

Life in the Drug Trafficking Era

by Romain Busnel

Between 2006 and 2021, the war on drugs left almost 300,000 dead and 100,000 missing in Mexico. Instead of presenting a romanticized account of drug trafficking and drug barons, Adèle Blazquez analyses the conditions of life in a rural municipality affected by armed violence.

About: Adèle Blazquez, *L'aube s'est levée sur un mort : violence armée et culture du pavot au Mexique*. CNRS Éditions, collection « Logiques du désordre », 336 p., 24 €.

Adèle Blazquez's book, based on an anthropology thesis defended in 2019 and published in 2021 at CNRS Éditions, offers an original and much-needed look at the hidden side of drug trafficking and armed violence in Mexico.

Blazquez explores this topic by focusing on living conditions and self-protection strategies in contexts marked by profound uncertainty. Specifically, she examines the case of Badiraguato, a rural municipality in northern Mexico presented by the media, politicians, and the cultural industry as the "cradle of drug trafficking." In songs, films, and TV series—including the Netflix hit "Narcos"—the story of Badiraguato is interwoven with those of local drug barons, regularly portrayed as social bandits hunted by the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) or as leaders of cartels fighting for control over the town and its inhabitants. The book counters this myth: Rather than presenting violence as capricious, eruptive, or in the service of the cartel war, Blazquez analyzes it as a deeply entrenched force in local society. She does this through the lens of the stories told by her informants, who, among other things, leverage their relations to trace the family trees and friendship links of both victims and aggressors. Drawing

on her conversations with them, but also on popular maxims, situations, and details collected through a close and rigorous 18-month ethnography in the main town and some of the hamlets of the municipality, Blazquez shows how the social norms and positions of individuals feed their understanding of violence and shape their self-protection strategies.

Living in the Criminalized Margins

The book follows several residents of Badiraguato, paying special attention to their daily activities (“traveling,” “being there,” “getting by”), their perceptions of the acts committed (“kidnapping a woman,” “killing”), and their work activities at the town hall (“administering”). From the very first chapter, Blazquez highlights the constraints faced by local residents as they travel between the main town and the various hamlets. “Knowing how to get around” and avoiding to “expose oneself” do not merely involve identifying the conflicts occurring in the various locations of the *Sierra*, but also, above all, knowing people who can provide protection or vouch for the traveler. “Making and cultivating connections” become a *sine qua non* for existing and “being there.” Normalized relations of predation are reflected in the inhabitants’ interactions with the state, whose presence is primarily embodied in the army and the crackdown on poppy cultivation.

The author investigates the economic and social organization that derives from this monoculture. She takes a historical detour and shows how, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, certain Badiraguato families have taken advantage of the region’s isolation to position themselves at the crossroads of commercial and political exchanges. These intermediaries, commonly known as *pesados* (literally those who weigh on the lives of people), have thus come to derive surplus value from the processing and trade of poppy. Peasants, for their part, have been content to cultivate the flowers and to extract the latex for immediate resale, at the risk of it being extorted by the police or the army. Starting in the 1980s, the increased use of violence in response to the war on drugs has superimposed itself on these relations of domination linked to the drug economy.

From Drug Trafficking to the Trafficking of Women

The grabbing of land, the monopolization of trade, the use of political networks, and the recourse to violence are all part of predatory accumulation strategies that extend to women's bodies. "The kidnapping of women" is a practice by which a man takes away a woman—with or without her consent and with weapons in hand—whom he has been courting and with whom he may or may not have had a relationship in the past. This practice, presented as a "local custom" by some informants, fuels representations of women as the property of men or as caught up in competitive relationships between them. Cemented by the recurrent use of violence, this form of subjugation makes it even more difficult for public authorities to intervene in family disputes.

The author goes on to show how killings form part of a logic of social reproduction. Murder, which is considered illegitimate and irrational when performed by the "poor" (p. 224), the residents of "hamlets" (p. 232), or the "uncultured" (p. 232), makes sense to locals when used by the powerful to punish behavior deemed deviant. Faced with such inertia, the town hall can carry out its actions "like clockwork in a village steeped in uncertainty" (p. 290). Murder and domestic violence are sidestepped in favor of grand inaugurations, urban works, and the solving of easy problems like road safety. Paradoxically, local elected officials gain strong visibility at the national level by acting as if nothing had happened or by presenting violence as a phenomenon largely external to politics.

