LOS ZETAS, NEOLIBERALISM, AND POPULAR OPPOSITION:
A STUDY IN LINKAGES

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts in History

by
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ABSTRACT

Los Zetas, Neoliberalism, and Popular Opposition: A Study in Linkages

Gina Renee Lyle

Los Zetas are considered by security analysts to be a transformative force within transnational criminal organizations (TCO), exporting their unique model throughout Mexico. Los Zetas’ idiosyncratic interventions include their diversification of criminal operations, professionalization of TCO security, sophisticated use of media and technology, extreme forms of violent coercion, and decentralized command structure. This project aims to complicate the narrative that Los Zetas emerged because of top leaders’ sadistic tendencies or due to an inherently violent culture in Mexico by reframing the group’s evolution within historical processes. Moving beyond Los Zetas, this project examines how persons affected by Los Zetas’ indiscriminate use of violence are forces of activism and social change, connecting opposition culture in Mexico to criminal impunity and resistance movements in Guerrero. Examining Los Zetas in connection with Cold War militarization in Latin America, processes of democratization in Mexico, and the neoliberal order, this analysis views Los Zetas as products and agents of structural inequities, destroying spaces of community cohesion to create spaces of elite economic growth.

Keywords: Los Zetas, Neoliberalism, Cold War, Militarization, Democratization, Opposition, Guerrero, Tamaulipas, Allende, Structural Violence, Dispossession
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

2020 was unique. It was the year I spent in quarantine, separated from loved ones, from friends, from normality. I was one of the lucky ones. It was the year I adapted, communicating through virtual forms of reality, mimicking social conventions I had once taken for granted, like birthday parties, like conversations with my grandmother, like school. I did not envision this project would be researched and written in a tiny bedroom (libraries and cafes are more my style), and while I felt isolated at times, this work allowed me a space to have purpose beyond the looming crisis that was omnipresent. I want to thank my thesis committee for its support and expertise. Andrew Morris, for always listening, always understanding, and for always providing honest feedback that motivated me to produce better work. Andrea Oñate-Madrazo for always pushing me with my words so I may approach my work with complexity and care. Craig Arceneaux for helping me to expand my perspective. Thank you to my colleagues in the graduate program Arianna Browne and Kailyn Pope for your unconditional support and for the long hours we spent together online. I will cherish those times. To my family and my partner, I appreciate you all.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2011, the international hacktivist group Anonymous, an online collective known for infiltrating and attacking corporate and government entities, took on the transnational criminal organization (TCO) Los Zetas after a member of Anonymous was reportedly kidnapped by the organization. In response to the abduction, which occurred in Veracruz, Mexico, on October 6, 2011, Anonymous posted a video threatening to expose the identities of Los Zetas and their collaborators, including public officials and taxi drivers. The hacktivists directed Los Zetas to either release their prisoner by November 5 or risk having the names and addresses of their “servants,” many of whom worked as municipal police, posted to the internet for all to see.¹

Los Zetas transformed the model of TCOs in Mexico, and while the conflict with Anonymous was just a small bump in the road for the group, it nevertheless illustrates the uniqueness of their model, and how they utilized irregular forms of warfare, including the media, in distinctive and forward-thinking ways. For Anonymous, the internet was a space to promote accessibility and the liberation of information. For Los Zetas, cyberspace was a domain integral to operational expansion as well as a space through which the group could enforce zones of silence.² The Anonymous clash occurred at the height of Los Zetas’ corrosive power and was sandwiched in between two abhorrent massacres in Tamaulipas. The interaction, in addition to showcasing Los Zetas’

technological sophistication, signifies the growing opposition to Zeta authority from a variety of actors. The opposition came at a moment when Los Zetas seemed to be basking in the glow of growth and power, indeed at a moment they had comprehensively penetrated state and social systems in their zones of operation.

In the Anonymous video, the group defiantly contended, “Veracruz, Mexico and the world is tired of the criminal group the Zetas, which is dedicated to kidnapping, stealing, and extortion.” Anonymous then went on to declare, “You have made a great mistake by taking one of us. Free him,” by Friday, November 5, or there will be consequences. “We cannot defend ourselves with weapons, but we know who they are. Information is free. We do not forgive. We do not forget.”

Anonymous did not move forward with exposing the members and collaborators of Los Zetas and eventually withdrew their threat from the public sphere. The hacktivists are a decentralized group without a cohesive mandate or system of defense and their withdrawal from the conflict may be attributed to the fact that Stratfor, a security company, warned Anonymous that Los Zetas had hired cybersecurity professionals to track their operatives. Paul Rexton Kan argues the “release of this information on the internet would have exposed members of Los Zetas to not only possible arrest by Mexican authorities, but also to assassination by rival cartels.” The retreat by both Anonymous and Los Zetas may have therefore come from fears of mutually assured destruction. There were also reports that the kidnapped Anonymous member had been

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3 AP, “Anonymous Hackers Threaten.”
5 Kan, “Cyberwar in the Underworld.”
quietly released on November 4, one day before the deadline.\(^6\) Despite the fact that the specifics of the conflict are vague and difficult to verify, a challenge to the research of TCOs more broadly and this thesis more specifically, the dispute continues to illustrate how evolving landscapes of irregular warfare, expanding modes of coercion, the unique use of technology, and a modern organizational structure resulted in a transformation, revolutionizing criminal organizations throughout Mexico.

1.1 Los Zetas: TCO Disruptors

Los Zetas began in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico, in the 1990s, originally serving as the armed wing of the Gulf Cartel (CDG). The enforcer wing was formed from Mexican army deserters who were members of elite military units and trained in counterinsurgency methods. Through their professionalization of violence, diversification of operations, indiscriminate methods of coercion, use of technology, and horizontal command structure,\(^7\) the organization represents a clear paradigm shift within TCO modeling, disrupting traditional hierarchies and modes of structure. As trained members of the military, the group used military culture, discipline, and weaponry skills to maintain a strong power base. The group’s flamboyant methods of violence became a potent source of coercion, allowing for widespread extortion in their regions of operation. In response to Los Zetas’ methods and organizational structure, other TCOs in Mexico created their own enforcer wings. For instance, groups including Barrio Azteca, Los Negros, and Gente Nueva replicated the model of Los Zetas by professionalizing their enforcement units.\(^8\) Los Zetas’ rapid growth, infiltration of

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\(^8\) Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas*, 37.
Mexican society, and indiscriminate modes of violence challenged the state’s monopoly on violence and its control over the formation of social structures, challenging the state’s “legitimate” right to exert authority and control over the population.

What place do TCOs, and Los Zetas more specifically, have in academic discourse? Too often the limited scholarly analysis has relied upon civilizational rhetoric, framing modern against unmodern, barbaric against developed, essentializing TCOs within Latin America as inherently hyperviolent. The focus of scholars such as Zeta expert George Grayson has been the role of sadism as an instrument of warfare, as typified, for example, by the dissolution of their victims’ bodies in vats of acid. While extreme coercive strategies are certainly a part of Los Zetas’ interventions, the subtext of such rhetoric, without the inclusion of structural and socioeconomic causes, greatly obfuscates the complexity of their emergence and reinforces imperialistic constructs.

Post-Cold War modes of violence, of which Los Zetas are included, are, according to anthropologist Kees Koonings, characterized by economic as opposed to ideological motivations. Koonings argues while old patterns of violence, occurring from 1950-1980, were motivated by “social inequity, political exclusion, and authoritarianism,” new forms of violence are similarly motivated by social inequality and exclusion but are less overtly political. New forms of violence, for the purposes of this thesis, can be defined as a “democratization in the sense that a variety of social

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actors pursue a variety of objectives and coercive strategies."\textsuperscript{13} These pursuits, while not directly related to ideological movements, are nevertheless connected to historical precedents and the social force of neoliberalism.

The emergence of Los Zetas brings two primary questions to the forefront: what historical factors contributed to Los Zetas' model, and are they a political organization? While there cannot be a rigid demarcation between ideological motivations and economic motivations (the interaction between the two exist within a porous space),\textsuperscript{14} there has been a marked shift in the patterns of non-state actors. This pattern, in which the violence of leftist insurgents has been replaced by depoliticized TCOs, is connected to both weakened state systems and neoliberal economic policies. Such economic policies, which are also inherently social in nature, have contributed to widespread poverty and dehumanization in Latin America.

Sociologist and journalist Dawn Paley argues the neoliberal revolution is differentiated from the Cold War because it occurs during an era of democratization and at a time when "neoliberalism is being consolidated as the hegemonic global model of economic and social governance."\textsuperscript{15} The shift is also characterized by the intentional depoliticization of the conflicts to uphold the neoliberal mandate. In this system, confusion is central to maintaining order and control. This confusion is partly achieved by linking both perpetrators and victims of violence to criminal activity, thereby creating

\textsuperscript{13} Koonings, "New Violence, Insecurity," 258.
\textsuperscript{14} Nigel Gould Davies' examination of ideology and realism within the context of Cold War international relations in that the two constructs are not mutually exclusive but exist alongside one another can be applied to the examination of TCOs within Mexico. See Nigel Gould Davies, "Rethinking the Role of Ideology in International Politics During the Cold War," \textit{Journal of Cold War Studies} 1, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 90-109.
\textsuperscript{15} Dawn Marie Paley, "Cold War, Neoliberal War, and Disappearance: Observations from Mexico," \textit{Latin American Perspectives} 48, no.1 (January 2021): 152.
societal vertigo to prevent forms of solidarity. Finally, the revolution outsources its main
actors, who use extreme coercive strategies, including the grotesque display of bodies
and elevated methods of torture, to communicate terror and exact division.\textsuperscript{16} The
depoliticization is a strategy, therefore, to obscure the inherent political nature of
poverty, displacement, and terrorization. The siloed approach, in which there is a solid
demarcation between Cold War conflicts and post-Cold War conflicts severs crucial
aspects of the interaction. In truth there are connective precedents integral to the
evolving forms of conflict in Latin America. This thesis expands upon scholars who
implement a more holistic approach, including political scientist Guadalupe Correa-
Cabrera and Dawn Paley, by examining the fluidity of historical context, including
democratization, militarization, and neoliberalism, to understand the evolution and
impact of Los Zetas.

\subsection*{1.2 The Modernity of Los Zetas}

Are Los Zetas exceptional, are they modern, and how have neoliberalism and
state formation contributed to their emergence? In chapter 2, "Replications of
Modernity," I explore the socioeconomic conditions necessary for the emergence of Los
Zetas, arguing their evolution is related to a weakening PRI and more fluid borders. The
section will examine how the fragmentation from democratization has been utilized by
the group and replicated in sophisticated ways. While idiosyncratic in their modeling and
trajectory, Los Zetas are inextricably linked to the process of state formation and
neoliberalism, filling vacuums of power with their unique organizational structure and
methods of coercion. Using documents such as FBI assessments, consulate

\textsuperscript{16} Paley, "Cold War, Neoliberal War," 152.
communications, and DEA assessments, I will examine theirprofessionalization of violence, their diversification of operations, their indiscriminate use of violence, and their horizontal command structure and compare it traditional TCOs, who utilized amateur security, used targeted violence, and a vertical command structure often connected to familial connections.\footnote{Correa-Cabrera, \textit{Los Zetas Inc.}, 59.}

While the traditional TCO more closely resembles pre-modern or monarchical systems of power, relying on allegiances formed through traditional hierarchies, Los Zetas utilize democratic power structures and meritocratic mobility. Additionally, the organization’s utilization of technology, including their use of media and a proprietary radio network, further accentuates their replication of modernity. The replication of democratization viewed through the model of Los Zetas reinforces the argument that neoliberalism was a structural agent of capitalism and a force of social change, and while Los Zetas benefitted from new modes of warfare, including their use of social media to exert power, the public sphere likewise replicated the democratization of Mexico, wielding information as a weapon of agency.

\textbf{1.3 Impunity and Opposition}

Discourse surrounding the conflict with Los Zetas often frames the interaction through a unidirectional lens, positioning Los Zetas as the central agents of change. Chapter 3, “Impunity and Opposition,” reorients the framework to include resistance as a significant force of change that is rooted in both democratization and the Dirty War in Guerrero. This section is informed by the work of historian Pablo Piccato, who explores the relationship between crime, truth, and justice in Mexico. In a modern justice system,
a crime is committed, police investigate the crime to determine what occurred, and justice is carried out by the judiciary. In Mexico, Piccato argues crime has been defined by a disconnection between these three tenets, and this disconnection has led to both a tolerance for extrajudicial punishment and a robust public discourse surrounding criminality. The abolishment of the jury trial in 1929, for instance, ignited a crisis of transparency in which popular participation was extinguished, and the justice system assumed an opaque quality. After 1929, extrajudicial forms of justice expanded dramatically, and the press became a legitimate source of truth for the public. The press assumed a role outside the boundary of typical private enterprise and participated in police investigations as a legitimate partner in state action. In this zone of exclusion, the media is a space through which the public can search for truth and exact justice. Considering the state has normalized impunity, the media can therefore be viewed as the arm of the people, and a method through which popular agency challenges TCOs.

During her discourse on the fragmentation of the police, Diane Davis argues the police were central to historical conflicts in Mexico, including the 1910 Mexican Revolution and the neoliberal transition of the nineties. Davis argues impunity is partly rooted in a 1917 constitutional reform that separated the judicial forces from the preventive forces. This resulted in a fragmentation of the police and led to challenges of accountability as well as threats to state legitimacy. To combat impunity during the Calderón administration, a more militaristic approach was applied to quell conflicts, and

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included the use of lie detector tests and coerced resignations among judicial police.\textsuperscript{19} While this may have led to increased accountability from above, it was limiting in its accountability from below.

Democratization can, like the formation of the criminal justice system, be viewed as integral to the evolution of activism and resistance in Mexico. This thesis explores how the democratic transition did not simply “happen” in 2000 but slowly progressed and is rooted in opposition groups who methodically undermined the authority of the PRI. This culture of dissent is also viewed through the uprising in Guerrero during the 1960s and 1970s, in which violent state repression was countered by the work of rebel Lucio Cabañas. Both the process of democratization and the history of popular uprisings provide a window through which to view forms of opposition to Los Zetas. Additionally, Chapter 3 explores challenges to Zeta authority in media spaces as well as through the resistance of the 72 migrants who were kidnapped in Tamaulipas in 2010.

Limitations to this examination include the inherent biases of journalistic and social media sources. Such biases, however, if examined through the lens through which the source was constructed, as well as in concert with academic literature, may prove valuable in revealing perspectives and modes of thinking. While Los Zetas utilized the tools of democratization to expand their model, the public likewise commandeered the democratizing space to challenge impunity, using transparency to exact justice. These acts can thus be viewed as crucial to the activism that ultimately contributed to the fragmentation and decline of Los Zetas.

1.4 Neoliberalism and Criminality

What interaction exists between neoliberalism and criminality? The work of David Harvey provides a foundational framework through which to view neoliberalism more broadly. Harvey argues neoliberalism is a political project by the capitalist elite to mitigate the social and economic effects of revolutionary movements during the 1960s and 1970s and is used to curb the power of labor. Harvey contextualizes neoliberal policies historically, arguing postwar capitalism and its uneasy alliance with labor (brokered by a state who focused on social welfare and the individual wage) was no longer fostering economic growth. The era of stagnation resulted in a 1970s crisis of capital accumulation.

This thesis explores the construct of neoliberalism within the policies inspired by the “Washington Consensus,” in which there was a formula for “sustained economic growth and seamless national development,” and is characterized by “a comprehensive program of balanced budgets, reduced taxes, decontrolled interest rates, floating exchange rates, liberalized trade relations, open foreign investment, deregulation, and privatization.” Policy changes, such as NAFTA, resulted in an uneven distribution of wealth and increasing economic and social marginalization of the global South, with farmers and other non-corporate entities unable to compete with powerful transnational corporations. This thesis does not seek to categorically equate

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neoliberalism with criminality, but to identify how structural changes that began in the 1970s changed the nature of capitalism and became a social force in Mexico. The end result has been the internalization of neoliberal mandates and a restructuring of political and socioeconomic systems.

