

Special Collection: *Violent configurations of power in Mexico*

Becoming a violent broker:
Cartels, Autodefensas, and the state in Michoacán, Mexico

Romain Le Cour Grandmaison
Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, CESSP

Abstract

This article explores the construction – or reconstruction – of brokerage channels by violent actors in Mexico. It focuses on the construction of the *Autodefensas* de Michoacán (Self-Defense Groups of Michoacán) and studies the process that put illegal armed leaders in active dialogue with the Mexican federal government, but also how they became brokers capable of controlling access to strategic political resources, economic markets, and the connections that tie local citizens and the central state. Through the concept of political intermediation, I investigate how coercion, as a skill and resource, has become central to governance in Mexico; and how this leads to consolidating intermediaries that participate in reproducing local, violent political order. This article shall contribute to the understanding of brokerage in contexts of violence, and shed new light on the political logic fueling the dynamics of violence in Mexico's war on drugs. Keywords: drug cartels, brokerage, Mexico, war on drugs, state, violence.

Resumen: Convirtiéndose en un *broker* violento: Carteles, Autodefensas y Estado en Michoacán, México

Este artículo explora la construcción –o reconstrucción– de canales de intermediación por parte de actores violentos en México. Se enfoca en la construcción de las Autodefensas de Michoacán y estudia el proceso que puso a los líderes armados ilegales en un diálogo activo con el Gobierno Federal Mexicano, pero también cómo se convirtieron en intermediarios capaces de controlar el acceso a recursos políticos estratégicos, los mercados económicos y las conexiones que unen a los ciudadanos locales y el estado central. A través del concepto de intermediación política, investigo cómo la coerción, como habilidad y recurso, se ha vuelto central para la gobernabilidad en México; y cómo esto conduce a la consolidación de intermediarios que participan en la reproducción del orden político local violento. Este artículo contribuirá a la comprensión del corretaje en contextos de violencia y arrojará una nueva luz sobre las lógicas políticas que alimentan las dinámicas de violencia en la guerra contra las drogas en México. *Palabras clave*: cartel de drogas, corretaje, México, guerra contra las drogas, Estado, violencia.

Introduction

February 28, 2014. Buenavista central square. José Manuel Mireles, a Michoacán *Autodefensas* (self-defense group) leader, advances through the crowd to the sound of cheers. Residents have come to celebrate the first anniversary of the *Autodefensas*' creation and the expulsion of the Knights Templar cartel (Cartel de los Caballeros Templarios). Hundreds of armed men are in attendance. *Autodefensas* members – proudly sporting *ranchero* hats, assault rifles, and bullet-proof vests – stand alongside Federal Police officers and Army soldiers enjoying the festivities and shaking the hands of those who approach them to offer thanks for their presence. The dense congregation of citizens, armed civilians, and public forces stand in front of a giant banner stretched across the city hall building that reads: “Buenavista’s *Autodefensas*: a free Michoacán and a new Mexico. First anniversary of the fight for the freedom and dignity of the people against narcotrafficking and organized crime.” Michoacán’s *Autodefensas* emerged on February 24, 2013, in the region of Tierra Caliente with a central claim: Eliminating the Knights Templar. They organized around armed groups, and a discourse that championed the moral ideals of hard work, family, and nativeness. Crucially, the members of this almost exclusively male rural movement (Álvarez, 2021) sought to “do what the Government would not”¹ in the fight against crime syndicates and racketeering, all while calling upon that same Government to support them with political and military resources. Hence, the interesting paradox of the mobilization: while it asserted a long tradition of *ranchero*-inspired self-help, it called upon the federal Government to actively back its armed endeavor.

At both ends, the movement succeeded. Within two years, between 2013 and 2015, the *Autodefensas* not only managed to disarticulate one of Mexico’s most powerful criminal organizations; they also partly became “legalized” by the federal government through a process that led to the creation of a new local police force (Fuerza Rural). This article will study the process that put illegal armed leaders in active dialogue with the Mexican Federal Government, from the *Autodefensas*' point of view. I will describe how the *Autodefensas* leaders managed not only to open the discussion with public authorities, but also to become brokers capable of controlling access to strategic political resources, economic markets, and the connections that tie local citizens and the central state. By building on research conducted within the *Autodefensas*,² this article therefore explores the construction – or reconstruction – of brokerage channels by violent actors. Through the concept of political intermediation,³ I investigate how coercion, as a skill and resource, has become central to governance in Mexico; and how this leads to consolidating intermediaries that participate in reproducing local, violent political order.

In order to study these questions, I use the *Autodefensas* movement as a rupture. That is, an “open moment when opportunities and risks multiply, when the scope of outcomes widens, and when new structural scaffolding is erected”

(Lund 2016: 1202) within local power structures. These moments, such as whenever an authority is toppled by a rival, are favorable for sociological observation, as they give rise to claims of legitimacy and calls for recognition, in a context in which multiple actors battle to become the sole supplier of “reassuring” protection, as the one able to offer “a reliable, low-cost defense against both local racketeers and foreign marauders” (Tilly, 1985: 171). Contrary to what is commonly assumed, I will show that mobilizing the *Autodefensas* was a far cry from an uprising against the state. In fact, I argue that it enabled the channels of brokerage to be reconstructed, thus affording a research opportunity to gain insight into how violent intermediaries are able to work with public authorities and, simultaneously, how the state is able to co-opt, repress, and institutionalize armed groups in contemporary Mexico. In other words, my objectives are to first investigate the emergence of a new set of brokers that are able to appropriate, organize, and use violence skills in order to become dominant in brokerage schemes; and second to understand how violence, as a central political resource for accessing positions of power, transforms the way public authorities remain able to govern locally through the action of violent intermediaries (Gutiérrez-Sanin, 2019).

