Order and Crime: Criminal Groups´ Political Legitimacy in Michoacán and Sicily

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Chapter 3.
Tracking Local Robin Hoods: Criminal Groups and Legitimacy Attempts in Michoacán, Mexico

After four years of being started the Independence war in the former New Spain (Mexico today), the insurgency proclaimed their independence from the Spanish crown. The Constitutional Decree for the Freedom of the Mexican America was promulgated in Apatzingán, a city now located in the Southwestern state of Michoacán,[17] on October 22, 1814. The document was symbolically relevant for insurgents' contestation as an attempt to promote their own rule of law in the middle of a battle that lasted eleven years (from 1810 to 1821). On the same day 196 years later, former Mexican president, Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, delivered a speech in Apatzingán commemorating the anniversary of the constitution and the beginning of two emblematic wars in the modern Mexican history: the bicentenary of the Independence (1810) and the centenary of Mexican Revolution (1910). The president used the occasion to talk about the achievements of José María Morelos y Pavón, the insurgent and independence hero who shaped the constitution and "[…] never agreed with the enemies of the Mexicans" (Calderón, 2010). Instead, he used the time to redefine the "new enemies of the nation": "Today, the enemies of the nation are others, but our duty to seek equality, security and protect the property of citizens and their freedom is the same", he said. Minutes later, the president gave a name to those enemies who, he said, are currently threatening both Mexico and Michoacán: "criminality" and "illegality" (Calderón, 2010).

The symbolic element was no longer the constitution, but the place itself. Apatzingán is a relatively small town[18] located in the middle of an interior region of Michoacán called Tierra Caliente (Hot Land). This region shares space with two other Mexican states (Guerrero and the State of Mexico), but it is principally located in Michoacán. However, Tierra Caliente was also the place in which local criminal groups were based and from where they have been operating since the middle of the 2000s (or even before depending on the version), and was the first battlefield of the Mexican war on drugs. Declared by Calderón himself, the war was announced a few days after he arrived at the presidency, in December of 2006. That happened in the middle of legitimacy struggles because of a close election result in which Calderón, from the right-wing party, won against the left-wing candidate by only 0.62% (INE, 2017). Some scholars have argued that war's declaration was a political reaction to electoral-crisis to regain political legitimacy (Meyer, 2015). However, he did not act alone, and he had the support of several actors when taking the decision (Astorga, 2015, 27-28).

[17] Actually, the current formal name of the municipality is *Apatzingán de la Constitución* (Apatzingán of the Constitution), as a reminder of the place in which the first independent constitution of Mexico and Latin America was signed.

[18] According to the last national governmental count (measure made between each decade national census), its population raised 128,250 inhabitants in 2015 (INEGI).

This war, however, unfolded very differently in different regions. Michoacán is Calderón's home state, which was symbolically relevant towards an acceptance of his security strategy and, possibly, his central governance. Twelve days before becoming president, Calderón discussed with the Federal Congress, in Mexico City, the necessity of increasing the security budgets in order run military operations in the country to fight criminal groups. The first one announced was the so-called *Operativo Conjunto Michoacán* (Joint Operative Michoacán). In this, several security institutions, mainly the Army, the Marines, and the Federal Police will operate in that state with the objective of "[…] fully restore the command of government authority over the territory and population of that entity" (Nuñez, 2006). Briefly stated, the former president presented it as the strategy "[…] to recover the normal life and tranquility of Mexicans who live in that state [of Michoacán]" (Calderón quoted by Nuñez, 2006). On the other hand, Michoacán is also the place of atypical criminal groups. First *La Familia Michoacana* (LFM) and later *Los Caballeros Templarios* (LCT) were quite peculiar groups in their campaigns to become legitimate, especially towards local society.

The case of Nazario Moreno, the LFM and LCT leader, is a good example. In December of 2010, he was shot to death by Mexican federal security forces. Months later, in March of 2011, the group´s name changed to LCT and developed a strange religious cult around Nazario, who according to local people appeared in the towns as a saint (Nájar, 2014). According to versions collected through interviews carried out in fieldwork, LCT started making initiation rituals, while creating and spreading their code of conduct. In the meantime, the criminal group kept committing crimes. Nazario was killed "again" in March of 2014, again by federal forces, and again in Michoacán, but during Enrique Peña Nieto's administration. That was how Nazario performed the art of dying twice. This chapter analyzes this process from a political legitimacy perspective, and focuses mainly (together with the next chapter) on the local criminal groups' performance. In fact, this legitimacy story is inserted inside a bigger one marked by the struggles of legitimacy among a broad diversity of political actors, both local and national, but with an interest in becoming the local ruler (the sovereign).

The data for this analysis comes from fieldwork conducted in Michoacán. That work is present in this and the following chapter through the methods described in the last section of the second chapter, and consists of semi-structured interviews in the field, digital ethnography, media and press analysis, and a literature review. First "the big picture", i.e., the Mexican war on drugs. This chapter describes and critically investigates how this war has unfolded – and continues in relatively different circumstances. Second, this chapter presents an overview of Michoacán from three angles: a description of the variety of actors, a summary of the evolution through these years of war, and an analysis of local geography. Across these sections the political legitimacy perspective is highlighted. The subsequent chapter analyzes where local criminal groups (both LFM and LCT) are located in the

constellation of local political actors. The criminal group's legitimacy analysis covers a range of almost a decade, from 2006 to 2014, in which these attempts can be attributed to the same criminal identity and agenda.

3.1. The Big Picture: The Mexican War on Drugs

After one month of assuming the presidency, Felipe Calderón made one of his first public appearances outside Mexico City. The war was already declared, and he appeared wearing an army suit and hat in Apatzingán, Michoacán. How to analyze and understand this war from a political legitimacy angle? What were their roots and consequences for Mexico and the region? What was the role that Michoacán played? Given that the criminal groups' legitimacy attempts were embedded in this context, before analyzing them the war and these questions need to be addressed to contextualize the big picture. After all, those legitimacy claims made by criminals were coexisting and struggling with other legitimacy claims coming from actors involved in this war – including especially the federal government's claims around the declaration of war. Following Tilly, this was a scenario of making violence and authority credible to others as a step towards becoming legitimate (1985, 172-173). Calderón, who did not have any kind of military background, had breakfast with troop members and commanders. He showed appreciation for the troops' efforts in the security tasks carried out in Michoacán (Herrera and Martínez, 2007). The war message was not only sent for the army members but also for the rest of the people.

It was not that seventy years later Mexico has again an army member governing, but that the messages and public displays had become codified in the terms of war. General Manuel Ávila Camacho was, in the 1940´s, the last Mexican president with a military background. After his administration, only civilians held the presidency, but all sustained cordial relations with the troops and their commanders, occasionally cooperating in campaigns against regime dissidents, as in the student mobilization of 1968 and the so-called *Guerra Sucia* (Dirty War) during the seventies (Lozoya, 1984; Matute, 1977). That cooperative relationship between civilian president and the army made of Mexico a sort of exception in Latin America regarding the non-threat of a military dictatorship. Unlike from many countries in Central and South America, in Mexico, the army has been historically seen as "the people themselves in uniform" (Mexican Army High Commander quoted by Moloeznik, 2008, 163). The army "survived" its institutional test when the PRI, the hegemonic party during the twentieth century, lost the 2000 election. The army showed loyalty to the state and not to the regime. However, the armed forces were about to face a higher test six years later, when the war on drugs was declared, and the army became one of the central characters fighting it.

3.1.1. War as Metaphor: From the Symbolic Dimension to Real Consequences

The September 11, 2002 edition of *The New York Times* included an editorial by Susan Sontag, "Real Battles, Empty Metaphors". In her text, Sontag made a critique review of the so-called war on terror undertaken by the former American president, George W. Bush. That war, she stated, has a "[...] peculiar nature. It seems to be, given the nature of the enemy, a war with no foreseeable end" (2002). She used as well other references of these sort of endless wars such as those declared against illness, poverty, or drugs. Sontag pointed out that, given the nature of those assumed "enemies", which cannot be terminated, thus the war on them cannot strictly end as well. That is why this is a metaphorical war, but with both real and powerful consequences. In other words, even when the idea of war may be metaphorical (in which discourses and representations play key roles), death, victims, bullets, and guns are all too real. The "war as metaphor" idea becomes helpful to understand the Mexican war on drugs declared four years later, in December of 2006. This one is not the first of its kind and nor the last one (for instance, in 1971 President Richard Nixon declared the first war on drugs in the United States, which President Ronald Reagan then redeclared in 1986.

Other countries around the world have followed suit with their own wars on drugs, in places such as Indonesia, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Iran, and more recently the Philippines. In very practical terms, those wars on drugs (or against organized crime) usually are no more than a repressive drug policy models in which security forces employ lethal force to eliminate drug supply and demand (Rolles, *et al.*, 2013, 26-27). By doing so, both drug producers and consumers get criminalized and shape the background of this policy, which generates additional problems around violence, justice administration, human rights violations and an extensive list of atrocities codified into a war code and language (i.e., “friend” and “enemy”, “good” and “bad”, “us” and “them”). Sontag is not necessarily dialoguing with the new wars´ literature, whose debate attempts to improve the understanding of the changes in how armed conflicts happened, usually by expanding the comprehensive range of war concept (Berdal, 2003 and 2011; Kaldor, 2013). However, her idea works together with this debate in the attempt to demystify the political usage of the war in crisis contexts, and explain the contexts of those hostile claims in which citizens (alleged criminals in this case) become enemies of war.[19]

One of the legacies of the Mexican Revolution was the creation of a government regime that orbited around one political party. That one was, first, the National Revolutionary Party (PNR, founded in 1929) and later renamed as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI, and which remains to date as one of the leading political forces in the country). Through that party, the Mexican State created institutions, bureaucracies, and power structures that allowed it to govern with carte blanche, and with more or less legitimacy for almost eighty

[19] Moreover, in the case of Mexico, during the first years of the XXI century, the federal government also launched a “war against piracy”. As a punitive strategy punishing the intellectual property rights violation, to some extent it could be understood as the predecessor of the war on drugs (Aguiar, 2010).

years depending on the time and location within the country. However, that period was not homogeneous. There is a stage that begins approximately at the end of the nineteen-sixties. Then, the Mexican political system gets transformed from an imperfect democracy (or under construction) and began to be called authoritarianism (Linz, 1964 and Meyer, 1977). The discourse of the Revolution decayed as a regime legitimacy resource (particularly after the student movement of 1968). Instead, the Mexican State showed a dependence on institutions and practices created around authoritarianism. That became the basis for the government exercise during those decades.

However, the eighties and nineties decades came with a gradual dismantling of the authoritarian regime in favor of neoliberal policies. As a result, Mexico joined the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which officially started in 1994 in the middle of internal economic and political crises (specifically the so-called *efecto tequila*) which included the assassination of the presidential PRI candidate, Luis Donaldo Colosio, plus PRI´s president, José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, and the armed rising of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). In addition, the government started several privatizations of former central industries for the national economy. Six years later, the PRI lost the presidential election for the first time, and the right-wing party, National Action Party (PAN) won the presidential election. That moment in known in the literature as the failed transition to democracy because of the administration failures in transforming practices and structures from the authoritarian period. When Felipe Calderón, candidate for the same right-wing party, won the next presidential election with a low margin, Mexico was in the middle of the historical authoritarianism and young democratic attempts.

