

THE DEBATE ABOUT THE DEFINITION OF THE MEXICAN VIOLENT CONFLICT: TOWARDS A USEFUL CONCEPT

Raúl Zepeda Gil

PhD Candidate, Defence Studies Department, King's College London.

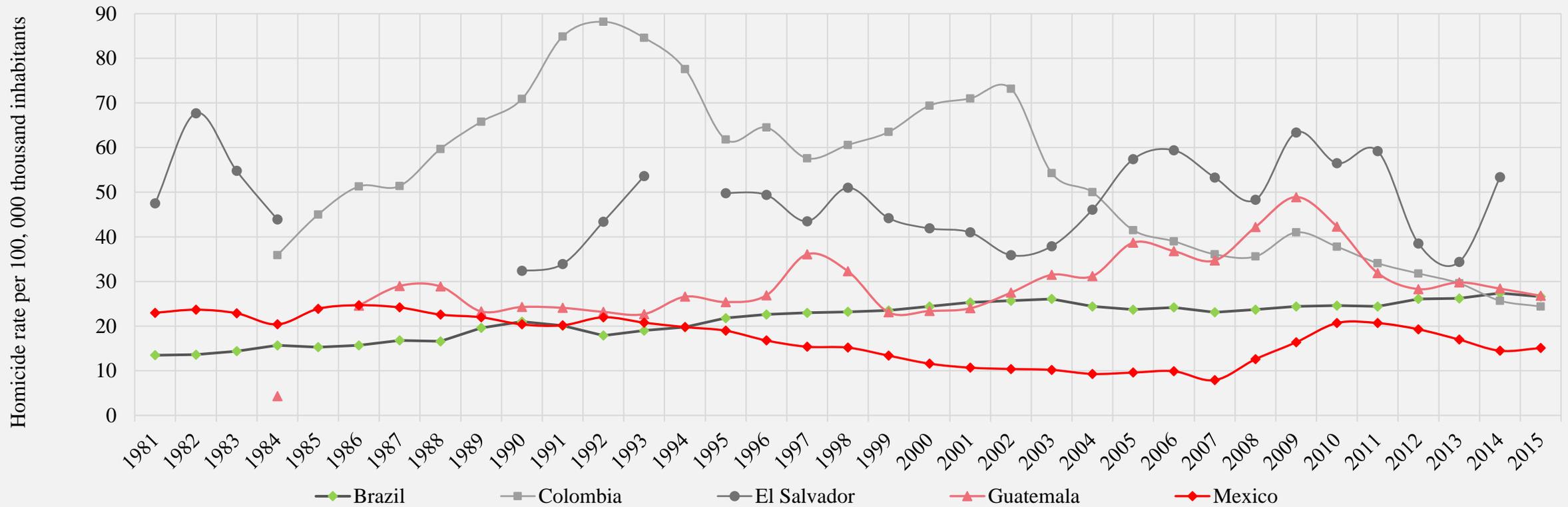
Email: zepeda.raul@kcl.ac.uk

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LATIN AMERICA IS ONE OF THE MOST VIOLENT REGIONS IN THE WORLD

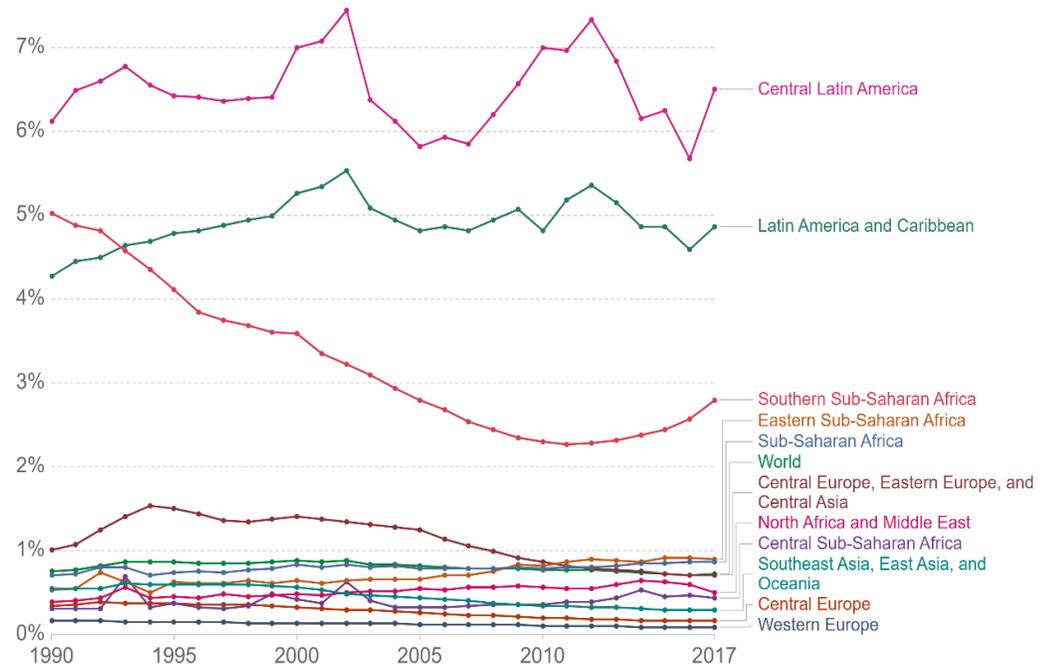
Graph 1.- Homicide rates in Latin America from 1981 to 2015