This article will first analyze how the *Autodefensas* sought to earn recognition from local populations by instituting protection practices. Then, how these practices – indispensable elements of their local anchorage – enabled them, under certain conditions, to earn recognition from the Federal Government. And, finally, how it enshrined their position as the new brokers established between the local and federal levels. Accordingly, and in line with the hypothesis put forward by David Pratten in the Nigerian context of armed vigilantes, I posit that Michoacán’s *Autodefensas* were indeed “the interface” between local and national politics (Pratten, 2008), in a context where the capacity to control coercive means remained the crucial factor in accumulating resources and social mobility. This article shall contribute empirically and conceptually to understanding brokerage in contexts of violence, and shed a new light on the political logics fueling the dynamics of violence in Mexico’s war on drugs.

***Autodefensas* as political intermediaries**

Scholarship addressing the dynamics of violence in Mexico has been dominated by quantitative, positivist approaches to organized crime. Political science and criminology in particular have promoted conceptual shortcuts with regard to political-criminal relations, mainly by normatively opposing notions of state, crime, and social order (Serrano-Kenny, 2012). In the context of the *Autodefensas*, these disciplinary approaches have considered the movement as another illustration of the weakening of the Mexican state against the power of drug cartels (Valdivia-García, 2014), as well as a symptom of an immature democracy (Aguirre Ochoa & Leco Tomas 2016) that has led to consolidating “un-governed spaces” (Galeana-Abarca, 2014). Most crucially, it is commonly con-

tended that Mexico's failed political system has given rise to political vacuums that leave inhabitants with no choice but to administer justice on their own, in opposition to the state (Brooks, 2019).

Sociological, historical, and anthropological perspectives have transcended these approaches by analyzing how informal violent groups' practices fit into the conditions in which Mexico has historically regulated the private use of coercion (Kloppe-Santamaría, 2020); how it connects with the perpetuation of violent social orders in rural areas, and how it reveals the mechanisms that govern power delegation (Berber, 2017) from public authorities to informal bosses in the country (Gaussens, 2020). Moreover, in the case of the Michoacán *Autodefensas*, it has been shown how these groups do not fully oppose the state (Guerra-Manzo, 2015), but rather try to open ways of collaboration with it (Pansters, 2015), and must therefore be understood in line with historic forms of political intermediation in Mexico (Fuentes Díaz & Fini, 2018). In doing so, this line of research connects with wider work showing how brokers – as violence specialists (Blok, 1974) – are instrumental to political order (Arias, 2006) as the actors able to navigate between licit and illicit, legal and illegal, public and private activities and authorities, even in contexts of violence (Auyero, 2003). Then, an emerging comparative literature has built on the “mediated state” theory (Berenschot, 2010) to specifically study the role played by violence within intermediation dynamics (Jackman, 2019) in order to show how and why violent actors tend to merge within intermediation schemes rather than looking to overthrow the political system.

I will follow these arguments in order to disentangle the following set of questions regarding the Michoacán *Autodefensas*: in the context of the Mexican war on drugs, who are the actors actually capable of connecting the intertwined licit and illicit worlds? How do brokering networks evolve in a context of extreme violence such as the one observed in Michoacán? And, finally, how does the presence of violent actors qualitatively affect the set of relationships that tie citizens and the state? Based on this case study, I will specifically analyze what happens when coercion becomes a key resource in connecting citizens with the state and thus how violent intermediaries might become increasingly central to maintaining political order (Sives, 2002).

In order to become the new crucial brokers in Michoacán, the *Autodefensas* leaders had first to deal with a key challenge: that of “being seen” in order to “be recognized” (Lund, 2016) as legitimate protectors, efficient bosses, and trustable brokers. This quest for recognition required them to quickly build legitimacy and to position themselves as indispensable to political intermediation, mainly through their capacity to regulate violence and restore the social and moral order. Federal authorities were not interested in putting a halt to the private use of coercion, but instead sought to harness and redefine the rules of violence, in order to renegotiate the informal accords that allow them to govern alongside local bosses and armed groups. Yet, these brokerage relationships are all but stable. They are characterized by incessant tensions, especially re-

garding the margin of autonomy that public authorities grant their informal partners (Gayer, 2014). In order to study them, it is important to pay special attention to how these tensions continually evolve in response to shifts in power and the conditions of interaction fostered not directly by public and private institutions, but by the political configurations instituted between them (Arias & Goldstein 2010). Sociologist Jesús Tapia-Santamaría (1992: 386) offers a definition of political intermediation that is particularly revealing for my case: “The fundamental condition of intermediation is the structural distance that is placed between the agents of production and political actors, and access to, or control over the production of resources of varying strategic importance.”

Within this equation of structural distance – be it physical, political, or symbolic – between different communities of interest and resource holders, the status of brokers is forged. The broker’s aim is to consolidate within this structural distance, while making themselves indispensable to those involved on either side of the transaction. Thus, the more effective brokers become, the harder it becomes for their audiences to circumvent them. If the broker can be bypassed, it loses its *raison d’être* and risks being ousted entirely (Friedrich, 1965). Therefore, like many other violent actors in Mexico – including drug traffickers – Michoacán’s *Autodefensas* fight to become “sieves” (Butlerm, 2005)⁴: indispensable interfaces that both connect and control the flows of resources that circulate between the state and local society.

