

Criminals and enemies?
The Mexican drug trafficker in official discourse and in *narcocorridos*¹
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When criminality is addressed as an existential threat to the state, a regime of law gives way to authoritarianism. This was the path that various nations in Latin America followed in the 1970s and 1980s. A war on crime too easily casts the criminal as enemy.

- Paul Kahn. *Sacred Violence*

I. Introduction

This paper offers the first conclusions of an effort to reflect upon the different discourses surrounding the drug trafficking phenomenon and its relation to the legal culture and the political imaginary in Mexico. There are two discourses that I am particularly interested in exploring. First, President Felipe Calderon's official discourse addressing drug trafficking, which states the problem explicitly and emphatically as a *war* against drugs (although in more recent times he has replaced the word "war" for "fight"). Secondly, the popular discourse embodied in the "*narcocorridos*",³ a controversial musical subgenre popular in Mexico, as well as in other countries that are part of the setting of the *war on drugs*, that offers an alternative, a counter-discourse to the official discourse which dominates the phenomenon.

What is offered here is the preliminary sketch for what will be a much more profound and extensive investigation. I intend for this exploration to contribute to the better understanding of how one discourse or the other *impact* the way we understand both law and the political community; and perhaps at the same time, how they *reflect* some deeper traits of our political and legal culture. Most likely the answers to these questions will

¹ First of all I would like to thank Paul Kahn for his generosity and above all, his work. Secondly, I would like to thank Daniel Miranda Terrés, who contributed enormously to this effort in its second phase, and a especially for helping me to better understand the *corrido* and its recent mutations, such as those reflected in Gerardo Ortiz's work. Thirdly, I would like to thank Estefanía Vela Barba for her aid in researching and compiling the presidential speeches as well as the *narcocorridos* that served as the base for the first version of this paper. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Catalina Pérez Correa, because it was in our discussions of Kahn's text and in the rest of the papers presented in SELA 2010 that my interest for this project began. A final version of this was presented in the Fifth Latin American Conference on Crítica Jurídica that took place at UNAM in October 2010, but has since then been substantially revised and updated for SELA 2012. I would like to thank Fernanda Alonso for her translation of the original text into English, as well as the Spanish quotes.

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³ The closest translation to a *corrido* is a ballad. A *narcocorrido* is a drug ballad. It is a type of Mexican music and song tradition that evolved out of the folk music in the northern part of the country. The first *corridos* focus on the drug smugglers in the 1930s, while the non-narco ones go back to the Mexican Revolution, telling the stories of revolutionary fighters. Sometimes compared to gangster rap, lyrics refer to particular events and include real dates and places surrounding illegal criminal activities in this case related to drug trafficking and all that surrounds it.

intersect and it will be impossible to trace a particular direction in the relationship between either discourse –be it the official or popular one– and the legal culture and political imaginary. For now, I mere outline the theoretical coordinates with which I intend to navigate the issue and present a first analysis of these two discourses.

In order to do this, I want to use a specific problem that the official discourse on the *war on drugs*, especially during the Calderon Administration, risks provoking: the politicization of the criminal. The official discourse, I hold, politicizes the criminal, that is, renders him a political actor. If this is so, the more important question then is whether the popular imaginary accepts and assumes this politicization?

This paper is divided into three sections. First, I will describe the theoretical coordinates, which I borrow from Paul Kahn⁴ to navigate the waters of the political imaginary and legal culture, starting from the fundamental distinction between *criminal* and *enemy*. In the second section, using the analytical tools offered by Kahn, I will analyze the official discourse of the *war on drugs*, through the use of the concepts of *war*, *citizen*, *criminal*, *enemy* and, more recently, *fight* in President Calderon's speeches.⁵ In the third, I will try to distill from the lyrics of various *narcocorridos* some elemental notions on how the categories of criminal and delinquents work in popular political imaginary, and finally, speculate the possible paths that the metaphor and the reality of the *war on drugs* could be taking us towards.⁶

With these notes, I hope to provoke reactions; criticisms, suggestions, corrections, and insight that allow me to sharpen and go deeper into the research that is just beginning.⁷

II. The criminal and the enemy in the political imaginary⁸

⁴ For now, I rely solely on the Kahn's work. First, because I know him well and, second, because I have not yet identified which critical tool is the one that can best serve in this research. In any case, this first approach can be considered as an application of Kahn's comments to the *war on drugs* in Mexico.

⁵ Evidently, the official discourse did not originate with the Calderon administration, but it has been exacerbated during it. Consequently, the Calderon's rhetoric offers a clear sample of the profile of the official discourse. Likewise, *narcocorridos* did not emerge with the Calderon administration, nor will the ones discussed here be only those who belong to it. The causal relation between both discourses is not what is of interest here, but rather the support of each other, and the risk that both agree on politicizing the offender.