According to Astorga the cracking of the authoritarian structures, especially in the remote regions, produced local power structures reconfigurations, which explains the increase of violence and helped the government to justify the war (Astorga, 2007). In his first day, a couple of hours after becoming president, Calderón pronounced a discourse in which he said: "I know that restoring security will not be easy or quick, it will take time, it will cost money and even, unfortunately, human lives. However, take this for granted: this is a battle in which I will be at the front, it is a battle that we have to fight and that together we Mexicans will win crime" (Calderón stated in Núñez, 2006). Since then, many efforts were developed by his government to make war allusions. The discourse repeatedly turned into a binary "us" (the good ones) and "them" (the bad guys) who were also called "cockroaches", “termites", and "rats" (Calderón, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). Metaphorical messages such as Calderón wearing a military suit mixed with the real side of the war, such as an increased homicide rate. Indeed, since the beginning of Felipe Calderón´s term, the national increase in the total homicide rate in Mexico was directly connected to the increase of the drug-related homicide rate (LSE, 2014, 30). That trend continued between 2007 and 2010.

In February of 2007, Calderón again justified the war. "The alternative is very clear", he said, "either we rescue Mexico or we cancel the future of prosperity that the children of every Mexican deserve [...] and we will use the full force of the State to respond to those who defy authority and society [and] those who challenge institutions and put our country's future at risk" (Calderón quoted by BBC Staff, 2007). Michoacán was the state in which the war was about to start. It was a non-exclusive list of 8 states out of 32 that constitutes the country (some other may be added if necessary). In this sense, the Mexican war on drugs is another side of the same legitimacy story in which Michoacán criminal groups participated. Following Claessen's idea of legitimation as a process (1988), for the Mexican federal government, this war had the function of promoting its mandate. This effort was codified through symbols and practices rather than through legality and justice management, i.e., descriptive political legitimacy language. Even a successfully legitimate actor or institution will need to continually reaffirm this condition, and the Mexican state is no exception. However, in the case of this war, the war implied a sort of rehabilitation of the state's image after decades or even centuries of distance if not absence. In Michoacán, this absence and rehabilitation is what enabled the co-existence of simultaneous authorities and, potentially, legitimacy struggles. The following section analyzes the extent to which this was the case of Michoacán, as well as its symbolic war relevance.

3.1.2. Michoacán: The First Battlefield

Michoacán is practical and symbolically relevant for the Mexican war on drugs for two reasons. This was the first battlefield of the war, and Michoacán is Calderon's hometown state. For a government who was looking for support for this war, this first battle becomes relevant. Next section of this chapter will be dedicated entirely to the understanding of Michoacán, especially those elements which deserve to be highlighted to conduct a political legitimacy research. By now, here we are only locating the relevance of this first battlefield and its role in the stated big war on drugs picture. The federal government used that violence as a critical juncture to launch the war, starting precisely in Michoacán (Meyer, 2007). Moreover, the federal government counted on with local Michoacán politicians who supported the strategy, even when they were not necessarily from the same political party. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, Michoacán experienced criminal groups' struggles guided by the ambition of these groups to control local illicit businesses. One especially relevant moment of these fights happened in the municipality of Uruapan, close to the capital city of Morelia.

In the early morning of September 6, 2006, five human heads were dropped in the middle of a nightclub dance floor in Uruapan. Journal chronicles talked about 15 to 20 men with rifles arriving in three pick-up vans; they released the heads without saying a word (Martínez *et al.*, 2006). However, a *narcomanta* (a practice associated with drug trafficking dynamics consisting in leaving banners with written messages; more about this communication

strategy, spread as a popular practice among different criminal groups, could be found in Maihold, 2012) was left there with the following message: "*La familia no mata por paga, no mata mujeres, no mata inocentes. Sólo muere quien debe morir. sépanlo toda la gente, esto es justicia divina*" ("The family [of Michoacán] does not kill for pay, it does not kill women, it does not kill innocent people. Only those who deserve to die, should perish. Let it be known to all: this is divine justice") (quoted in Relea, 2006). That was a sort of presentation message towards society from the criminal group *La Familia Michoacana*. As Arjona and Hollister pointed out:

> The effect of violence on *freezing* may help explain why armed groups rely on symbolic violence, such as exhibiting the dead bodies of their victims in public places or gathering communities to witness the killing of locals: it might help to make civilians obey not only because they learn that disobedience carries serious consequences, but also because fear makes the psychologically *incapable* of reacting in any way but complying. As Hollister points out, "[t]hrough dramatizing punishments, an aura of imagined pain may be built around the painful experiences which can actually be inflicted" (Arjona and Hollister quoted by Arjona, 2017, 765).

Members of *LFM* recognized the authorship of committing that atrocity, but they tried to cover it with a justification. As explained later, not every crime or illegality needs to be explained. However, when this is the case, the criminal agenda acquires relevance as a political instrument through which the practices of legitimation make sense and become rationalized. The heads dropped were supposed to belong to former members of the local rival organization, the Zetas, a criminal group dedicated to drug trafficking and integrated by former army members in Mexico and Guatemala known for their bloody techniques to perform their illegal activities (Astorga and Shrink, 2010, 15-16: Logan, 2012, 6). Thus, in another way, that was also a violent political statement from LFM against their main rivalry. This action exemplifies the understanding of sovereignty as practice in the very last sense of deciding over who lives and who dies (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005). The event happened three months before Calderon's presidency began, and thus before the war declaration. Strictly, it justified government's argument in the sense of the necessity of taking extreme measures given the circumstances.

However, as explained in the previous chapter, criminal agendas are not usually or exclusively based on violence. Even when they are, that *narcomanta* was possibly the first legitimacy attempt made by *LFM*, it was followed by another certainly friendlier claim. Almost three months later (but again before the war's declaration), LFM paid to publish a disclaimer in the local newspaper. Together with a collection of justifications, the text also presented "who we are", its "mission", its "objective" and its reasons to be seen as a group. It goes from an enterprise discourse to a rebellious one, but never acknowledges them as criminals or drug traffickers. The entire disclaimer was published in *La Voz de Michoacán* and *El Sol de Morelia*, both local newspapers without circulation outside Michoacán

(2006).[20] In both cases, the publication date was November 22, 2006, days before the war on drugs declaration:

LA FAMILIA MICHOACANA

ABOUT US?

We are native workers of the Tierra Caliente region in the state of Michoacán, organized by the necessity to get out of the oppression, of the humiliation to which we were always subjected by people who have been holding power, which allowed them to perform all kinds of mischiefs and abuses in the state [of Michoacán], such as those of the MILLENNIUM Cartel, some others with the surname Valencia and other organizations, such as the band of the 30, which has been terrorized a large part of the state [of Michoacán] since the eighties to nowadays, especially in the areas of Puruarán, Turicato, Tacámbaro and Ario de Rosales, and who have carried out kidnappings, robberies, extortions and other crimes that harm the peace of Michoacán´s people.

MISSION

To eradicate kidnapping activities from the State of Michoacán, direct and telephone extortion, paid assassinations, express kidnapping, theft of trailers and cars, house robberies, by people like the mentioned above, and that have made of the state of Michoacán an insecure place. Our only reason is that we love our state [of Michoacán] and that we are no longer willing to let people´s dignity become run over.

Maybe at this moment people will not understand us, but we know that in the most affected regions, they understand our actions, because it is possible to fight these criminals, who settled down from other states and we will not let them enter into Michoacán to keep committing crimes.

We are totally eradicating in the entire state the sale of the LETHAL drug known as "ICE" or "ICE" [referring to methamphetamines], as it is one of the worst drugs that are causing irreversible damage to the society, thus it is going to be prohibited the sale of adulterated wine that, people say, comes from 'Tepito' [a well-known dangerous neighborhood in Mexico City], and we know that whatever comes from there has bad quality.

OBJECTIVE

To maintain the universal values of the people, to which they have full right.

By eradicating what we have proposed, although for this, unfortunately, we have appealed to very strong strategies on the part of us, since in this way we have seen that it is the only way to bring order to the state [of Michoacán], and we will not allow this [situation] to get out of control again.

[We will] Support people with food, literature, as well as classrooms to improve education in society: this is mainly directed to the rural area, which is the most marginalized, humiliated and especially in the Tierra Caliente region.

WHY DO WE FORM OUR GROUP?

[20] The original one was published in Spanish. Besides the analytical elements for this research, it was characterized by several grammatical mistakes as well. This translation did not attempt to correct them, but to reflect the original spirit of the message. The original newspaper page is included Appendix. See Picture 8.

When this *LA FAMILIA Michoacana* organization began, it was not expected to be possible eradicate kidnapping, paid-murders, scams, and the sale of the drug known as 'ice', however, thanks to the large number of people who have had faith, this great problem in the state [of Michoacán] is now being controlled.

LA FAMILIA is a group of people, which has been growing in such a way that; now, we cover the entire state of Michoacán. This organization emerged with the straight intention of combating the unrestrained crime that existed in our state [of Michoacán].

LA FAMILIA has made great progress, as we are fighting these evils little by little, but we still cannot claim victory, but if we can say that the state [of Michoacán] has improved in these problems by 80%. Also, we have eradicated the kidnapping in the same percentage.

People who work decently in any activity should not worry, we respect them, but we will not allow people from here or from other states to commit crimes or [the same will go for] those who control other types of activities.

When we started to organizing and propose to remove the retail drug sale from the streets, such as it was with the 'Ice', many people told us that not even in the first world countries they could reach to control it, and we are already doing it.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

What would you do as a Michoacán origin? Would you join *la familia* if you see that we are fighting these crimes? Or would you let them keep growing? ... Give us your opinion.

I ask you, father [as the family leader]: Would you like your son to walk the streets in danger of falling into drugs and crime?

Would you support this organization in its fight against these evils that attack our state [of Michoacán]?

The media have been very successful and objective in their comments on the events that occurred, which is appreciated for their impartiality and we thank these media for their comments on our actions.

Even in other countries, they have not already organized themselves to carry out this type of activity in favor of their people, and we have already started here. The expected success will depend on the support and understanding of the Michoacán Society.

SINCERELY,
LA FAMILIA MICHOACANA

After the severed heads event, the text was the second materialization of the agenda as a political legitimacy guideline. Although there was no direct reference to the Uruapan events happened weeks earlier, indirect statements about people committing crimes in Michoacán needs be understood as a connection between both legitimacy claims, one violent and one peaceful: carrots and sticks towards the same objective. LFM took a position towards them, but did not talk to them. The language is directed at the Michoacán people as an audience, including expressly direct reference to the family fathers (men to men dialogue). Invitations to support them, as well as to join them are included. Moreover, the narration portrays the idea of an enemy. It also built the idea of shared moral beliefs: those ambiguously called "universal values of the people", to which, they said, everyone has full right. Their fight is against criminals such as kidnappers, murderers, and meth traffickers. More legitimacy calls came out from this group, LFM, as well as LCT. Both are the same criminal group; however,

even his name change had political legitimacy implications. All of this is presented later in this chapter.

