Riding Horses
I played with the cats and dogs and a sheep.
I wanted to ride the horses. (If I was old, I
would ride the horses and paint sticks with lots
of colours so that the horses can jump over
them.)

Pilar Calveiro
Private and State Violence under Neo-liberalism

The transition from a bipolar to a globalized
world has involved an important and
differentiated use of violence, articulated by
new forms of the political, the social, and
the subjective. That is to say, in the new
world order, institutional power assumes
specific forms of violence that have significant
correspondences to the forms of political power
and social representation, and the social values
that render acceptable these forms of violence.
On the one hand, states manage commercial,
financial, and political organizations—such as
the International Monetary Fund and the World
Bank—that have implemented certain policies
in order to assure the worldwide expansion of
corporate powers. On the other hand, states
manage internal repressive apparatuses and
military forces that allow them control; they
function as the true guarantors of new forms of
wealth accumulation, either through persuasion
or imposition. In this scenario, State violence
plays a central role in the current process of
hegemonic reconfiguration; in turn, it has
reorganized itself mainly in two forms of war:
a) the so-called War Against Terror, which
includes the concentration camp model, however restricted, for the moment; and b) the
war against insecurity and organized crime,
which has led to the large-scale extension
and re-organization of the penal system. In
both cases, as the privatization of the means
of destruction and instruments of violence
proliferate, State violence is carried out both
by public and private organizations.
Nations worldwide have subjected
to global security policies internally
and externally, adopting the language of war
scripted by the global world powers. The “War
Against Terror” and the “War Against Crime”
are wars waged on behalf of authoritarian
domination and enable the most radical forms of
repressive violence. The first allows for the
maintenance of the new global order by
replicating the concentration camp model (e.g.
Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and the web of CIA
“black sites”). The second, waged on behalf of a
State’s supposed internal security, uses juridical
and penal reorganization leading to increased
imprisonment, especially of the young poor
population. Both bellicose logics are intertwined,
dictated by world powers through the States’
supranational State agencies, and are effective
tools for global hegemonic reorganization.

The “War” Against Terror

The end of the Cold War both opened up a
new phase for capitalism and represented an
obstacle for it. With the disappearance of the
communist “enemy,” the legitimacy of armed
intervention at the international level waned.
It therefore became necessary to find a new
enemy, to construct the figure of a dangerous
opponent of imprecise location and indefinite
power that would justify the strong-armed
actions necessary for global expansion. At
that time, drug-dealing nets seemed to offer
that new figure and already in 1987, one heard
about “the war on drugs.” Drug trafficking,
however, is too intertwined with the corporate
network and their economic interests to be
able to become a permanent, primary enemy.
Indeed, it constitutes one of the most profitable
global businesses, involving hundreds of
billions of dollars. Although it is extremely
difficult to establish quotes, in a conservative
estimate from 2011, the United Nations Office
on Drug and Crime calculated that global
income for drug trafficking was 320 billion
dollars. Researcher Marcelo Colussi argues, however, that the commercial circuit of illicit drugs generates even higher profits of about 800 billion dollars per annum, more than the income generated by the oil industry. Already in 2002, economist Michel Chossudovsky stated: “The multimillion-dollar income generated by the sale of drugs is deposited in the Western banks, which are spreading like hives; they launder enormous quantities of narco-dollars, and this is why international narcotic trafficking constitutes a multimillion-dollar business that reaches the same magnitude as the international oil business. From this point of view, geopolitical control of the narco-routes is as strategic as the control of pipelines.”

Aside from its profitability, drug trafficking has been tied to international political power networks, which finance illegal and undercover operations by the CIA in different parts of the planet. These are some of the reasons why the target for a global and sustained “war” needed to be gradually shifted in another direction. Beginning in the Reagan era, international terrorism as a threat to the United States was offered as such a target, and since the 1980s the mass media have increasingly thematized the terrorist phenomenon as the central security threat—not only nationally, but globally.

If we add up the victims of international terrorism reported by the press between 1988 and 2001, it turns out that the victims do not even reach 3,000. Even Walter Laqueur, who studies terrorism and urban guerrillas, stated in 2001 that up to that time, “terrorism was no more than a nuisance.” Three million, three thousand or three victims are always something more than a nuisance, always irreparable, but put into perspective, it is evident that a phenomenon causing three thousand victims worldwide and in the span of 11 years cannot be considered a serious threat to global security. Moreover, by 2000, the Anti-Terrorist Protocol had been signed at an American Summit, thus assigning it disproportionate international relevance.