⁶ I must warn the reader that I am fundamentally ignorant as far as music in general is concerned, and more so in the case of *narcocorridos*. I am barely starting to involve myself in these music themes so I am sure my interpretation of the *narcocorridos* will, very soon, be very different from what is now. In that sense, I greatly appreciate any suggestions about what to listen to and how to listen.

⁷ In reality, this research is only the starting point for a much more ambitious project that is still to be defined in many ways: theorize the law from what has hitherto been peripheral phenomena in the theory of law, but central to the experience of law in Mexico, Latin America and probably most of the world: the systematic non-application of legal norms and the application of different legal systems than those formally established, which is what some, following Nino, call the phenomenon of anomie and of course, legal pluralism (both the officially accepted one as well as the de facto one operating in many communities in our continent).

⁸ This section closely reproduces the first part of Kahn's text (2010). Some key elements from Kahn's paper –the bulk of the discussion that addresses the analysis of the categories of "criminal" and "enemy" and focuses on the importance of this representation in understanding the relationship between law and

The temptation to label a criminal as an enemy and point him out as "public enemy number 1", is enormous, especially when the threat he represents is perceived as overwhelming. But the distinction between a criminal and an enemy in the political imaginary is crucial: it reflects and supports the distinction between sovereignty and law, between political action –in its strictest sense— and legal action.

Criminals and enemies may do the same violent acts, destroying property and persons. Nevertheless, the modern political imaginary carefully maintained the distinction as a matter of both formal law and informal representation. (Kahn, 2010; 1)

In the modern political imaginary, the criminal and the enemy occupy different spaces: the criminal faces the law; the enemy faces sovereignty. Law is restricted, predetermined, it cannot overturn the rules that it is made up of; sovereignty is unlimited, unrestricted, subject only to its ability to affirm itself.

The criminal is not the enemy; the enemy is not the criminal. The enemy can be killed but not punished. (...) On the other hand, the criminal can be punished but, in most of the West, he cannot be killed. (Kahn, 2010; 1)⁹

The distinction lies precisely on the difference between the criminal's relationship to law and the enemy's relationship to sovereignty. The criminal is a citizen, a part of the political community, and therefore enjoys the protection of the very laws which he infringes; the enemy is the opposite of a citizen, located outside the political community and posing a threat to it; consequently the enemy does not enjoy the protection of the law, nor is he under obligation to abide by it. Moreover, the enemy has the right to resist the violence of a political community to which he does not belong to; the criminal does not.

Informally, warfare is imagined as a sort of duel: a reciprocal relationship of threat, of killing and being killed. (...) This is why every war is imagined as "self-defense" by both sides of the conflict. The confrontation with the criminal, on the other hand, is certainly not imagined as a duel. Criminals have no right of self-defense against the police. The force of law is asymmetrical. For this reason, we think of the violence of law – policing – as

sovereignty—are omitted as they are not relevant for this work. On the other hand, there are issues raised here that are not explicit in Kahn's paper, but that break off from the bulk of his work. In general, this section should be seen as the summary of the critical apparatus offered by Kahn without relevant contributions from me. Mistakes, of course, are mine.

⁹ This was not always so. Before modern times –and even for many years well into modernity— the delinquent was equated with the enemy and his punishment was the palpable manifestation of sovereignty, but the modernization of criminal law consisted precisely in subjecting punishment to legal regulation. On this, Kahn: "Punishment was once a display of sovereign power – the spectacle of the scaffold. That display cast the criminal as the enemy. The scaffold is long gone, replaced by the largely invisible, highly regulated space of the penitentiary. A bordered space of law has displaced a limitless assertion of sovereignty. Even released, the criminal has a "permanent record." Marked by the law, he is simultaneously included and excluded." (Kahn, 2010; 1).

“depoliticized.” There is a corresponding depoliticalization of the violence of crime: it is not political threat, but personal pathology. Law enforcement aims to prevent the violence of the criminal from becoming a source of collective self-expression. Were it to become so, we would confront an enemy. (Kahn, 2010; 2)

The law in a political community says nothing to its enemies, nor does it say anything *about* its enemies. The enemy does not operate in the restricted field of law, operating instead in the unrestricted space of sovereignty. Contrastingly, the criminal is determined by the law he infringes:

Everything about the criminal is defined by law, from the elements of the crime, to the procedure of adjudication, to the character of punishment. His depoliticalization is accomplished through his complete juridification. The law, however, will not tell us who are our enemies. It will not define the conditions of victory or defeat. It will not tell us how seriously to take a threat or how devastating to make the response. The enemy, despite the efforts of international law, is not a juridical figure at all. (Kahn, 2010; 2)

The enemy is located outside the political community and threatens it. Because of this, the enemy endows members of the community with an identity: they are ultimately identified in contrast to the person who is not a member of the political community: the enemy (who is in turn, identified in contrast to the first). The criminal does not fulfill that role in the political imaginary. His existence does not identify us, and he does not identify himself as opposed to the political community, but rather he participates in it. True, he participates from a marginal and stigmatized position, but he is part of the community that punishes him. Against the enemy, the state may legitimately require sacrifices from us –including our lives— so as to protect the continuity of the political community. Against the criminal, we require the State’s protection, not vice versa.