As said earlier, Michoacán became the first battlefield in this war. The *Operativo Conjunto Michoacán* (Joint Operative Michoacán) became the model for the war strategy in its very early stage. The model consisted of sending federal security institutions coordinated by the federal government and was later used in other Mexican states such as Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Guerrero, and Baja California. In the case of Michoacán, it is important to remember that the former governor, Lázaro Cárdenas Batel (grandson of the former President during the nineteen-thirties, Lázaro Cárdenas del Río), request the president to receive federal support to deal with local criminal groups (Astorga, 2015, 28). The strategy was mainly to dismantle the more prominent criminal organizations linked to the illicit drug trafficking in the country. However, scholars have proved a correlation between the operative implementation and the homicide increase (Zepeda, 2016; Merino, 2011). From a historical point of view, these operatives interestingly look like a state return. At least in the case of Michoacán, but not only, the federal government is anything but close to the local population. For instance, Maldonado argues that especially the Southern region of Michoacán became a sort of marginal region within the Mexican state (2010, 24). This real and symbolic remoteness produced the myth of entire lawless regions within Michoacán.

However, on the contrary, this supposed power absence generated local rulers, close to *cacicazgos*. After the implementation of the operative, the government carried out a sort of state return to the territory, but wearing the mask of security forces instead of other types of masks, such as healthcare, education, or employment. That is especially relevant because we are talking about one of the poorest and marginalized states in the country. Ironically, 2007 became the most peaceful year in the recent Mexican history (see Figure 1). Even in Michoacán, where the war started, 2007 was the third most peaceful year in the last 25. However, from 2008 and onwards, almost all indicators of crime rose, generally led by specific states. Michoacán was one of them. September of 2008 became an especially relevant month in both local and national agendas. On the evening of the sixteenth, during the Independence Day celebration (possibly the highest national commemoration), a fragmentation grenade was thrown in the main square of Morelia´s downtown, that is, in the core of Michoacán's capital city. Some civilians died and others were injured.

Hours later, the United States government, through its ambassador to Mexico, categorized the phenomenon as narcoterrorism (Gómez, 2008). In the end, that statement supported the war on drugs strategy together with the necessity of hard hand against the so-called cartels. However, neither LFM nor any other local group acknowledged the grenades, but it meant a war reinforcement in the region. When the grenade event happened, Michoacán was already one of the many battlefronts across the country. Each of those places had particular settings. In this case, the legitimacy perspective opens an analytical window through which it is

possible to analyze the local phenomenon. Each of these multiple actors will be reviewed later, especially concerning their legitimacy interest and the resultant conflict. Meanwhile, next section is dedicated to assessing the conflicts´ size and tendencies. This work is made through the recovery and systematization of violence variables available from public data.

3.1.3. The Real Battles: The Size of Violence in Michoacán

As Sontag said: even when the war is metaphorical, it has real consequences: real bullets, casualties, violence, and battles. The war impact was different depending on the state or region of the country. For example, while certain cities such as the Northern Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, reached higher homicide rates levels than Bagdad, Iraq, or Afghanistan at the height of recent wars, others like Mérida in the Yucatán peninsula, had the same levels of homicide as Canada (data for 2010 and 2012: Staff El Universal, 2009; Nolasco and Ávila, 2014). Some variables directly affecting this difference were the presence or absence of a) disputing local criminal groups, b) federal forces presence (like in the joint operatives), and c) geographical conditions (mainly related to transnational illegal routes). In Michoacán, the three conditions were present in addition to other particularities such as a historical absence of the state power and an excess of political actors performing state functions, especially those related to security and the monopoly of the use of force.

Before continuing with the analysis, a methodological comment needs to be made regarding the figures presented in this section. Three illicit behaviors were selected as variables analysis; these are homicides, kidnappings, and extortions. With exceptions, these three crimes used to be associated with larger criminal groups activities rather than solitairy criminal actions. Thus, these variables are helpful to trace changes in violent dynamics, mirroring the background political struggles. However, analyze Mexican criminal registers is challenging because of the dark figure of crime, a criminological term to refer the unregistered and non-reported crimes (Biderman and Reiss, 1967, 2). Both in Mexico and Michoacán, this number is always above the 90 percent. In other words, specifically in Michoacán, more than 9 out of 10 crimes are not reported in the official statistics (see Table 2). This pattern changes from crime to crime, and from state to state. Does this mean that there is no sense in studying this data? Indeed, official statistics present a problem. But one can make some sense of the data if the analysis carefully parses it by taking into account specific local considerations around these variations.

For instance, the homicide variable is analyzed here from two sources. In the first one, from INEGI, the dark figure does not indicate a problem. That is because of how the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (stands for INEGI, the Mexican federal agency for demography and economic analysis and one of the most prestigious institutions in its field within Latin America) collect the data. Since 1990, INEGI has registered the "deaths occurred by homicide" by concentrating the medical examiner archives from those who

received the corpses. Thus, they do not work with official reports from any justice institution. On the other hand, the second source is the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (stands for SESNSP, a federal bureau that concentrates criminal data from denouncing reports). That is the source for the 1) intentional homicides (differentiated in this case from the non-intentional), 2) kidnappings, and 3) extortions registers. Its database is built with the victims reported cases to authorities. In this case, yes we are dealing with the dark figure problem. Is it convenient to work with this data anyway? The answer is yes but the analysis needs to be careful and aware of these.

Table 2. Dark figure (%), Michoacán (2010-2016)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Michoacán	94.7	92.0	94.0	94.0	93.6	92.9	93.8

Source: *Encuesta Nacional sobre Victimización y Percepción de Seguridad Pública* (ENVIPE), INEGI.

For instance, it is helpful to trace significant changes in illicit trends, the increase or decrease in reported cases, and places in which people used to report these kinds of crimes. Moreover, even when it is not possible to accurately calculate precisely, homicides, kidnappings, and extortions used to have lower dark figures percentages (Ochoa, 2016). In addition, in the homicide variable, this database offers to distinguish those cases, in which the murders were intentional, which adds a violence charge to the action and shapes another sort of behavior from the perpetrator. Finally, regarding these methodological difficulties, it is necessary to affirm that not all these crimes are associated or responsible for the war on drugs dynamics, nor the army nor the criminal groups´ activities. However, here we are looking for data that might help to identify changes in the general trends that could contribute to portray how Michoacán, in particular, lived this context. Moreover, this information is also helpful to understand the scenario in which the legitimacy attempts, and struggles were made.

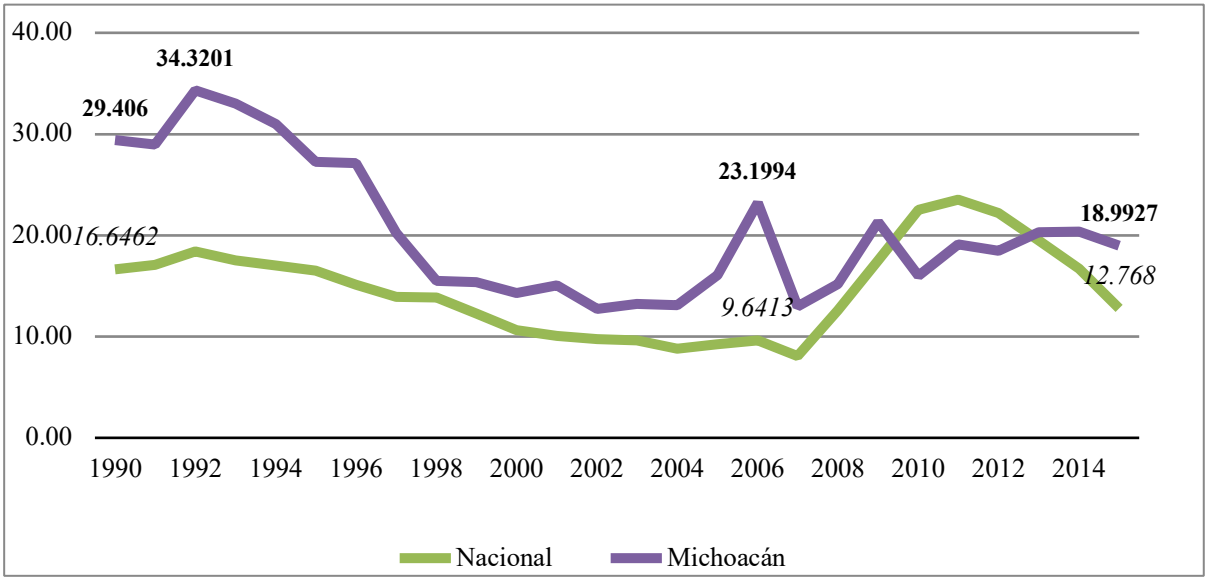
After explaining those considerations, the first analytical statement in this sense is that Michoacán´s violence is everything but new. The early 1990´s decade showed higher homicide levels than in the last decade (see Figure 1). Following the homicide data registered by INEGI, demonstrates Michoacán with higher homicide levels than the national number. That happened from 1990 to 2009. In the next year, Michoacán experienced a decrease and kept with lower rates than the national one until 2013. Furthermore, as said earlier with Mexico in general, the state of Michoacán had the lower homicide levels in 2007, the same year in which the war was launched. In the coming years, the rate raised in both cases and until 2009 for Michoacán and 2011 for Mexico. Many lectures can be given to this, but in this case, it becomes relevant the observe at least three trends:

1) In the year of 2005, the homicide rate was bigger than ever later within the context of the war on drugs, this before LFM publicly appeared through the Uruapan heads event and the message in the local newspapers. This number could explain the local struggles (later justified by LFM and LCT) in which these criminal groups became predominant in the state.

2) As will be explained later in detail, December of 2010 is especially relevant. In this month, the criminal leader group and responsible for many of the legitimacy attempts, Nazario Moreno, was supposed to be killed for the first time. That might have provoked a significant increase in homicides in 2011, the year in which civilian and local people rebellions against the criminal groups started as well.

3) While in the national rate it is possible to appreciate certain trends through the last 25 years, in Michoacán the trends stopped in 2005. Since then, there are drastic but constant "ups and downs", especially during 2005 to 2012, which coincide with the war on drugs period and the whole Calderón administration.

Figure 1. Homicide Rate per 100 Thousand Inhabitants, Michoacán *vs.* Mexico, 1990-2015

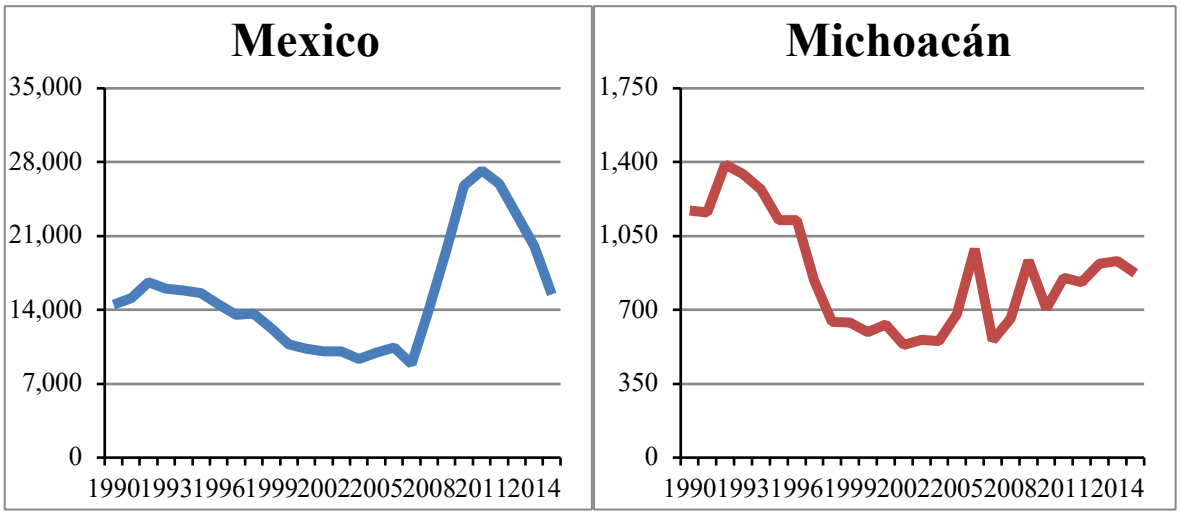


Source: Author´s calculations based on data from INEGI and CONAPO.