Chapter 4 will examine the social force of neoliberalism in Tamaulipas to view how it displaced and divided the population. The social division as well as a weakened Mexican state also provided a space for TCOs to challenge state authority outside a Weberian construction of legitimacy. While a conspiracy between corporate elites and TCOs is not a contention of this thesis, there is a paradoxical alignment of interests in that instability in Mexico and weak state systems ultimately facilitates capital expansion and elite hegemony. In the state of Tamaulipas, for instance, the instability caused by Zeta violence opened a space for private capital to buy land and exploit the region so rich in resources.

Porfirian liberalism, a period that was marked by an influx of American capital that undermined Mexican sovereignty, informs my analysis of Los Zetas and the neoliberal period. In *Empire and Revolution*, John Mason Hart examines the extensive involvement of American capitalists within the Mexican political sphere from the Civil War to the end of the twentieth century. The monograph uses detailed case studies of American industrialists and financiers, from their development of the Mexican railway system to their control of the Mexican insurance industry, to explore the deep interactions between the United States and Mexico. This monograph highlights connections between American capital and shifting political processes, including the

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Mexican Revolution and WWII. Hart details the astounding amount of capital that flowed into Mexico before the Revolution, including that of William Randolph Hearst, George T. Bliss, Percy Rockefeller, and J.P. Morgan, highlighting the concept of Mexican corruption as a justification for U.S. intervention.

For instance, although Mexican President Lerdo (served as president from 1872 to 1876) was open to privatization, he still feared American hegemony and did not want to be alienated from trade with Europe through a bilateral trade agreement. This was at a time when Mexican nationalists and campesinos opposed the hacienda system, raiding large plantations and demanding restoration of “usurped” lands. As a result, Lerdo canceled major contracts with American financiers, resulting in American intervention. To protect their financial interests, and with the support of the United States Government, U.S. elites armed General Diaz, helping him to depose the democratically elected Lerdo in 1876. This interaction highlights a pattern of behavior, illuminating the U.S. penchant for support of military regimes to uphold American financial interests in Latin America.

With respect to the linkages between liberalism and neoliberalism, Hart argues Mexican interactions with the United States, including policies such as NAFTA, can serve as a framework through which to view American hegemony. Hart contends such interactions are critical to understanding “how the United States became a global empire, the impulses behind neoliberalism, the growth of American culture in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, and the process of globalization.” Beyond globalization,

26 Hart, *Empire and Revolution*, 56.
Hart explores the ongoing conflict between Mexican sovereignty and American hegemony, a dialectical struggle that continues to this day. This thesis will explore how economically motivated violence is connected to structural inequities and the period of democratization, which transformed entrenched hierarchical structures of the authoritarian PRI.

A linear narrative between TCOs and historical precedents such as neoliberalism would oversimplify the shifting landscape of irregular warfare in Mexico, but a closer analysis of state formation and global economic patterns of development are crucial to understanding Los Zetas and their unique characteristics. I will examine how Los Zetas’ use of irregular warfare and their use of hypermodern superstructures of hegemony caused instability, weakening Mexican state authority. Ultimately, this instability allowed a space for private capital to invest and exploit. This is the paradox: Los Zetas use the tools of modernity and globalization to advance economic interests and simultaneously uphold elite and imperialistic structures that seek to subjugate their interests and the interests of Mexican sovereignty more broadly.

In the end, Los Zetas’ greatest power became their greatest weakness, and while their extreme strategies of coercion worked to solidify power, they simultaneously magnified criminal operations, facilitating widespread retaliation. The group’s unique structure challenged entrenched hierarchies, uniting seemingly disparate interests to strike against the disruptors. This is a story about the power of interaction between different spheres of operation, in which state formation and economic policies facilitate shifts within TCO structures. It is also a story about the power of popular resistance, a force that ceaselessly illuminates forms of injustice.
Chapter 2
Replications of Modernity

In May of 2013, the U.S. Attorney’s Office, Western District of Texas, announced four men were facing up to twenty years in prison after they had been convicted of laundering millions of dollars of illicit Zeta funds to “purchase, train, breed and race American quarter horses in the United States.”¹ The complex conspiracy to legitimate proceeds involved using straw purchasers to make transactions. The launderers were also careful to make deposits under $10,000 to avoid mandatory bank reporting federal requirements.² Jose Treviño Morales, the brother of Zeta leader Miguel Treviño Morales, was among those convicted. When the FBI arrested the seemingly ordinary Jose Treviño, a bricklayer by trade, he reportedly told the arresting officers, “You can pick your friends, you can’t pick your family.”³ Jose Treviño was remembered fondly by equine lovers. Former American Quarter Horse Association president Jim Helzer recalls Jose blended seamlessly into the community, saying “you would think he was the nicest guy who ever walked.”

Oklahoma City Clerk Kim McClarney also had good things to say about Jose: “He played the part of the cowboy, very respectful. I was shocked to hear the brother

² DOJ, Federal Jury Convicts Fourth.
was...evil, and is into beheadings!" 4 While people were shocked and appalled an associate of Los Zetas was hiding in plain sight, and insisted they were not interested “in those drug cartel horses,” 5 prospective buyers quickly cast their outrage aside in the name of a good bargain. In all, more than four hundred quarter horses sold without issue, yielding more than nine million dollars. 6 Additionally, the U.S. Government sought a monetary judgment of sixty million dollars, the amount they estimated was derived from the illegal operation.

Scholars such as George Grayson sensationalize the violence and sadism of Los Zetas, dwelling on beheadings and boiled bodies rather than the historical causes that facilitated the group’s growth. For instance, Grayson characterizes Zeta leader Miguel Treviño Morales (Z-40) as a man who “could not sleep at night unless he killed,” 7 arguing Los Zetas’ violence is a manifestation of top leaders’ sadistic personality disorder (SPD)—a disorder where one “derives pleasure from harming or humiliating others.” 8 Schemes such as the complex money laundering operation not only question the simplicity of such frameworks but illustrate the transnational complexity of Los Zetas’ operations. By examining the group’s history, structure, technology, and transnational connections, this chapter will move beyond sadism and argue for the exceptionalism of Los Zetas.

While extreme forms of violence are crucial to the branding and forms of coercion utilized by Los Zetas and should be examined in detail, hyperbole obscures the context

4 Dallasnews Administrator, “Auction of Horses.”
5 Dallasnews Administrator, “Auction of Horses.”
6 DOJ, Federal Jury Convicts Fourth.
7 Grayson, Evolution of Los Zetas, 6.
8 Grayson, Evolution of Los Zetas, 5.
of the violence. The sensationalism has likewise dramatically influenced popular conceptions of Latin American countries, framing them as inherently violent, residing outside modern, civil society. Z-40 can no doubt be categorized as sadistic but how could this extreme form of sadism thrive within the organization? Why was their brand and structure replicated throughout Mexico? A few sadistic leaders cannot transform the structure of criminal organizations without collaboration, collusion, and consent. In short, why here, why now, and why did it spread?

2.1 Genesis

The rise of globalization and policy shifts such as NAFTA transformed the state of Tamaulipas, the cradle of Los Zetas, into a region that was increasingly coveted and contested by TCOs. With eighteen border crossings, more than any other state in Mexico, and with Nuevo Laredo handling “approximately 40 percent of the trade between Mexico and the United States,”\(^9\) the area became a booming center of growth. In Nuevo Laredo alone, “over eight thousand vehicles and more than three hundred thousand people cross”\(^10\) into Texas via international bridges every day. Tamaulipas became a key region for corporate and criminal expansion alike, forming a gateway to markets and capital.

Due to an increase in trade, cities along the border, including Nuevo Laredo, Miguel Alemán, Reynosa, Río Bravo, and Matamoros, assumed a more fluid quality, and a rapid increase in the movement of legitimate goods within Tamaulipas was inverted and then replicated by TCOs, who were able to fill the power vacuum left by a weakened state with both merchandise and power. Reduced trade barriers, dissolving

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rigid border demarcations, had the unintended consequence of creating a robust space through which Los Zetas’ exceptionalism could emerge triumphant, seeping into the fractures of state formation and globalization.

Los Zetas were born from the deserters of elite Mexican forces in 1997.\textsuperscript{11} They were recruited by Osiel Cárdenas, leader of the Cártel del Golfo (CDG), who was becoming increasingly paranoid of assassination\textsuperscript{12} and used Los Zetas to “seize territory and dispatch rivals.”\textsuperscript{13} The group reportedly took its name from leader Arturo Guzmán Decena’s military call sign (Z-1),\textsuperscript{14} and members of the organization assumed their individual Zeta identities with an accompanying number, facilitating a more cohesive group identity and militarized culture. A person who assumes the identity of a letter and a number, becomes partially stripped of their individual identity, leaving space for a collective identity where group mandates can assume control of the collectivized self. In this way, the collective identity can be viewed as a method for subverting individual identities.

Guzmán recruited an additional 30 members from Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales (GAFE), offering better pay (Cárdenas offered new recruits $3000 to invest in illicit commodities)\textsuperscript{15} in exchange for loyalty and obedience. Guzmán was born in Puebla, Mexico in 1976 while Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano, Z-3, was born on December 25, 1975, in the rural village of Apan, Hidalgo, Mexico. Lazcano joined the military at the

\textsuperscript{12} Correa-Cabrera, \textit{Los Zetas}, 21.
\textsuperscript{13} Correa-Cabrera, \textit{Los Zetas}, 21.
\textsuperscript{15} Grayson, \textit{Evolution of Los Zetas}, 3.
age of seventeen, later gaining promotion to GAFE. While in the military, original members such as Guzmán and Lazcano “completed specialized training in intelligence collection, surveillance techniques, and operational planning,” creating a solid foundation for their professionalization of violence within the criminal community.

Considering both Guzmán and Lazcano, Los Zetas’ leading members, both come from areas of concentrated poverty, we can view their need for economic mobility, a need that was not met by military service, as a primary motivator for deserting GAFE. The military, then, can be viewed as a training ground and bridge for additional economic expansion, a necessity that was influenced by rampant underdevelopment. The economic and cultural alienation of the non-elite following globalization is partially manifested in the continuing expansion of informal economic sectors and the emergence of non-state actors such as Guzmán and Lazcano, who can be viewed as progenies of economic policies. This is not an argument of linearity, but a thread in the tapestry of causality.

Treviño Morales, Z-40, was born in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, around 1970 (there are varying records as to his year of birth) to a working-class family, and spent his teenage years working “for the wealthy, cleaning yards, chimneys and cars,” all the while detesting “Mexico’s de facto caste system, which pounded a sense of inferiority into its poorer citizens.” During his teenage years, Z-40 migrated to Dallas, Texas, where he encountered additional bias against the Latinx community, marginalized by economics and ethnicity. Oscar Hagelsieb, assistant special agent in charge of the

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16 FBI, *Los Zetas Emerging.*
investigative unit of U.S. immigration and Customs enforcement in El Paso, says Z-40 “felt Mexican immigrants were discriminated against, that Americans were too prejudiced against Mexican immigrants.”18 These grievances against a system Treviño Morales felt was designed to subjugate left him enraged, and were echoed by his family. Z-40’s older brother, Juan Francisco, moved to Texas in 1978, and worked as a bricklayer. During his trial for marijuana distribution in 1995, Juan Francisco recalled how he and Z-40 “would work all week long, Saturdays and Sundays, sometimes holidays. Sometimes in the whole month, there was barely a day off for us.”19

The legacy of imperial hierarchies, partially manifested in the servitude and exploitation of formerly colonized peoples, a new fluidity of the border, and increased economic marginalization wrought through neoliberal policies, cannot create sadistic “monsters” but it can become a factor in a person’s trajectory. The inability to compete during globalization, as viewed through early members of Los Zetas, highlights the discontinuity of the connective economic system, the paradox of globalization. Transparent spaces for trade and exchange should provide mobility for now globalized citizens, not simply the objects they transport. In the case of Treviño Morales and Guzmán, an inverted narrative emerges whereby they, and others in similar circumstances, were both limited and liberated in their movements and identities by the fluidity of borders, leaving them to create mobility in the zone of inversion using the tools of globalization. Z-40 directed a multitude of non-state actors to distribute violence within the group’s territories, operating with near impunity throughout the state of Tamaulipas. Without the consent of the group, especially considering their meritocratic

18 Solis, “Top Leader Zetas.”
19 Solis, “Top Leader Zetas.”
structure, actors such as Z-40, who spread a unique brand of coercion, would not have thrived within the syndicate. In short, the sadism of one leader can only spread through support within the organization.

2.2 Structural Exceptionalism

In 2005, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) office in Little Rock, Arkansas, requested a control file be opened to "maintain information pertaining to the Los Zetas organization." The communication categorizes the group as violent, heavily armed, and a "highly structured Hispanic gang that operates in the fashion of a paramilitary organization." According to the report, members of GAFE who later became the original members of Los Zetas "trained in the U.S. at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, GA," and the "Zetas’ organizational structure includes counterintelligence, intelligence and tactical enforcement units." The recruitment of elite soldiers within criminal organizations is integral to Los Zetas’ model, diffusing throughout TCOs in Mexico. Establishing the extent to which criminal syndicates have recruited special forces has proven difficult to quantify. According to political scientist Dr. Correa-Cabrera, "It’s an inconvenient issue for the government, so they deny freedom-of-information requests," but Mexico’s Ministry of Defence estimate 1,383 elite soldiers deserted between 1994 and 2015. The militarization of criminal syndicates, formed in part through training provided by the U.S. Government, not only illuminates the

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21 FBI, Los Zetas; International.
22 FBI, Los Zetas; International.
transnationalism of the group, but marks a clear divergence from previous criminal syndicates who relied upon amateur protection. Furthermore, while traditional TCOs employed a vertical hierarchy, fusing alliances through blood and marriage, Los Zetas transitioned to a more decentralized structure.

In the old compadres system,\textsuperscript{24} mobility is attained not simply through blood and marriage but through longstanding informal contracts, relying on the authoritarian PRI to solidify power and protection through its network of players. The weakening of the PRI, changing administrations, and the rapid growth of private capital fractured what was once a stable system of impunity and collusion amongst powerful players. Political scientist Jorge Chabat discusses the contention that the CDG’s decline, which occurred after the arrest of Juan García Abrego in 1996, was “related to the fact that the Salinas administration protected it, and that this protection vanished with the arrival of the Zedillo administration.”\textsuperscript{25} Chabat makes it clear this speculation is impossible to prove, but that Abrego testified during his trial that CDG had obtained illicit goods from “seizures made by the attorney general’s office.”\textsuperscript{26}

Los Zetas’ replication of fractures within state power can be viewed through their organizational structure. While the group had an overarching militaristic culture, strong leaders, and a collective identity, the organization allowed individual cells to operate somewhat autonomously, exploiting resources and diversifying interests based on the local environment. Their massive diversification of operations, a key divergence from previous TCOs, included entry into activities such as “public corruption, alien smuggling,

\textsuperscript{24} Correa-Cabrera, \textit{Los Zetas Inc.}, 61.
\textsuperscript{26} Chabat, "Mexico’s War Drugs," 136.
kidnapping, assault, murder extortion, and money laundering.” Instead of operating through a centralized command structure, the group operated more like a franchise, using their unique brand, that of brutal and indiscriminate violence, to recruit and subjugate, ensuring territories complied with taxation but also permitting variation.

The decentralization was compounded when Miguel Guzmán Decena (Z-1) was killed during a shootout in November of 2002, and the structural void left by Guzmán went unfilled. While Lazcano, Z-3, assumed some form of leadership within the organization, Los Zetas “likely developed a more fluid structure with commanders roving the South Texas border.” In effect, there were “few clear lines distinguishing between full-fledged members, associates, and imitators” Thus, members who profited and gained mobility by exploiting the more fluid border economy and the weakness of the state, became more localized during their day-to-day activities. While the culture, or blueprint, of Los Zetas remained intact, the structural shifts and decentralization increased the group’s operative autonomy from CDG, anticipating their continuing independence and eventual split from the alliance, known as the Company, that occurred in 2010.