We are presented then, with two very different categories, which must not be confused. The criminal is a member of the political community; the enemy is not. The criminal is subject to the law of the community and is simultaneously protected and bound by it; the enemy is not. The criminal should be punished; the enemy destroyed or subdued. The criminal is completely juridified (he is regulated and precisely constraint by the law) and, therefore, depoliticized; the enemy is necessarily a politicized subject (he defines the *polis* by opposing it) and cannot be understood through the law.

But the distinction between criminal and enemy is not only important to them; the distinction is fundamental –foundational even– to the political community, i.e. to "us", all individuals belonging to it:

At stake in the criminal/enemy distinction, I will argue, is the relationship of sovereignty to law. These are not just categories of theory, but the organizing principles of political and personal narrative. When we lose control of the categories, we can lose the sense of who we are. (Kahn, 2010;

4)

If we collapse the two categories, we lose our political identity. We no longer know who belongs to the "us" (the political community, which in principle, includes criminals) and who belongs to the "they" (the enemies). When the criminal becomes an enemy, the community's action is no longer the application of law, but that of a civil war:

Indeed, under some circumstances criminals do become enemies: the order of law becomes the disorder of civil war. (Kahn, 2010; 5)

When the criminal is politicized, he is mistaken for the enemy; he *becomes* the enemy. He is no longer identified by the law (which signals him as an offender), but instead he is identified as that which opposes sovereignty, that is the political community; against which he is now "entitled" to confront. The community can no longer demand obedience from him. He goes from being in an asymmetrical relationship governed by the law to a symmetric relation (symbolically) analogous to a duel, in which the law disappears and all that remains is the contrast of two competing wills in the field of sovereignty. That is, in a space in which only a civil war can be deployed, no longer a normative system.

III. The criminal and the enemy in the official discourse

On December 4th, 2006, just three days after assuming the presidency of the Mexican government, Felipe Calderon announced the first deployment of federal forces, Army included, so as to perform police functions in a state: his native state, Michoacan. "Be assured that my government is working hard to win the *war against crime*" (Calderón, 2011q). With this, the President defined his crime fighting strategy as a *war*; he justified the move on the fact that the number of drug-related killings in the region during the previous year exceeded 500.¹⁰ A few weeks later, on January 22, 2007, at the XXI Session of the National Security Council, the President went further: "To win the *war against crime* it is essential that we work together beyond our differences [...] beyond any political party's flag and any private interest." (Calderon, 2007n) He presented the war as a reason to demand national unity in a country deeply divided by party likes and dislikes, after a competed and questioned election.

Infancy is destiny; the use of war metaphors marked the official narrative surrounding crime and security throughout the his administration. Since then, the government does not pursue common criminals in the fulfillment of police functions or law enforcement, but instead confronts them in a *war*, for which there will be no *truce* until the enemy is defeated. The war jargon in the *war on drugs* has dominated the narrative, the political imaginary and the current government policy.

¹⁰ "This announcement was originally distributed by the media when the federal government launched operation Michoacan, communicates the announcement of a "battle" against organized crime, deploying more than 5 thousand troops in that state due to the 500 plus murders in that previous year (2006) ". (Norzagaray Lopez, Miguel David, 2010; 172)

The war metaphor in the government's discourse has obvious practical and strategic functions. On the one hand, "(...) it is applied to keep justifying the use of the Armed Forces..." (Miguel Lopez Norzagaray David 2010; 172), one of the building blocks of the security policy for the administration. On the other hand, it functions as a rhetorical framework to call for national unity. However, it also has consequences that go beyond those that it seemingly seeks. On the one hand, it builds up crime and on the other it blurs the boundaries between different categories within the law. The government does not prosecute people who commit different types of crimes –kidnapping, drug trafficking, and murder– but crime itself. In this sense, "(...) drug trafficking was framed within a larger *enemy*, an enemy that is even more sparse than the very same drug trafficking, one ranging from common crime to the organized social structure needed to commit a crime." (Norzagaray Lopez 2010; 229)

This section looks to explore how, in the official discourse dominated by the war metaphor, the distinction between criminal and enemy collapses. By labeling delinquents as enemies, President Calderon is not only establishing an identity between the terms, but also establishing in the political imaginary, on which he reflects and builds his discourse, that the criminal fulfills the function of the enemy (and not only shares his label).¹¹

Up until the year 2010, we find, in President Calderon's speeches, the explicit use of the term "enemy" when referring to criminals.

