as the number-one export exceeding oil or remittances, the Mexican economy would shrink by 63% if the drugs trade was to disappear.³⁷

What might constitute an explanation for this structural shift towards Mexico becoming a trans-shipment corridor for the drug trade to the USA? The transformation in cocaine’s geographic centre of gravity to Mexico is, in some measure, linked to the war on drugs conducted by the Drug

Enforcement Administration (DEA) against the Colombian cartels, principally the Medellín cartel in the 1980s and the Cali cartel in the 1990s, focusing on the Florida corridor. Nascent drug lords in Sinaloa in Mexico (Pedro Aviles Pérez, Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo), subjected to control over drug cultivation and production (mainly marijuana and heroin) in the 1980s, then underwent a geographical restructuring and territorial subdivision of their cartel operations, which are known as *Plazas*. Previously, during the so-called *pax narcotica*, there was a statist equilibrium based on a traditional compact between the traffickers loosely affiliated to the Sinaloan drug lords and the state-organised system of patronage and corporatism linked to the ruling PRI. As Ed Vulliamy puts it:

It would have been almost impossible for the narco cartels to operate without the help of the PRI; they mirrored and were part of the party's pyramidal, monopolistic system. But a newly competitive economic environment and the defeat of the PRI obliged the cartels to look again at their own operations, tighten international alliances beyond the cocaine line that had been the main product of their boom years, the 1970s and 1980s, during which cohabitation with the PRI had been sustained.³⁸

Even today, it is claimed, 'most of Mexico's *narcotraficantes* still rise from the rustic northern under-class, if often aligned with and professionalised by regional entrepreneurs and politicians nurtured under decades of PRI rule.'³⁹ The territorial and spatial reorganisation of the *Plazas* is complex but can be outlined in terms of the waxing and waning of:

- the *Sinaloa cartel* primarily operating out of the states of Baja California, Sinaloa, Durango, Sonora and Chihuahua, once run by the brothers Arturo, Héctor and Alfredo Beltrán Leyva, who splintered and engaged in open conflict with Joaquín *El Chapo* (or Shorty) Guzmán;
- the *Jalisco New Generation Cartel* originally linked to the state of Jalisco and the 'heating up of the plaza' for control of Guadalajara but also operating across the states of Nayarit, Michoacán, Colima and Guanajuato in conflict with Los Zetas (see below);
- the *Beltrán Leyva* cartel founded by the Beltrán Leyva brothers in 2008, following the split with *Chapo* Guzmán, which established itself in Sinaloa but has since been linked to the creation of two new cells, the first created by Héctor Beltrán Leyva known as the Cartel Pacífico Sur, centred in Morelos, and the second known as the Edgar Valdez Villareal faction working in pockets across Guerrero and the State of Mexico;
- the *Tijuana cartel* revolving around the Arellano Félix Organisation based in Tijuana and California, the subject of the Steven Soderbergh film *Traffic* (2000);
- the *Juárez cartel* (CJNG) forged by Vicente Carrillo Fuentes and Pablo Acosta Villareal in the 1980s, operating across Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and El Paso, TX;
- the *Gulf cartel* operating in Matamoros and Tamaulipas, supplying cocaine, marijuana and methamphetamine across the US–Mexico border

allied at one time with its military wing, Los Zetas, and estimated at 4000 highly trained soldiers defected from the Mexican Army's Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales, but since splintered;

- La *Familia Michoacana*, a syndicate based in the state of Michoacán breaking from the Gulf cartel as part of Los Zetas and founded by Nazario Moreno González or 'El Más Loco' allied with José de Jesús Méndez Vargas, Servando Gómez Martínez and Dionicio Loya Placente; now claiming status as the 'Knights Templar'.⁴⁰

Emerging from this organisational sea, since 2010 the major cartels have aligned into two factions, notably also as a result of losing at least 20 of their leaders to capture or death. One faction is integrated by the Juárez cartel, the Tijuana cartel, Los Zetas and the Beltrán Leyva cartel and the other faction is integrated by the Gulf cartel, the Sinaloa cartel, elements of CJNG and La Familia Michoacana/Knights Templar cartel. Yet the operations of the Plazas should be seen expansively, with their spatial dimension best captured, at the very least, by reference to the three principal geographic axes or poles around which their operations are based, covering Sinaloa–Phoenix–Denver, Juárez–El Paso–Chicago and the Gulf of Mexico–Houston–Atlanta.