In this sense, we could discuss the construction of the figure of terrorism in at least two senses. On the one hand, to the establishment and funding of armed paramilitary terrorism is destined to kill, badly hurt, or take hostages with the purpose of creating a state of terror in the population in general, in a group or in a person, as well as to intimidate populations, to obligate a government or an international organization to execute an action or abstain itself from it.” It is highly significant that criminal acts such as killing or gravely hurting with the purpose of creating a state of terror “in a person” are included. According to this, what distinguishes simple murder from a terrorist attack is intentionality, which opens up a wide space for judiciary discretion and interpretation, while facilitating political manipulation of the law. John Brown points out that this slippage fundamentally implies a transition from “no punishment without law”—characteristic of the Rule of Law—to “no crime without punishment” proper to the securitized State.

One of the problems posed by anti-terrorism legislation at the national and international levels is that it is based on the “state of exception,” where legal protections like felony probation are suspended, and the powers of intelligence-gathering and police services are expanded to the detriment of individual rights. Even more alarming is the vast internal intelligence apparatus that has been established in place in the US after 2001 under the justification of supporting the “war against terror.” The FBI has gathered a gigantic database of information on citizens signaled as “suspects” using a secret government apparatus of global proportions, comprising 1,271 governmental organizations and 1,931 private security and intelligence companies.

A global consensus has emerged around the struggle against terrorism, which is very useful for the control of internal discord. This has resulted in the internal approval of a variety of anti-terrorism laws, which, with certain variations among countries, expand the concept of terrorism in order to make it valid both for local circumstances and international political conflicts—consequently (either intentionally or not) enabling the indiscriminate repression of anti-systemic movements and individuals. To summarize, the figure of terrorism operates in order to sanction almost any opposition to the social, political, or economic system, punishing subjects with harsh measures under a law of exception. In order to accomplish this, the concept of terrorism is criminalized and thus de-politicized; next, protest and violence are assimilated, rendering illegitimate any non-State use of force; finally, all violence against the system and formal democracy, insofar as it is destabilizing and violent, is considered to be terrorist. The crime of rebellion disappears—as it is synonymous with terrorism—and with it, the right to rebel, widely recognized by liberal doctrine before these recent transgressions on behalf of governments worldwide. In this manner, all forms of insurgency are de-legitimized and legislated as exceptional. As previously legitimate forms of protest are pushed beyond legal protection, a “system without opposition” is thus created. Indeed, the most alarming aspect of the war on terrorism is not the harshness of its penalties, but the suspension of rights and the exceptionality of the punishments.

The elasticity of the term “terrorism” allows it to accommodate a variety of phenomena. Thus, the “terrorist” is turned against the “enemy,” whereby either the “terrorist” or the “enemy” justifies “preventive” measures, and not only are certain acts and individuals punished, but also those considered to be potentially capable of committing them, even before the felony exists. It could be said that the only criterion that identifies the “terrorist,” insofar as it is a diffuse category that can include many ethnicities, political inclinations, and religious preferences, embodies the Other of our times. In the construction of this Other and the war scenarios against it, many public and private interests—both political and economic—are played out.

While the first bombs were falling in Baghdad in order to respond to a non-extant terrorist threat, big corporations like Halliburton and Bechtel Group were signing contracts for... under Neo-liberalism
In the context of the so-called war against terror,14 over a hundred private military companies were established in Iraq and the Arabic Peninsula. The growth of the private military industry, in addition to representing a major business endeavour supported by the United States, defies the Geneva Convention and other international treaties, and also questions the alleged State monopoly on legitimate violence. As businesses grow, civilian casualties multiply. The majority of victims—over 100,000—were civilians killed indiscriminately: women, children, journalists, wedding assistants, either casually or intentionally murdered. The second largest number of deaths were insurgents from occupied countries; third, representing only three percent of the total, were the occupation forces, made up of American citizens who do not necessarily benefit from corporate profits gained through war. In addition, civilian victims multiply by way of technology: only 60 percent of unmanned aircraft and “intelligent” weapons effectively found their targets, and over 90 percent caused “collateral” damage in unarmed civilian zones. This did not only occur in Iraq and Afghanistan but also during the peak of George W. Bush’s bellicose fever. In the course of Barack Obama’s first term, the United States continued to murder civilians, either through the direct bombardment of targets in Afghanistan or unmanned aircraft (drone) attacks against alleged insurgents in Pakistan, or by claiming they were terrorists. According to the Daily Times, between January 2009 and July 2010, these raids over Pakistan left at least 2,500 casualties,15 and many more deaths have been reported since. This indiscriminate violence was brought about by the so-called “technological wars,” which aim to cause the death of others without putting one’s own at risk, thus radicalizing the principle according to which “saving humanity” presupposes eliminating a fraction of it.