By taking a look on the total homicide cases (and not the rates), we can confirm the trend differences between the national and the local context. In this regard, is relevant to look at how both graphs "move" through the time for the same period of twenty-five years. Following Figure 2, we can look again to 1) the "violent past" of Michoacán in the early nineties, 2) the national rising trend in Mexico after the war on drugs declaration, which although is not that accentuated in Michoacán, and 3) the ups and downs in Michoacán within

the same period. This latter point shows that this trend was clear enough to be appreciated both figures, i.e., the homicide rate as well as in the total homicide cases.

Figure 2. Trends of Total Homicides in Michoacán *vs.* Mexico, 1990-2015

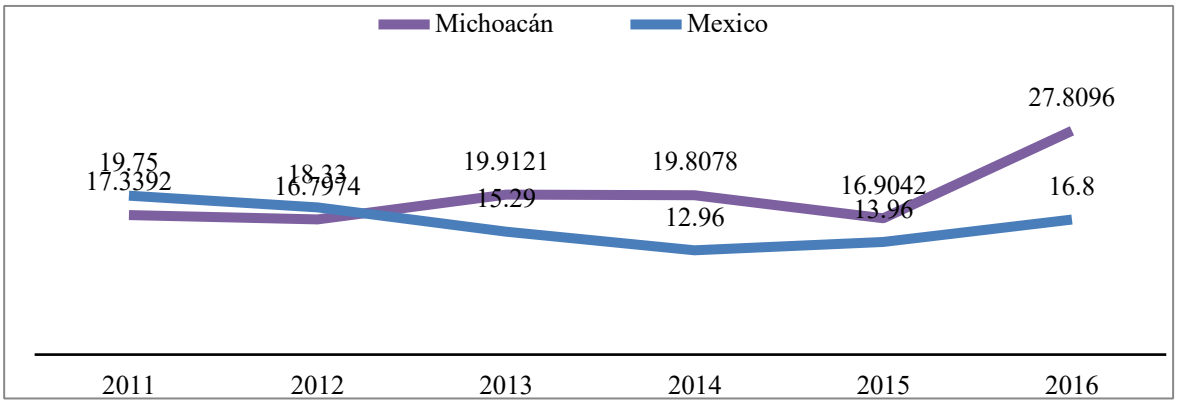


Source: Author´s calculations based on data from INEGI.

Regarding the SESNSP variables, this data was calculated for this research from 2011 to 2016. This period is relevant for this research case because the local criminal group suffered a significant change. As said earlier, LFM's leader, Nazario Moreno, was killed for the first time in December of 2010,[21] thus LFM turned into LCT, and the cult around Nazario was developed together with other rituals and legitimacy attempts. Nazario was killed for the second (and definitive) time in March 2014. This timeline, along with the criminal group's legitimacy analysis, will be explored in detail later. However, here it's important to highlight the significance of this period. Following the intentional homicides graph, the reports registered in the denounced cases show a couple of matches with the total cases in the INEGI database even when, as it was expected, the numbers are not equal. The first one is that Michoacán kept a lower rate than the national figure both in 2011 and 2012, and this trend change since 2013 and onwards. The second coincidence is to show Michoacán 2013 and 2014 as years with upward rates, and 2015 descending. However, in the SESNSP data, it is possible to appreciate a significant rise for 2016, reaching the highest level in the figure.

Figure 3. Denounced Intentional Homicides in Michoacán *vs.* Mexico, 2011-2016

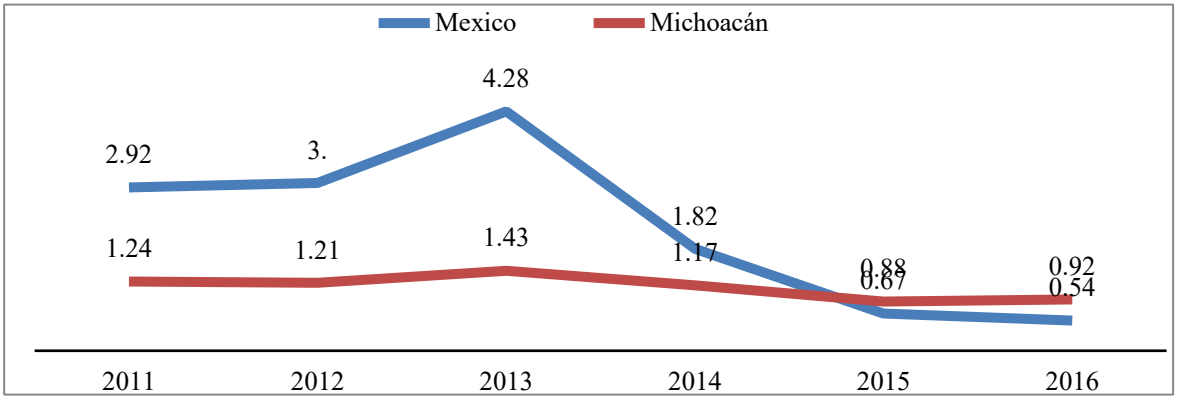
[21] Allegedly, locals in Apatzingán, Michoacán made a demonstration supporting Nazario. The people held up signs with the legend "Nazario will always live in our hearts", and "Rest in peace, Nazareo [sic]". See Pictures 3 and 4 in the Appendix.



Source: Author´s calculations based on data from SESNSP and CONAPO.

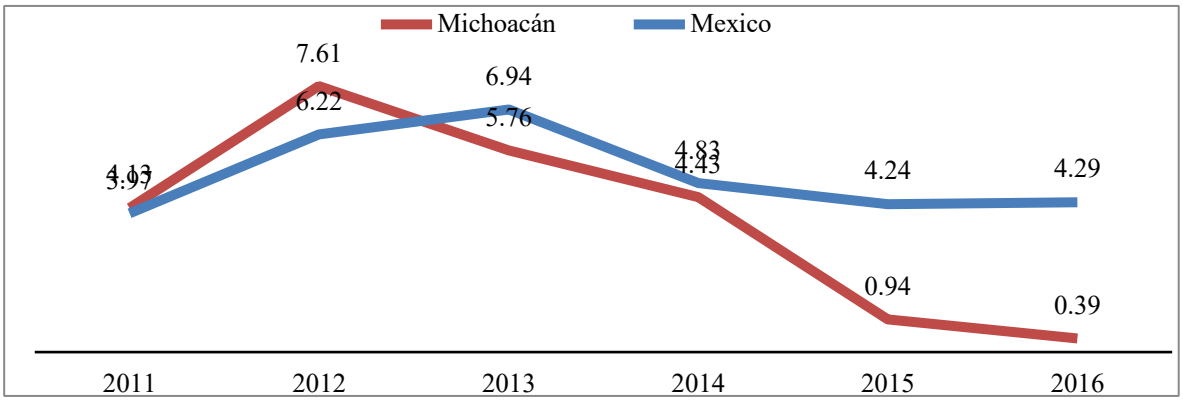
The other two variables from SESNSP, kidnappings, and extortions denounced, presented different trends between them. In the former, Michoacán does not show drastic changes; however, the possible reading is not that kidnappings keep stable in Michoacán but that the victim´s reports towards official authorities were (see Figure 4). Regarding the extortion cases, 2012 and 2013 were the years with high rates. In any case, this crime followed the national trend closely until 2014 (see Figure 5). Besides, it is relevant to take into consideration that these both crimes use to be reported by urban victims. In this case, most of the reports happened in the capital city, Morelia, relatively far away from the countryside and rural areas in which both LFM and LCT were based.

Figure 4. Denounced Kidnappings Rate per 100 Thousand Inhabitants, Michoacán *vs.* Mexico, 2011-2016



Source: Author´s calculations based on data from SESNSP and CONAPO.

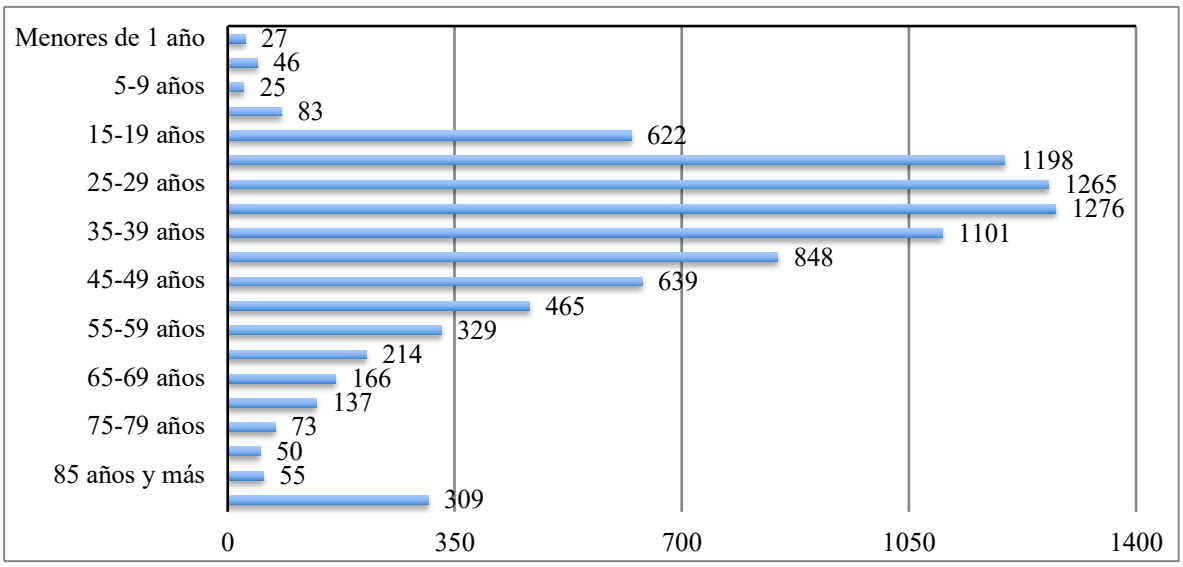
Figure 5. Denounced Extortions Rate per 100 Thousand Inhabitants, Michoacán *vs.* Mexico, 2011-2016



Source: Author´s calculations based on data from SESNSP and CONAPO.