This alternative cartography of power reveals new borderland and subnational dimensions of space that are in constant flux as the war on drugs ebbs and flows. The simplistic narration of state failure would emphasise zones or regions that have been abandoned, existing without specific forms of governance, as vacuums of power and politics. Depictions like this would include that of the Juárez valley in northern Mexico—at the epicentre of the drug cartel violence—once populated by 20 000 people, which now 'has detached from Mexico and entered a realm beyond any map. There is no state here, no rule of law. There are killings and beheadings and burnings and no one sees anything'. As Rory Carroll claims, this is a place expressed locally as *hasta que el viento tiene miedo*—even the wind is afraid.⁴¹ Hence, Alejandra Sota Mirafuentes, Media and Communications Coordinator for President Felipe Calderón, has admitted 'the power of the cartels has become a very real threat to the security of the Mexican state—the ability to buy off local and state authority, even federal government'.⁴² But, perhaps analogous with developments elsewhere linked to the global drugs trade, rather than view such borderland and subnational contexts as non-state spaces, the challenge is to better understand the political economy of the nature of 'borderlands', reimagining the transformation of state space as less about the collapse and breakdown of social relations leading to power vacuums and more about the transformation of space according to new hierarchies of power.⁴³ The very serious and startling levels of war, conflict and violence—documented above—may therefore be regarded also as a mode of governance itself: a predatory and hideous expression of violence articulated through the drugs war as a mode of political reproduction based on the seizure of resources and the social control over people, place and space. The Sinaloa cartel is reported to have comingled organised crime centred on drugs, cargo theft and prostitution, as well as business interests in

cultivating avocados. Hence supposed 'anti-state forces', one argument proposes, 'often function rather like states in the territory they control, operating welfare services and primitive justice systems, while at the same time engaging in crime'.⁴⁴

Dovetailing with these developments has been the process of neoliberal restructuring in Mexico since the 1980s, based on an accumulation strategy that has favoured common class interests revolving around the importance of market-oriented reforms between technocratic elites.⁴⁵ The accumulation strategy of neoliberalism, especially as reflected in NAFTA and the era of *salinismo* associated with President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–94), seriously eroded the historical basis of PRI hegemony in Mexico. The demise of ISI and the rise of neoliberalism were therefore accompanied by the exhaustion of PRI hegemony, albeit with a lagging effect sustained through a modernisation of populist, traditional clientelist and corporatist forms of co-optation. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the PRI resorted to forms of dominance and coercion to project and protect an increasingly dwindling form of hegemony. As neoliberalism progressively undercut the traditional modes of PRI corporatist rule and social control, leading to the electoral victory for the first time, in 2000, of the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN), under Vicente Fox, the *ante-bellum* equilibrium sustaining control over the drugs cartels also eroded. Whether it be through the 250 000 soldiers deserting the army since 1995, alienated by low salaries and tempted by the largesse dispensed by the drug lords; or the growing ranks of mass migrants divorced from their means of subsistence in the countryside and subjected to market-dependence, which marks the particular imperative of capitalism and adds to the narco cartels' business operations; or the uneven development and fragmentation of state space resulting from NAFTA and the globalising contradictions of capital and symbolised by the *maquila* forms of 'in-bond' assembly production, neoliberalism has contributed to the recent rise of the drugs cartels in Mexico and the ensuing internecine war. As Thomas Shannon, the former US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere affairs (now US Ambassador to Brazil), stated in 2008, there is a need to understand 'North America as a shared economic space and that as a shared economic space we need to protect it, and that we need to understand that we don't protect this economic space only at our frontiers, that it has to be protected more broadly . . . To a certain extent, we're armoring NAFTA'.⁴⁶ Without a doubt, the contemporary contours of uneven development producing state space in Mexico have been fashioned through the complex intertwining of a triumvirate of specific issues: the narcos, the *maquiladoras* and migration. Yet these are all embedded within the wider circumstances of neoliberal restructuring that has a presence on a global scale. Hence the resolute conclusion that neoliberal policies have exacerbated this context, adding to the growth of the drugs industry, protecting NAFTA under the pretext of the war on drugs, and enhancing the levels of money laundering and forms of financialisation linked to the trade in narcotics.⁴⁷

Ed Vulliamy has tracked this relationship to reveal the extent of permissive financial institutions enabling the laundering of drug cartel money through