This global violence, under the name of the “War Against Terrorism,” is indeed terrorist in itself because it resorts to mass violence, creating hundreds of thousands of victims through arbitrary and indiscriminate bombing or aerial civilian populations. The war embodies the transgression of every legal order in order to dominate the world by force and fear, applying “exemplary punishments” that would dissuade other nations from resisting the advance of the global corporate model. The war against terror and other forms of “terrorists” is also a question of the alleged State monopoly on violence. As businesses grow, civilian casualties multiply. The majority of victims—over 100,000—were civilians killed indiscriminately: women, children, journalists, wedding assistants, either casually or intentionally murdered. The second largest number of deaths were insurgents from occupied countries; third, representing only three percent of the total, were the occupation forces, made up of American citizens who do not necessarily benefit from corporate profits gained through war. In addition, civilian victims multiply by way of technology: only 60 percent of unmanned aircraft and “intelligent” weapons effectively found their targets, and over 90 percent caused “collateral” damage in unarmed civilian zones. This did not only occur in Iraq and Afghanistan but also during the peak of George W. Bush’s bellicose fever. In the course of Barack Obama’s first term, the United States continued to murder civilians, either through the direct bombardment of targets in Afghanistan or unmanned aircraft (drone) attacks against alleged insurgents in Pakistan, or by claiming they were terrorists. According to the Daily Times, between January 2009 and July 2010, these raids over Pakistan left at least 2,500 casualties,15 and many more deaths have been reported since. This indiscriminate violence was brought about by the so-called “technological wars,” which aim to cause the death of others without putting one’s own at risk, thus radicalizing the principle according to which “saving humanity” presupposes eliminating a fraction of it.

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narcotics was actually considered to be a policy matter of the State. This began to change under President Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988) and took a decisive turn under Carlos Salinas de Gortari’s government (1988–1994), coinciding with the establishment of the neoliberal model. According to Anabel Hernández, in the early 1990s, the government moved from charging a non-official tax to demanding large amounts of money in personal bribes. In turn, officials offered protection to specific cartels. Moreover, Hernández states that many of the officials involved became subordinate to the drug lords, and completely invested in the business. In turn, some drug lords became government officials, blurring even more the already indistinct boundaries between politics and drug trafficking.

In past years, many politicians have made agreements with organized crime groups in exchange for money in their campaigns. According to Columbia University professor Edgardo Buscaglia, “between 55 and 65 percent of political campaigns are infiltrated by criminal groups,” including all political parties. In turn, businessmen in charge of big corporations launder the money earned in the illegal traffic of people, goods, and narcotics, as well as from other criminal activities such as kidnapping. In this manner, they enable the drug lords’ entry into the legal economy in exchange for large amounts of money and weapons from the United States, and will be able to do so until they either get out of control or cease to be useful. Considering that the majority of drug trafficking profits remain in the US, it is clear where the main business is, and who benefits from it. As Argentinian lawyer and writer Eugenio Raul Zaffaroni states, there is “a protectionist effect toward the benefit of some of the non-state service lenders (and) a concentration of criminal profits in the big transnational corporations that ends up in the central countries.”