The localized approach allowed for more flexibility and is facilitated by a more robust border economy following accelerated liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s. As the decentralization of state authority is replicated by Los Zetas, the fluidity within the organizational structure exists in continuity with border regions. Diversification of profits

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27 FBI, Los Zetas Emerging.
29 FBI, Los Zetas Emerging.
30 FBI, Los Zetas Emerging.
through extortion of small business owners and informal economic actors is aided by
the informal economy that operates outside traditional economic structures, as Los
Zetas operate outside traditional organizational structures. The structure of Los Zetas,
then, can be viewed as contingent upon the structure of trade liberalization without
which the group would be trapped within a command economy and traditional
hierarchical structures.

2.3 Technology

Los Zetas' proprietary radio network utilized technology in unique and modern
ways, illuminating the benefits advanced technology can offer criminal syndicates. In
2006, the organization began to construct a large-scale radio communication network
throughout the Gulf Coast states of Mexico, aiming to “establish a proprietary, real-time
communications infrastructure,”31 to gather intelligence and coordinate operations. The
operation was managed by Jose Luis Del Toro Estrada, a seemingly innocuous
shopkeeper who owned a radio equipment store in Texas until his arrest during an
extensive international law enforcement operation, known as “Project Reckoning.”
Estrada, known as El Tecníco, not only set up the radio network, the infrastructure
through which Los Zetas coordinated sophisticated operations, but he oversaw a secret
network of cameras through which the group could surveil Mexican officials and stash
houses. Carl Pike, head of the DEA Special Operations Division, asserts the technology
allowed the group to track operations as well as “Mexican Police, military, even U.S.
border-patrol agents.”32

31 James Halverson, "Los Zetas and Proprietary Radio Network Development," *Journal of
32 Damon Tabor, “Radio Tecníco: How the Zetas Cartel Took Over Mexico with Walkie Talkies,”
The radio network was preferable to cell phones so the group could operate in areas outside cell networks and so they could switch frequencies to evade law enforcement, garbling transmissions if necessary. In urban settings, such as Nuevo Laredo, Estrada would have identified “unused frequencies to avoid interference from the likes of taxi and truck drivers’ radio chatter.” After the frequencies were mapped, they implemented the physical components of the network. Once the infrastructure was constructed, they had a “command-and-control capacity,” with DEA agent Pike stating the technology linked the members of Los Zetas and CDG (before they split) so that halcones (lookouts) could contact commanders to evade the authorities. The infrastructure illustrates a sophisticated use of technology that was not standard within criminal syndicates and highlights Los Zetas use of apparatus normally reserved for the state. The advanced system, which allowed for increased communications connectivity, is a transgression of state territory, uniquely challenging sovereignty and paving the way for other TCOs to utilize technology for the purpose of subversion.

2.4 Legacy of Militarization

Los Zetas’ transnational interactions become evident upon examination of the group’s connection to Guatemalan Kaibles, an elite special forces unit who are known for their counterinsurgency skills. In 2005, the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency reported Los Zetas were “using Kaibles to train new members,” suggesting the Zeta leadership, following heavy leadership losses, no longer had the internal capability to train new recruits. DEA intelligence, too, concluded such transnational cooperation,
reporting that a Zeta member, after their arrest on September 10, 2005, stated the group “had recruited former Guatemalan Kaibiles to work with the Zetas and that the Kaibiles were procuring firearms and grenades from Guatemala,” so Los Zetas could expand territory. While intelligence documents assert anticorruption efforts in Mexico had hampered the recruitment of Mexican military members by criminal syndicates, the “Guatemalan military downsizing from 1994 through 2004 created a pool of special forces-trained candidates for the Zetas to draw on to train new Zeta members or offset personnel shortfalls.” Mexican intelligence reached similar conclusions with regards to the Zeta-Kaibil connection, with Mexican Attorney General Santiago asserting the need for Kaibil training was due to a stream of arrests of original Zeta members.

The Kaibiles, who were instrumental in quelling guerillas during the 36-year Civil War (1960-1996) in Guatemala, and who were known for human rights violations, were heavily impacted by budget cuts and had few alternatives to military life after 1996. Of the 6,000 Kaibiles the Guatemalan Army has trained since 1975, approximately 360 were still active in 2011. Privates earned 250 dollars a month, with Kaibiles garnering a bonus of thirty-eight dollars for transportation expenses. In contrast, Zeta recruiters offered 2,000 dollars a month to work for the organization. Like the original Zeta members, who were drawn to illegal economic sectors to facilitate growth, the

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37 DIA, *Intelligence Summary*.
38 DIA, *Intelligence Summary*.
40 Hurtado, “For Zetas, Guatemala.”
downsizing of the Guatemalan military facilitated a similar outcome, with trained members of the military migrating to TCOs, highlighting the unintended consequences of military deconstruction. When you combine advanced training, a robust military culture, and little hope of economic mobility, especially considering the instability wrought through the Civil War, we find motivation for TCO migration.

When expanding their territory, Los Zetas were known to use propaganda to “alert and warn the local population”⁴¹ that they were operating in the region. These alerts were also used to recruit new members from the military. For instance, in one Mexican town, Los Zetas used a banner to promise new members “three square meals a day, in lieu of ramen noodles,” reportedly a “staple in the Mexican military.”⁴² The propaganda not only offers a more lucrative lifestyle but illuminates the state’s inability to provide adequate sustenance for its agents. Compared to previous criminal syndicates in Mexico, the tactic more thoroughly utilizes propaganda to expand and coerce, while simultaneously exploiting the economic marginalization of military members. The strategies for expansion, most notably extreme forms of violent coercion, likewise illuminates the inability of the state, decentralized like the zeta cells, to uphold the public safety of its citizens, arguably the state’s principal responsibility.

To better understand linkages between militarization and Los Zetas, it is crucial to examine militarization in Latin America during the Cold War. Specifically, it is important to explore U.S. interventions and complicity in the militarization of right-wing authoritarian regimes. To mitigate the spread of communism, and solidify U.S. power within the continent, the U.S. destabilized governments in Guatemala, El Salvador,

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Nicaragua, Ecuador, Chile, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, and British Guiana (Guyana), between 1945 and 1989.\textsuperscript{43} These interventions occurred despite the fact there was little evidence to support international connections between the Soviet Union and leftist movements in Latin America. Historians argue interventions were less related to communism and more related to colonial predilections and the desire to “maintain peace and stability, exclude foreign influences, expand U.S. trade and investment, and shape Latin America’s political, sociological, and ideological development.”\textsuperscript{44}

U.S. intervention in Guatemala during the 1950s and the decision to destabilize the constitutional government of Guatemala had devastating consequences for people living in the region. During the four decades of violent upheaval, at least two hundred thousand people would die. The conflict served as laboratory for the CIA who developed strategies to combat insurgents and included psychological warfare and the infiltration of labor unions and student groups. These tools of U.S. hegemony would be used throughout the continent during the Cold War.\textsuperscript{45} Furthermore, U.S. support of death squads sent a message to other leftist organizations that the U.S. would not support democratic change by socialist factions, leaving violent revolution as the only path to victory. When human rights violations occurred, the U.S. argued Latin America was inherently violent due to the region’s culture and history. For instance, a U.S. State Department study in 1986 examining state terror argued Guatemala was simply a violent society, neglecting the socioeconomic disparity formed through colonial and Cold War endeavors. Similarly, Los Zetas’ violent acts and human rights violations are


\textsuperscript{44} Rabe, \textit{The Killing Zone}, 1.

\textsuperscript{45} Rabe, \textit{The Killing Zone}, 36.
framed as inherent to Mexican culture rather than a production of historical factors such as militarization during the Cold War.

In a January 4, 1966, Agency for International Development (AID) cable, for instance, U.S. Public Safety Advisor John Longan, who was selected to assist the Government of Guatemala’s (GOG) “law enforcement authorities on techniques and methods for combatting terrorists, kidnapping, and extortion tactics,” details the plan to assist the GOG in counter-insurgency tactics, both covert and overt, immediate and long-range. Included in these plans, was immediate raids in Guatemala City, where police forces “were given detailed instructions on how to seal off given areas” to force communists out of hiding and into the hands of the authorities. During the covert phase, the GOG was instructed to set up a safe house where all information regarding subversive activities was to be sent to avoid communist penetration.

In Guatemala, July 1968, the CIA was informed by an undisclosed source that due to concerns over “unfavorable publicity of past counter-insurgency operations,” going forward any insurgents “killed by Guatemalan security forces must appear to have died in an armed encounter, regardless of the manner in which actually died.” What’s more, a judge was to be called to validate the narrative of the “encounter whenever possible.” It is within this space of transnational complicity, where the military was weaponized against popular uprisings, that the Kaibiles, along with their specific brand

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47 AID, Secret Cable [Counter-Terror Assistance].
49 CIA, Secret Cable [Cover-up].
of violence, evolved. A perfect storm emerged whereby the Kaibiles, highly trained and stripped of economic autonomy by demilitarization, became poised to collaborate with Los Zetas, who were likewise born from the U.S.-trained GAFE, also used in quelling leftist insurgencies, specifically in Chiapas in 1994. In this way, the U.S. Cold War policy coupled with the marginalization of globalization, birthed revised TCO structures and operational capacity.

The Zeta-Kaibil connection confirms the transnational repercussions of militarization. In post-Cold War conflicts, state militarization has had a multitude of consequences in regions that have a heavy TCO presence. Critics assert when the military suppresses social movements “it becomes difficult to distinguish between the force employed to combat organized crime and that directed at social protest.” Similar to the way democratization of both the state and markets connects to the structure of Los Zetas, militarization connects to Los Zetas’ methods for coercion and control. Militarization fostered the culture and training for original Zeta members and remains a powerful force in the group’s organizational and social evolution.

2.5 Forms of Coercion

The extreme forms of violence utilized by Los Zetas transformed the landscape within criminal organizations, but can we, as outlined by Koonings, characterize this as a new form of violence, and how much does this diverge from the ideologically motivated violence that dominated the Cold War period? In short, is there a significant categorical shift in forms of violence? During a 2018 Wilson Center discussion on Los Zetas, analyst Steven Dudley engaged with socially and economically motivated

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violence, arguing that Los Zetas may not be a political organization, but their expressions of power are nevertheless incredibly political.\footnote{Steven Dudley, “Los Zetas, Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico” (discussion, Wilson Center, Washington D.C., February 13, 2018), accessed on November 14, 2020, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/los-zetas-inc-criminal-corporations-energy-and-civil-war-mexico.} It is true that the organization may not be politically motivated but they are, in fact, politically influenced, forged through political context, including the Cold War, global economic policies, and state formation, and the outcomes of their actions are extremely political, so their actions can be categorized as political. Like most TCOs, Los Zetas are largely driven by the desire for economic and social mobility. This can be viewed as a replication of economic liberalization as well as a reaction to economic marginalization, part of the new model of violence. The experience of Treviño Morales, working in servitude for the needs of the wealthy was not unique, and while this cannot be framed as causality for Los Zetas’ participation in violent criminality, it can be understood as, by nature, a political experience.

Von Clausewitz argues war is a continuation of the political,\footnote{Carl Von Clausewitz, \textit{On War} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).} and while the irregular warfare utilized by Los Zetas falls outside traditional ideological conflict, these forms of violence are clearly a challenge to state authority and a political expression with significant consequences. These challenges are often manifested in confrontations with state agents. In 2006 and 2007, according to a DEA cable, Los Zetas increased direct confrontations with the Mexican military, executing public officials on multiple occasions.\footnote{DEA, \textit{Los Zetas} (2001-2009).} For instance, on December 14, 2007, two soldiers were assassinated after they had participated in an operation that resulted in the seizure of seven tons of
marijuana. While challenges to state authority are not unique to Los Zetas, the characteristics of the organization, including their decentralized structure, militaristic culture, indiscriminate violence, among other idiosyncrasies, magnifies their challenges in unique ways, presenting a new context for such defiance.

In 2004, after posing as “Mexican soldiers and federal agents in military vehicles, approximately 40 armed Zetas broke into the Apatzingán prison in Michoacán, Mexico.” The interaction challenges the authority of the state on multiple levels. While the military uniforms were worn as a disguise to avoid detection, the “disguise” can be interpreted as an infiltration of state power where the lines of legitimacy are blurred beyond recognition. If the state no longer has the power or authority to secure its prisoners and thus ensure public safety, the disguise becomes reality within the space of legitimate authority. Additionally, the elements of corruption within police forces can be viewed as a method to transfer authority to TCOs.

In Nuevo Laredo in 2005, the infiltration of the organization into the local police force was so widespread, with the FBI asserting that “until June 2005, Los Zetas effectively controlled the police force,” that the Mexican State sent federal forces into Nuevo Laredo to retain control of the city. Former legitimate agents of the state, Los Zetas, collaborating with current legitimate agents of the state, all while assuming the identity and culture of the military, creates confusion within the public sphere. Thus, the public is thrust into a realm of statelessness, where multiple actors with authority exert

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56 FBI, Los Zetas Emerging.
57 FBI, Los Zetas Emerging.
control. In this way, the public, reacting to multiple agents of authority, assumes a
degree of autonomy, where they exist outside the control of a single authority.

When agents of the state did not submit to the group’s authority, the
consequences could be dire. This was the case on June 7, 2005, when Nuevo Laredo
Police Chief Alejandro Dominguez Coello was murdered hours after he was sworn in.
Fifty-six-year-old Coello, who was formerly the head of the Nuevo Laredo Chamber of
Commerce, spoke to reporters about his decision to take a job many deemed not worth
the risk, declaring, “I’m not beholden to anyone. My commitment is to the citizenry,” and
“those who should be afraid are those who have been compromised.”58 Hours later, the
new chief was fired upon as he “climbed into his Ford pickup.”59 The agency of Coello
and his quest to ensure justice in the face of widespread impunity60 illustrates the
inability of the state to ensure the safety of its agents. Considering the local police force
was heavily infiltrated by TCOs, the exchange also illuminates continuous fractures
within protective sectors of government.

2.6 Replication of Structure

The replication of Los Zetas’ structures and culture is crucial to the contention
that the group represents a turning point in the trajectory of criminal organizations in
Mexico. La Familia Michoacana (LFM) is a notable example of the replication of the
Zeta model but like any reproduction it is full of modifications and idiosyncrasies.
Criminal enterprise in Michoacán, which is home to a large population of rural farmers,
was under the control of El Milenio, which was under the control of its parent

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58 Marla Dickerson, “Mexican Police Chief Is Killed on His First Day,” Los Angeles Times, June
59 Dickerson, “Mexican Police Chief.”
60 Piccato, History of Infamy.
organization in Tijuana, when fractures within alliances prompted Los Zetas to assume power in the region in 2003.\(^{61}\)

Los Zetas, “good teachers but bad landlords,”\(^ {62}\) trained former Milenio members in their brand of irregular warfare to disrupt Tijuana and expand into a region key to the cultivation of marijuana and the poppy. Familia worked in collaboration with Los Zetas to overthrow the traditional crime family in Michoacán, the Valencias, illustrating a modern alliance that sought to overthrow the “pre-modern” system that relied on lineage. LFM, however, became increasingly agitated by Los Zetas, viewing the group as a disruptive presence in the region. The inter-alliance conflict exemplifies the ability of Los Zetas to export their model within Mexico but their inability to do so without modifications.