Michoacán’s *Autodefensas*: From reaction to resistance

Security through armed struggle

The emergence of self-defense groups in Michoacán was a reaction against the control exerted by the Knights Templar cartel over the region’s economic and social life. Product of a schism within the Familia Michoacana (Michoacán Family) cartel, the Templars established themselves by promising to protect the local population from the extortion carried out by La Familia, which fell apart in the winter of 2011. Although the Templars initially stood up against former extortion practices, the cartel became the vector of a renewed racketeering system of unprecedented sophistication that did not spare any social group or economic activity. Beyond their illicit revenues, the Templars managed to violently enforce a series of norms destined to control the daily life of inhabitants that lived on their territory. This territorial control lay at the base of their ability to control social relationships and hierarchies, to impose alternative social orders and governance models. By doing so, the Templars also transformed intermediation practices by displacing, replacing, or mirroring brokers that were in place. In the context of the Templars’ domination – particularly between 2011 and 2013 – the state ceased to be the “sole center for rewards and privileges” (Barkey, 1994: 13), as well as the institution in charge of regulating the terms of political brokerage. The central Government found itself competing with

criminal groups that had sufficient economic, territorial, social, and coercive clout to impose their norms, and to produce, centralize, and redistribute political resources almost on their own. More importantly, they were able to briefly monopolize the channels of brokerage that tie the center and the margins. This is the configuration that the *Autodefensas* and the Federal Government together sought to put an end to.

As a backlash to the cartel's domination, the *Autodefensas* emerged in the Tierra Caliente region of Michoacán in February 2013. From the outset, they featured substantial sociological disparities. Their members ranged from small farmers and employees to large landowners, industrial bosses, and local notables. They also included former cartel members and individuals with criminal pasts extending into the 1980s and 1990s, who saw in the *Autodefensas* an opportunity to attain social redemption and recover criminal assets from the dominant group. In addition, *Autodefensas* leadership positions were occupied by local elites, including men who had held elected office in the years preceding the movement. In the time between the first mobilizations in the towns of La Ruana and Tepalcatepec on February 24, 2013, and the winter of 2015, the ranks of the *Autodefensas* had swollen from just a few hundred members to over 15,000 men, forming the biggest civilian armed mobilization in Mexican recent history.⁵ However, these groups almost never formed a single homogeneous regional force: each was closely tied to its own municipality (*municipio*). Composed of between 200 and 1,000 members, the groups were responsible for their own territory as defined by their administrative borders. This localism appeared on the *Autodefensas* "uniforms" – white or blue T-shirts emblazoned with the name of the *municipio* they hailed from, beneath the words *Autodefensas de Michoacán*.

Achieving recognition through discourse

Autodefensas therefore mobilized *within* and *for* their home territory. When assuming control over their municipalities, the groups followed a recurring *modus operandi*. Armed men set up checkpoints at town's entrances and exits, and conducted identity checks to apprehend Knights Templar members, gather intelligence, and seal off their towns from possible attacks. In most cases, the members personally knew each other, or at least each other's family and background. These local ties strengthened the groups and offered possibilities in terms of intelligence gathering (Le Cour Grandmaison, 2016). They also evidenced a desire for entrenchment and the promotion of nativeness and autochthony as values associating their mission's effectiveness with a search for moral binding, community building, and mutual surveillance. As a former member of the Buenavista Council of *Autodefensas* told me in September 2015:

If everyone knows each other and everything is known, certain behaviors will understandably be prevented. If I know your family, and vice versa,

and you aren't protected by a cartel, you are going to think twice before messing around. Here, everyone keeps an eye on everyone else: for better or for worse. You know how the saying goes: '*Pueblo chico, infierno grande*' [Little village, big hell].⁶

During my field research between January and March 2014, the inhabitants I interviewed emphasized their feeling that things were back to "normal." One might expect the presence of armed men, as in the scene I described in the introduction, to give the impression they were living in occupied territory, but my interviewees saw this as a return to security after years of grimness. This recognition by local populations afforded the *Autodefensas* substantial legitimacy during the first phase of the movement, until the spring of 2014. To nourish this recognition, the *Autodefensas* leaders used a number of discursive methods related to protection, honesty, and security. For instance, their members took care to emphasize that they had a "real job" outside of the armed mobilization, thus underscoring the distinction between themselves and the narcos. On a barricade in the municipality of Los Reyes, one member explained:⁷

I have a job, you know! I sell chickens for a living. I am not a criminal. I am not here to have fun. I am here because I have to be. Because I want revenge for my family. To overthrow [the Templars] and put an end to this organization that harms everyone, children, women, old people [...] Us, we are nobody! We are not here to fight a war. We just want the Government to do its job and get rid of them

These discourses framed the mobilization as a moral imperative. Massively shared on social media, the speeches delivered by leaders in town and village squares during the mobilizations and the operations to "liberate" municipalities also helped to further this objective, and legitimize the movement.

The rules of violence

Such speeches, however, failed to mention one major characteristic of the *Autodefensas*: the involvement, including within their leadership, of narcotraffickers looking to oust the Templars. For the *Autodefensas*, the presence of traffickers was both an asset and a liability. While damaging the movement's public image, it allowed the groups to hone certain skills needed to fight, and intelligence in order to swiftly dismantle the cartel. More importantly, the paradox of the narcos' involvement in the *Autodefensas* offers insight into a key aspect of the movement. Namely, the will to reestablish the rules of private violence, and establish a renewed, clear line between what is tolerated or not, without putting an end to narcotrafficking. This is what Julio, an *Autodefensa* member based in Apatzingán, explained to me:

In Parácuaro [a *municipio* near Apatzingán, in Tierra Caliente], they gave me an assault rifle. Then we went to a big meeting where the leaders ex-

plained what was going to happen: that the narcos were going to be narcos again...Of course there were narcos in the movement but that did not have anything to do with the plans that were being made for the people... The narcos could go on with their business, and fight with the state, but they needed to stop their racketeering. They told us we were there to get rid of the Templars by any means necessary...Basically, the new narcos were going to go back to being the old narcos from before, you know what I mean?⁸

So, whether or not one was a narcotrafficker was of no importance, so long as morally condemnable practices were put to an end – extortion and violence against women, among others. Moreover, the presence of traffickers within the movement was not necessarily an issue for the Government, as long as these narcos followed the new rules of the game, as we will study in the next section. In fact, in order to position themselves as respectable allies in the eyes of the Federal Government, the *Autodefensas* leaders had to focus on ensuring the best possible conditions of stability, an achievement that would also provide them with the inhabitants' support. The general objective was to jointly provide security, make the Knights Templar cartel disappear, and instate new public and private authority figures, although these included active drug-traffickers.