Source: World Health Organisation Causes of Death Database.

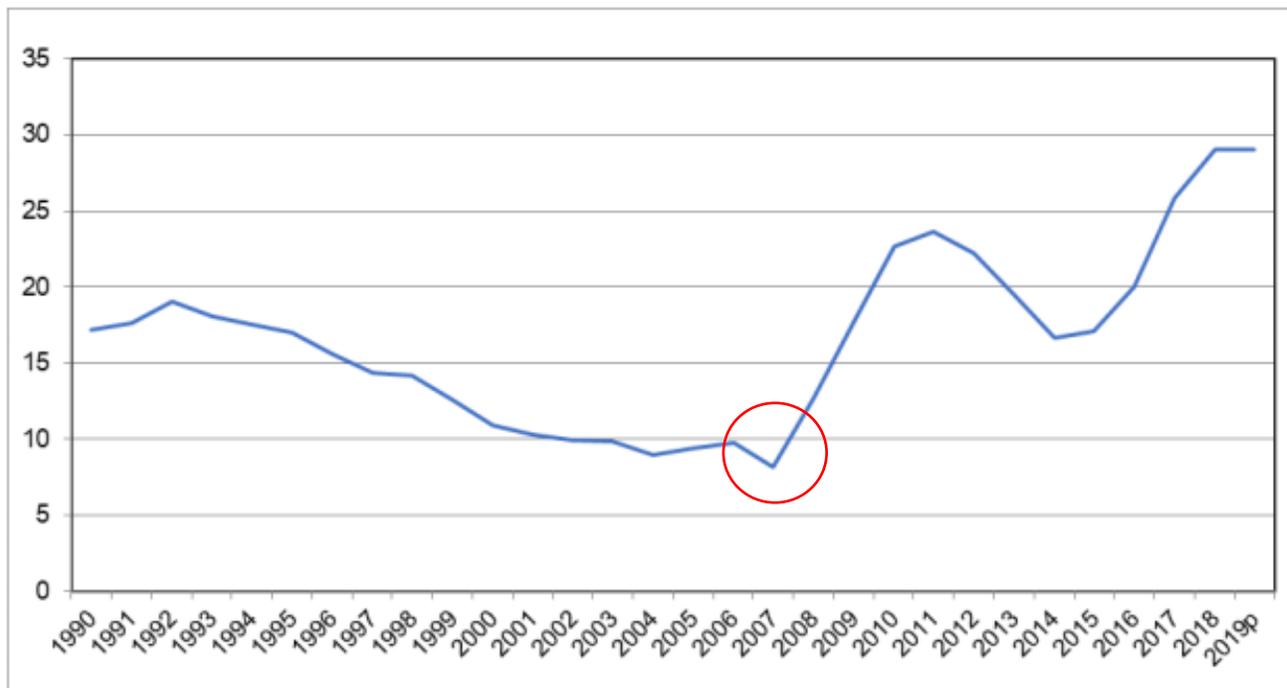
IN PARTICULAR CENTRAL AMERICA

Graph 2.- Share of deaths from homicide by regions, 1990 to 2017



Source: Global Burden of Disease Collaborative Network. Global Burden of Disease Study 2017 (GBD 2017) Results. Seattle, United States: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), 2018. Map: <https://ourworldindata.org/homicides>.