Eventually, and after significant conflict, the LFM were able to successfully expel Los Zetas from Michoacán, expanding to Guerrero, Morelos, Guanajuato, Queretaro, Jalisco, and Mexico City. LFM’s use of modern marketing techniques recalls the propaganda of Los Zetas, especially their use of banners. Combined with their use of extreme violence, LFM can be viewed as the offspring of Los Zetas. In September of 2006, for instance, LFM announced their “existence”\(^{63}\) into the arena of criminal organizations by reproducing Los Zetas’ coercive methods of spectacular violence and propaganda. “After firing a round of shots into the air, they ordered the patrons to lie on their stomachs, tore open a plastic bag, and tossed five severed heads across the floor.”\(^ {64}\) Once the heads were on the floor, the group differentiated themselves from Los

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\(^{62}\) “Familia Michoacána,” *Insight Crime*.

\(^{63}\) “Familia Michoacána,” *Insight Crime*.

Zetas through a banner that read, “La Familia doesn’t kill for money; it doesn’t kill women; it doesn’t kill innocent people; only those who deserve to die, die. Everyone should know...this is divine justice.” From their first act as an official organization, the group frames their work as a protective element, fusing the methods of Zetas with a paternal air of security.

Jean Franco proposes the dead body, when mutilated, can be transformed into objects and used as “messages for the civilian population or the enemy,” claiming acts where the logic of the killer is clear are “expressive crimes.” During the nightclub incident, LFM’s expressive crime implicitly communicates their alliance with Los Zetas, by now their mortal enemy, in that their form of coercion is aligned with the methods employed by Los Zetas, that they are willing to take extreme measures to challenge rivals. LFM makes clear, however, that they diverge from Los Zetas by assuming a moral code that prohibits the murder of “innocents” in the battle for territory and sovereignty. While both LFM and the Zetas used propaganda and the human body as expressive acts of power, and are thus political, LFM transcends the precedent set by Zetas in that they align themselves with forms of justice and Christianity. In fact, the group’s use of beheading elevated Zeta coercive techniques, and illuminates LFM’s utilization of expressive criminality, leaving Los Zetas to call the group “radical Islamists,” driven “crazy by ice.”

The group, therefore, like any successful protégé, takes the Zetas’ most effective methodology, that of spectacular, if violent, coercion, and fuses it with morality as

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67 Franco, Cruel Modernity, 21.
68 “Familia Michoacána,” InSight Crime.
justification for its actions. The LFM model, while continuing to challenge the state and illuminate its deficits, fills the vacuum of state power by funding “food and medicine, public works projects, and low interest loans”\textsuperscript{69} to the economically marginalized population of Michoacán. While many criminal organizations have been known to provide social programs to the public, acting as a proto-welfare state, LFM created infrastructure in the region not previously implemented by TCOs, including rehabilitation centers for populations suffering from substance abuse (there is evidence to suggest this was a recruiting tool for LFM). NAFTA and the 2008-10 recession left people living in areas such as Lazaro, Cardenas, Morelia “uprooted from their families, unemployed, poorly educated, and homeless.”\textsuperscript{70} Other forms of governance provided by the LFM include “regulating the prices of agricultural products and establishing harvesting periods, giving licenses for forestry activities, giving permits for festivals and religious events.”\textsuperscript{71} Weakness within bureaucratic and political institutions, especially glaring in Michoacán where access to social services within low-income communities was inadequate, created a space through which LFM could expand operations.

LFM frames this form of governance as protection, recalling the inability of the state to ensure the safety and prosperity of its citizens. After the group’s spiritual leader, Nazario Moreno Gonzalez, was supposedly killed in a military operation in 2010 (he was, in fact, not killed until 2014), the public reaction was mixed. During a march for peace following the operation, “some protestors held signs saying, “Viva la Familia,”

\textsuperscript{69} Shawn T. Flanigan, “Motivations and Implications of Community Service Provision by La Familia Michoacána / Knights Templar and Other Mexican Drug Cartels,” Journal of Strategic Security 7, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 68.
\textsuperscript{70} George W. Grayson, La Familia Drug Cartel: Implications for U.S.-Mexican Security (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2010), iii.
\textsuperscript{71} Flanigan, "Motivations and Implications," 68.
and "Nazario will always live in our hearts." While it was reported that the protestors were planted by LFM, the interaction shows the contradictory reactions of the public. State officials likewise showed support for LFM, with the mayor of Apatzingán declaring, "La Familia does not cause violence, the government does." While popular support for Los Zetas in Tamaulipas or Michoacán was virtually nonexistent, the mixed reaction of the public following the death of Nazario may be an indication that LFM was successful at adopting the Zeta model in effective ways, exhibiting the group’s ability to synthesize modern and traditional methods to solidify power.

2.7 Challenges

The structural decentralization of Los Zetas allowed for increased mobility when operating locally, and the group’s diversification was a significant factor in their economic growth, both components of their exceptionalism. The recruitment of highly trained members, however, became challenging as military operations often resulted in the arrest or death of original Zetas. In short, the decentralized and horizontal model was a contributing factor for the organization’s rapid ascent as well as their decline. While there was a high barrier for entry into traditional criminal organizations, you must be entrenched within the vertical hierarchy by birth or other longstanding alliance, the low barrier for entry for Los Zetas proved a catastrophic liability in the end.

To expand, Los Zetas had to recruit from below, outside the military model, which led to the monopolization of local resources, as local actors, much like unregulated

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73 American Embassy in Mexico, [Complex Police Operation].
74 Dudley, “Los Zetas Inc.”
capitalism, extorted beyond sustainable parameters. While groups such as LFM reframed local extortion in terms of protection, Los Zetas never pivoted from their aggressive extortive patterns, depleting the local economy of its meager resources, and fomenting dissent and hostility within local populations. The extreme coercive tactics of the group simultaneously ignited loathing from traditional criminal syndicates, the government, and the public against their common enemy. From a security perspective, the high value targeting strategy utilized by the military against Los Zetas proved a success story. In general, however, the “kingpin strategy” has been viewed as an abysmal failure by analysts who favor a more complicated policy of coordinated middle-level targeting.\textsuperscript{75}

Eventually, the once powerful organization would fragment beyond recognition. Lazcano, or Z-3, was allegedly killed by Mexican security forces in Coahuila in October of 2012, his body quickly disappeared. The disappearance of Lazcano marks a moment when the fragmentation of the organization accelerated dramatically.\textsuperscript{76} Los Zetas proved exceptional in their model, but this was not due to the sadistic qualities of the group’s leaders or the inherent violence of its members. Instead, Los Zetas’ evolution was deeply rooted in complex social and historical factors, including militarization and globalization, that created an environment conducive for a new brand of criminality.


Chapter 3

Impunity and Opposition

In 2011, the Mexican municipality of Allende became the locus of Los Zetas’ retribution and an example of the rampant criminal impunity within local governments. After the DEA leaked the fact that they had secured the cell phone personal identification numbers of Zeta leaders Miguel Trevino Morales (Z-40) and his brother Omar, both of whom lived in Allende, to Mexican security forces, the brothers erroneously traced the leak to longtime Allende resident and Zeta ally Jose Luis Garza, Jr., a rancher whose family had deep roots in the region.\(^1\) Beginning on the evening of March 18, 2011, residents noticed large groups of outsiders streaming into the municipality, prompting many locals to hunker down in the otherwise quiet town. Retired government worker Guadalupe Garcia recalls eating at a local restaurant when two young men came in to order some fifty hamburgers to go.\(^2\) What may seem an innocuous event triggered a sense of foreboding in Garcia, who trusted her intuition and decided to head home.\(^3\) The streets remained deserted that night, and over the next three days Los Zetas waged a war on the residents of Allende, kidnapping, murdering, and burning the bodies of up to 300 people.

Many of the victims were handed over to Los Zetas by local police and had no ties to criminal organizations. The massacre embodies the indiscriminate violence utilized by Los Zetas and the impunity through which they operated, but it also highlights

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\(^2\) Thompson, “How the U.S. Triggered.”
\(^3\) Thompson, “How the U.S. Triggered.”
the multidirectional exchange of violence and the culture of resistance within Mexico. The official investigation stalled for years, leaving vast amounts of evidence, including bone and tooth fragments, to sit undisturbed in the ashes of abandoned ranches.\textsuperscript{4} In 2014, however, a more robust investigation ensued, and a special task force was established.\textsuperscript{5} The investigation was prompted in large part by investigative journalism in Mexico and the United States as well as external pressures from human rights organizations.

The abundance of compelling testimony that came from the investigation was a powerful tool for substantive change, illuminating the importance of activism in the fight against criminal organizations. While human rights violations in Mexico are often viewed as a unidirectional interaction, the multidirectional impact of testimony and acts of resistance, often obscured by violence, emerge apparent in the case of Allende. The massacres in Allende and Tamaulipas are viewed within the framework of victimhood but an equally significant component of the interaction deals with how the disconnection between crime and justice has led to a more robust discourse on criminality and fueled resistance within personal and media spaces. To better understand the genesis of resistance to Los Zetas, this chapter will first establish historical linkages between TCO opposition, the Dirty War in Guerrero, and the democratization of Mexico.


3.1 Resistance in Guerrero

Chapter 3 examined the transnational interaction between Los Zetas and the Kaibiles, arguing their alignment was connected to a shared military culture and demilitarization post-1996. The Mexican Dirty War, similarly, illuminates the interaction between violent political repression, a culture of popular resistance, and popular opposition to criminal organizations. The Dirty War in Guerrero, specifically, and the conflict between the state and leftist guerrillas Genaro Vazquez, of the National Revolutionary Civic Association (ACNR), and Lucio Cabañas, of the Party of the Poor, provides a window through which to view Los Zetas professionalization of violence and military culture, as well as their replication of state repression. Simultaneously, the resistance of the Guerrerense anticipates the acts of opposition in the face of Zeta coercion.

During the late 1960s and 1970s, Cabañas and Vázquez led a series of attacks in the mountains of Guerrero, arguing the promises of the 1910 Revolution had fallen woefully short of its goals and the people of Guerrero had suffered the consequences. Historian O’Neill Blacker argues that while Mexico had a relatively successful revolution, with the government implementing social welfare programs and President Cárdenas initiating agrarian land reform, it was “the government’s failure to fulfill their potential, rather than demands for creation, that led to popular discontent.”6 Mexico outwardly supported international socialist revolutions, including those in Chile and Cuba, but stood opposed to internal policy changes that would meaningfully alter inequities. The contradictions of Mexico, including its stance on international revolutions, served as a

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façade that “masked internal policies”\(^7\) that promoted state-sponsored human rights violations and the violent repression of popular uprisings. In other words, the PRI’s consolidation of power took precedence over revolutionary values.

During the 1960s, Guerrero became an epicenter of racial and economic disparity, ranking among the poorest states in Mexico.\(^8\) The “Mexican Miracle,” in which the PRI consolidated power and assisted Allies during WWII by developing industrial sectors to support war efforts, was only a miracle for a select few and a gap in wealth dramatically increased for Mexico’s poorest fifty percent.\(^9\) For the campesino, many of whom farmed coffee and coconuts, earning a living wage became challenging when the government cut credits to peasant organizations in 1955.\(^10\) By the late 1960s, approximately 62 percent of Guerrerense were illiterate,\(^11\) and between 1960 and 1970 unemployment increased by 487 percent.\(^12\)

Both Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez began their paths to insurgency as educators and activists, working within a more traditional system of dissent. Teachers in the region headed social welfare programs, playing “instrumental roles in community life, furthering local improvements, intervening in relations with government, and in the generation after World War II, organizing movements for greater democracy and accountability in state and municipal politics.”\(^13\) As prominent activists, both Cabañas

\(^7\) Blacker, “Cold War Countryside,” 183.
\(^8\) Peter Watt, “Saving History from Oblivion in Guerrero,” *Monthly Review* 61, no. 10 (March 2010), 52.
\(^12\) Watt, “Saving History Oblivion,” 53.
and Vázquez led electoral efforts and organized opposition parties.\textsuperscript{14} In the face of popular opposition, however, the state became increasingly intent on militarization and repression. The authoritarian state was focused on continuing its hegemony and subverting revolutionary values rather than making policy changes that would address systemic inequities.

In December of 1962, police fired upon Vázquez and a group of protesters during a sit-in outside the municipal palace in Iguala, “killing seven and injuring twenty-three.”\textsuperscript{15} In 1967, during a protest in Atoyac, Cabañas and fellow protestors were also fired upon, killing several people, including Cabañas’s brother. “Facing a regime that repeatedly punished legal forms of pacific dissent and protest with violence,”\textsuperscript{16} both Vázquez and Cabañas sought justice outside the legal framework. The actions of the rebels represent a pattern in Mexico that can be viewed within the work of activists in Allende and Tamaulipas. The public, accustomed to the state’s inability to fulfill promises and ensure public safety, is forced to seek justice within marginalized zones.

During a press conference, Secretary Hermenegildo Cuenca Diaz, an architect of Dirty War policies, justified militarization, declaring “neither in the state of Guerrero nor in any part of the republic are there guerillas. Persons who rob and kill are not guerillas, they are bandits.”\textsuperscript{17} The PRI, “a national regime self-proclaimed as the “revolution turned into government,”\textsuperscript{18} refused to acknowledge the legitimate claims of the Guerrerense, that people were starving, that the state was not upholding its

\textsuperscript{15} Avina, \textit{Specters of the Revolution}, 88.
\textsuperscript{16} Avina, \textit{Specters of the Revolution}, 91.
\textsuperscript{18} Avina, \textit{Specters of the Revolution}, 105.
responsibility, and instead rapidly militarized the region, sending 12,000 troops by 1971 and more than double that amount by 1974.\textsuperscript{19} The history of militarization and human rights violations by the state sets a precedent for Los Zetas, who are trained within this culture.

During the early 1970s, those displaced from traditional regions of dissent carried out a series of attacks against the Mexican elite, including the kidnapping of Senator Ruben Figueroa, who was a close friend of President Echeverria and the administration’s choice for governor of Guerrero. Echeverria outwardly refused to negotiate with “criminals” (even though Senator Figueroa later told a reporter a twenty-five-million-peso ransom, or two million U.S. dollars, was negotiated for his release), sending “16,000 soldiers—about one third of the Mexican Army”\textsuperscript{20} to Guerrero. Figueroa was “rescued” by the military in September 1974, months after the initial kidnapping in May. Cabañas was not captured during the raid, but the military pressure following the string of high-profile kidnappings and assassinations proved fatal for the leader, who, on December 2, 1974, was killed in a shootout with the military.\textsuperscript{21}

While the life of Cabañas ended in 1974, the trauma of violence, as well as the impunity with which the state exerted its power remains in continuity with Mexican identity. In 2006, special prosecutors leaked their report on the Dirty War to the public. Investigators concluded that between the 1960s and 1980s, President Echeverria ordered a genocide in Guerrero and directed Secretary Hermenegildo Cuenca Diaz to

\textsuperscript{19} Watt, “Saving History Oblivion,” 53.
execute his plan. The military was ordered to kidnap, torture, and kill suspected subversives, with entire villages suspected of supporting Cabañas (mostly located in Ayotzinapa) destroyed.\(^{22}\) The soldiers “rounded up all the men and boys, executed some on the spot and detained others,” using rape, torture, beatings, electric shock, and the forced ingestion of gasoline to repress the uprising.\(^{23}\) Upon entering office in 2000, President Fox promised a more transparent state, declaring “No society can tolerate excesses and wrongs committed against human rights,”\(^{24}\) and while Fox and democratization had a role in the continuing investigations, it is activism outside the state that pushed for transparency and justice.

The patterns solidified during the Dirty War are echoed in towns such as Allende on multiple levels. First, and most obviously, Los Zetas are the concrete result of the authoritarian militarization that flourished under U.S. Cold War interventions. Much like the military was directed to indiscriminately kidnap, torture, and kill whole villages in Ayotzinapa regardless of personal affiliation with Cabañas, everyone in Allende was subject to punishment by Los Zetas, regardless of involvement with the organization. Cesar Alfonso Garcia Ramirez was one such man. Garcia was friends with Everardo Elizondo, who worked at the Garza ranch and raised fighting cocks.\(^{25}\) Both men drove to the ranch on the night of March 18 to get medicine for a cockfight scheduled for that night. Garcia’s wife, Etelvina Rodriguez, became alarmed when her husband did not

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\(^{23}\) Thompson, “Report on Mexican.”