Finally, the last figure presented in this section shows the age profile of the homicide victims in Michoacán during the studied period. A general Mexican trend within these years is that youngsters were the principal victims and killers. Michoacán is not the exception to this rule. Several investigations have been conducted trying to understand the role of young people in the violence dynamics. Many of them locate young people in marginal zones and low education or job expectations as the principal criminal groups´ cannon fodder (Ramírez, 2014; González-Pérez, *et al.*, 2012). Young people are used either for awareness of foreigners or officers in towns and highways (the so-called *halcones*, falcons), or as gunmen (*sicarios*). The crises in this regard is such big that the federal government made a national survey which was conducted by INEGI to understand how and why youngsters spend their free time, feel about their surroundings, and perceive the future, etcetera (INEGI and SEGOB, 2014). In the case of Michoacán, 4,361 of the homicide victims from 2005 to 2015 were between 15 and 34 years old. That is the 48.8% of the total (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Total Homicides in Michoacán by Age Group, 2005-2015



Source: Author´s calculations based on data from INEGI.

Since the first decade of the current century, Mexican demographers proved how a "demographic bonus" was coming for Mexico. This bonus means a change in the demographic structure due to population age, characterized by a swifter increase in the number of young people in productive age (Ordorica, 2010, 50). In other words, the bonus is a demographic opportunity to boost the economy based on a larger number of young people instead of older retired or not in working conditions. According to García, the bonus would take place between 2012 and 2033 (2010, 384). However, according to Giorguli, a prominent Mexican demographer, the bonus was not capitalized due to a lack of working conditions (Giorguli quoted by Sánchez, 2016). If that was not enough, the demographic bonus also coincided with a deadly trend era for youngsters in Mexico in general, as well as in particular states like Michoacán. This violence data will be returned to in the case analysis, since it is there where it begins to make sense. In the end, following Arendt once again, violence is not an end itself, but an instrument linked to ends. Even when particularly in Michoacán the political legitimacy struggles indeed were not the goal, they help to rationalize these data.

3.1.4. An International Overview: Michoacán Between the Caribbean Basin and Asia Pacific

Before delving into the Michoacán study, a broader (global and regional) overview of the Mexican violence crisis is needed in order to recognize how local consequences may modify the global trends and vice-versa. In this regard, transnational crime activities work into a sort of interconnected logic, sometimes even into a global scale (van de Ven, 2017, 25-28). For instance, a change in the pattern of cocaine consumption in Amsterdam could affect how local politics happen in a small settlement in the Colombian jungle, including the countless changes in social dynamics occurring in the middle. This shock might presumably result in a new scenario also susceptible to suffering potential changes as a result of a further modification of the dynamics (either, production, regulation, prohibition, enhancement, or deterioration of routes, changes in political configurations, and a large etcetera). The variables involved are neither fixed, and the local contexts have a relevant influence but always connected to the regional and global illicit trends.

Although the history of Mexican narcotics did not start with the War on Drugs nor in the recent present, a convenient starting point for this analysis is located during the 1980´s and 1990´s. In the first place, the Ronald Reagan´s war on drugs policy in the late 80´s, implied sealing Miami´s border, which was the main entrance of cocaine coming from Colombia. The strategy involved two faces: the "friendly", and the "bloody". The former was the "Just Say No" campaign led by Nancy Reagan. The latter consisted of a hard security repressive policy, especially abroad (Schroth, Helfer and Lanfair, 2011, 436-438). Later, this resulted in Plan Colombia, an integral security policy developed in this South American country in which the local forces were coordinated and commanded by the American military. As a result of the plan, the two most prominent criminal organizations in the Americas were

dismantled. Both Medellin and Cali cartels were taken down through the kingpin strategy -a security policy emerged from the American security agencies that consist in eliminating the "head" of each criminal group. Pablo Escobar, the leader of Medellin, was killed in December of 1993. Of course, within the dialectic logic explained earlier, that meant a significant change in the global configuration of drug trafficking.

For instance, from the nineties to the first decade of the twenty-first century, the drug trafficking through the Caribbean Sea fell 71 percent and was rerouted through Central America and Mexico (Aguayo, 2014). In other words, cocaine trafficking (whose only sowing point is Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia) keep flowing to the United States but using an alternative corridor – causing a sort of water effect phenomenon, in which a first “push down”, causes a second “pop up” elsewhere. According to John Bailey, this change let the formerly inexperienced Mexican criminal groups take the lead and the profits of the business from the proficient Colombian groups, which were struggling to survive (Bagley, 2009). That meant a full transformation of the criminal corridor settings in the Americas and transformed Mexican politics. It is useful to remember here that this regional change coincides with the Mexican transition in which the historically dominant political party (PRI) lost the Presidency, including a reconfiguration of several local power settings across the country. Following Aguayo, Mexican violence cannot be understood outside the Caribbean Basin. This region is the most violent on the planet and lives through constant flows going both from South to North (drugs and migrants), and North to South (money and weapons) (2014, chapter 5).

These are permanent ingredients in the war on drugs. However, another global geographical element needs to be included when talking about Michoacán, namely, the Asian Pacific. Even when LFM and LCT participated in the fundamental Caribbean Basin scheme, the Mexican West coast plays an essential role in this case. As will be seen later in detail, the port of Lázaro Cárdenas located in the western part of the country enables a full entrance to the Pacific Ocean. Journal and official reports identified exchanges between LFM and LCT with China: the criminal group sent iron and other mining extracts from the mountains in Michoacán, and they received in exchange precursors to fabricate methamphetamines. From 2008 to early 2013, 4.6 tons of iron were sent to China from Lázaro Cárdenas port, a quadrupling of export (Gil Olmos, 2015, 59). Finally, it is possible to argue that Michoacán plays a specific role, at least, into two global illegal market circuits, which are not disconnected. The first one is in the Caribbean Basin, including the illicit commerce occurring in the Americas, but especially from Michoacán to the United States. Both official and journal reports have detected meth production sent to Mexico's northern neighbor (Grillo, 2017). The second one looks at Michoacán’s connections to Asia, especially China. We will come back to these dynamics in the third section of this chapter. Meanwhile, the second section offers an explanation of conceptual elements to understand Michoacán´s current sociology.

3.2. How to Understand Michoacán: Many Actors, Complex State

In this section, the Michoacán context is explained through the conceptual approach proposed earlier in the first chapter together with a geographical analysis. They all configure analytical tools to achieve a broad understanding of the scenario that lets us proceed later with the review of criminal groups' legitimacy campaigns. The argument followed can be stated in a straightforward formula, but has a profound background: it is not that in Michoacán there is no state, but that there are too many political actors whose agency is developed into a state language (including sovereignty practices). Within these actors, the criminal actors have a crucial role in several aspects of public life, and this will be observed in the last section through their political legitimacy interests and attempts. Here we follow the ideas of Aranda in terms of authority excess in Michoacán, as well as the historical state experienced by local social agents (2014, 155). In particular, this is related to how certain *ranchero* societies later become greater drug traffickers as well as how these populations experienced the state, its sovereignty, and the general formal authority expectations (Interview in field no. 17, 2017).

> For several ranchero societies, the family is more important than society. Family is your network of kinship before than the citizenship of the state. The family is your domestic group, it is your core institution on which you are going to being cared, you will protect yourself, you will reproduce, and you will socialize. This idea of the family as the central nucleus also explains why after 30 or 40 years *la familia* of Michoacán concept emerged, [but also] the concept of caring for the Michoacán, the concept of Michoacán for the Michoacán people. All these in places where the State did not manage to build its sovereignty and it could not displace these other more informal sovereignties and over which control, sociability and the use of violence were more effective. All these values are being crystallized, but between the sixties and eighties, they become consolidated with the strong expansion of drug cultivation around Michoacán. The actual expansion of drug crops occurred in these territories where these family societies controlled inhospitable areas in which these families handled territorial control very well (Interview in field no. 17, 2017).

In other words, geography and family culture come together and historically shape the context. Both are elements that explain the transformations of a specific society, in which drug trafficking evolved towards producing such particular criminal groups formations. Since legality and illegality blur due to historical reasons, then what remains in the middle are two versions of legitimacy. On the one hand, there are the *ranchero* societies that have been performing their own authority for decades, in which drug cultivation was not precisely seen as a bad activity due to its illegality. On the other, there is an aggressive return of the official authority by attempting to bring back a version of order based in legality and the state monopoly of sovereignty. This analysis is guided by geography plus the cartography of social actors performing sovereign practices. In other words, to build the constellation of social actors having legitimacy interest, Michoacán´s Geography parallel to those actors performing as the state are analyzed in the following section.

3.2.1. Michoacán: Geography Matters

As one of the 32 states that compose Mexico, Michoacán is located in the Southwestern part of Mexico. His location and its natural resources are both strategic elements to understand the recent violent crises and the legitimacy struggles in which the state was (and possibly still is) inserted. Its population grew to 4,584,471 in the last count in 2015 (INEGI, 2015), of which 48.2% are men and 51.8% are women. Maldonado divides the state into five regions: 1) the avocado zone, 2) the Michoacán coast, 3) the South Mother mountain range, 4) the Michoacán and Jalisco (northern neighboring state) mountain range, and 5) the Tierra Caliente (hot land). All those regions are essential to explain the local context. However, each of them has a different role in the local criminal groups that is explained below. Moreover, violence and criminality in Michoacán can be traced back to a booming regional mining and agro-industrial economy, which developed alongside expanding drug trafficking (see Picture 9 on Michoacán regions; Maldonado, 2010).

The avocado zone is profoundly relevant for both licit and illicit activities. Mexico is the world's top avocado producer, and Michoacán is the leading state in that production (del Moral and Murillo, 2016). In 2016, this meant the first source of income for the local economy, even above from the remittances sent by migrants from Michoacán in the United States and income from tourism (Nájar, 2016). Forty-six out of the 113 municipalities of Michoacán produce avocados (Notimex, 2017b). This lucrative business was taken over by the local criminal groups. They control production by regulating offer and demand, levy a sort of tax through extortion (the so-called "*piso*" or "*cobro de piso*", which is analyzed later in detail), stealing fields from the original farmers, and by regulating felling trees and forest burns to transform them into avocado farming zones. The avocado zone frequently coincides with indigenous municipalities and borders with the flat region in the northern part of the state (the *Purépecha* zone), many of these towns are characterized by poverty and marginalization. The avocado agro-industrial area has more than 120 thousand internationally certified hectares that export about a billion dollars' worth of avocados per year, mostly to U.S. and European markets.

The second region, the Michoacán coast, is quite relevant as well. The central point is the Lázaro Cárdenas port, in the municipality of Lázaro Cárdenas. This port is one of the most developed on the Mexican Pacific coast. Its capacity enables commercial links with China, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Colombia, Central America, and the West coasts of the United States and Canada (Gobierno del estado de Michoacán, 2015; Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes, 2015). At the beginning of 2017, the National Economy minister inaugurated a new terminal in the port. It was the result of federal government investment. With this enlargement project, the port increased its moving capacity from 27 to 47 million tons (Notimex, 2017a). The relation of the port is, as said in the last section, crucial. The detected exchanges of metals (especially iron) going from the port to China and

receiving elements to cook meth proved a profitable business for criminal groups. In the words of the journalist Ian Grillo: “For Americans, your guacamole on game day, the metal in your kid’s remote-controlled car, and the beef in your burger may have passed through the Knights Templars’ hands—alongside the meth smoked by your local fiend” (2017, 456). From this port, thousands of tons of iron and other ores are extracted legally and illegally from communal land by transnational companies that have interwoven complex networks with armed groups. These ore exports are going mostly to India and China (Gledhill, 2014). Even further, according to Maldonado (2014) tons of precursor chemicals come back from these countries, basically on the same cargo ships and containers in order to make synthetic drugs in clandestine laboratories located in the state’s highlands.