exchange houses, or *Casas de Cambio*, in Mexico. In 2010 the Bloomberg financial group reported an admission to federal prosecutors by Wachovia Bank, now owned by Wells Fargo, that it had failed to stop the laundering of \$100 million of cartel funds passing through exchange houses and that between 2004 and 2007 at least \$378.3 billion of similar transactions had been processed and were unmonitored. Wachovia, bought by Wells Fargo in 2008, paid \$160 million in fines to resolve the criminal investigation into how drug cartels used Wachovia accounts to buy planes used to smuggle cocaine across the US–Mexico border. The Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) from 2002 to 2010, Antonio Maria Costa, has established a connection between organised crime and the global financial institutions, commencing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, coincident with the neoliberal era. The subsequent exposure of the global banking sector to crisis conditions in 2007–08 and severe liquidity shortages following the sub-prime mortgage predicament then established a closer penetration of the banks by criminal laundering. Most recently (July 2012), HSBC bank has been revealed to have laundered at least \$7 billion from its Mexico operations into the banking sector in the USA, which was tied to drug traffickers. Following the report issued by the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which produced the revelations about HSBC acting as a conduit for ‘drug kingpins and rogue nations’, it has been fined \$27.5 million by Mexican regulators and has set aside a further \$700 million for potential fines in the USA. A correlation can then be drawn between the money laundering by banks—including those in the City of London and Wall Street—and the more than 40 000 people killed in Mexico.⁴⁸ Overlapping with these links, John Gibler concludes that, overall there is complicity in Mexico between government employees, politicians, army generals, police chiefs, patrol officers, prison guards, judges and drug traffickers and that such ‘illegality allows for massive funding of police and military repression and mechanisms of social control. The drug war is a horrid success of state violence and capitalist accumulation.’⁴⁹

In lieu of conclusion: getting the spatial genie back into the state bottle?

At a time when it was claimed that the post-cold war world order lacked an overwhelmingly dominant division, the threat of ‘failed states’ came to the fore of policy makers’ and international theorists’ concerns. Statehood, according to those attached to ascribing the status of ‘failed states’, is assumed to be a universal order achieved through the acceptance of objective conditions of sovereignty shaped in the self-image of Western development. Yet my argument has raised the need to problematise supposedly universal signs of sovereign statehood and to rethink state space. It has done so by drawing attention to the relationship between territoriality and capitalism in shaping the transformation of state space within specific and general geographical conditions of uneven development. A political economy approach to state space is therefore better able to draw attention to the twin geopolitical processes shaping the war on drugs in Mexico: first, the

geographic restructuring of the trade in cocaine and, second, the coeval onset and consolidation of neoliberalism as a strategy of capital accumulation. Recognising these rather different political economy processes is essential in moving beyond the increasing presence of flawed ‘failed state’ theorising in and beyond the case of Mexico.

Henri Lefebvre once stated that, ‘rather than resolving the contradictions of space, state action makes them worse’.⁵⁰ Indeed, since President Felipe Calderón proclaimed his war on drugs in 2006, and pursued his ‘kingpin strategy’ of targeting cartel leaders, one has observed the mobilisation of thousands of soldiers and federal police officers, the limited seizure of drugs and weapons, and the escalation of death to gruesome levels, while also witnessing how the state has allied itself with the Sinaloa cartel without challenging the financial and economic structure of the drug *narcotraficantes*. The outcome of the current war on drugs in Mexico is yet to be seen, although the view that ‘Calderón sent the army into the streets... seeking to grasp through the exercise of violence the social legitimacy he never achieved through the ballot box’ is gaining widespread currency.⁵¹ Debate now also revolves around a myriad of issues, whether in the form of the USA emphasising the theme of ‘co-responsibility’, meaning acknowledgement of its citizens’ own appetite for drugs as well as an inability to stem the flow of arms crossing the border; or in terms of the debate on drug liberalisation and legalisation, sparked not least by three former Latin American presidents—César Gavira of Colombia, Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil and Ernesto Zedillo of Mexico—urging governments through the Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy to legalise marijuana in a bid to squeeze cartel profits; or in the form of a further iteration of the ‘balloon effect’, leading to the shifting of drug cartel operations from Colombia, to Mexico, to Central America, where the ‘northern triangle’ of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras may yet become the new battlefield site of drug trafficking, a strategic location for smuggling to Europe and Africa and a source of military-grade weapons. Indeed, Honduras has granted operating bases to the US military, which is articulating an aggressive militarised anti-trafficking strategy along the Mosquito Coast. Codenamed ‘Operation Anvil’, the Palmerola Air Base (or Soto Cano Air Base) to the south of Comayagua, once the key asset in the war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, is now the pivot for the war on drugs efforts against criminal gangs such as Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha in Honduras, which have forged links with Los Zetas. The extent to which the malevolent spatial genie of the drugs cartels’ presence in Mexico can be put back into the state bottle is, of course, a perturbing matter for future consideration.

Notes

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Note on contributor

Adam David Morton is Associate Professor of Political Economy and Co-Director of the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ) at the University of Nottingham. His research interests include state theory and the political economy of development in their relevance to the study of modern Mexico. Most recently he is the author of *Revolution and State in Modern Mexico: The Political Economy of Uneven Development* (2011). Further details on his research interests can be found at his blog site, *For the Desk Drawer*, at <http://adamdavidmorton.com>.

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