Autodefensas: The struggle for political brokerage

Between February 2013 and January 2014, the *Autodefensas* sought to put their discourse of protection into action through an enterprise of territorialization. *Municipios* were transformed into geographical and social fiefdoms built around leaders who offered an image of isolation, but who in reality were acting as the agents of reinstating brokerage channels with the Federal Government. In fact, the *Autodefensas*' territorialization was implemented by individuals with the social and cultural capital needed to work as the interface with the central Government – regardless of whether they boasted a long criminal past. As we will study now, these leaders assumed brokerage roles that are common in rural Mexico – tantamount to those occupied by *caciques*, for example, local informal authorities that the Government has historically tolerated, supported, and even authorized to use violence to assert their authority, as long as they remained open to brokerage (Knight, Pansters, 2006).

“Here comes the Government:” Building trust with public forces

On the ground, reconstructing intermediation would necessarily involve a dialogue with the federal forces present at the time of the uprising, on February 24, 2013. Those public forces were deployed long before the *Autodefensas*. In fact, Michoacán – and the Tierra Caliente in particular – have been home to

federal military operations since 1950s counter-insurgency operations (Maldonado Aranda, 2010). Since 2006 and the launch of President Felipe Calderón's "War on Drugs," it has been one of Mexico's most militarized regions, averaging over 4,000 permanently stationed troops on the ground, including during the periods of control by different drug cartels. This presence was physically and symbolically noticeable during the fieldwork I conducted. During an interview at a checkpoint, an *Autodefensa* member pointed to an approaching army convoy and said, "Look, here comes the Government" [*Mira, ahí viene el Gobierno*].⁹ For him, like most others I spoke with, the state is embodied, more than anything, by its armed forces.

On the day of the uprising, in a significant move, federal forces did not prevent the newly created *Autodefensas* from publicly gathering with assault rifles, setting up checkpoints, and addressing the crowds on the towns' main squares. In fact, some versions of the events (provided by leaders) mention a previous coordination with army officers in the run-up to the mobilizations.¹⁰ While this has never been confirmed by officials, the fact remains that the military did not stop those who took up arms that day. Yet, the attitude espoused by different tiers of Government towards the *Autodefensas* – especially at the federal and state levels – has not been uniform, including within law-enforcement and military corporations.¹¹ In analyzing these, the first year of mobilization – between February 2013 and January 2014 – was marked by Michoacán's state government attempts to delegitimize the *Autodefensas*. In March 2013, Michoacán's state Secretary General Jesús Reyna-García – who would later go on to be prosecuted for his ties with the Templars – declared that the *Autodefensas* were paramilitary groups working for a competing cartel and that they were on their last leg (Martínez, 2013). The Federal Government, on the other hand, alternated between tolerance, vigilance, and repression. However, and despite massive arrests of *Autodefensas* members in March 2013, the Mexican Army and Federal Police mostly let the armed civilians work, even though their hierarchies did not publicly acknowledge such cooperation.

During the first year, the *Autodefensas* seized control of eleven municipalities. There is a distinction between *municipios* who "rebelled" [*levantamientos*] and those who were "liberated" [*liberados*]. In the former scenario, *Autodefensas* were directly created by local inhabitants. In "liberated" zones, by contrast, groups from other municipalities came in and secured the territory, before transferring control to a local group. In these cases, convoys of armed men – between 200 and 1,000 members – would enter the municipality's main town (*cabecera*) sometimes escorted – or even awaited – by public forces who were there to offer them protection, as much as to observe and keep watch over them. The distinction between "rebel" and "liberated" *municipios* therefore had implications in terms of the cooperation between *Autodefensas* and military and police forces. Of the 34 municipalities and communities in which *Autodefensas* ultimately emerged, 24 were created through outside "liberation" efforts, supported by public armed forces. In the vast majority, the groups from

Tepalcatepec and La Ruana, led by Juan Manuel Mireles, Hipólito Mora, and Estanislao Beltrán, were coordinating the liberation operations. This initially helped them cementing their position as both the original leaders of the movement, and, as will be seen later, the main interlocutors, allies, and brokers for the state. Then, the *Autodefensas*' territorialization tactics enabled them to engage in active military cooperation with the public forces, particularly when it came to hunting down fleeing Knights Templar leaders. In spite of political fault lines, this cooperation came in two key forms, both ultimately tied to establishing brokerage channels.

First, by securing the municipalities, the leaders earned legitimacy vis-à-vis the locals and armed forces altogether. Then, they offered federal forces much-needed skills and knowledge not just in terms of local social life, but also in terms of mastering the terrain. This practical intel – such as knowing the trails [*brechas*] that are indispensable to travel in the mountains [*sierra*] – was of the kind that federal forces did not necessarily possess. It proved to be one of the primary assets that ultimately enabled *Autodefensas* to earn trust from the public forces and federal authorities. During the first year, by providing intel, the *Autodefensas* handed the Government a strategic advantage in terms of operational effectiveness in a context of extreme violence, shaped by constant battles with the Knights Templar.¹²

Lastly, these attributes were essential for the *Autodefensas* purpose of restoring order, which consisted above all in reintroducing “legibility” in a confused social world. According to James Scott, who developed the notion, producing legibility involves reading grids for the social and population arrangements that are intended to simplify the state’s primary functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion (Scott, 1988: 2). But as Scott himself agrees, these state procedures cannot function without being articulated to informal practices and actors that are founded on localized competencies and resources.¹³ This is precisely the grounds upon which the self-defense groups – and their leaders in particular – would earn their legitimacy and brokerage credentials in the eyes of both their federal partners (for whom they played the role of guide and interpreter) and local society (within which they would initially help to refound the friend/ enemy distinction). The public forces’ technical competencies were not able to make up for gaps in their practical knowledge; they could only hope to overcome these through working with local intermediaries, within the *Autodefensas*.