The third and the fourth regions are the mountain zones in the state. The South Mother mountain range is especially relevant in this case because of the geopolitical role played in favor of the criminal groups´ interests. The relevance of this region increased given the interest of the criminals in controlling both mining production and the port. Thus, its geopolitical relevance added value to this region. In this case, we are talking about a sort of forgotten area by the government; in other words, this is a place in which the "state experienced" has not been close. Moreover, the zone has important unspoiled mineral resources, and exploitation becomes deeply profitable, especially for mining companies even when the activity is illegal. Local people argue that the most recent violence wave has been a coordinated effort between mining companies with interest in the area, and local criminal groups in an effort to break or displace the community and its communal institutions (Gledhill, 2014). Thus, criminal groups become a sort of regulatory entity making profits by administrating, exchanging, and controlling resources.

Finally, the last region is probably the most important for this research. Tierra Caliente (the hot land) is the origin, hometown, control area, and operation center of LFM and later LCT. Thus, it is not a coincidence that most of the legitimacy attempts registered for this research happened there, even when this is not a rule. In addition, around Tierra Caliente area there are other emerging agro-industrial complexes producing raspberries, blackberries, mulberries and loganberries, this is an industry supported by transnational capital. The export of Mexican berries has been growing since 2010 at rates over 30%. The largest market for Mexican berries is the United States, where 97.1% of imported berries come from Mexico; followed by the United Kingdom, The Netherlands and Italy (Stupkova, 2016).[22] In the past people complained about the state’s difficulty to access this area together with Tierra Caliente. According to González y González, this is a “[…] region that ‘[d]ue to its isolation from well-trodden roads has earned the epithet Netherworld and been nicknamed ‘the abyss

[22] Michoacán has been for decades a national and worldwide berries producer and exporter. However, as happened with the avocado, the increasing demand for these fruits in recent years pushed producers to focus on this market. Indeed, together with the United States, Canada, and European countries, China has become a major consumer to which Michoacán producers have looked for supplying their demand.

of the globe' [moreover] more than remote […] it was virtually inaccessible because of the sierras, crags and ravines that surround it'; a place that caused such wonderment that it came to be catalogued 'as a house of horrors'" (González, 1991, 108 quoted by Aranda, 2013b, 47-48).

After that prompt recognition of the regions, this analysis continues tracing how violence phenomena happened in specific places within Michoacán. This work is conducted through the municipalities' homicide rate calculations with INEGI data. The rate calculations were made by a thousand inhabitants to make all the registers comparable between them. In the following maps, this data is presented for the years of 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015, and show how this variable evolved during this research (2005 to 2014). In other words, this goes from the first LFM struggles against the other criminal groups based then in Michoacán, until the second and definitive death of Nazario, which resulted in a transformation of the local criminal groups´ legitimacy setting. In the middle, several relevant events related to legitimacy struggles happened in Michoacán (see Table 3).

Table 3. Michoacán's Legitimacy Events Timeline

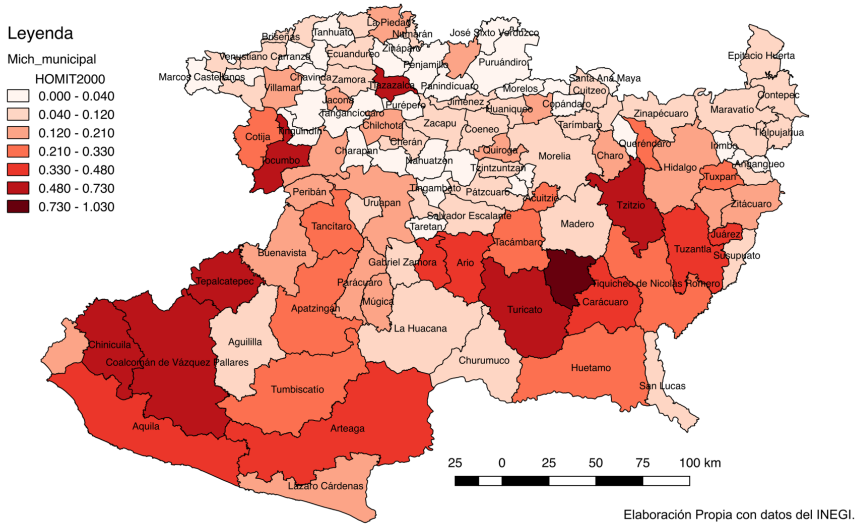
2006	September	LFM dropped the severed heads in the Uruapan´s nightclub.
	November	Publishing of the paid advertisement in local newspapers.
	December	The former president, Felipe Calderón, declared war on drugs.
2007	January	The Joint Operative Michoacán was launched.
2008	September	The grenade event in Morelia´s downtown.
2009	May	The federal government imprisoned 28 local public officers without judgment through the *Michoacanazo* strategy.
	December	The first death of Nazario happened.
2010	March	The change from LFM to LCT.
	And onwards	Religious rituals around of San Nazario, together with the spread of a series of published books by the criminal groups (this is analyzed in the last section of this chapter).
2011	April	Indigenous rebellion in the municipality of Cherán, located in the avocado region.
2013	February	First groups of vigilantes (*Autodefensas*) appeared in Michoacán, specifically in the region of Tierra Caliente
	January	The federal government sent a special commissioner, Alfredo Castillo (trusted person to current president Enrique Peña Nieto) who became the Commissioner for the Security and Integral Development of Michoacán (more of this together with Cherán and vigilantes events is explained later).

2014	January	The *Acuerdos de Tepalcatepec* (agreement of Tepalcatepec) was signed between the federal government and vigilantes groups. Through this document, the vigilantes were legalized and became official local police.
	April	Second and definitive Nazario´s death and the resultant change in the local criminal group´s legitimacy attempts setting.

Source: Overview based on newspaper reports.

The 2000 map works as a background context – given that none of the events related to this research had appeared yet. However, certain trends were already happening since then, such as the high levels of homicide in the Pacific coast, in Tierra Caliente, and mountain ranges. In particular, three regions violence is especially linked: the coast, the Northern Mother mountain range and Tierra Caliente. Within those zones, both LFM and LCT were positioned (even when they performed activities in practically the whole state of Michoacán). Moreover, in two cases there is a correlation between the highways and the municipalities with high homicide rates. The first one is on the coast. Except for 2005, both Lázaro Cárdenas (port municipality) and Aquila (the northern coast neighbor municipality) always displayed high rates.

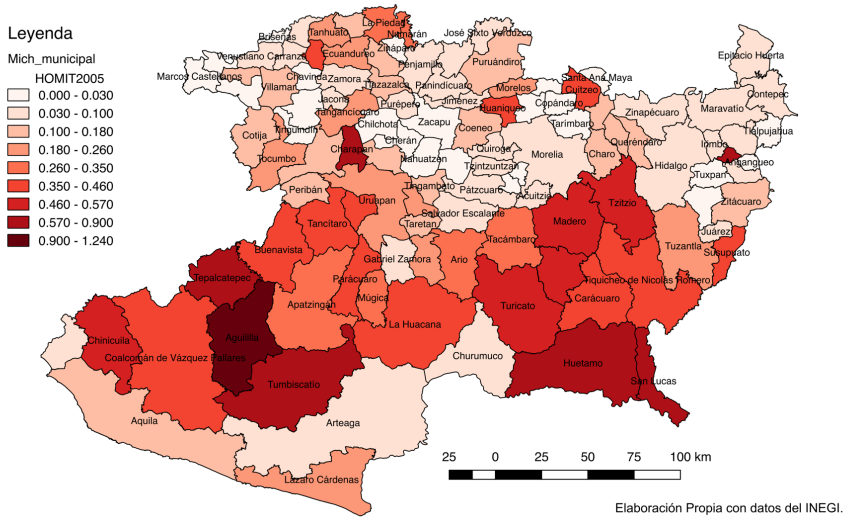
Map 2. Homicide Rate in Michoacán per Municipality, 2000 (INEGI)



Source: Built with data from INEGI.

The second case is precisely the set of roads connecting Tierra Caliente with the capital city, Morelia, especially those going from Apatzingán and La Huacana. The relevance of highways for criminal enterprises is not exclusive for Michoacán but for Mexico and the hemisphere as well. More about this and the role of the Mexican government will be explored in the following chapter, as part of the specific LFM and LCT political legitimacy sources and resources.

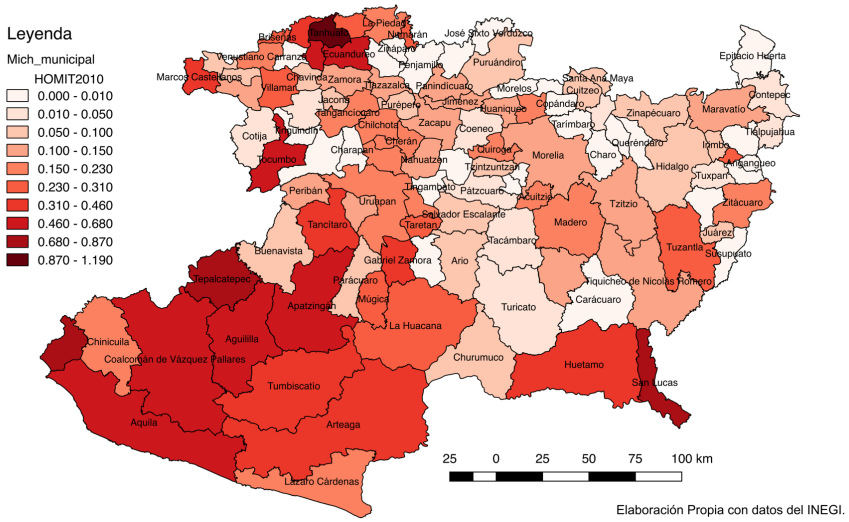
Map 3. Homicide Rate in Michoacán per Municipality, 2005 (INEGI)



Source: Built with data from INEGI.

Highways become relevant when considering that the region's primary transportation occurs through these paths (as in the country in general), given the absence of trains and the high costs of air travel. Hence, from a logistical point of view, illicit flows require the efficient use and control of transportation resources in order to keep the business moving on. During 2005, two analytical angles stated earlier need to be considered. The first one is the violent fight between the Zetas, the criminal group that had a significant presence in the state, and LFM, which was recently created. The second angle is the substantial increase in the state homicide rate, which was the higher during the analyzed period in this research (see Figure 1). Some elements such as the displays of violence might suggest a connection between both cases.