Cartel Myths and the Politicization of Violence

As Blazquez reminds us in the conclusion, this story is in fact that of liberal capitalism. Over the course of the twentieth century, the region's infrastructural and commercial isolation contributed to an economic specialization geared towards the drug trade, an activity that was seized upon by a political and commercial elite who outsourced production to small farmers. The resulting social hierarchy today is not so different from that found in other contexts, except for the fact that in Badiraguato, the increased use of violence prompted by the war on drugs has further cemented this social order. There have ensued strong economic and social disparities, which are now reproduced and obscured through extortion and predation.

In this respect, the book brilliantly shatters the myths about “Narcos” that have been conveyed by the cultural industry and have often been repeated—not without a certain romanticization—by the Mexican media. Through a meticulous analysis of the division of labor in the drug economy, Blazquez points to the misuses of the notion of “cartels” by showing that these control neither territories nor populations. As for the major drug barons such as *El Chapo* or Rafael Caro Quintero, who regularly make national headlines when they are arrested, escape prison, or run from the police, they essentially owe their fame not to the fact that they come from poor backgrounds (as some like to portray them), but to their “membership in the richest families, who built their wealth precisely thanks to the region’s isolation” (p. 309). The use of violence then cements this social hierarchy by destroying anyone who dares to challenge it. Thus, the book calls for politicizing the issue of violence through a *mise-en-abîme* of local social and political hierarchies—an approach that could certainly be applied to other case studies.

This call, however, runs up against the author’s indisputable observation that the best protection for oneself and one’s loved ones against the unpredictability of violence is to accept one’s situation, or, in the words of informants, “to behave well” (p. 250) or “to keep your nose out of other people’s business” (p. 75). While protection is clearly not the same as emancipation, the latter question remains insufficiently explored in the book. Blazquez does make clear that the answer will not come from institutional actors like the town hall, the National System for the Integral Development of Families (DIF), or the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) which was long hegemonic in Mexico (1946-2000) and in Badiraguato (until 2021). Yet to what extent is this also true of the protest movements that have unfolded in the rest of the country in recent years? Residents’ representations and possible reappropriations of the mobilizations against violence that have marked the Mexican national scene (against killings, disappearances, feminicides, and other forms of violence against women)¹ remain a blind spot in the book.

¹ Sabrina Melenotte (ed.), *Mexique: une terre de disparu.e.s : 19 récits, 2 enquêtes, 1 portfolio*, Paris, FMSH, 2021; Kathleen Staudt, *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juarez*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2008.

A Call for Ethnographic Studies on Illicit Activities and Violence

Nevertheless, a major strength of the book lies in its adopting the point of view of local residents. As the narrative unfolds, we gradually come to grasp the different issues that confront each of them depending on their geographical position, social status, or gender. However, the analysis is far from straightforward, first and foremost because of the difficulties and dangers inherent to working in such a field as a foreign researcher. To cope with these dangers, Blazquez forged strong ties with certain families and individuals who offered her friendship and access to information, but who also used their position to protect her when others failed to perceive the stakes or the necessity of doing so. In this regard, some of the passages on the role of informants and resource persons should be read by every aspiring ethnographer (p. 79-87; p. 97-99).

Moreover, one can easily imagine how much the work of analysis was tested by the many colorful statements expressed all day long by the informants (“Do you know why turtles live a hundred years? Because they don’t stick their noses in other people’s business!,” p. 75; “The river is next door, so we can’t leave you alone,” p. 111; “There are a lot of killings during the holidays,” p. 113; “You can’t give soup to one person and refuse it to another,” p. 179), which nevertheless contradicted such statements as “It’s very quiet here” (p. 118).

The author takes care to dissect each of these expressions by drawing on her fine knowledge of the social milieu being investigated, by putting situations and activities in historical perspective (though this perspective is sometimes uneven, in particular when it comes to “the kidnapping of women”), and, above all, by constructing a beautiful narrative around simple, methodical questions. One by one, the boundaries of the unsayable and the unspeakable dissolve under the author’s pen, revealing the relations of domination that underpin predation, extortion, murder, and domestic violence. In sum, Blazquez’s book is an exemplary contribution to the study of illicit activities and violence based on a dangerous ethnography that delivers on all its promises.²

² Chiara Calzolaio, Pamela Colombo, and Chowra Makaremi (eds), Dossier “Ethnographies politiques de la violence,” *Cultures & Conflits*, 103-104, Fall/Winter 2016, <https://journals-openedition->

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org.ressources-electroniques.univ-lille.fr/conflits/19335; Kimberly Theidon, *Intimate Enemies: Violence and Reconciliation in Peru*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.