\(^{24}\) Doyle, “Forgetting is not Justice.”

\(^{25}\) Evans, *The Allende Massacre*. 
respond to phone calls. The next morning Rodriguez drove by the ranch and noticed groups of hooded men with black vests and rifles. As she drove back to Allende, Rodriguez took a second look inside the ranch and noticed a pile of bodies next to a burning building. Past the entrance she saw Allende municipal police trucks and armed people she recognized as the police guarding the area. Like the atrocities of the Dirty War, the state was not enthusiastic about transparency, and did not want to illuminate the complicity of local officials in the murder of up to 300 people (the total population of Allende was only around 23,000). Evidence sat undisturbed for years without adequate investigation, requiring the media and survivor testimony, both mechanisms outside the traditional Mexican justice system, to illuminate the massacre.

For Cabañas and Vázquez, the failure of the state to fulfill its promises, and its violent repression of legal protest, was viewed as an illegitimate and criminal act against the population, requiring extralegal forms of opposition. The complicity of the police in Allende can similarly be viewed as a criminal act against the population, requiring action outside an illegitimate local government. For survivors of the Guerrero conflict, a robust public discourse on the criminality of the state and the “structural culture of impunity” became essential for securing justice for the 1200 disappeared as well as their families who suffered the trauma of militarization. The pattern of criminal impunity and state complicity recalls the certainty that the justice system “only punished those that did

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27 Evans, The Allende Massacre.
not have the means to circumvent justice,” prompting the public to seek justice autonomously.

The search for transparency can thus be viewed as a mechanism for true democratization and justice. For Tita Radilla, whose father Rosendo Radilla was disappeared while stopped at a checkpoint on August 25, 1974, the quest to find out what happened that day has been integral to justice. Radilla took her case to the Interamerican Human Rights Court, securing a victory against the Mexican State in 2009. Radilla also founded an advocacy group, The Association of Families of Detained and Disappeared Victims of Human Rights Violations in Mexico (AFADEM), an organization that not only advocates for people affected by the Dirty War but for those forcibly disappeared today, either by transnational criminal organizations, the military, or a combination thereof. Like Radilla, the media and survivors of the Allende massacre understood the state would not willingly investigate the murders without external pressure and advocated for truth outside the state. It is within this space of autonomy that a clear line between the Dirty War and Allende exists.

3.2 Democratization

The election of Vicente Fox of the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) marked the official democratization of Mexico, which had operated under the relatively stable yet authoritarian PRI for a staggering seventy-one years. The process of democratization, however, began long before the election of President Fox, and is inextricably linked to Mexico’s rich history of opposition. During his speech on December 2, 2000, Fox offered a new vision, one that lived up to the ideals of Mexico’s revolutionary past,

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30 Piccato, History of Infamy, 263.
31 Wattenbarger, “Relentless Quest.”
declaring, “I differ radically from the old view that power is not to be shared. I will share power, and also the responsibilities. I am the guardian of power, not its owner.”

Fox promised a more transparent and participatory system, one that would illuminate the moral failings of the past. In 2002, the president demanded the secretariats of the interior and the Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (SEDENA) turn over all Mexican Dirty War records to the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) located in the infamous Lecumberri, a former Mexico City prison that had housed Mexico’s political prisoners from the 1950s to the 1970s. While the election in 2000 represents official democratization, an examination of the process of democratization is essential to understanding the framework through which resistance and activism evolved. Mexican systems of governance were not static entities but constantly evolving processes. The 2000 election, therefore, can be viewed as a marker of a more equitable distribution of powers that are continually developing.

In 1977, President Jose Lopez Portillo allowed for the registration of new political parties, including that of the Mexican Communist Party. Portillo’s move was strategic; he wasn’t necessarily interested in democratization but sought to uphold the legitimacy and hegemony of the PRI, who had “looked distinctly undemocratic during the 1976 presidential election,” when its candidate had run unopposed. The PRI was in a unique political position. Their continuing dominance was of the utmost concern, but the

34 Doyle, “Forgetting is not Justice,” 62.
35 Doyle, “Forgetting is not Justice,” 62.
culture of revolutionary values that permeated the society always loomed large, threatening to explode as it did during the Guerrero conflict and notably during the Tlatelolco massacre in 1968. Push the leftists too far, and the stability of the PRI would topple, causing economic catastrophe. What’s more, the state needed to maintain a facade of equity else they would be the subject of intense international criticism. Thus, the policy change was an optical illusion, a sweet spot of sorts, designed to ward off critics and "co-opt an angry and articulate leftist movement that accused the PRI of betraying its revolutionary roots."³⁶ While candidates had no hope of competing within a political system designed in favor of the PRI, it allowed the public a sense of inclusion, cracking the door of democracy, without permitting substantive change.

The PRI deftly walked the line of political acceptability, permitting opposition through minute policy changes without tipping the balance of power.³⁷ The allowance of oppositional inroads, while necessary for a semblance of national and international legitimacy, eventually gave way to oppositional power on the local level. The PRI-state could not hold the line forever, and parties such as the PAN slowly and methodically chipped away at PRI power. Although the opposition parties were “rarely allowed to win on an electoral playing field skewed by the PRI-state,"³⁸ small concessions, outside formal electoral institutions and through informal bargaining tables, resolved simultaneously “in the streets and in the courtrooms,"³⁹ ultimately benefitting opposition parties. Often these acts of dissent involved protracted and public battles, including sit-

³⁶ Doyle, “Forgetting is not Justice,” 62.
³⁸ Eisenstadt, Courting Democracy in Mexico, 2.
³⁹ Eisenstadt, Courting Democracy in Mexico, 3.
ins outside, or even inside, municipal buildings. Battles such as these often took years to resolve, siphoning energy from the PRI, and while they only resulted in small victories within local elections, the oppositional victories were still a voice for dissent and a path to secure information about the PRI.  

While the process of democratization was incremental and required years of patience and determination, Todd Eisenstadt argues it was an “exemplar protracted transition.”

The culture of dissent, without which democratization may have looked very different, exists in continuity with the culture of opposition to Los Zetas. Authoritarianism pushed the public into the margins of governmental participation, and change required that they doggedly persevere in the face of injustice. The PAN victory in 2000 can be traced back to the 1980s. During the economic catastrophe of the 1980s, elites became weary of the economic stagnation, and began supporting the Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in state and local elections. While Mexican presidents still selected their successors, in a practice known as the dedazo, business groups hoped the rightist PAN could force change within the local political system. Then in 1988, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the son of beloved President Lazaro Cárdenas, who had been a champion of agrarian land reform, ran for president. When it looked like Cárdenas might win the election, the PRI took steps to prevent the victory. Access to the election results were abruptly halted “due to computer failure,” ballots were burned, and Carlos Salinas was declared president of Mexico.

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40 Eisenstadt, Courting Democracy in Mexico, 4.
41 Eisenstadt, Courting Democracy, 4.
42 Doyle, “Forgetting is Not Justice,” 62.
After the election results were announced, Cárdenas contested the results, declaring the “government and the president of the republic offered clean elections and respect for the will of the people, but since July 6, the people are being trampled, the law is being violated, and now we are in the final phase of the consummation of an enormous electoral fraud.”

During a stunning demonstration of public outrage, exemplifying patterns of opposition, 200,000 people marched on the National Palace to protest voter fraud. Citizens decried the departure from revolutionary values, with protest banners declaring Salinas’s economic policies had created rampant poverty, further marginalizing those not entrenched within the Mexican elite. Protestors argued the PRI and Salinas brought hunger and hardship rather than the promised growth. While Cárdenas asked his followers to exercise legal political pressure rather than violent opposition to uphold the election results, the legacy of Mexico’s revolutionary culture infiltrated the movement and Cárdenas supporters threatened insurrection, declaring revolutionary heroes like Jose Maria Morelos and Emiliano Zapata were sources of inspiration.

With intensifying globalization and the weakening of central state power, 1994 became a turbulent year for Mexico. It was the year NAFTA was implemented by President Salinas, the year PRI candidate Donaldo Colosio was assassinated, and the year of the Chiapas Rebellion, which rapidly caused instability. All this marked the beginning of the remarkable Zedillo presidency. Zedillo, an economist educated at

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44 Rohter, “200,000 in Mexican Capital.”
45 Rohter, “200,000 in Mexican Capital.”
46 Rohter, “200,000 in Mexican Capital.”
Yale, continued to implement neoliberal reforms begun by Salinas, declaring the reform process would continue even in the face of internal opposition by the PRI. During his inauguration speech, Zedillo criticized the corruption of the Salinas administration (Salinas endured the speech and criticism with stoicism), declaring the poorest Mexicans were not treated fairly. Zedillo committed the administration to fighting monopolistic practices that marginalized the majority of Mexicans. Ironically, liberalization, as discussed in Chapter 2, further marginalized the poor, but also contributed to PRI fragmentation. For instance, Zedillo made a concerted effort to appoint members of his cabinet that were poised to continue the economic reforms of Salinas (he appointed the chief NAFTA negotiator Herminio Blanco as the commerce secretary). Zedillo also appointed a member of the opposition party PAN as the attorney general.

While the 1917 Mexican Constitution was far from static, decentralization of presidential power and changes to the Mexican Supreme did accelerate under President Zedillo. After the creation of the National Party (later known as the PRI) in 1929, a monopoly of political power was centralized within the executive branch. The control was rooted in the PRI’s dominance over the electoral process and their control over Congress, the state legislatures, and state gubernatorial offices. The judicial branch, restricted by the power of presidential appointment, did not challenge

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48 Roberson, “Taking Office Mexican.”

presidential authority and Congress was likewise beholden to the will of the presidency. This system of presidential control, known as the presidencialismo, was noticeably in decline during the presidency of Zedillo. A revised separation of powers became apparent when in 1997 the PRI lost control of the Chamber of Deputies (Cámara de Diputados). President Zedillo was still able to pass a significant amount of legislation, but the loss of power reflected the shift of legislative power toward Congress, and an overall decentralization of the executive branch.50

The anti-corruption agenda was an important component of the Zedillo Administration’s agenda. In a bold move, the new president asked for the resignation of all 26 Supreme Court justices. Zedillo, through his anti-corruption policies, liberalization, and election finance laws, accelerated the process of democratization, resulting in fractures within the political and social fabric of Mexico. Zedillo made a final striking move at the end of his presidency by publicly congratulating Fox on his electoral victory, ensuring a smooth transition of power and the democratization of Mexico. Years of entrenched alliances were slowly and methodically losing power, the consequences of which were manifested in groups such as Los Zetas. The authoritarian system had been oppressive but relatively stable, using targeted coercion to secure power.

Ultimately, the process of democratization, along with a longstanding culture of impunity and the aggressive policies of President Calderón starting in 2006, would facilitate Los Zetas’ detachment from traditional systems of order that had been stable under authoritarianism. This detachment would have dire consequences for the people of Tamaulipas and Coahuila—migrants and media alike. The process of

50 Zamora and Cossío, “Mexican Constitutionalism after Presidencialismo.”
democratization also provided a small space for the public to access systems of governance, as seen during the opening of the Dirty War records in 2002. While there was an increased space for access and participation, the culture of impunity, as witnessed in Allende, remained firmly entrenched within local systems of governance. After the Allende massacre, the public expected the state to conceal crimes from the public and shirk the responsibility of an investigation. Local police had after all participated in the crimes, blurring the line between legitimate and illegitimate actors.

When considering the dramatic increase in crime following the period of democratization, questions naturally arise. For instance, what connection exists between democratization and criminality? The decentralization of executive power and the ultimate triumph of democratization did not solve deeper issues concerning public faith in the electoral process. The PRI’s long history of electoral fraud undermined the legitimacy of state institutions, creating uncertainty within the public sphere. This instability and uncertainty motivated criminal organizations to expand operations and fill vacuums of power. Sociologist Andrés Villarreal examines increases in violent crime during the democratic transition, arguing homicide rates increased among municipalities with greater electoral competition. The increased violence, Villarreal argues, is due in part to disruptions within patronage networks. This disruption to patronage networks becomes especially apparent in more rural areas where such hierarchical networks are more entrenched, leading to a loss of social and political control. In Allende, former systems of social and political control were replaced by Los Zetas’ unique brand of

criminality. The group integrated themselves within social structures of order and cohesion. Los Zetas purchased businesses, married into local families, and coerced the local labor force to support their operations. Top leaders Miguel Treviño Morales and his brother Omar even made Allende their home. Ultimately the process of integration by Los Zetas coupled with DEA operational indiscretion and Mexican security leaks created an environment where Los Zetas could operate with impunity.

3.3 A Case for Impunity

The fractures within the justice system, lack of a cohesive system of accountability, and endemic poverty within police forces contributed to increased law enforcement collaboration with criminal organizations. In Nuevo Laredo alone, it has been estimated that during the height of Los Zetas’ power approximately “90 percent of the municipal police were allegedly on Los Zetas’ payroll.” As employees of the organization, the police were directed to alert Los Zetas when unauthorized groups were moving commodities through their territory and when rival organizations or the military were conducting operations in the region. Los Zetas also directed law enforcement personnel to secure safe houses.

According to a special report by Michael Evans of the National Security Archive, the military received multiple reports about the violence in Allende. On March 20, 2011, the army sent a patrol to the Garza Ranch after a man reported the disappearance of multiple family members. The soldiers “found doors torn off, the building sacked, spent shell casings, dead animals, burned buildings, and a pick-up truck riddled with bullets,

52 Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc.*, 94.
but no people.”54 The reasons the army was reluctant to investigate further is unknown but illustrates the absence of state order in the region. The military’s reluctance to investigate not only left evidence unsecured but directly affected people like Elvira Espinoza who reported three of her grandchildren as disappeared from Allende. She found two of her grandchildren at an orphanage a week after their disappearance. Later Espinoza discovered the two young children and their infant brother had been separated from their parents and held for days. The two older children were then dropped off at a park. The baby, Mauricio, was too little to be left at the park, Los Zetas told the older children, he cried too much. Los Zetas then separated baby Mauricio from the older children. He has not been seen since.55

While there are unanswered questions regarding the reluctance of the military to investigate further, there is direct testimony connecting the local police to the crimes. Christian Alejandro Lopez Tamez, the Allende fire chief, identified officials from the Allende police department who were connected to the massacre during his testimony on December 17, 2014.56 “When I saw all those police I realized that they were keeping watch or guarding the place, that is to say the ranch.”57 Lopez adds he spent a lot of time with police in what was after all a small town, and he can therefore positively identify its members. Before condemning the police department, it is important to remember city officials were in an impossible position. If they refused to cooperate with Los Zetas or refused payments they were given for their cooperation, they put their lives

54 Evans, The Allende Massacre.
55 Thompson, “How the U.S. Triggered.”
57 Testimonial Christian Alejandro López, 2014.
and the lives of their family at risk. Similarly, journalists who were paid to kill stories or not investigate certain crimes did so not necessarily out of adherence to the authority of Los Zetas but because to do otherwise would immediately endanger lives.

Events such as those in Allende are often viewed as the result of Mexican corruption and seen as inevitable in the region, but Allende also raises significant issues relating to the role of U.S. intelligence when interacting with Mexican security forces. Allende is approximately 40 minutes from the border and remains inextricably connected to the United States, recalling the fluidity of North America during globalization. U.S. intelligence, therefore, has a responsibility to the citizens of Mexico to ensure their safety. The fact that the U.S. frivolously shared information with Mexican security forces when they had been explicitly warned that sharing information could result in violence is problematic, but it also speaks to the need for international solutions. Human rights violations are not Mexico’s “problem” but the problem of everyone concerned with the civil and political rights of all human beings. Allende illuminates the international responsibility of all nations to ensure global safety.