Beyond the struggle against a complex network of organized crime organizations, North American agencies have thus actually enabled drug trafficking, building an enormous paralegal apparatus operating under its control. The consolidation of such a large apparatus has led to a balance between the apparatus itself and official power structures, making uncertain who imposes which rules on whom. If the US government prefers to deal with a single criminal organization—and it seems that for now, and in Mexico’s case, it is the cartel led by El Chapo Guzman, who has access to the US market—its because they reap profits from this arrangement. In that sense, it is interesting to remember the defense of Vicente Zambara Niebla—the son of one of the Sinaloa cartel capos who was captured in Mexico and extradited to the US—who affirmed he had performed both legal and illegal activities with the cooperation of US federal officials. His defense lawyer used the legal figures “defense by exercise of public authority” and “incitement to an offense by law enforcement personnel,” as Zambara stated he had worked for over five years with personnel from the DEA and the FBI (whom he named). Furthermore, he stated that officers from both Agencies, as well as from the Immigration and Customs Enforcement US (ICE), gave him their consent to execute criminal activities from January 2004 to March 2009. This from, it can be inferred that the US government is not at all interested in ending drug trafficking—as it has shifted focus towards terrorism—but rather to control and use it for their own benefit. Both phenomena have been the product of their own construction, first creating allies and then “enemies.” Bearing this in mind, we can consider this system to be a war [narco-craty], constituted by drug lords, narco-businessmen, and narco-politicians, along with the narco-military and narco-police that give them protection.

2 It could be argued that we are not facing a war against drug trafficking, as is often affirmed, for such a war would presuppose two sides: the government and drug dealers fighting to the death. On the contrary, the involvement of different state and non-state actors demonstrates the interpenetration between government, society, and organized crime, which comprises a massive network that disseminates atrocious forms of violence in a struggle for market control amongst its internal factions. Officials from different departments are part of this confrontation and favour one of the sides in order to gain profit. This network affects with its violence large sectors of society that end up being its victims, although they may also be involved in it. Kidnapped, murdered, tortured—they are the most common victims. Youth are frequently used by criminal groups who take advantage of their cultural and economic precarity; police and soldiers are recruited from the most humble sectors for the same reasons. Any way we look at it, from a national or international perspective, we are dealing with a false war that, on the one hand, allows for an extraordinary accumulation of illegal profits, which are partly reinvested in illegal activities, and are also useful to the political system. On the other hand, like terrorism, this war offers an enemy that does not weaken but, rather empowers violence, making it more and more threatening. It could be pointed out that when Vicente Fox’s presidency ended, the balance of this alleged war was 9,000 dead; during Felipe Calderón’s term, the number of victims rose to 60,000. Unleashed violence that threatens everyone and disseminates fear thus justifies the use of bellicose discourse as a useful weapon for legitimacy. Considering that Calderón declared a “war” against organized crime four days after taking charge, in the context of a highly questioned electoral process, the parallel with George W. Bush’s war against terrorism is more than evident.

3 Drug trafficking is not sought to be eliminated, but controlled. Struggles amongst rival factions are a key part of the history of drug trafficking. In the last decade, however, there have been efforts to unify all the criminal groups under a single command, with which accords may be established. Shortly after Guzmán Loera’s flight from the Puente Grande jail, he assembled more than 25 important drug lords in a sort of cartel. The idea was to coordinate actions and share protection from the authorities. In this meeting, a national criminal organization was created, La Federación, homonymous with so-called legitimate institutional power. Guzmán Loera was recognized as the head of the organization because he was protected by Vicente Fox’s government. Anabel Hernández states that “many things that the brilliant idea of creating a drug dealer union was a suggestion by the DEA...[because] for the US government it was easier to have a single interlocutor with whom to negotiate drug smuggling in its territory.” The truth is that La Federación was also protected by Calderón’s government, and all signs point to the fact this protection exists on both sides of the border.

4 The real dangerousness of the cartels resides in the information they know. Organized crime bosses know in detail how this network functions and who benefits from it. Their power resides in this knowledge, but is also their greatest weakness. Indeed, the narco-lords know which “decent” politicians are linked to the network, and they know which “prominent” men allow the real drug lords to

... under Neo-liberalism
operate. This is why when their cycle comes to an end, when there are no longer useful, or when they are lascively behave as if they were autonomous, they are locked in high-security prisons, or an adversary is ordered to murder them. The information they posses is pure venom for politicians, as drug money feeds their electoral campaigns.