Homicide Rate per 100,000 inhabitants in Mexico since 1990 to 2019



Source: INEGI Mortality Statistics.

2006 WAS THE
INFLEXION
YEAR FOR
MEXICO

MEXICAN ACADEMIA HAS
TRIED TO EXPLAIN THE
INCREASE OF VIOLENCE

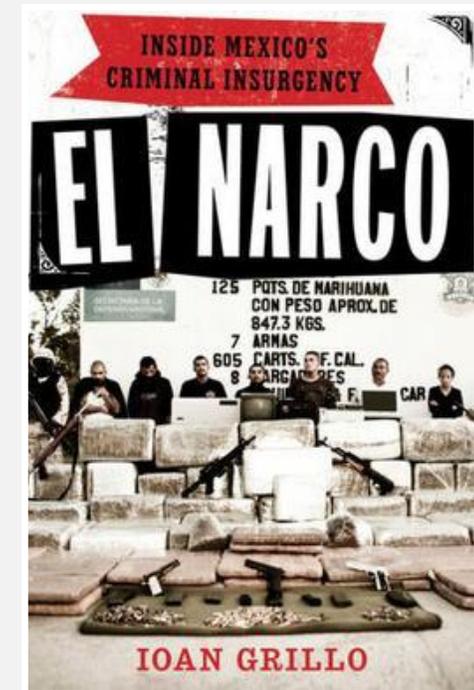
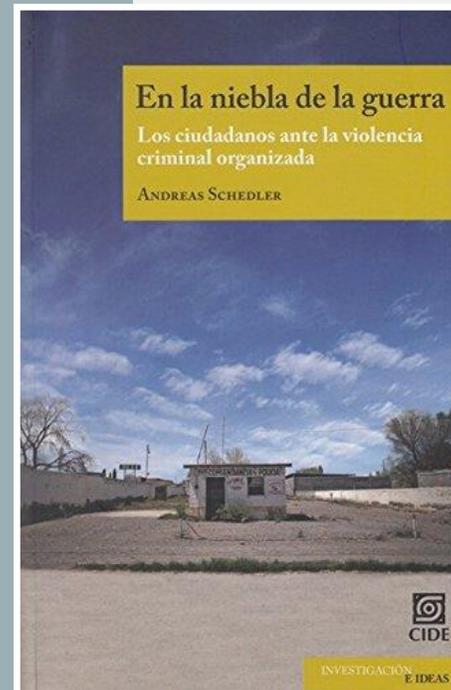
And many labels came with it

Zepeda (2018)

1. Government deployment of the Army (War on Drugs) from 2006.
2. Intergovernmental discoordination.
3. Collapse of security institutions due pressure of drug cartels.
4. External shocks of international drug and weapons markets.

Due to the lack of a concept that could characterise high violence in a country that was not ideologically motivated, labels such as economic civil war (Schedler, 2015) or Narco-Insurgency (Grillo, 2012) have obscured the discussion on the organised violence in Mexico.

FOR EXAMPLE, CIVIL WAR – OR NARCO INSURGENCY



How Civil Wars Help Explain Organized Crime—and How They Do Not

Stathis N. Kalyvas¹

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Abstract

Large-scale organized crime occupies a gray zone between ordinary crime and political violence. The unprecedented scale of drug-related crime in Mexico has led to its description as an insurgency or even a civil war, a conceptual move that draws on recent studies that have associated civil war with large-scale criminality. By questioning both the “crime as civil war” and “civil war as crime” models, I argue that instead of folding the two phenomena, we should draw primarily from the micro-dynamics of civil war research program to identify areas of potentially productive cross-fertilization. I point to four such areas, namely, onset and termination, organization, combat and violence, and governance and territory. I conclude by sketching a theoretical and empirical agenda for the study of large-scale organized crime.