The return of the state as the “sole center for rewards”

The first phase, between February 2013 and January 2014, was thus characterized by federal military intervention alongside the *Autodefensas*, a phase during which the Government was unwilling to fully acknowledge cooperation with the groups. This changed over the subsequent stage that lasted from January 2014 to January 2015. It was marked by the creation of the “Federal Com-

mission for Security and Integral Development in Michoacán,” overseen by *Comisionado* Alfredo Castillo-Cervantes, a man very close to the Mexican President. During this period, the *Autodefensas*, in cooperation with federal forces, made spectacular progress and seized control of 22 additional *municipios*. This second phase was also the backdrop for the start of the process that would see the *Autodefensas* being “legalized”, a moment during which certain leaders progressed as powerful brokers. Finally, it consolidated the state as the referee for the use of violence, and its return as the center for rewards within the local conflict. In order to document this phase, I will not provide a comprehensive timeline of the negotiations, but instead will assess, from the point of view of the *Autodefensas*, how these interactions enabled the state to act as an arbiter of violence, while remaining an active party in the conflict.

The Federal Government and categorizing actors

On January 15, 2014, in Michoacán’s capital city of Morelia, Mexico’s federal Interior Secretary, Osorio Chong announced the Commission’s creation. It stood as proof of the Federal Government’s desire to portray itself as the only tier of public authority capable of finding a resolution to Michoacán’s intractable conflict. In addition, it served as a symbolic victory for the *Autodefensas*, who had spent a year calling for the Federal Government to intervene. The first half of 2014 marked the solidification and formal recognition of the role played by the *Autodefensas’* leaders as brokers. *Comisionado* Castillo acknowledged these mechanisms and explained how they had operated in an interview with *Nexos Magazine* (De Mauleon, 2014):

[Castillo:] The *Autodefensas* told us *who* was *who*. I think that without them, we would have been unable to do anything. Often, they were the ones who told us just *who* we had in custody. A lot of the numerous complaints filed, including after we had been able to detain people, were signed by *Autodefensas*. They put us on the right track: what criminal cell, what local chief [*Jefe de plaza*], what his sphere of influence was...

[Journalist:] But during this time, the *Autodefensas* continued to conduct armed operations...

[Castillo:] We told them that if they worked hand in hand with us, we could focus on the fight against the Templars. But that if they went off on their own, we would have to fight *them* too, in addition to the Templars. And that would require us to sacrifice half of our strength, and we would shed our advantage.

In fact, immediately after taking office, the *Comisionado* announced an accord with the *Autodefensas*. It aimed to disarm and “legalize” them – to use to the government’s terminology – through the creation of a public force. To be officially recognized, the *Autodefensas* would have to submit a roster of their

members that would need to be green-lit by the authorities. In addition, they were given until May 10, 2014, to register their weapons and/or turn them over to the army. Lastly, a second series of accords stipulated that the *Autodefensas* were not to attempt to enter Morelia or any other important urban area, and that any large-scale troop movements had to be approved beforehand by federal authorities. The *Comisionado*'s objective was to prevent the *Autodefensas* from operating outside their *municipios*, officially to avoid skirmishes. In practice, these accords – which some of the leaders refused – enabled the Government to divide the *Autodefensas* into two camps: those who were “aligned” with the state (*alineadas*) and those who were not. This fault line fed three distinct dynamics in the hostilities in the region: “rebel” *Autodefensas* fighting the Federal Government; “rebel” *Autodefensas* fighting “aligned” *Autodefensas*; and shared efforts to combat the Knights Templar.

On the ground, divisions began to surface among *Autodefensas*. Some of the groups pursued illicit activities, including drug trafficking, which enabled them to gain financial independence, all while complying with the Federal Government's terms. After a time, the *Comisionado* began to meet only with the leaders of these groups, excluding those who refused to sign political accords with the state. The latter, incarnated by Hipólito Mora and Juan Manuel Mireles, criticized the state's involvement and refused to turn over their weapons. By focusing on this distinction, the Federal Government was able to take charge of the politico-criminal reconfiguration process, relying on leaders with the capacity to serve as efficient allies and brokers for the Government's intervention – even if it implied mobilizing illicit resources – while isolating the rebels.

This was made apparent during hunts for Templars' leaders. These were in part conducted by *Autodefensas* “commando groups” (*grupos de choque*) primarily made up of former narcos and sicarios, with support from federal authorities. An elite squad dubbed the “G250,” supposedly composed of the *Autodefensas*' 250 best men, was created to track down the cartel bosses. My interviewees in Tierra Caliente said that this group, whose existence was initially denied by the authorities, had been created by *Comisionado* Castillo himself upon arriving in Michoacán. When rumors of the existence of the G250 surfaced in the press, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) demanded answers regarding its existence and funding. The Government responded on July 1, 2014: the G250 did not exist. Yet six months later, the dismantling of this commando unit – still officially inexistent – was publicly announced in a series of accords presented by the *Comisionado*. (CNDH 2015).

The G250 leaders included two controversial *Autodefensa* figures: Simón *El Americano* (the American) Torres and Nicolás *El Gordo* (Fatso) Sierra-Santana. Their profiles offer insight into the Federal Government's strategic approach. *El Americano* was the leader of the “H3” group, some of whose members – fighting for the Buenavista *Autodefensas* – were former Knights Templar *sicarios*. Likewise, *El Gordo* is one of the founders of the *Viagras*

crime syndicate, which specialized in methamphetamine production and formerly served as sicarios for the Templars.