Augmenting Penitentiary Punishment

As an answer to the violence unleashed by the large drug networks, the tendency in Mexico has been to modify the law in order to increase penitentiary punishment. As Marcelo Bergman states: “Reforms to criminal codes that took place after 1994 typified as serious a large amount of crimes, resulting in an increase of penalties. Moreover, many crimes were exempt from the possibility of early release, therefore increasing the duration of potential time spent in prison.”

Between 2000 and 2008, 17 reforms were enacted in the Federal Criminal Code geared toward increasing punishment. In 2008, a Constitutional Reform took place with significant implications for this tendency, affecting the principle of presumption of innocence and increasing the number of cases that deserve preventive jailing. But perhaps the side of the new law that most contravenes human rights is the provision of aggravating circumstances, or of “organized crime, the main object of the reform. Organized crime is defined as “the factual organization of three or more people with the purpose of permanently and repeatedly committing crimes,” that is, it is a crime accomplished with the sole intention of executing another crime. Modifications introduced by the Judiciary Reform at the legislative level, as well as attributions and procedures by the police and judiciary, are geared toward expanding the prison population. Instituting a “state of exception” centers on the figure of “organized crime” enables many disturbing changes: the suspension of people’s liberties because of their probable participation in illicit activities; the augmentation of isolation periods, mainly to extend the length of the order not to leave the jurisdiction; the suspension of trial and statute of limitations, when the accused evades justice or is put under the hands of a judge abroad; the concealment of the accusing party; the restriction of public audience; and the confiscation of property allegedly derived from illicit activities, even before a case is put to trial.

In this manner, the state “authorizes” itself to violate the rights of persons who have been accused of organized and other crimes, and to take exceptional measures legalizing the misrecognition of some citizens as subjects of rights, only because of their being suspected organized crime or other severe illicit acts. The increase of imprisonment time has naturally led to prison overcrowding and an increased lack of control in penitentiary centres. Those who remain imprisoned, moreover, are largely minor criminals, as people at the top of the cartels have enough resources to evade justice. This reproduces an old and yet singular phenomenon with a specific purpose in contemporary penitentiary system: the imprisonment of the poor for longer terms, and in more degrading conditions. This phenomenon in Mexico and neighbouring countries, as well as the orientation of law and justice toward these perverse consequences, beg the question of why the system purportedly seeks (the reduction of crime and the reinvestment of criminals into society) occurs, and moreover, how the system actually benefits from these policies.

The Penitentiary System

The population of Mexican prisons has been steadily increasing over the past 20 years, from 98 of every 100,000 inhabitants in 1992, to 200 of every 100,000 inhabitants in 2010 (ICPS). Marcelo Bergman argues that the growth of the prison population resides in “the extension of the convictions rather than the number of persons imprisoned.”

Surveys conducted in Mexico DF and State prisons by the Center for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE) in 2002, 2005, and 2009 present some very interesting data, which can now function as the representative of the situation across the country, as they hold the largest jail population in total. They showed that in 2009, 40 percent of inmates were between 18 and 30 years old, and if we add the 30-to-40-year-old portion, 76.4 percent were between the ages of 12 and 15, and 92.3 percent of those older than 18. Moreover, fully 97.3 percent were employed a month before being detained, more than half of them as self-employed merchants or taxi drivers.” At the national level, by April 2008, the numbers indicate that 23.54 percent of inmates were jailed because of crimes under federal jurisdiction, which encompasses drug-related crimes, illegal weapons, criminal association and money laundering, and 74.46 percent were jailed for common law offenses. These numbers allow us to see that the jailed population differs vastly from the perpetrators of severe crimes, which evidently have a larger impact on society. In fact, as Bergman states, “most of the crimes punished are simple and not serious.”

Furthermore, the percentage of recidivism is high (29.3 percent in 2002), and increased in each subsequent survey up to 36.5 percent in 2009. This fact shows that the penitentiary system does not encourage re-socialization and tends to re-imprison petty criminals. Indeed, “many detainees are harassed by corrupt policemen; after their release, they ask them for money or simply arrest them in order to cover their detainee quota.”

We could conclude with Bergman that Mexican jails are not imprisoning the most dangerous criminals, but those whose detention poses the least problems. [This] means that there are a large number of poor people in prisons, while most professional criminals live outside them.”