Keywords

organized crime, civil war, political violence

Civil Wars and Organized Crime: Insights from the Intersection of Two Phenomena

Large-scale organized crime occupies a gray zone between “ordinary crime” and political violence, an ambiguity that has been at the root of conceptual and analytical

¹Department of Political Science, Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

Corresponding Author:

Stathis N. Kalyvas, Department of Political Science, Yale University, 115 Prospect St, New Haven, CT 06511 USA

KALYVAS (2015) SAYS:

In short, if we accept to designate nonideological conflicts as civil wars, this argument goes, why not call the Mexican drug wars civil wars as well? (p. 1520)

In short, it is highly questionable whether the civil war as organized crime model holds sufficient empirical validity as a characterization of civil wars. For all these reasons, it should not be used to lend support to the description of large-scale organized crime as a form of insurgency and civil war. (p. 1521)

To say that large-scale organized crime and civil wars are distinct phenomena is not to assert the absence of overlap. On the contrary, there are significant benefits to be reaped by exploring the intersection of the two phenomena (p. 1522).

EVEN IF THERE IS CONCEPT
OVERSTRECHING (SARTORI,
1970), RESEARCH HAS DEALT
WITH LATÍN AMERICA
VIOLENCE

An this research program can be understood
under the umbrella of the formation of a
criminal war hardcore theory under Lakatos
epistemological perspective (Lakatos, 1976)

- Lessing, B. (2017). *Making peace in drug wars: crackdowns and cartels in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Durán-Martínez, A. (2017). *The politics of drug violence: Criminals, cops and politicians in Colombia and Mexico*. Oxford University Press.
- Trejo, G., & Ley, S. (2020). *Votes, drugs, and violence: The political logic of criminal wars in Mexico*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yashar, D. J. (2018). *Homicidal ecologies: illicit economies and complicit states in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bergman, M. (2018). *More money, more crime: Prosperity and rising crime in Latin America*. Oxford University Press.