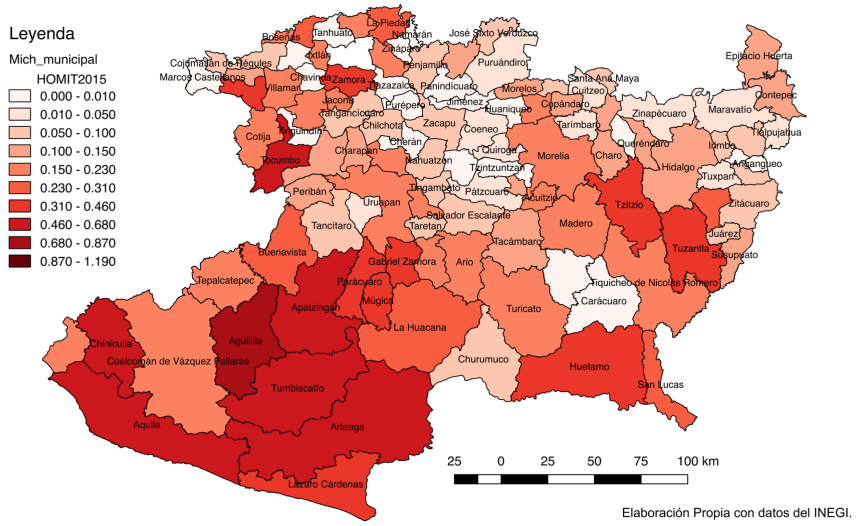
Map 4. Homicide Rate in Michoacán per Municipality, 2010 (INEGI)



Source: Built with data from INEGI.

Finally, for 2010 there is a sharp connection between the southern and coast rates (mostly from Tierra Caliente), together with the northern rates. In other words, if a vertical line is drawn on the map, the right side shows higher homicide rates than the left side (see Map 4). In 2010, after the first death of Nazario, no civil resistance appeared in Michoacán. These cases came up in the coming years. Finally, in 2015, Michoacán still is a violent state even after the last death of Nazario. Meanwhile, Tierra Caliente, the coast, and the southern mountains continue with the same high levels. For this year, LCT has been affected because of the open fronts including struggles with the army, the Mexican marine, the federal police, vigilantes, and even the indigenous rebellion in Cherán. In the meantime, a new criminal group from the state of Jalisco, started operating in Michoacán without an interest in becoming legitimate but in controlling the territory to administrate illicit business (Flores, 229). That resulted in a considerable increase in violence, especially in the northern part of Michoacán, in the Michoacán-Jalisco mountain range. During this time, local criminal groups still had operations and disputes but without becoming a single cohesive group.

Map 5. Homicide Rate in Michoacán per Municipality, 2015 (INEGI)



Source: Built with data from INEGI.

The next section is the last one dedicated to offering analytical elements to understand the local context. Before beginning a legitimacy analysis, another kind of mapping is required: the one in which the principal key actors involved in the local legitimacy struggles are located, described, and identified.

3.2.2. Cartography of a Pre-supposed Sovereign: State-effect, Statehood, and Sovereign Practices

This research is guided by the idea that, in Michoacán, it is not that there is no state, nor that it is weak. On the contrary, the primary characteristic is that there are too many actors with agency performing the role and function of the state. Michoacán could be seen as a case of "formations of sovereignty", a political landscape in which several claims to sovereignty simultaneously struggle, coexist, and overlap (Stepputat 2015). This excess of statehood practices and discourses, as well as the rejection of the notion that violence is the result of a deficit of democracy, can help better understand what is happening in the region. This has several consequences concerning the local definition of political legitimacy. In a context like this, who is legitimate and who is not is under constant pressure and contest. These ideas help to realize that claims to legitimacy in Michoacán are a permanent negotiation between various audiences, including the non-legitimate, the newly legitimate, and the public.

The discussion can take many shapes: either when the criminal groups justify themselves because the government does not do its duty, vice-versa, or when vigilantes justify their weapons because criminals threaten them. Legitimacy is always explicitly or implicitly at stake. This work has been called 'the cartography of a pre-supposed sovereign', namely, local political actors. That name acknowledges that sovereignty is a practice, a negotiation, a performance that is contextual and in constant flux, as chapter 1 demonstrated. These actors are listed below together with an explanation of their local legitimacy struggle role between 2005 and 2015. Below some ideas and examples of sovereign practices of state functions are given. Except for the criminal groups for which the specific considerations are below, this is not an exhaustive study of these actors. Several different disciplines have investigated each of them. The following section briefly describe the main participants in the constellation of legitimacy during this research.

Criminal groups (particularly LFM and LCT). As said earlier, LFM appeared around 2005 and was explicitly displayed in 2006, and turned into LCT in 2011. However, criminal history in Michoacán did not start with these groups. During the 1980s, Michoacán suffered a major agricultural crisis as a consequence of the exponential growth of marijuana and poppy seed cultivation. The *Milenio* and *Los Valencia* cartels emerged and centralized drug production and trafficking and started massive transfer of cocaine from Colombia to Mexico and the United States. They had the support of several politicians and police officers until early 2000 when the Gulf Cartel, seeking control over the Michoacán region, sent its armed wing, the Zetas. In 2006, the local groups expelled Zetas from Michoacán, with the remaining forces from the *Milenio* cartel merging into LFM. After several years of negotiations and alliances with local power elites, the cartel managed to become a strong organization with transnational networks and State political connections, in addition to running multiple "social" programs in order to maintain popularity amongst the population. There are even reports of the cartel running small supermarkets where items were sold under the market value in order to "help" the community (Falko, 2015). This is actually part of the larger political legitimacy story, which is analyzed in detail in the following chapter.

After becoming LCT, this group, under the leadership of Nazario Moreno Gonzalez, turned out to be one of the most peculiar criminal organizations in the country. Nazario was known to act as a benefactor to schools, churches, farmers, and more. He also wrote books, devised a code of conduct for every member of the criminal gang, and even created his own local religious cult. LCT also went to great lengths to develop mechanisms and practices that would further legitimize its activities and presence. A good example is the quasi-judicial system implemented by LCT. Under this system, if a member of society engaged in what was considered deviant behavior (rape, stealing, etcetera) then a three-phase punishment system unfolded. In this system, first members of LCT approached the perpetrator for a "chat". Second, physical punishment (euphemism for torture) was given. And third, if the behavior persisted, or if the transgression was deemed too disruptive, then execution was carried out (Falko, 2015). This information will be explored as part of the legitimacy analysis, but here it is examined in terms of the sovereign practices and state-effects performances. Before continuing, however, a conceptual disclaimer must be highlighted again.

In addition to what was explained in the first chapter, by adopting this idea, we try to demystify Calderon's government hypothesis of "us" and "them", as if criminals were completely distinct and disconnected from the rest of the population. However, in the case of Michoacán, both LFM and later LCT made explicit efforts to portray, shape, and display the image of a cohesive, unitary, and distinguishable group when attempting to legitimate themselves. These attempts included initiation rituals and their own code of conduct, representing a particularity of this case. Moreover, and recalling Migdal's definition of the state, Michoacán's criminal groups were part of the "multiple parts" with their own specific practices. Both LFM and LCT coexisted with the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, i.e., the federal and local government. In Migdal's terms, they all shape the state as a field of power marked by the use and threat of violence.

Government (both local and federal). In Michoacán, some crimes were attempted to be transformed into social causes. The hypothesis of political decision-making vacuum as a condition that let criminal groups look for legitimacy regularly appears among the local perceptions. Some scholars have argued that the absence of the state in some regions of Michoacán is historical. This argument fits with the hypothesis that the state´s "heavy handed return" to Michoacán in the context of the war on drugs and a securitization strategy, later resulted in an increase in violence (Gledhill, 2003). This return has been reviewed through the previous section of this chapter. However, to highlight the role of the government (both local and federal) into specifically Michoacán´s legitimacy dynamic, three events are essential. They are: 1) the Joint Operative Michoacán, 2) the imprisonment of several municipal authorities by the federal government (*Michoacanazo*), and 3) the designation of a special commissioner from the federal government for being responsible for the local security.

These three events are helpful to understand how the government emerged again in a supposedly non-state context and performed the State face into a very specific manner. As said earlier, the Joint Operative made of Michoacán the first battlefield after the declaration of the war on drugs, and become the first moment in which the government involved into the local legitimacy struggle. After the violence and drug trafficking conditions in the state of Michoacán, and in the context described earlier, the federal government decided on a punitive strategy to solve the problem. Seven thousand army members were sent to Michoacán to combat this new fluid "enemy", organized crime (Becerril, 2012). The strategy did not consider health problems, or solutions such as rehab centers, education and employment policies, crime prevention, or conflict resolution. The strategy was war.

In the second place comes what the Mexican media called *Michoacanazo*. At the end of May 2009, the federal government decided to imprison 28 of Michoacán´s public officers without any judicial procedure. Ten municipal presidents, one judge, and sixteen others with high positions at the local level. Those public officers were accused of having links with organized crime structures, and the apprehensions order were carried out by the army and federal police officers (Zermeño, 2009). However, each of them was released because the authorities could not demonstrate any charges against not even one of them. Even more, the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) issued a recommendation to the federal institutions involved in the *Michoacanazo* (General Attorney of Mexico (PGR) and the Public Security Secretary (SSP)) for the human rights violations against these public officers (CNDH, 72/2009 recommendation). Even though the procedures were completely wrong from a legal perspective, they represent a new era in the relation between the federal and local government, marked by mistrust (Zermeño, 2009). The local authorities were now seen either as corrupt or inefficient by the federal authorities in Mexico City. Moreover, the *Michoacanzo* could be read as a particular state-effect and sovereign practice, this is, through performing authority, justice, and combat against the corrupt local authorities, members of organized crime.

Whether this was real or not, the legal procedure could not produce evidence. The relevance of the case does not seem to be in the justice generation but in the effect of making it appear the state was carrying out justice. The third and last moment happened in the context of the *Autodefensas* crisis explained above. Parallel to the rise of popularity of these vigilantes groups, a political crisis occurred in Michoacán with the resignation of the governor of the state, Fausto Vallejo, because of health problems. In this context, the federal government designed a special plan to intervene in the state with the appointment of a special commissioner for security in Michoacán. It was the creation of a sui generis charge. Alfredo Castillo, who was very close person to President Enrique Peña Nieto, was appointed to the position. It was an ad hoc legal instrument that allowed the federal government a direct say over local politics, including the relationships and negotiations with the self-defense groups

and its leaders. The most important consequence of the negotiation was the signing of the agreements of Tepalcatepec.

After months of talks between both, the Mexican federal government and the armed groups, the signing occurred in January 2014 and meant a schism between the leaders of the movement, because at that time not everyone agreed with the particularities of the agreement, particularly in the idea of trust and/or collaborate with the government. It was an event full of performativity by the Mexican State (Lampérière, 2007, 57) with two consequences, one symbolic and one practical, on which *Autodefensas* were registered (including their weapons, guns, ammo, etcetera) and received uniforms. The symbolic consequence was their legalization. The practical consequence was to provoke confrontations between *Autodefensas* leaders. Thus, they became uncoordinated and finally were immobilized and unable to have a unitary speech. The agreements contained eight points among which the vigilante groups would become part of the municipal police. Of course, those members or groups who did not agree with the agreements and continued carrying weapons and defending themselves became, from that moment, illegal. They were no longer carrying out self-defense but criminal activity. In general, the federal government never stopped participating in the definition who is legitimate by defining itself as the legitimate one. Violence, justice simulation, negotiation, and creating an internal enemy represent examples of the state-effect.