Evidently, the rule of law implies differential sets of rights according to an overall strategy of differential punishment. In addition, just as a person dealing with the system could evade prison thanks to corruption—mainly of the police, but also public prosecutors and judges—once she is in the system, she is trapped in a network of corruption that encompasses payments for minor crimes, legitimacy derived from a roll call, trafficking of all kinds of legal and illegal goods and services, all of which are allowed in these institutions.

The difference between leading a life relatively worth living inside prison or living in a truly horrible situation is determined by the networks of corruption that govern the system. Overcrowding is the rule for the majority of prisoners. According to the 2002 survey, “there are cells intended for three inmates in which more than 10 sleep... On average, inmates report that in the past week they slept in the same room with other 9 inmates... (and because of) a lack of mattresses and beds they sleep on the floor (20 percent report having to pay for a mattress).” Furthermore, by way of the same mechanism through which some inmates gain access to mattresses, others with more money are able to individually occupy cells that would normally hold five or more people, and have other privileges as well. These institutions, moreover, do not provide access to basic food and healthcare when it is needed, nor do they provide sufficient food and clothing. In 2002, for example, 90 percent of inmates received food from their families. A large amount of goods not supplied by the prison, however, are available inside, illegally traded among the prisoners. Business transactions include prohibited goods, and authorities have estimated that 50 percent of inmates consume drugs regularly, especially marijuana and cocaine.

Indeed, drugs can “pacify” the population, as well as all those involved in trafficking, be they inmates, penitentiary personnel, and external distribution networks. Anybody who sells things inside a jail, from soda to forbidden drugs and cellphones, must pay a “fee” to the guards. The National... under Neo-liberalism
Association for Family and Friends of Prisoners (18) estimated that every year in Mexico DF institutions, authorities make up to 1.7 billion pesos (about US $1.3 billion) by charging illegal fees to prisoners and their families. The fact that inmates resort to illegal trafficking in order to obtain the income allowing them to survive inside jail is associated with the corrupt, formal, and informal power networks within prison and beyond. Illicit activities from which they can derive higher profits, which in turn produces more profits for those higher up in the system. At a first glance, these illegal networks seem to control the jail, which is only possible with the consent of the formal institutional powers, and superior powers. Sometimes, the direction taken by a prison may be dictated by external political powers, associated with mafias both inside and outside the jails, thus demonstrating the interconnected power relations that run inside, and outside the jails, thus demonstrating the capacity of criminal networks to reproduce crime —as opposed to the exceptionality of the law and of the State itself. As a consequence, we must consider that the increase in the incarcerated population, combined with allowing and maintaining conditions of “exception” and corruption within prisons, serves a penitentiary system that reproduces crime—as opposed to preventing it. Furthermore, this system allows the transfer of public funds to private enterprises and individuals, strengthening private-state power networks, they allow concentration practices employed by powerful private-state power networks, they allow corporations at the cost of the State; they facilitate the military occupation of territories, as well as the intervention of other countries; and they legitimate laws of exception while restricting civil rights and augmenting the repressive potential of the State. And to top it all off, they are being employed by current so-called democracies, which are hardly participatory and bear strong authoritarian components that have intensified in recent decades.

Jail as an institution neither prevents nor reduces crime and neither does it successfully reininsert criminals into society; rather, it creates society, as once they get out they find themselves severed from their previous connections between guards, authorities, and prison directors with illicit activities inside the prisons have been proven... (There prevails) a systemic corruption that goes back a long time. In this system, with all the licit and illicit businesses entailed in its administration, many officials and politicians have access to petty cash, on which directors also depend. Astorga concludes with a key affirmation: “Contrary to common belief, it is not organized crime who is in charge of the game, but rather, it is the game that dominates politics.” It should be added: politics tied to organized crime. A city within a city, the jail is a sort of holographic reality with regards to the external world, although the state of exceptionality that exists in other social areas is highly exacerbated. Jail as an institution neither prevents nor reduces crime and neither does it successfully reininsert criminals into society; rather, it creates society, as once they get out they find themselves severed from their previous connections between guards, authorities, and prison directors with illicit activities inside the prisons have been proven... (There prevails) a systemic corruption that goes back a long time. In this system, with all the licit and illicit businesses entailed in its administration, many officials and politicians have access to petty cash, on which directors also depend. 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A city within a city, the jail is a sort of holographic reality with regards to the external world, although the state of exceptionality that exists in other social areas is highly exacerbated. Under Neo-liberalism, the privatization of the penitentiary system has been propitiated with the promise of reducing its costs. In June 2009, Public Safety and Security Minister Genaro Garcia Luna announced, they would outsource the government to the private sector 11 of the 18 jails in the state. In the State of San Luis Potosi, a public tender was announced with the goal of building the Ciudad Valles prison, and the tender was won by ICA, associated with the large construction firms La Nacional and La Peninsular. This is the first time to have been built with private funds, which amounted to 1.2 billion pesos ($960 million). Moreover, the classification and differentiation of prisoners into “danger” levels has led to the creation of prisons of medium, maximum, and super-maximum security, with more technology required and larger amounts of money invested. Indeed, the State Executive Branch proposed in April 2011 the creation of super-maximum security prisons where even visitations would take place through technological devices. This evidently increases prison costs, opened up as public tenders to the private sector, as well as creating ultimately negative implications for the living conditions of prisoners.