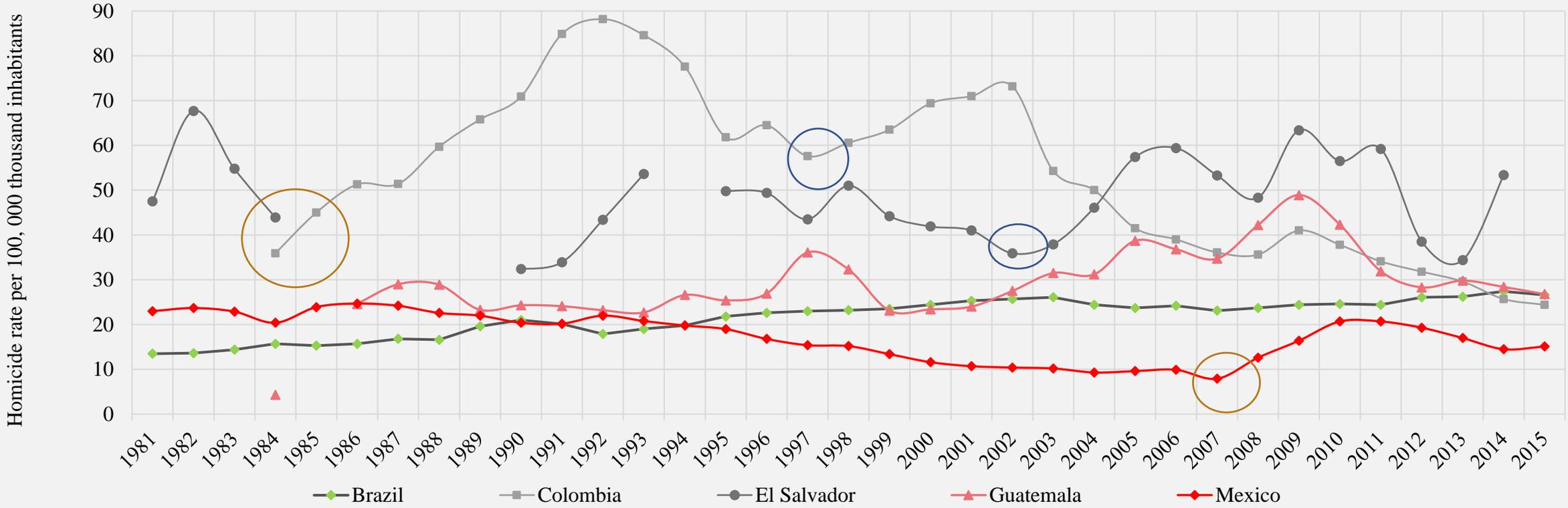
NONTHELESS, I DISAGREE WITH SOME OF THEM

Even if they understand clearly violence in Latin America, they disregard the key element of violence in the region: the deployment of the militarised phase of drug wars.

- Bergman underscores the role of drug wars and attributes too much to economic growth in the region.
- Yashar overstates how the legacies of civil wars in Central America affect violence while there are also violence waves in South America and Mexico.
- Yashar, Trejo and Ley give too much relevance to political corruption or democratic transition while this is not the trigger of violence.

MOST OF VIOLENCE IN THE REGION COMES FROM THE DEPLOYMENT OF US INTERVENTIONS

Graph 1.- Homicide rates in Latin America from 1981 to 2015



Source: World Health Organisation Causes of Death Database.

CRITICAL CONJECTURES IN LATIN AMERICA

- 2003 deployment of militarised drug war in El Salvador by president Francisco Flores “Mano Dura”
- 2012 Otto Pérez Molina deploys the Army Against Drug Cartels in Guatemala after the legacies of civil war
- 2006 Felipe Calderón, president of Mexico, deploys the Army against drug cartels
- 1999 President Pastrana of Colombia and Bill Clinton from the US deploy both countries armies against drug trafficking
- 2006 Sao Paulo militarised police forces crackdown against drug cartels in Favelas
- International organised crime policies have won terrain in the UN framework and in national prohibition policies (Berdal & Serrano, 2002).
- The US Drug Prohibition has an spill over effect in Latin America (Andreas, 1995).
- Terrorism and counterinsurgency have shadowed the study on drug prohibition as a militarised endeavour (Felbab-Brown, 2019).

LESSING (2015) COINED THE CRIMINAL WAR CONCEPT

He explains that lobbying or corruption to twist prohibition policies is the main logic of drug cartels in the region: they change the government policy for entrepreneurial objectives, not ideological.

Violence is the main way to change policy when the State confronts drug cartels violently. Violence was not the usual way to deal with repression before the drug wars.

However, Lessing does not define criminal war.

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Logics of Violence in Criminal War

Benjamin Lessing¹

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Abstract

What kind of war is Mexico's drug war? The prominent "criminal insurgency" approach helpfully focuses attention on cartel-state conflict, but unnecessarily redefines insurgency as "state-weakening," eliding critical differences in rebels' and cartels' aims. Whereas rebels fight states, and cartels fight with one another, to *conquer* mutually prized territory and resources, cartels fight states "merely" to *constrain* their behavior and influence policy outcomes. This distinction yields a typology with theoretical consequences: decisive victory plays an important role in most models of civil war but is impossible or undesirable in wars of constraint. Theories of criminal war must therefore explain how ongoing coercive violence can be preferable to pacific strategies. I distinguish two such coercive logics of cartel-state conflict: *violent lobbying* and *violent corruption*. Lobbyings' more universalistic benefits elicit free riding, so turf war among cartels should make it rarer than violent corruption. This prediction accords with qualitative and quantitative evidence from Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil.

Keywords

conflict, civil wars, bargaining, game theory, internal armed conflict, terrorism, use of force

In the study of war, "criminal" may be the new "civil." Since 2006, Mexico's drug war has claimed 60–70,000 lives (Shirk and Wallman 2015), as many as 16,000 a year (Shirk et al. 2013), an order of magnitude larger than the common

A DISAGREEMENT ON CONCEPTUALISATION

- The logic of his violent lobbying theory is the component of his concept. This decision is understandable because Lessing wants to differentiate disputes between criminal organisations (turf wars) and the State (cartel-State). However, he and other scholars recognise a grey zone between cartel and turf wars. Even as he recognises that, the international drug prohibition regime is the source of these conflicts, he does not incorporate that historical grounding in his conceptual definition. His classification might be more inclusive and comparable for more cases, but there is an essential digression in terms of Sartori:

All in all, then, it can hardly be held that our "losses of specificity" are compensated by gains in inclusiveness. I would rather say that our gains in travelling capacity, or universal inclusiveness, are verbal (and deceptive) while our "gains in obfuscation" are very substantial.