Like the police and journalists, mayors and other city officials often had to make difficult choices when encountering criminal organizations. Mauricio Fernandez, who served as the mayor of San Pedro Garza, details the infiltration of criminal organizations into state systems and their use of irregular warfare, claiming “I hear about events occurring—through mayors, through friends of mine with cattle ranches, through people who say: ‘Well, they came, and landed in helicopters, and killed everyone.’” On his friend’s ranch, he asserts, “helicopters came in and basically massacred everyone.”

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Much of the violence against public officials did not result in formal investigations, and the search for truth was often left to journalists and activists. While it’s easy to blame mayors or police who turned a blind eye to violence, without the support of the military, and with copious intelligence leaks, ethical governance verges on impossible.

In August of 2010, Edelmiro Cavazos, the mayor of Santiago, Nuevo Leon, was at his home when he noticed an approaching convoy. Wanting to know the nature of the visit, Cavazos and his bodyguard approached the group. Both Cavazos and his bodyguard were then kidnapped “by at least 15 gunman wearing uniforms of a defunct police agency who arrived in a convoy of sport-utility vehicles, with patrol lights flashing.”\(^{60}\) While the bodyguard was later released, and still later found to be complicit in the crime, Cavazos’s “bound, blindfolded body was found dumped alongside a rural road.”\(^{61}\) It was hypothesized by Nuevo Leon Governor Rodrigo Medina that the execution was in retaliation for anti-corruption efforts made by the 38-eight-year-old Cavazos. State Attorney General of Nuevo Leon Alejandro Garza y Garza reported police officers, who were arrested in connection to the slaying, “admitted they worked for the Zetas as lookouts.”\(^{62}\) The killing had been ordered by a Zeta leader, reportedly Angel Virgilio Avila Sanchez, known as El Vampiro,\(^{63}\) after the police officers/zeta operatives complained the mayor had disciplined them (he apparently initiated pay cuts

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\(^{61}\) Wilkerson, “Mayor Found Dead.”


and other disciplinary measures after Cavazos discovered the officers were wrongfully issuing citations to mountain bikers), leading them to assume Cavazos worked for a rival criminal organization.

In 2010, approximately fifteen mayors were executed by criminal organizations in Mexico.64 Often there was collaboration between municipal police forces and criminal organizations. The executions and the duplicity of police forces illuminates the fluidity between state and non-state actors during this time as well as the legacy of militarization and governmental impunity. Los Zetas, considering their military culture, were well-suited to form an alliance with police forces. Mayor Mauricio Fernandez spoke with Cavazos before his death. Cavazos reportedly said he “received a “threatening visit from traffickers shortly after taking office.”65 Fernandez urged Cavazos to call in the army, remembering “he was frightened and had found a municipal government enormously in cahoots with organized crime.”66 The surge in mayoral murders can be viewed as a challenge to the state’s monopoly on violence, but the continuity between authoritarianism and militarization also becomes apparent, inevitably breeding impunity.

As discussed in Chapter 2, “the police did not merely secure the state in the face of citizen mobilization and political challenge; they also became part of the problem.”67 The fragmentation of police forces bred “conflict and competition,” and issues of accountability. In the case of municipalities occupied by Los Zetas, the alliance between the local police and Zetas presented an impossible situation for mayors and other public

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65 Wilkinson, “Mayor Found Dead.”
66 Wilkerson, “Mayor Found Dead.”
67 Davis, “Policing and Regime Transition,” 69.
officials as the fluidity between state and non-state actors often made opposition a choice between life and death.

3.4 Media Resistance

In 2011, Los Zetas became very concerned with social media. Media may have been disrupting operations due to real-time reporting. Activist bloggers were known to broadcast interactive maps “which logged where drugs were sold, stash houses were based and where the halcones” stood watch, but more than that, bloggers openly questioned Zeta authority. This period can be characterized as the height of Zeta violence, especially in relation to the public, and this escalation correlates to intensified media opposition. As the state’s failure to ensure public safety became apparent, the public filled the void of state weakness to uphold order. The fall of 2011 was marked by the murders of multiple bloggers who publicly denounced the Zeta occupation of Nuevo Laredo.

First, on September 13, two social media activists “were found hanging from a bridge.” There were signs found with the bodies that read, “this will happen to all internet snitches,” putting Frontera al Rojo Vivo, Blog del Narco, and Denuncia Ciudadano on notice. Then on September 24, Maria Elizabeth Macias, the editor of Nuevo Laredo newspaper Primera Hora and a blogger for Nuevo Laredo en Vivo (NLV), was found decapitated in Nuevo Laredo. Known as “La Nena Laredo,” or the Girl of Laredo, the editor’s head was placed on La Glorieta de Colon, a Christopher

69 Stone, “The Zetas’ Biggest Rival.”
70 Stone, “The Zetas’ Biggest Rival.”
71 Correa-Cabrera, Los Zetas Inc., 146.
Columbus monument in Nuevo Laredo, with a message: “Ok Nuevo Laredo en Vivo and social media sites. I am Nena de Laredo and I’m here because of my actions, for trusting the army and the navy…Thank you for your attention,”72 signed ZZZ. A few months later, A second blogger at NLV, a 35-year-old male known as “El Rascatripas,73 was tortured, decapitated, and dumped, like Macias, near La Glorieta de Colon, with a sign: “Hi I’m Rascatripas and this happened to me because I didn’t understand I shouldn’t post things on social networks.”74

The ability of Los Zetas to track media users has been attributed to informants or possibly cybersecurity experts. Either way, the acts of violence are indicative of Los Zetas’ technological adeptness and their media savvy. The messaging backfired, however, unleashing even more national and international outrage. Viewed through the theoretical framework of Franco, the bodies of Macias, El Rascatripas, and the 2 other activists, are clearly intended to be expressions of Zeta power, warning opponents about the consequences of resistance. The question is, who sent the message? Los Zetas? Macias? There is dual messaging at play, depending on the perspective. The expression of the body is an interaction between sender and receiver, a negotiation. While intended to be a form of coercive power, the more dominant message remains the power of activists to exact change.

72 Correa-Cabrera, Los Zetas Inc., 146.
3.5 Tamaulipas

On August 22, 2010, Ecuadoran Luis Fredy Lala Pomavilla, and “approximately 75 migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, Brazil, and Ecuador,”75 were traveling in panel trucks along the highway between Ciudad Victoria and San Fernando, Tamaulipas, in an effort to reach the U.S. border. As they neared the U.S. border, approximately ninety miles from Brownsville, Texas, they were stopped by armed Zetas and transported to a ranch in San Fernando. Once at the compound, Los Zetas offered the kidnapped migrants the opportunity to work for the organization. The men were offered work as sicarios and the women were offered work as cooks. They could earn good money, more than they could hope to earn through legitimate work, a staggering $500 per week.76

Lala remembers the refusals uttered that night. All but one of the men and women who had made the arduous journey from Central America, who were almost there, almost, refused to work for Los Zetas. Their refusal to work for the organization was not well-received, and every member of the group who refused, except for one female and one child who were separated from the rest, was escorted to a nearby warehouse, bound and blindfolded, and shot in the back of the head. In total, fifty-eight men and fourteen women were executed that day. Lala passed out after being shot in the jaw. According to Lala’s testimony, he miraculously awoke hours later and found everyone dead except for one Salvadoran male. Lala and the unidentified Salvadoran then fled the ranch in different directions, searching for help. Lala indicated he “heard

76 Intelligence questions what they consider to be a generous salary and asserts the pay would have been much lower and they may have entered a form of indentured servitude. See US Consulate Matamoros, *Los Zetas Massacre.*
trucks pursuing the other survivor and later heard gun shots, which led him to believe that the Salvadoran had been caught and executed.”

When Lala asked people in the area for assistance (in one account Lala asked the police for help, and during another interview, Lala asked occupants in a house near the Zeta compound), they refused, and so he continued to walk through the night. During the “early morning hours of Monday, August 23” Lala approached a Mexican Navy checkpoint near San Fernando, Mexico, where he finally found help. Based on Lala’s information, the Mexican Navy began searching for the site of the massacre, and then came into contact with Zetas at a nearby ranch. A gun battle ensued, leaving a marine and three Zetas dead. On Tuesday, August 24, at around 6 p.m., the military found the executed migrants. They had been piled up against the wall of a warehouse.

On August 30, Lala returned to Ecuador, refusing to stay in Mexico even after the GOM offered the eighteen-year-old a humanitarian visa.

Motivations for this crime have long been under investigation, and the answers remain unclear. Security analysts find it unconvincing that Los Zetas were motivated by a need to recruit new members. It also seems questionable that Los Zetas mistakenly identified the migrants as members of another criminal organization. They were travel

77 US Consulate Matamoros, Los Zetas Massacre.
worn and from Central America, and Los Zetas would not have linked them to rivals. There has been speculation that the profits for smuggling the migrants were to be paid to the CDG, who were in an ongoing conflict with Los Zetas, but even this explanation is questionable considering the extreme nature of the crimes. That said, Los Zetas are known for such extremities and so the explanation cannot be ruled out.

The migrant massacre marked the beginning of a string of violent events that occurred in Tamaulipas between August 22-27, 2010.81

- On August 24, two Secretaría de la Defensa (SEDENA) and four members of Los Zetas were killed during an altercation in Reynosa, Tamaulipas. It was reported that Los Zetas utilized advanced weaponry including an RPG and the situation was so volatile that the public was advised to stay indoors for safety.
- On August 24, two blocks from the U.S. Consulate, a grenade was detonated near the Matamoros City Water Offices. The attack was near the B&M International Bridge and resulted in the closure of lanes heading into Mexico.
- On August 25, Roberto Jaime Suarez Vasquez, who was the San Fernando State Prosecutor, and Juan Carlos Sanchez Suarez, who was the San Fernando Municipal Police Director, were reported missing after investigating the Tamaulipas Massacre on August 24.
- On August 27, another grenade was thrown at the Department of Public Safety in the city of Valle Hermoso. The building was damaged during the attack, but no injuries occurred.

• On August 27, a car bomb was detonated in Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas, outside of the Mexican Televisa station. The station’s towers were damaged, causing the station to discontinue broadcasting.

• On August 27, another car bomb was detonated in Ciudad Victoria near the transit police.\(^{82}\)

While Zeta operations in 2010 and 2011 are a clear challenge to state authority, the period is also marked by popular opposition that correlates to the overall decline of the organization. As discussed in Chapter 2, indiscriminate violence was a crucial component to Zeta branding, but the events of Allende and Tamaulipas solidified a foundation of opposition that Los Zetas could not effectively combat. After the well-publicized human rights violations, law enforcement intensified efforts to capture Zeta leaders and on the morning of July 13, 2013, Miguel Treviño, or Z-40, was captured by Mexican Marines in Anahuac, near Nuevo Laredo.\(^{83}\) Activism and the sacrifice of mayors, journalists, migrants, and many others can be viewed as integral to the decline of Los Zetas. As Lucio Cabañas became an inspiration for leftist revolutionaries, the people impacted by Los Zetas' violence became an inspiration for activists. By examining resistance to Los Zetas, we find the opposition was deeply rooted in not only a culture of impunity but a confluence of historical contexts, including the process of democratization and the Mexican Dirty War. The intensity of violence during this period can be linked to the Calderon presidency, of course, but historical connections go still deeper, and the fight for transparency and

\(^{82}\) US Consulate Matamoros, *Timeline of Violent Events.*

justice assumes an equal role in the conflict. The deaths of journalists in Nuevo Laredo, the executions of the 72 migrants in San Fernando, and countless others, should therefore be viewed as expressions of power beyond that of Los Zetas and a mechanism for change.
Chapter 4

Neoliberalism and Criminality

During the 1990s, economists and policymakers proselytized the benefits of a less regulated market economy, viewing the formula known as the Washington Consensus as an elixir guaranteed to facilitate unlimited growth.\(^1\) Many leading advocates of the Consensus thought there was a role for government in creating frameworks to facilitate globalization, but there was nevertheless a marked shift to deregulation and privatization.\(^2\) In short, advocates of neoliberalism thought the government should “simply get out of the way and let the markets do their work.”\(^3\)

While many now vilify globalization as a harbinger of poverty and death in the developing world, the costs and benefits of triumphalist capitalism transcend such narratives. Economist Joseph Stiglitz, while a critic of globalization, argues reduced barriers for international trade allowed many countries a faster path to development, including Asia where millions were better off with export-led growth policies.\(^4\)

Additionally, globalization brought a sense of connectivity, combatting the economic and social alienation many people felt throughout the developing world.

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\(^1\) Massey, et al., “Myths and Markets,” 8.
\(^2\) A key liberalizing reform introduced under President Salinas was an amendment to Article 27, which had under the 1917 constitution prioritized the state with regard to land ownership and facilitated ejido or communal lands. The amendment introduced a new Agrarian law that modified the ejido land-reform program in significant ways: the state was no longer obligated to provide land to landless peasants; community members were now permitted to sell, rent, and mortgage their land; ejido communities could transfer ownership of land; communities no longer were required to personally work the land to retain rights over the property; the state promoted collaboration between private sectors and ejido communities. See Amy L. Luers, Naylor, Rosamond L Naylor, and Pamela A. Matson, “A Case Study of Land Reform and Coastal Land Transformation in Southern Sonora, Mexico,” *Land Use Policy* 23, no. 4 (October 2006): 437.
\(^3\) Massey, *Of Myths and Markets*, 8.
The interconnectedness simultaneously facilitated an increased access to knowledge and resources that were not previously within reach.

While globalization brought increased connectivity throughout the world, it has also been a hegemonic force of the elite,\textsuperscript{5} creating a space for a select few, including educational institutions, the media, and private capital to curate world discourse and accumulate wealth. Neoliberalism did create an aspirational zone within developing countries, in which barriers for growth were seemingly demolished, yet questions linger as to the long-term effects of such economic policies. Critics of liberalization claim the promised growth was a façade, masking the true purpose of globalization, that of subjugation and exploitation. This chapter will look at neoliberalism in relation to Los Zetas to examine how reforms have infiltrated the public and private sphere, comprehensively dividing and reorienting values and social systems.

Los Zetas have benefitted from globalization and from the restructuring of national frameworks and hierarchies, but how has the organization become an object of a neoliberal agenda? While this thesis does not claim that there is collusion between TCOs and transnational corporations, it does examine the paradoxical alignment between the two zones of operation. Los Zetas have clearly contributed to the destabilization of Mexico, facilitating socioeconomic schisms throughout their regions of operation. Their zones of interference have not been arbitrary, however, and have occurred in areas that are extremely rich in undeveloped natural resources. While Los Zetas did not consciously collaborate with the state and corporations to destabilize the

region, the instability they wrought did make space for private investment. Los Zetas can therefore be viewed as agents of neoliberalism and a force of social change.

4.1 Economic Transition

Prior to the 1980s, Latin American economic policy was dominated by import substitution industrialization (ISI), in which the state facilitated economic development and growth, investing in projects such as railways, seaports, and refineries, to promote capital accumulation.\(^6\) Under this system, the state is the agent of change and the markets support the mandates of the state through their development. Political scientist Wendy Brown describes the process of neoliberal reform as transmogrifying “every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic.”\(^7\) If modernity can be understood in part as a process of substitution whereby science, reason, and centrally organized governments replace monarchical allegiance and religious morality, neoliberalism can similarly be viewed as a framework that elevates the market economy to the new primary point of allegiance.

The neoliberal transition is a significant factor in the evolution of Los Zetas in that the restructuring of economic policy and state apparatus not only created economic insecurity for large portions of the population but fractured social groups and traditions. In his wildly successful 1999 monograph *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Pulitzer Prize winning author Thomas Friedman argued globalization, “a new, very greased, interconnected system,”\(^8\) would not fracture systems but would allow us to connect the

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dots and vanquish chaos. This new system would demolish the walls between “countries, markets and disciplines”\(^9\) and increase efficiency. In short, globalization had more benefits than drawbacks. Like Modernization Theory, in which there is a single path to progress, globalization would homogenize the international systems to propel us to a universal order. For Latin America, this order is inherently undemocratic not only because it has been mandated by the U.S., but also because its structural design creates an uneven landscape for growth. Thus, globalization became a structural force of violence.