According to my field research on the role of the G250, this commando was responsible for tracking down Templar leaders with funding and equipment provided by the Commission. However, the Federal Police, apparently responsible for distributing weapons and equipment, was hesitant to pay the compensation that had been promised. Julio, whose *Autodefensa* group sometimes provided backup for the G250, saw its members progressively gain power, while accumulating frustration against the Government:¹⁴

They were powerful, and they were working hand in hand with Castillo, so they started to expand. But the Government never paid. That is why those guys started grabbing whatever they found, or exploited the territories they had under their control.

Once again, intel was an essential part of what made the G250 so valuable. The men knew the habits and turfs of the cartel, and passed this information on to federal forces. By backing them, the Government *recognized* their skills as trustable violent brokers and – not without irony – contributed to circulating knowledge between narcotraffickers and Mexican soldiers. As a result, the tactical effectiveness of the G250 seems to have been undeniable. According to my research, two key Knights Templar leaders killed in 2014 were located and hunted down by the G250 with support from federal forces.

Governing through the justice system

Nevertheless, the distinction made by the Federal Government between friends and foes had a massive impact on the *Autodefensas'* already fragile cohesion. Some of the groups under the authority of Hipólito Mora began to advance as quickly as possible towards Apatzingán, the unofficial “capital” of the Templars cartel, then toward towns on the outskirts of Morelia, Michoacán’s capital. By conquering the greatest possible number of *municipios* and making their discontent publicly known in the media, these factions sought to regain bargaining position in their negotiations with the state. This political tension spilled over to local inhabitants, whose support for the *Autodefensas* varied from one *municipio* to the next, depending on how their members behaved toward them. While some groups still benefited from strong support, most had a fairly negative image. The locals I interviewed in 2014 told me about their fears that the movement “would just lead to creating new cartels.”¹⁵ In addition, the ties between certain leaders and the Commission fueled the idea among civilians that they were primarily negotiating personal political favors, and accumulating power in order to become new bosses. Three kinds of *Autodefensa* leaders could then be distinguished: those who publicly supported the Federal Government’s initiative; those whose actions took place more in the shadows, overseeing illegal activities and coordinating “shock groups”; and,

lastly, those who openly fought the terms set by the *Comisionado*, such as Mora or Mireles.

To control recalcitrant elements and affirm its broader monopoly over ruling, the Federal Government used the Attorney General's powers. Two examples can be cited to illustrate this tactic. In the spring of 2014, compromising videos featuring Michoacán Government authorities were released online. They depicted friendly meetings and negotiations organized from 2011 to 2013 between Michoacán State officials, as well as the Governor's son, with Servando *La Tuta* Gómez-Martínez, the Templars' second-in-command. The videos confirmed the accusations of corruption leveled by the *Autodefensas* from the outset. Putting their uncertain origins aside, the recordings were used by the Federal Government to arrest state officials in Michoacán – although they belonged to the same political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The state Government's General Secretary, José Jesús Reyna-García, and the Governor's son, Rodrigo Vallejo, were taken into custody. Combined with the elimination of several Templar leaders, this led Governor Fausto Vallejo to step down from power in June 2014, strongly bolstering the Federal Government's political control and leverage within Michoacán.

On March 8, 2014, another event illustrated the use of the judiciary by the Federal Government. That day, the corpse of Rafael *El Pollo* Sánchez-Moreno was found in Buenavista. A former member of the Familia Michoacana and Knights Templar cartels, *El Pollo* had also been a Mayoral contender in Buenavista in 2001. In 2013, he had fled the region after the *Autodefensas* took over. A few months later, he returned as a *perdonado* (forgiven). A month before his killing, he had participated in a meeting with *Comisionado* Castillo and Juan José *El Abuelo* Farías, a leading figure in the *Autodefensas* movement and one of the region's emblematic narco-caciques. Castillo initially denied that this meeting, revealed by non-aligned *Autodefensas*, had ever occurred, and would later only claim that he did not know who he was meeting with. A month later though, the blame for *El Pollo*'s assassination was attributed to Hipólito Mora. He was jailed for murder, despite his supporters' claims that his arrest was a political conspiracy.

Yet, the involvement of the judicial branch did not imply a “judicialization” of the *Autodefensas*. Rather, the law was an instrument used by the Federal Government to assert its dominance in the establishment of formal and informal rules, particularly regarding the use of violence. Here, the law is a discretionary tool, and its obscurity and unpredictability are an asset. Rather than a transparent medium, the law served as a resource which – in the hands of the *Comisionado* – rendered it possible to maintain a high level of uncertainty as to how and when sanctions would be doled out, thereby solidifying the referee position of the central Government. Indeed, the state held a monopoly on “imprecision” regarding “what is punishable and allowable, what is authorized, tolerated, and sanctioned, or what is legal and illegal”, and the existence of conflicting legislation “allows political figures not just to exercise arbitrary

authority at any time, but also to continually bargain among different actors.” (Hibou, 2004).

Building a new politico-criminal configuration

This process was simultaneous to the negotiation leading to demobilizing the *Autodefensas* – between April 28 and May 10, 2014 – and establishing the new Rural Police Force (*Fuerza Rural*). The inauguration ceremony was led by the *Comisionado* on the grounds of the Tepalcatepec Rancher’s Association, in the very same spot where the *Autodefensas* had emerged fifteen months prior. On that day, “aligned” leaders and over 400 men and women received uniforms, weapons, and vehicles, along with the promise of a salary. Estanislao Beltrán, one of the original *Autodefensas* leaders, struck a pose. As he was holding an assault rifle given by the authorities, he exclaimed: “Now, everything we do will be legal! We are the Government now!” [*Ahora todo lo que hacemos será legal. Somos el gobierno*]. Then, Castillo gave a speech:

What is unprecedented in this armed social movement, which emerged fifteen months ago, is that the people did not rise up against the state. They rose up to ask for help from the state! And today, the state is with you! Today, *you* are representatives of the state! And you are responsible for making sure that in the future, be it in one month or fifteen, we do not have to hear another cry for help from the state because someone feels that you no longer represent their communities or their families.¹⁶

Those in attendance then paraded in front of the Mexican flag and sang the national anthem. During an interview with me, Julio, who was present at the ceremony, analyzed it in slightly different terms:

They brought us in to sign up, sure. They took down our names, addresses, all that. They said that once we were a member of *La Rural*, we would receive a paycheck and a weapon, just like they said at the ceremony. In reality, they gave us uniforms, a few weapons, and that was it...The money we were paid always came from local bosses. You know, cash...And it turns out, the Government was pretty smart in the end...They made good use of the enrollment registers, because now they had our names, our addresses, everything, and with that they knew everything about you and could track you down, no problem.¹⁷

This enrollment procedure ties in perfectly to James Scott’s theories on government legibility. All while reinforcing the *imagined construct* of the state, it consolidated Government control over the population through public registers, in this case a list of armed men. Moreover, the accords signed on May 10, 2014, stipulated that no unregistered civilians would be authorized to carry high-caliber firearms, enabling the – discretionary – arrest of anyone who chose to continue to use such weapons.

Six days later, the charges held against Hipólito Mora in the *El Pollo* murder case were dropped. Immediately after being released, he declared his willingness to “register his weapons and join the *Fuerza Rural*.” (Ureste, 2014). José Manuel Mireles, in contrast, organized a new brigade on the Pacific coast of Michoacán. He told the press that his men were planning to launch an assault to reclaim the state’s capital. The Army was sent in, and arrested Mireles for unlawful possession of unregistered weapons. He would spend over three years in prison, without trial, before ultimately being freed. When questioned about him months later, my interviewees said:

Mireles had a lot of fun playing Pancho Villa...But here, you just can’t do that to the Government! If you stand up to the Government, if you challenge the Government, the Government stares at you right in the eyes and says: ‘*All right, then.*’ And you’re fucked, right then and there. [*Si vas en contra del Gobierno, si retas al Gobierno, pues el Gobierno te mira derecho a los ojos y te dice: ‘Orale pues...’ Y ahí mismo te carga la chingada*]¹⁸

For them, standing up to the Federal Government was not just a strategic error: it was pure stupidity. Instead of opposing the state, one should negotiate. Even more surprising, *Comisionado* Castillo himself said as much the same (De Mauleon, 2014):

After May 10, we knew that if we did not stop the next one who stood up to the State, we would lose all credibility. We were going to look like buffoons. Mireles had transformed his fight in Tepalcatepec into a fight for Tierra Caliente, and then for Morelia, and then for all of Michoacán, and then for the country, and afterward I think he would have begun eyeing the rest of Latin America. [...] He had said he was going to occupy Morelia. In a press interview, I even told him: ‘*I hope that you won’t, because if you do, we are going to arrest you.*’ And he did not listen. [...] In the beginning, you could understand what he was getting at, with the corruption in Government, but now, we had put in place permanent channels for dialogue. We were not going to tolerate the creation of yet another new armed group.

Here again, Castillo clearly expressed the return of the state as the regulator of violence, and the patron of political brokerage. As a matter of fact, the arrest of Mireles marked the final attempt to “liberate” *municipios*. The second six months, the Commission featured polarization of fights between still-active leaders, and Castillo’s steady withdrawal from the limelight, before the Commission was dissolved on January 22, 2015. One year after its creation, it was replaced by a military command.

The *Autodefensas*’ territorialization endeavors, which had enabled them to establish themselves as the point of contact with federal authorities, were supplanted by fortresses in which leaders individually sought to maximize their strategic advantages. Creating the *Fuerza Rural* illustrated these dynamics with

regard to the progressive personal embodiment of power. *Autodefensa* leaders were allowed to establish lists of candidates for police positions. Because these positions offered the promise of a salary, a firearms license, and an authorization to patrol, they were extremely valuable. At the end of 2014, my interviewees complained that leaders were listing their *cliques* in order to build up private armies for themselves, as well as were seeking to transform their status as brokers and strongmen into political capital in the run-up to the June 2015 elections. This political mobility had contributed to isolating many leaders from their social bases, where wary inhabitants saw this process as confirmation of their fears of betrayal, both from their local leaders and from the Federal Government.

The Commission therefore embodied the Federal Government's "patronage and appointment capacities," which, paired with its resources in terms of coercion, enabled it to impose new rules for maintaining order and using violence. (Favarel-Garrigues & Gayer 2016: 28). Then, by centralizing coercive, judicial, political, and financial authority in the Commission, the Federal Government was also able to reaffirm its power over private violent actors. Michoacán *Autodefensas* thus contributed as much to consolidating the Federal Government's authority as to furthering competition between different levels of government regarding patronage over violent intermediaries.

Conclusion

The emergence of Michoacán's *Autodefensas* in 2013 portrays the creation of new channels of political brokerage by violent actors, installing new rules for using coercion, and crucial aspects of the continuous process of state formation. This case also reminds us of the ever-fluctuating nature of negotiations within political brokerage processes, especially in contexts of violence. These appeared both in the way in which the state intervened and co-opted the movement, but also through the *Autodefensas*' ability to influence them – in other words, to "force the state to bargain, co-opt, or fight." (Barkey, 1994: 13). In this process, the relationship is not a zero-sum game. The Federal Government consolidated its local authority through these negotiations, while the *Autodefensas* earned recognition as legitimate, indispensable brokers. With regard to this point, *Autodefensas* do not diverge from the historical fragmentation of the use of violence in Mexico and Latin America. They actually offer an opportunity to study the state-building processes that accompany it. As violent actors seeking to impose themselves within the political order, armed civilian groups continue to perpetuate the "centrality of state control within the political system, the (re)deployment of state institutions in society, and the omnipresence of an imagined version of the state," in addition to accepting the trinity of embodiment, bargaining, and incorporation into the state. Ultimately, this involves "demands *for* state, demands *of* state, and demands *by* the state." (Grajales & Le Cour Grandmaison, 2019: 13).