10 La Jornada (Mexico), 22 December 2010.

11 Mary Luz Sandoval, Diáctica del terror (Bogotá: Tercer Mundo, 2007), 265.

12 Público (Madrid), 2 December 2010.


14 These include Airsearch, Blackwater, ISS Group, Cochise, OS&S, Centurion Risk, Triple Canopy, Titan, WRLR, CACI International, MMZ, Vinnell, DynCorp, Ronco, Grupo 4 Seguridad, Combat Support, to name a few. See La Jornada (Mexico), 9 September 2007.

15 “Who gets married in the middle of the desert?” asked general Mattis from the US Marine Corps, trying to undermine the fact that his forces had killed 41 people, including many children, at a wedding. La Jornada (Mexico), 21 May 2004.

16 Between September and December 2010, the CIA committed 50 attacks of this kind in Pakistani territory. See Público (Madrid), 22 December 2010.

17 See ONU (UN), 2004.

18 Anabel Hernández, Los señores del narco (Mexico: Planeta, 2010), 504.

19 Eduardo Buscaglia, “En México, hasta 65% de las campañas están infiltradas por el crimen,” La Jornada, 7 July 2011.

20 Ibid.


22 La Jornada (Mexico), 4 August 2011.

23 Hernandez, Los señores del narco, 383.


25 Ibid., 7.

26 Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educación (CIDE), Delincuencia, marginalidad y desempeño institucional: Tercera encuesta a población en reclusión en el Distrito Federal y el Estado de México (Mexico: CIDE, 2010), 9-15.

27 Ibid., 17.


30 CIDE, Delincuencia, marginalidad y desempeño institucional, 25.


32 Ibid., 12.

33 Ibid., 15


Will Straw

Pulling Back From Apocalypse

In two recent works of audiovisual documentary we see Mexican newspaper crime photography and writers on the routines through which a small local newspaper covers violent crime. Its central character is an amiable, methodical reporter-photographer, followed as he drives from one crime scene another during bright sunny days. Alarma! (2010), Vice Media’s 3-part online documentary about Mexico City’s longest-lasting crime newspaper, is noisier and more sensational, as its source might lend one to expect. Filmed mostly at night, it is filled with the sounds of police sirens and footage of photographers on motorcycles speeding along city streets.

Both of these documentaries are from the very recent past, but each, in minor and slightly sinister ways, prompts a sense of nostalgia. For viewers from the Anglophone North, these films evoke an adventurous mid-twentieth-century print journalism long gone from their home countries. The continuing vitality of this journalism in Mexico is signalled by intense competition among newspapers, front-page photographs of dead bodies, and the mythologized bravado or ingenuity of news photographers. For visitors to Mexico City, this same nostalgia is often fueled by the discovery that a morbidly sensational press, delivered to consumers by an underclass of news-hawks circulating precariously amidst the movement of cars and people, still exists somewhere on the North American continent. As they have for decades, and with virtually unbroken consistency, daily tabloid newspapers like El Gráfico and La Prensa fill their front pages with images of one or more corpses lying on city streets. Perversely, this daily death imagery functions as reassuring proof that, somewhere, newspapers still have the capacity to interrupt everyday life with novel, startling content.

Increasingly, however, the heroic photojournalism documented in El diablo y