ISI helped facilitate growth following WWII, and from 1945-1975 the Mexican Miracle was largely viewed as a success story. The downside to ISI, as discussed in Chapter 3, was the growing economic marginalization in states such as Guerrero. After increasing economic stagnation during the 1970s and the immense growth of social movements throughout Latin America, the U.S. treasury and lending institutions “persuaded” Mexico to deconstruct more centralized state systems that were developed under ISI and implement reforms that fell within the framework of the Washington Consensus. The restructuring included the dismantlement of bureaucracies and the deregulation and privatization of industries. Neoliberal policies, and the shift toward a market driven state, both facilitated increased rates of socioeconomic inequality and an unequal access to resources, including clean water, healthy foods, and quality education, thereby creating barriers to upward mobility.

By 2003, income inequality was high, with the poorest one-tenth of Latin American families earning 1.6 percent of the total income. The wealthiest families in

Latin America, on the other hand, earned 48 percent of total income. With dramatically reduced opportunities and the inability to compete with transnational corporations in the formal economic sector, workers fled to the informal sector, and by the end of the 1990s, 40 percent of workers in Mexico earned a living through informal means. Data from the United Nations indicates that 70 percent of jobs created in Latin America between 1990 and 1997 were in the informal sector, and by 2000, 59 percent of urban work was also informal, a 19 percent jump from 1980. The structural links between formal and informal sectors under liberalization created more opportunities for criminal organizations to expand, forcing informal sectors to continually interact with criminal actors for basic needs.

Under neoliberalism, the concept of an informal economic sector became an opaque reality, with formal organizations exploiting the informal sectors to increase profits. With reduced rates of pay and long hours, the sector was extraordinarily valuable to private industry as well as private citizens of higher socioeconomic classes. During the 1990s, for instance, informal sectors often supplied formal organizations with products and services at a discounted rate. In short, the increasing poverty and exclusion became a method to increase surplus value without fairly compensating the source. Additionally, the fluidity between the formal and informal spheres made it challenging to determine the origins of products and services and whether goods were

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11 Sanchez, “Insecurity and Violence,” 181.
12 Sanchez, “Insecurity and Violence,” 182.
produced ethically. Put within the context of the economic stagnation of the 1970s, and liberalization becomes a path for transferring wealth back to the ruling class.

4.2 Structural Exclusion and Violence

In 2001, the media reported on the severe mistreatment of a 12-year-old maid who was held in abhorrent conditions by Sandra Beardon, of Laredo, Texas. When the police found the girl, she was covered in cuts and bruises and sent to the intensive care unit, where she received treatment for dehydration as well as skin and eye infections. When she was not fulfilling her duties as a maid, the girl was chained to a pole in the Beardons’ backyard, and had police not discovered her, doctors insist she would not have survived another week. During the trial, it was reported that Mrs. Beardon had forced the girl to eat dog feces, sleep outside, and had sexually assaulted her by inserting a tool into her private parts. Mrs. Beardon’s sadistic tendencies also included breaking a broom over the girl’s back, hitting her over the head with a glass bottle, and spraying her in the face with red pepper if she didn’t think the child was performing her chores to standard. It was later discovered that seven months previously Mrs. Beardon had traveled to an impoverished village in Veracruz where she had persuaded the child’s parents to allow the girl to migrate to the United States where she would have more opportunities. Beardon then smuggled the girl across the McAllen, Texas border, finally taking the child back to her home in Laredo.

14 “Police: Woman Chained 12-Year-Old Maid.”
The Beardon case exemplifies the experiences of one family that arose within the confines of socioeconomic marginalization, but the communal experience of alienation and subjugation, over time, can translate to a culture of violence. Children, for instance, are often born without birth certificates and exist without access to state services. Persons within these spheres move outside the order of state structures but are nevertheless expected to adhere to its mandates. It is thus, as Magaly Sanchez has explained, that “under conditions of prolonged informality and illegality, and without official documentation, the structural violence of neoliberalism produced new expressions of violence.”¹⁷ There is a sphere of invisibility that surrounds concentrated areas of poverty, and without official status or the means to gain status or visibility, autonomy can be affected for life.

Los Zetas are a magnification of this structural effect, manifesting in unique forms. Despite their uniqueness, they are nevertheless connected to the structural violence of liberalization, both in terms of their organizational capabilities, including their migrant trafficking monopolization, and in terms of their evolution. As discussed in Chapter 2, Guzmán and Lazcano, Z-1 and Z-3 respectively, both came from military backgrounds while Miguel Treviño Morales, Z-40, considered by many to be the most violent Zeta, did not have any military training. Instead, Z-40 was the product of border culture. It is in Texas, not Mexico, United States investigators claim, that Treviño Morales, the teenager, was transformed into Z-40, the violent criminal.

According to detective Roberto García, Treviño Morales preyed upon teenagers in Texas, recruiting young people who came from socioeconomic backgrounds similar

¹⁷ Sanchez, “Insecurity and Violence,” 182.
to his own. Police reports indicate a new generation of Zetas were operating in the Dallas area, and unlike their predecessors, the new generation was better assimilated within the region and therefore more difficult for law enforcement to identify. As products of both American culture and bias, and motivated by the desire for class mobility, their appearance solidifies the connection between the United States and Los Zetas throughout the group’s evolution.

The undercover detective who raised the alarm about Los Zetas operational capacity in Texas, claims, “I wasn’t trying to make anybody panic,” but the fact was Los Zetas were expanding and recruiting in Texas. The city, afraid the report would scare away investors, dismissed the findings and refused to take action. The detective admits the police were not proactive in stopping Zeta recruitment and operations in Texas and questions whether more robust interventions could have prevented violence in Mexico, musing, “maybe had we been more engaged, things could have turned out differently.”

While it is problematic to engage in counterfactual history, there remains a clear connection between Los Zetas and the United States, both in terms of militarization and socioeconomic alienation within border zones. Minimally, the connection challenges the idea that TCO violence, including the massacres in Tamaulipas and Allende, are exclusive products of Mexican society. Beyond this, it illustrates the effects of intimate border relations as well as the relegation of Brown bodies to zones of informality, illegality, and servitude.

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18 Solis, “Top leader Zetas.”
4.3 Oil in Tamaulipas

The state of Tamaulipas has been central to Zeta operations, resulting in escalating violence and instability throughout the region. It is also, coincidentally or not, a strategic geographic location for the energy sector, with significant oil and gas deposits located in or near the state, particularly in the Burgos Basin, Tampico-Misantla, and in the Gulf of Mexico. Furthermore, the energy resources identified have been largely undeveloped and therefore are potentially lucrative for investors. For instance, in 2010, while there were 11,000 explored deposits in Tamaulipas, there were only 1,900 that were operational, and in 2014, the government of Tamaulipas estimated that approximately 65 percent of the 52.6 thousand million barrels of crude oil that had been identified by Pemex as a prospective resource was in Tamaulipas.

After NAFTA was enacted in 1994, transnational corporations were allowed more operational capacity in the region. As a result, private companies such as Halliburton, Delta, and Schlumberger were able to work as contractors for Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX). The transition to private investment in the region intensified during the succeeding years, and in 2017, a few years after the peak in violence, most notably in 2011, the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) disclosed Mexico’s Secretariat of Energy, or SENER, would begin allowing private companies to explore and develop the Burgos Basin for natural gas. Since the creation of PEMEX, energy exploration

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19 Correa-Cabrera, Los Zetas Inc., 195.
20 Correa-Cabrera, Los Zetas Inc., 162.
has been limited to state agents and the reform marks a notable policy shift with significant consequences for the region.

Even though shale deposits in the basin are the most undeveloped in the country, recent years have seen a decrease in PEMEX production. In 2012, for instance, PEMEX invested $657 million on exploration and production in the region. By 2017, PEMEX had reduced its investment in the Burgos Basin to $51 million, down 92%. While there are challenges to production in the basin, including low permeability, in which the oil or gas cannot move quickly through the rock, requiring additional pressure for efficient resource extraction, the increased investment by private companies indicates there is substantial value in the region.

Considering many of the most violent zones in Mexico, including Tamaulipas, Coahuila, the Juárez Valley, and Michoacán, are also extremely rich in energy resources, questions of correlation and motivation naturally arise. Motivations for Los Zetas occur on multiple levels and are consistently connected to neoliberal reforms and ethos. Specifically, and most glaringly, increased exclusion from upward social mobility sparked desire among expanding portions of the population, including those living along border zones, to expand wealth through criminal means. This is especially apparent when examining the youth recruitment by Z-40 in Dallas, Texas. While the desire for wealth is not a new phenomenon, the expanding interaction between criminal groups and populations living within informal zones has significantly increased the opportunity for TCOs to diversify operations.

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23 U.S. Energy Information Administration, Mexico’s Shale-Rich Burgos.
24 U.S. Energy Information Administration, Mexico’s Shale-Rich Burgos.
Beyond the desire for mobility, the reconfiguration of state and social structures under the neoliberal transition can be viewed as a significant factor in Los Zetas’ development, especially their expansion into migrant trafficking. According to David Harvey, dispossession is crucial to the expansion of capital, and acts as a key method for the redistribution of wealth. In Mexico, there is a marked pattern whereby surges in violence consistently occur in energy-rich regions. While it is not the intention of Los Zetas to create instability and dispossess people of land so private investors can develop Tamaulipas, they nevertheless serve the interests of such investors, who opportunistically seek out societal fractures in the name of progress. In 2017, BNamericas, an investment tool that focuses on Latin America, declared the state of Tamaulipas was poised to become a “major energy hub” in the coming years. With Tamaulipas expected to receive more than $32 billion in exploration and development contracts, and with the state governor, Francisco García Cabeza de Vaca meeting with Texas officials to shore up energy and infrastructure ties, the state that was home to some of the worst massacres in Mexico’s history is well-positioned to be a windfall for energy investors.

4.4 Instability in Tamaulipas

Between 2006 and 2015, Tamaulipas was marked by instability, and reported a total of 5,720 disappeared, the highest in the nation. The region was also the location of a large number of mass grave sites, for which Los Zetas were responsible. On April 6, 2011, the U.S. Consulate in Matamoros reported SEDENA had discovered two mass

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25 Harvey, “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction,” 34.  
graves containing 48 bodies near San Fernando in Tamaulipas.\textsuperscript{27} Many of the bodies, two of which were wearing police uniforms, were in advanced stages of decomposition while others appeared to have died within the last seven to ten days.\textsuperscript{28} The varying degrees of decomposition indicates Los Zetas had been disposing of bodies in these mass graves for a considerable period of time, and that it was standard operating procedure rather than a unique event.

Then on April 8, 2011, the U.S. Consulate in Matamoros reported the discovery of additional mass graves near San Fernando. Mexican federal officials said they had discovered a total of 81 bodies in 17 burial sites and believed that the majority of the bodies belonged to people that were kidnapped from public buses that had run through San Fernando.\textsuperscript{29} The investigation came as a result of information that was obtained from kidnapping victims and arrested members of Los Zetas, and resulted in the arrest of seventeen Zetas and sixteen members of the San Fernando Police Department.\textsuperscript{30} At the conclusion of the SEDENA investigation, which took place between April 1-14, 2011, Mexican officials reported they had discovered a total of 145 bodies spread out over 36 gravesites.\textsuperscript{31} Off the record, Mexican officials indicated the bodies were spread amongst different gravesites to make the massacres appear less alarming to the public.

\textsuperscript{28} U.S. Consulate Matamoros, \textit{Two Mass Graves}.
\textsuperscript{31} U.S. Consulate Matamoros, \textit{Tamaulipas Mass Graves: 145}.
The consulate report also indicates the Tamaulipas bus companies did not officially report the attacks on the line or any subsequent kidnappings. Certain bus lines did modify their routes through San Fernando and avoided nighttime travel, but other companies made no modifications. For instance, of the five bus lines that ran through the area, two, Omnibus and ETN, discontinued their Matamoros-Ciudad Victoria routes, Senda only offered the route during the day, and Transpais and Grupo Estrella Blanca continued to run their normal schedules, including trips that were scheduled at night. State officials were apparently concerned reports about the region’s security issues would have a negative impact on tourism, specifically tourism during the holy week vacation period.32

According to the testimony of Alvaro Alba Terrazaz, a police officer detained in connection with the kidnappings, both police and transit officials assisted Los Zetas, turning persons of interest over to the TCO. In effect, there was a sophisticated network of informants and active criminal participants embedded within both the transit system and the municipal police to uphold the authority of Los Zetas in Tamaulipas. The negligence and collusion of transit companies illustrates the widespread infiltration of Los Zetas within transit infrastructure, but it also reflects the overall prioritization of profit over human life. This is not a new phenomenon, yet the prioritization of capital coupled with the indiscriminate violence of TCOs in Tamaulipas does elevate the intensity of such prioritizations. While cancelling routes altogether may have further decreased the mobility of the residents in Tamaulipas, the complete lack of official

reporting, and the non-modification of bus routes, elevates the ethical negligence of the companies, reflecting the internalization of broader neoliberal constructs.

Motivation for the bus attacks was revealed through the testimony of Zeta Edgar Huerta Montiel, who told authorities members were ordered by Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano, Z-3, to screen incoming buses, especially those coming from Michoacán, for reinforcements for the CDG, whom Los Zetas were actively engaged in a conflict. According to Montiel, Los Zetas would intercept buses and scan passengers’ cell phones for evidence that connected them to the CDG. Montiel recounted the process for screening, saying, “Every day a bus would come, and every day we would pull the people off and investigate them.”

Once the passengers were adequately vetted, “those that had nothing to do with it were freed, and those that did were killed.”

While at first the kidnappings appeared to be the direct result of the conflict between Los Zetas and the CDG, which remains questionable considering Los Zetas have a history of killing indiscriminately, closer examination reveal additional factors at work.

The crimes and rapidly declining security can be viewed as an integral catalyst for land dispossession. By initiating terror, division, and spaces of silence, whereby the media, state officials, and the public are fearful of reporting criminal acts, Los Zetas were able to destroy state infrastructure and social systems in their areas of operation. Instead of disavowing such acts of violence, media and officials that do report on crimes, often attempt to divert attention away from violent acts by framing the victims as

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34 Evans, “Mexico’s Recurring Nightmare.”
partially responsible, either by indicating they were involved in criminal activities or by
implying they were engaged in dangerous activities such as migration. It is thus through
destruction that private investment is able to expand its development of regions rich in
resources, such as Tamaulipas.

In *Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein names “orchestrated raids on the public sphere
in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting
market opportunities, ‘disaster capitalism,’”\(^{35}\) arguing the free market is dependent on
shock to transfer immense amounts of wealth to the elite. Klein uses Hurricane Katrina
to illustrate the methods used by elites to exploit tragedy for the expansion of wealth.
After the hurricane, Klein recalls how a Republican congressman from New Orleans,
Richard Baker, touted the benefits of the natural disaster, telling lobbyists, “We finally
cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn’t do it, but God did it.”\(^{36}\) He
wasn’t alone. Joseph Canizaro, a wealthy developer in the region, expressed similar
elation about the displacement of residents, saying, “I think we have a clean sheet to
start again. And with that clean sheet we have some very big opportunities.”\(^{37}\) One of
the “opportunities” that arose from the disaster came from the rapid privatization of the
school system, in which the vast majority of the public schools were converted into
privately run charter schools, all while the city’s marginalized communities were exiled
from their homes.