- Only directionality or logics of violence are not enough to give the concept of criminal wars the strength to understand what happens in Mexico. Moreover, profit cannot be enough as the distinction. The massive use of violence or change of policy via *violent lobbying* either. The source of the use of violence for profit and the need for changing the enforcement policies and capacities of government comes from the simple fact that criminal organisations are illegal. The illegality of their profitable activities is central to criminal wars.

CRIMINAL WAR CONCEPTUALISATION (GERRING, 1999)

- *criminal war: a violent conflict between the State and criminal organisations, produced by the militarised use of the State to implement a prohibition regime of any illicit goods, and the sustained violent resistance and lobbying by mafias dedicated to profitable illicit traffic, transformed into non-state violent armies.*
- (1) familiarity: war and crime together
- (2) resonance: distinctive phenomenon
- (3) parsimony: short and general
- (5) differentiation: not civil war, neither occasional violence
- (6) depth: conflict dynamics.
- (8) field utility: new research program

ARE WARS DUE CRIME POSSIBLE? FREEDMAN (2012) SAYS YES:

- War has always been as likely to be intra-state as inter-state. Recalling Weber's definition of states as monopolising legitimate violence within their borders, then internally or externally generated challenges to this monopoly are two sides of the same coin (Weber, 2004). Even during inter-state wars at least one party, and possibly both, will seek to stir up discontent and rebellion inside the enemy's territory. Given the range and the types of violence that can take place within states, wars of this sort are even harder to define and describe. **This has encouraged the spread of the term to cover any violent conflict, for example between warlords, drug cartels, and even rival urban gangs.**
- Though 'war' will often be adopted as a metaphor whenever a conflict becomes angry or intense, the core meaning depends on the **association with purposive violence**. Simply put there can be no war without acts of warfare. It is not enough to break diplomatic relations, exert economic pressure, or threaten force without actually doing so (as in a 'cold war'). It is, as Dinstein argued, indispensable that some armed force be employed (Dinstein, 2005: 9–10). **War involves organised, purposive violence, undertaken by one wilful group against another.**
- Without the element of violence, the study of war loses all focus. **It does not, however, need states. There is no reason why wars between gangs or other organised and semi-organised groups cannot be discussed in similar terms.** After all, war pre-dates states and in its earlier forms probably took place as small communities competed over access to fertile land or proximity to water. For the violence to be purposive, **it must be to a degree strategic**. It must be geared to an end other than whatever satisfactions are derived directly from the experience of violence. Street fights, random displays of hostility, or 'letting off steam' do not count.

COUNTERARGUMENTS

the concept of war is that there is a legal framework entwined with it



Not all wars have to be declared legally: they are products of political decisions (prohibition regime)

Some countries may be experiencing more street interpersonal violence rather than drug trafficking related.



But this violence does not explain the historical trends and changes.

Another counterargument is that high homicide rates can not constitute by itself a marker of a war.



Indeed, but willingness of the State to use violence against drug cartels do.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the 1990s in Latin America, criminal organisations benefited from a growing drug illicit market like the United States. Also, the deregulation of guns in that country led to massive traffic of guns. Rapidly there were fewer barriers to international trade due to the expansion of free trade agreements. The liberalisation process leads to more opportunities for illicit trade through borders and cargo ships. These economic changes happened in highly unequal but growing economies with a large youth bulge. Combining these factors created the ideal preconditions for criminal wars: a perfect storm of state-weakness and resource possibilities to create armies. Soon after, States created the opportunity for violent conflict by prosecuting criminal organisation through military techniques. Paradoxically, although the outcomes have been disastrous, governments in Latin America continue to respond to international prohibition demands. Mainly, these demands come from the U.S. Government.

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