Therefore, this article shows how these situations pit different public and private actors against one another, each of them vying to establish clear hierarchical relations into the political brokerage system, while the state tries to impose itself as the patron of turbulent partners. Far from the idea of retreat or failure, the Government, as a “multi-voiced conglomerate of conflicting institutions” (Gayer, 2013) alternately assumes the role of judge and of accused party, in a context in which the armed mobilization further intensifies the state’s “paradox of inadequacy and indispensability.” That is, despite criticism of its ineffectiveness, corruption, and authoritarian ways, it remains both the “battlefield and the prize” for violent brokers looking to carve out a space for themselves within the political order and for citizens who – irrespective of the State’s ostensible inability to keep its promises – persist in calling upon and demanding intervention from an imagined version of it, which acts as a sort of “hope-generating machine” (Blom-Hansen & Stepputat 2001: 36)¹⁹. It offers them a form of comfort in spite of the constant criticism levied against it. This article therefore contributes to the body of literature concerned with constructing non-state authorities and overlapping sovereignties in violent contexts, as well as with scholarship on violent orders, armed conflicts, and borderlands, providing critical perspectives on notions such as organized crime and the war on drugs.

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Romain Le Cour Grandmaison holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Sorbonne Paris-1. He is pursuing a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Sorbonne Paris-1. He has been a Visiting Fellow at Columbia University, and a Research Fellow at the Center for US-Mexican Studies at the University of California, San Diego (USMEX). His work focuses on the role of violent intermediaries in Mexico. Romain has co-edited *L’État malgré tout. Produire l’autorité dans la violence* with Professor Jacobo Grajales (2019). His dissertation, titled *Drug cartels, Autodefensas, and the state: From political brokerage to patronage wars in Michoacán, Mexico* will be published in 2022. Address: Université Sorbonne Paris-1, 17, rue de la Sorbonne 75005 Paris, France. Email: romain.lecourgrandmaison@gmail.com

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Notes

- 1 This was a central theme in the *Autodefensas*' first speeches, which were widely relayed by Mexican and international news outlets.
- 2 This article is based on the research I conducted in Michoacán over 13 months of fieldwork, spread out over five visits between 2013 and 2017. The research coincided with the conflict between the Knights Templar and the *Autodefensas*. The presence of *Autodefensas* enabled the inhabitants to speak more freely, and I was able to conduct more than sixty formal interviews with *Autodefensas* leaders, residents of the region, members of criminal organizations, as well as numerous informal conversations and observations. Although the violent situation in this region of Mexico makes data collection difficult, it is paradoxically easier to meet with private violent actors than it is to meet with representatives of the Mexican state, with back-and-forth communication between these actors being prohibited for obvious security reasons. This is the main bias of this study: I could not conduct interviews with state actors, including members of the Michoacán and federal governments. This article is therefore based on the *Autodefensas* and local inhabitants' points of view. In order to gain insight about the state positioning within the negotiations, see Salvador Maldonado-Aranda, *La ilusión de la seguridad. Política y violencia en la periferia michoacana* (2018).
- 3 I use the terms of 'brokerage', 'intermediation', 'brokers', and 'intermediaries' synonymously in the article.
- 4 I borrow this expression from Matthew Butler, who uses it to describe the forms of power brokerage in Mexico, and particularly the role of caciques, who serve as "a semi-porous wall which absorb[s] some state initiatives while blocking others."
- 5 Some sources claim that this number is as high as 25,000. Prudence is warranted, however, as *Autodefensas* were temporary mobilizations. Though some spikes in violence or particularly critical situations in the most exposed *municipios* may have resulted in increased participation in these militia groups, the "regular" forces involved in them generally numbered in the hundreds for each participating *municipio*. At the height of the movement, 34 of Michoacán's 113 municipalities had taken part in the mobilization.
- 6 Interview in Buenavista. September 2015. Author's field notes.
- 7 For a compilation of videos and interviews on *Autodefensas*, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ihb6d1GfTQk>
- 8 Author's interview with Julio. October 6, 2017.
- 9 Author's field notes, 2014.
- 10 Author's interview with Hipólito Mora, October 2015.
- 11 Over time, the relationship between the latter and the *Autodefensas* oscillated between hostility and cooperation, all while revealing substantial infighting among different bodies of the Mexican security apparatus, including competition between the Secretariat of the Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación) – responsible for the Mexican Federal Police, with the Secretariat of Public Security (Secretaría de Seguridad Pública) and favorable to active cooperation with the *Autodefensas* – and the Secretariat of Defense (Secretaría de Defensa Nacional), responsible for Army forces.
- 12 In 2013, Michoacán had its most violent year ever registered, with 961 homicides.

- 13 Scott analyzes such know-how, borrowing the concept of *métis* from Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant. *Les Ruses de l'intelligence. La métis des Grecs* (1978).
- 14 Author's interview with Julio. October 6, 2017.
- 15 Author's field notes. 2014.
- 16 Archives from the newspaper *Reforma* – “Ahora somos gobierno” – May 10, 2014.
- 17 Author's Interview with Julio. October 8, 2017.
- 18 Author's field notes. January 2015.
- 19 An expression used by Monique Nuijten in her work on Mexico. See M. Nuijten, *In the Name of the Land: Organization, Transnationalism, and the Culture of the State in a Mexican Ejido*, Ph.D. Thesis, Wageningen University, Netherlands, 1998, cited by T. Blom-Hansen and F. Stepputat, *States of Imagination. Ethnographic Explorations of the Postcolonial State*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2001, 36.

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