New Orleans is not Tamaulipas, yet they, and other shocks to the system, share
striking similarities. Harvey argues that accumulation by dispossession can be achieved

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through the forceful expulsion of peasants, the conversion of property rights, from communal to private, for instance, and through the appropriation of natural resources.\(^{38}\) In Tamaulipas, these forms of neoliberal resource appropriation have clearly been facilitated by Los Zetas’ unique use of violence. Katrina was a “natural” disaster, viewed by capitalists as a cleansing, forcing deregulation and enabling opportunists to flourish. Similarly, Los Zetas can be viewed as a natural occurrence whose evolution is the logical conclusion to militarization, democratization, and liberalization. Under neoliberalism, they are akin to soldiers, clearing the space that was previously held by the communities of Tamaulipas, and indirectly filling the emptiness with transnational capital.

### 4.5 Migration and Predation

Exclusion from formal economic sectors has had a tremendous impact on patterns of migration. Groups such as Los Zetas have targeted vulnerable populations, perpetrating violence and exploiting migrants through extortion and forced labor. Violence against migrants was not limited to Mexican citizens, however, and many of those who were targeted by Los Zetas came from Central America, where Cold War conflicts and liberalization left the scars of instability. In 2009, there were over 540,000 undocumented immigrants apprehended by U.S. Border Patrol. While 90 percent of those apprehended were from Mexico, a significant percentage of those migrating North came from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

During a press conference in 2011, National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) President Raul Plascencia surprised the public after estimating that over 20,000

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\(^{38}\) David Harvey, "Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction," 34.
migrants had been kidnapped in Mexico in 2010.\footnote{U.S. Embassy in Mexico, \textit{A Perilous Road through Mexico for Migrants}, January 31, 2011, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB445/docs/20110131.pdf.} Considering undocumented peoples exist within exclusion zones of society, it is extremely difficult to substantiate such estimates. Regardless of the exact number, there was a consensus amongst government officials and non-governmental organizations that the potential danger to migrants was worsening. On January 13, 2011, the presidents of both Mexico and Guatemala declared TCOs presented the largest threat to migrant security. Additionally, the UN International Narcotics Control Board (JIFE) found that the consolidation of power by TCOs like Los Zetas had contributed to a new era of migration for Central Americans, and that TCOs were now the controlling force in migration. While migrants have long been vulnerable to exploitation by criminal groups, the period marked an intensification of predatory behaviors, such as kidnapping and sexual violence. Previously, there were more independent actors participating in the movement of migrants, but the highly organized structure, propensity for diversification, and extreme forms of coercion forced out independent actors, allowing the group to monopolize the industry.

A January 2011 U.S. Embassy cable details the intensifying dangers facing migrants on their journey north, arguing the massacres of migrants highlights the extensive TCO control over migration routes. Migrants often follow the routes of freight trains north, either by riding the train or by walking along the tracks, creating a focused space for TCOs to target those seeking safety and opportunity in the United States. Testimonies indicate TCO members often approach migrants to offer assistance reaching the border or appear to offer humanitarian aid, such as food, water, and
shelter. Once under the control of TCO agents, migrants are transported to safe houses where they are “frequently beaten, poorly fed, and suffer numerous abuses.” After coercing migrants to provide phone numbers of relatives, they are forcibly held until family members pay for their release (if they are able). CNDH estimates that, on average, migrants were charged a $2,500 ransom. Considering the CNDH report covers a period of six months, this translates to $25 million dollars within a short timeframe.

Once held in a safe house, it was difficult to leave without paying the TCO. Migrants were often tortured and sometimes killed, as was the case in Tamaulipas. Still others were used as coerced labor to pay their “debt.” The fate of women who fell under the control of Los Zetas was different and often resulted in rape and sexual exploitation. A 2010 Amnesty International report indicated that 6 out of 10 migrant women experienced sexual violence during their journey. According to the same report, smugglers sometimes required women to get contraceptive injections so they did not become pregnant from rape during the journey. Violence is not necessarily the direct result of poverty but the result of sustained segregation in concentrated spaces.

It is through these exclusionary spaces that social fractures naturally occur. If under the neoliberal system, markets and the aspiration for upward mobility replaces both the state and community as the framework through which society is viewed, a process of neoliberal internalization occurs. Traditional familial and social connections become unmoored from their foundations and disconnected from their meaning. There is thus a

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40 U.S. Embassy in Mexico, *A Perilous Road Migrants.*
42 Sanchez, “Insecurity and Violence,” 181.
disintegration of previously held standards and the process of capital accumulation assumes control of all systems.

In the case of Los Zetas, who are unmoored from traditional patterns of behavior, the focus should in part center on their role in global patterns of division and accumulation. Journalist and sociologist Dawn Paley argues we should think beyond neoliberalism in strictly economic terms and think of post-Cold War conflicts in Latin America, what she terms drug war capitalism, as a crucial part of the neoliberal war. Similar to Wendy Brown’s contention that neoliberalism infiltrates all societal systems, Paley argues the division and terror wrought through neoliberalism is dispersed throughout the population. The disappearances are crucial to neoliberalism and therefore to the expansion of capitalism.43

During the Cold War in Latin America, militants and activists who sought societal change were disappeared. Post-Cold War conflicts, Paley argues, move beyond the sphere of activism and societal change, targeting the population more broadly. Specifically, young men regardless of political affiliation now account for most disappearances and are targeted because of their physical geography.44 According to the Registro Nacional de Datos de Personas Extraviados o Desaparecidos (RNPED), a registry for the disappeared, 50 percent of reported disappearances occurred in only 28 municipalities (there a total of 2,547 municipalities in Mexico) and 30 percent of those reported occurred in either Guerrero or Tamaulipas. Additionally, the locations of the targets are inextricably connected to racial and socioeconomic demarcations and

44 Paley, “Cold War, Neoliberal War,” 155.
globalization, as many of the disappearances take place along the U.S. border and along state-run highways, for which there is no toll. With each of these contexts in mind, the violence can therefore be viewed as directed at specific populations.

The rhetoric in state documentation and within the media often frames the violence as related to the actions of the victims. A communication from the American Embassy in El Salvador in 2010, after the death of the 72 migrants in Tamaulipas, frames the violence as a natural result of “illegal” migration, implicitly assigning blame to the migrant community. The communication also highlights a cultural propensity in El Salvador, arguing the population doesn’t view themselves as engaged in illegality. “Migration to the United States is a unifying factor in Salvadoran society, and is not regarded by most as illegal, even when it is illegal.” The document implies it is the dangers of illegal migration that should be the focus of popular discourse, not the failure of the state to protect migrants.

El Salvadorans had an alternate viewpoint and put the massacre on the front page of every major newspaper. As the number of Salvadoran victims rose, papers significantly increased their coverage, with certain papers publishing ten articles in one day. The focus of editorials was on criminality and the “GOM’s inability to provide security and justice,” as opposed to misguided victim-blaming. One leftist newspaper in El Salvador even had the audacity to blame U.S. immigration policy for the tragic events. Both the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) were united in their horror of Tamaulipas, focusing

on the migrants’ hope for a better life as the primary motivation for migration. The U.S. Embassy, on the other hand, decried the failure of Salvadoran officials and policymakers to “underscore the dangers of illegal immigration,”\textsuperscript{48} considering they had an opportunity to do so in multiple interviews. This failure was, in the words of the U.S. Embassy, “ironic given the state of security in El Salvador.”\textsuperscript{49} The outrage against the GOM’s failure to protect migrants, as well as popular sentiments that thought U.S. policy contributed to insecurity in the region, challenged U.S. discourse that sought to shift the focus toward migrant negligence rather than regional insecurity.

\section*{4.6 Social Division}

Los Zetas’ violent campaign in Tamaulipas was an efficient method for comprehensively infiltrating social space, sowing division and terror near San Fernando and beyond. In 2011, after the string of kidnappings in San Fernando, an anonymously written and unconfirmed article\textsuperscript{50} was posted in the blog \textit{Borderland Beat}. Written in narrative form, the piece recounts a bus hijacking in Tamaulipas, detailing how Los Zetas forced kidnapped men to fight to the death. According to the story, they were paired up, given sledgehammers, and told if they survived the fight they would be allowed to live and join the organization. The complete veracity of the dramatized story remains questionable; however an anonymous witness did speak with the \textit{Houston Chronicle}, substantiating claims that Los Zetas forced kidnapped victims to fight in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[48] U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, \textit{Tamaulipas Massacre El Salvador}.
\item[49] U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, \textit{Tamaulipas Massacre El Salvador}.
\end{itemize}
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gladiatorial style combat.\textsuperscript{51} Regardless of whether the witness was truthful, the
gruesome accounting highlights the impact the violence in San Fernando had on
popular consciousness, resulting in altered states of community.\textsuperscript{52}

The impact is not necessarily found in the article itself but is revealed in the
public comment section, where people freely voice anger, repulsion, and opposition to
the kidnappings. Most users are anonymous, and while members of TCOs likely post to
blogs to spread disinformation and propaganda, a pattern nevertheless emerges that
highlights the social fragmentation that occurs throughout Latin America as a result of
escalating violence. While many users openly question whether the story is “true,”
others don’t care if every detail is accurate, declaring the story itself is rooted in truth,
and reflects deeper trends throughout the region. One user recounts their experience,
writing, “i wish all you people behind this key boards would stop trying to figure out if it’s
fake or real and come live a bit of what we live here in mexico…people it’s real i see it
everyday ther’s so much we can’t tell because of fear over here but it’s happening.”\textsuperscript{53} In
another comment, a user discloses their experience in Tamaulipas: “i used to visit my
family in tamaulipas not anymore is so sad what is happening down there no one dares
to come at night after 6 or 7 pm only them run the streets.”\textsuperscript{54} These silent zones are a

\textsuperscript{51} Dane Schiller, “Mexican Crook: Gangsters Arrange Fights to Death for Entertainment,”
\textit{Houston Chronicle}, June 11, 2011, updated August 2, 2011 (5:05 a.m.), accessed on April 20,
fights-to-death-1692716.php.
\textsuperscript{52} Émile Durkheim, \textit{The Division of Labor in Society} (New York: The Free Press, 2013).
\textsuperscript{53} Anonymous, comment, April 27, 2011 (4:13 a.m.), on Buggs, “Nightmare Massacre San
Fernando.”
\textsuperscript{54} Anonymous, comment, April 19, 2011 (6:24 p.m.) on Buggs, Nightmare Massacre San
Fernando.”
potent form of social division, in which people no longer gather in bars, have festivals, or indeed interact as they did previously.

While the public does find a way to break through enforced silences, they are nevertheless relegated to more informal formats, such as blogs. In another post, a user from Brazil reflects upon 4 Brazilian victims who died at the “hands of these monsters.” The commenter does not seem to be directly affected by Los Zetas, but they are nevertheless psychologically affected by the acts, calling for the extermination of the group. It is in this way that the blog reflects both the connectivity of the format, in which the global public can interact in real-time, and the ways in which such connectivity can facilitate dramatic changes in the mindset of community members. The assaults on the mind can therefore reach spaces, in effect altering communities, that would otherwise be out of reach.

Blogs such as Borderland Beat offer a unique opportunity to view the mindset of those affected by Los Zetas. It also illustrates the extent to which TCOs offer the “maintenance of extreme inequality,” relegating marginalized communities to atomized zones. The increasing socioeconomic exclusion coupled with social division provides an effective means to prevent forms of solidarity. There is no direct evidence of collusion between TCOs and private industry, but there is a consistent alignment of interests between the two groups, with transnational corporations emerging as the main benefactors of violence. The fear and instability in Tamaulipas caused the

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55 Anonymous, comment, August 10, 2013 (10:21 p.m.) on Buggs, Nightmare Massacre San Fernando.
56 Paley, “Cold War, Neoliberal War,” 146.
57 Correa-Cabrera, Los Zetas Inc., 159.
displacement of residents, creating ghost towns, empty space devoid of populations who had previously called the region home. In effect, the displacement erased the social structures and community that had been in place prior to the occupation of Los Zetas. The emptiness in Tamaulipas, which resulted in diminishing land values, then provided an opportunity for private investors to develop the region so rich in resources. It is in this way that violence in the region extends to multiple domains within society, changing the movement through which the public interacted.

Stiglitz argues globalization provided increased connectivity that reduced alienation and allowed people from varying backgrounds to have access to information and resources, but that developing countries were largely excluded from the economic benefits of globalization. While connectivity could be a positive force of change, it simultaneously provided an opportunity for elites to transform social meanings within all aspects of life. After neoliberalism was internalized and had replaced socioeconomic systems, those living outside the formal zone of society were forced to access the liberal zone by interacting with criminal groups or by existing within the nether regions of society. It therefore becomes more and more difficult to create private spaces of meaning according to individual and community needs and values. The alignment between TCOs and transnational corporations can therefore be viewed as rooted in the agency of the neoliberal frameworks themselves. In short, globalization has made Los Zetas, transnational corporations, and government systems agents of the neoliberal mandate. This is not to argue that private capital does not view instability as an opportunity or that corporations do not benefit from the violence but that the systems

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58 Correa-Cabrera, Los Zetas Inc., 190.
themselves transcend individual actors and become a social force through which to affect change.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

Los Zetas transformed the landscape of criminality in Mexico, but the group is far from an anomaly. By moving past Los Zetas’ sadism and spectacular use of violence, it is possible to view how the organization is rooted within historical patterns in not only Mexico but the U.S. as well, existing in a space of transnational fluidity. Los Zetas, whose original members were trained at Fort Benning, GA, are an American invention as well as a Mexican one. The evolution of Z-40 is as much the product of Dallas, Texas, as Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. This project builds upon the work of Professor Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera who argues Los Zetas radically transformed criminal organizations throughout Mexico, and scholar Dawn Paley who views TCO conflicts in connection to a neoliberal war, by reframing Los Zetas’ evolution within historical processes like militarization, democratization, and neoliberalism. Such processes are not static and monolithic but are reliant on each other to develop and progress. This reorientation creates a more holistic perspective that recalls the historical continuity through which the Los Zetas emerged and importantly rejects essentialist rhetoric.

The study of Los Zetas transcends their unique use of radio technology or their diversification of operations. It moves beyond their professionalization of violence that spread throughout Mexico. It even transcends their place within the post-Cold War paradigm. To study Los Zetas, is also to study the migrants, journalists, mayors, and townspeople who played an instrumental role in the
organization’s demise. It is through their perspectives that the power of activism and sacrifice becomes apparent. While the victims of Los Zetas are often viewed within a framework of powerlessness, this work reorients such unidirectional narratives. By examining a robust culture of opposition, rooted in the evolution of the criminal justice system, resistance in Guerrero, and the process of democratization, it becomes possible to understand how “victims” are not simply the objects of Los Zetas’ indiscriminate violence but a force of change.

This study moves beyond even Los Zetas and their opposition, however, by looking at the post-Cold War infrastructure of power—that of neoliberalism. It is through this lens that Los Zetas can be viewed as a force of instability, creating a space through which elite hegemony could thrive. Soldiers of the neoliberal project, Los Zetas created ghost towns where communities once thrived. They infiltrated and challenged state spaces, compromising police forces, and murdering agents of the state. They instilled terror in their zones of operation, dispossessing people not only of their lands but of the moments that forge solidarity—dances, weddings, funerals.

The model of Los Zetas, therefore, while different from the Cold-War model of violence, is unquestionably connected to the political. In 2020, by the November count, 32,759 people had been murdered in Mexico.⁠¹ On January 22, 2021, nineteen migrants, three Mexican and sixteen Guatemalan, were executed by police forces in Tamaulipas, their burned bodies left in a pickup truck.

approximately forty miles from the U.S. border. There is an alternate vision of Tamaulipas, however, one that includes the March 2021 Inter-American Petroleum Technology Exhibition. Jalil Alva Monterrubio, director of the exhibition, stated the objective of the event was to develop projects such as deep-sea explorations: “We are inviting foreign investors to come and see what we are doing in Tamaulipas; to be able to generate investment from the oil sector within the state.”

While globalization has increased growth and connectivity for certain sectors, its legacy of division, forming spaces of informality, illegality, and structural violence, cannot be denied. For those looking to better understand the violence in Mexico today, historicizing groups such as Los Zetas remains of vital importance.

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