Cherán Rebellion Movement. Located almost two-hours away from Michoacán's capital, Cherán is a small town with a little over 18 thousand inhabitants (INEGI). Cherán is one of eleven municipalities that are inhabited by the Purépecha indigenous people. They speak the Purépecha language, as well as Spanish. In the early hours of April 11, 2011, the local women lead an upraising against criminals, public officers, and political party members (Interview in fieldwork no. 20, June 2016). The rest of the local population followed them and rose up to confront illegal loggers and organized crime members who have been working together to exploit the community's forest first for its wood and forest resources in general (Gasparello, 2018), and second, once the forest is depleted, to claim the land for farming — mostly avocado, lemon, berries, and marihuana. The local authorities were complicit and by the time of the uprising, more than 80% of the 27 thousand hectares had been stripped of its trees (Ventura Patiño, 2012, 160). The community came out victorious from that first confrontation and began a political battle, which consisted of the capture and detention of the illegal loggers, who were taken into custody for almost a week. The head of the government at the municipal level was also expelled from the town, as well as the municipal police and all the representatives from every political party. After this political battle, a legal battle followed.

The people of Cherán sought to secure a governing system closer to their own customs and ways of life. This is how they laid out the work for instating the "usos y costumbres" (traditions and customs) model. "Usos y costumbres" is a legal term denoting indigenous

customary law in Latin America. Since colonial times, authorities have approved of communal self-governments, the use of indigenous customary law and juridical practice, and basically local forms of rulership with varying degrees of acceptance and formality. In its contemporary form, this system is usually based on the selection of community representatives through consensus in community gatherings. This was how Cherán overthrew the municipal government, and began a legal battle, which took them to the Electoral Tribunal for Federal Judicial Power (*Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación*). The town's people were asking for future municipal elections to take place in a model based on their idea of an autonomous government, and without political parties. Given their violent context, their claims were heard, and The Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (*Suprema Corte de Justicia de la Nación*) which is the supreme court of Mexico and the head of the judicial branch of the Mexican federal government, consisting of eleven judges, voted in favor (10 in favor and 1 against) of Cherán's petition.

The state gave the *Concejo Mayor* or Elders Council legal authority to govern as the municipal government. This included its local community security forces, and granted access to state resources, including the Federal budget that every Mexican municipality receives. For the purposes of this paper, and as previously mentioned, we are analyzing two points for each case 1) how legitimization was built based on the audience sought to legitimize the movement; and 2) the ways in which each movement negotiated with authorities. For the first point, we find that Cherán sought legitimacy within the town's people only, never outside. It was a battle for and by Cherán. Its people didn't look for allies or sympathizers — at least not overtly, outside of its own limits. And support by the town's people was overwhelming. At the end of 2011, a few months after local people led by women rose up and took over, the Electoral Institute of Michoacán carried out informative meetings with the population of Cherán, to inform about the self-governing practice based on 'Usos y Costumbres'. Then in December a referendum took place so that people could choose whether they wanted to remain in the party system in place for decades or change to the communal self-governing system. The result was very clear, with 4,846 community members in favor of the self-governing system, and only eight against it (Ventura Patiño, 2012, 169).

According to a member of the Elder's Council, at some point, one of the most charismatic leaders in the self-defense movement, Manuel Mireles, came to Cherán seeking possibilities for an alliance. However, the town's people opted for keeping its distance and remained focused on its own process, which they considered to be "just", "legal", and "able to grant them many more rights, more than before" (Interview in fieldwork no. 20, June 2016). The second important point is the type of negotiation maintained with authorities. The people of Cherán's position was firm and never open to negotiating the terms. Since the beginning, there was no intention to negotiate or to align with any other actor or group. The people always maintained the intention to form an autonomous government system. There was never the intention to spread the movement to even neighboring towns or vicinities, even though

some of those towns are also indigenous Purépecha, and thus share the same language and culture. Up to this day, based on fieldwork recently conducted, the idea still remains, throughout the council, to abstain from forming alliances or cooperation outside of the town's border. There's an additional factor, which has worked as a cohesive force, and that is the threat of political parties wanting to return. This has brought the town together again now to defend their recently gained and legalized autonomy. In this case, the legitimacy struggle was both through legality and extra legal means. We are talking about a special legitimacy case, which happened through both descriptive and normative grounds.

Vigilantes. This group appeared in Michoacán in the beginning of 2013. They were mostly men from the *Tierra Caliente* region who wanted to fight directly against LCT because of their abuses. Regarding the so-called *Autodefensas*, Schneckener proposed a three-pronged militia profile depending on their formation type, objectives, and stakeholders. Initially, each of them plays with "borrowed legitimacy" from those actors who pursue the same objectives and foundational interest. However, the next steps depend on how they manage that borrowed legitimacy. The threefold profile explained by Schneckener is as follows: counter-insurgency, counter-rival, and counter-crime. This latter definition explains the Michoacán *Autodefensas* profile. According to him, in this latter: […] militia violence is part of the fight against organized crime and (alleged) 'criminals'. Militias see themselves as safeguards for 'law and order' which includes the physical protection of marketplaces, villages or urban neighborhoods, the deterrence, arrest and prosecution of (presumed) offenders, the fight against corruption, the support of the police and the judiciary, but also extra-legal measures and forms of vigilante justice. Thereby, militias claim they provide security and protect the property of citizens, but especially of certain interest groups […] who often act as sponsors and stakeholders (Schneckener, 2017, 809-810).

In early March 2013, two years after the start of the movement in Cherán, one of the most prominent Mexican newspapers reported the existence of 68 paramilitary groups in the same number of Mexican municipalities. Guerrero (27), Chiapas (11) and Michoacán (10) topped the list (Staff Reform, 2013). Their emergence had historical and contextual explanations. On the one hand, the historical distance with the official authority, mainly their idea of the state, opened the window for local people to carry out the task of creating or recovering public security. On the other hand, the recent events in the region were enough motivation for them to take the big decision of deciding between keeping living under the yoke of crime and risking their lives trying to beat the local criminal groups. Hipólito Mora, a lemon farmer from Michoacán, founded the first self-defense group in that state in February 2013, in La Ruana (Buenavista Tomatlán municipality). The group aimed to end extortion and violence generated by the LCT, even if that meant to negotiate, cooperate, or collaborate with the government, or to kill them directly. As Mora said, self-defense groups were willing to let the government rule once they finished with the criminals.

During an interview, Mora was asked, “Do you have the antidote for scorpion?” referring to LCT as an insect metaphor, "The antidote is the government, together with its citizens”. "Will you lay down arms, if the government asks?” Mora was questioned by the interviewer and he answered: "Only when they, the leaders of LCT, die or when they are in prison” (Zamarripa, 2013). Self-defense groups were able not only to expand territorially through Tierra Caliente area in Michoacán. In just a couple of years, they had a presence in a big part of the state, were recognized and visible in the rest of the country, and even overseas. For instance, during August 2013, the Center of Social Studies and Public Opinion of the Mexican Congress raised a survey on self-defense groups. There, 72% of respondents said they are aware that in some communities across the country have emerged armed civilian groups or the so-called self-defense groups, and 42% said they were agree or strongly agree with the struggle of those groups against organized crime (CESOP, 2013). The liberating and anti-crime speech of the self-defense groups leaders, their presence in national media and the sympathy and/or public recognition of their fight and some of its leaders (particularly to José Manuel Mireles and Mora himself) caused this rebel movement to become a matter of national public interest.

Gradually, people of other Michoacán towns, former criminals (specifically former members of LCT, the so called *perdonados* or "the forgiven"), among others, joined them. Nevertheless, the self-defense groups in Michoacán achieved sympathy among various sectors of Mexican society. Almost a year after being formed, in May 2014, a video entitled #TodosSomosAutodefensas (we all are *Autodefensas*) circulated on the Internet. Businesspeople, politicians, religious leaders, and members of social organizations joined the message, not only from Michoacán but also from all of Mexico. José Manuel Mireles Valverde became the most representative and charismatic leader, and received solidarity and sympathy from these groups. The “First Meeting of *Autodefensas*” followed that video. The reunion held in Mexico City, where Mireles and Mora met with movement´s supporters. Mireles said at that time: "Here we are in the center of Mexico, from here we speak out...let all over the world hear us, the self-defense of Michoacán are willing to defend Mexico" (quoted by Baranda; 2014). The search for local legitimacy had reached a national scope.

However, the crisis in the coming months started with the public-officer Alfredo Castillo´s appointment, whose capacity to negotiate with *Autodefensas* leaders became an effective tool for the federal government to participate in local Michoacán disputes. Castillo achieved the signature of the agreements of Tepalcatepec, and a consequent division between the *Autodefensas* leaders. Years later, in February of 2016, Michoacán´s governor declared (for the second time in less than one year) the end of the self-defense groups in the state: "From now on the work of so-called self-defense groups is completed. There are no more armed civilian groups doing that work, which only concerns to the government. Anyone who may want to do this task must do it illegally" (Aureoles quoted by García; 2016). Afterward, other actors such as farmers, peasants, religious leaders played a role in the criminal group’s

attempts at legitimation. In the following pages, these attempts are described and analyzed. Hence, the next chapter is specifically dedicated to analyze LFM and LCT legitimacy endeavors.

3.3. Closing Remarks: Chapter III Summary

After elaborating on Michoacán's political legitimacy context, the following are closing remarks derived from this third chapter. In the first place, the LFM/LCT phenomenon is connected to the war on drugs launched in Mexico in 2006. In the case of Michoacán, this iron-fisted punitive strategy set the basis for a political legitimacy struggle that implicated several actors – LFM and LCT among them. Increased violence around Michoacán becomes rationalized through the different versions of the local social order clash. The war on drugs had and still has real consequences in terms of multiple sovereign bodies performing simultaneous legitimacy practices. In other words, Michoacán became a particularly contested legitimacy scenario. On the side of the Mexican federal government, Michoacán became a relevant symbolic war arena not only because was it the home state of the president, but also because the first army deployment was launched there.

On the side of the local criminal groups, but more particularly LFM, two particular actions were recovered in this chapter. Both matter deeply in terms of their political legitimacy interest at the beginning of Michoacán´s case analysis – during the following years, there were a collection of actions in this regard, but they are revisited in the next chapter. On the one hand, the event in which LFM dropped the heads of their alleged enemy, a rival and foreign criminal group. LFM left a *narcomanta* with a justification of illegality. It was not only the agenda´s spread but also crime justification and public explanation pointing to a legitimacy interest. On the other hand, the text published in the local newspaper and reproduced here was another action in which elements of locality and moral values were spread and addressed to the local people. Other political actors also emerged and had a presence in the field by clashing for the local social order definition.

Autodefensas, the people of Cherán, as well as the local and federal government are the prominent examples in this regard. LFM and later LCT were embedded in the same social context. Even when the analysis here centers on criminal groups, their legitimacy performance always takes place in relation to these other agencies. Michoacán became an intense arena to contest political legitimacy. The place experienced a saturation of authority practices (codified into sovereignty exercise, state-effect, statehood practices). This condition only increased through the next years when other social agents also took part. Within this context, from a general political legitimacy evaluation, Michoacán is appreciated by the simple equation of many actors, many of them state actors. As a result of the political legitimacy contestation, the context exhibited a multiplicity of authority and not an absence

of it. Each of the political actors in the social order constellation of Michoacán performed sovereign as well as political legitimacy practices.