There is one elementary truth that we cannot lose: **the true enemy, the threat to society is the criminals** ... (Calderon, 2010c)

The enemy, I clearly endorse, **the enemies are the criminals**. We are not different Mexicans in comparison to others, no matter how different our ideologies and our different ways of thinking are. (Calderon, 2010e)

Organized crime thrives on division. **The enemy** advances when there is disagreement between those who have a duty to confront it. (Calderon, 2010b)

These quotes reflect the identification of the terms "criminal" and "enemy." In addition, they signal to one of the fundamental features that characterize the enemy within the political imaginary because of the role this concept plays: the criminal is located outside the political community and *threatens it*:

Today in 2010, like in 1847, or in 1913, or in 1810, or in 1910, **Mexico also faces enemies who wish to impose their perverse rules**, terrorize Mexicans, paralyze authority and **subdue us all to their will with their violence**. (Calderon, 2010f)

¹¹ This is seen clearly in recent years in which –as will be specified later– the label "war" has been deleted from the official discourse, but the role of the criminal as an enemy –that threatens the political community and justifies the use of Armed forces for police work– remains.

They constitute a real **threat to our society**, and this threat requires that we confront them, decisively, united and without hesitation. (Calderon, 2010e)

And we have opened this space to critical analysis, to reflection, because we want to make the fight for security a state policy; that is not a policy of a president or a government but a **government policy shared by the whole Nation** because **it is in its defense**.

(...)

And today, it must also be said that the country's democratic **institutions** and values such as freedom of expression, **are being threatened by the criminality**. (Calderon, 2010c)

The role that organized crime has come to play as a threat against the Nation in the official discourse is so central that when issuing his message commemorating the bicentennial anniversary of Mexico's national independence, President Calderon defined the role his generation occupies in national history in terms of it:

We are the generation of the Bicentennial. Our historical purpose is to achieve a fair, free and democratic Motherland, longed for by our liberators; it is **to fight** for it every day and overcome challenges, including that of **preserving our security** and freedom. Our duty is to recognize problems, **identify the enemy with clarity and courage** and close ranks to beat him. Close ranks with the conviction that our cause is legitimate and necessary; that our cause is just and worth fighting for, because what is at stake is the future of our children and grandchildren, from the generations of today and tomorrow; with the conviction that we will move forward with the certainty that in our history, **our motherland has** come out ahead from bigger problems with fewer resources. (Calderon, 2010g)

The historical development of the country is threatened, that is, the very future is at stake, "either we rescue Mexico or cancel a future of prosperity that all Mexican children deserve." (Calderón, 2007a) What organized crime threatens is not only society or government institutions, which a criminal can do, but it also threatens sovereignty, a role which in Kahn's analytical framework, corresponds to the enemy:

In fulfilling this **patriotic mission of the defense of national sovereignty** and the integrity of the Mexican territory, the Mexican Navy has occupied a place in the **motherland's first line of defense before its enemies**.

Yesterday, it was before the foreign powers that sought to invade us; **today the fight is to defend our country from the clutches of crime** to bequeath a safe Mexico, free and prosperous for the new generations of Mexicans. (Calderon, 2008d)

The criminal, as an enemy, must be subdued to sovereignty: "There will be no truce for

those who wanted to see Mexico fall into chaos and lawlessness. As long as there are cadets, as long as [...] the national spirit is renewed, sovereignty will be protected ... "(Calderón, 2010f). Thus, it is not surprising that the criminal (as an enemy) be expelled from the political community in the official discourse: "**The adversaries of society are criminals, it is not some Mexicans against others...**" (Calderón, 2010c). If the opponents are not the Mexicans, one against another, then what are the criminals? Are they not Mexicans? President Calderon discursively *expels* them from the political community and they cease being Mexican: "because together, us Mexicans can overcome, and overcome we will, a common enemy, which now threatens to destroy not only our tranquility, but also our democratic institutions." (Calderon, 2010a)

The expulsion of criminals from the political community is so sharp that as enemies, they are defined by being the opposite of the members of the political community, this is to say, the body citizens. Opening a public park, the President asked the audience:

Help this and other communities in Juarez change their appearance and have them become spaces for the **citizens and not for the criminals.** (Calderon, 2010h)

The President of all Mexicans goes even further. Not only does he expel the criminals from the political community, but also, once they are outside of it, he does what is usually done with the enemies: he dehumanizes them.

Criminality makes use of illicit resources in the common market, **as if we were dealing with normal persons, which they are not.** (Calderon, 2010d)

I think the first step is not to lose sight that these are not only the **bad guys** in the movie, **but also the bloodthirsty; these are the criminals.** (Calderon, 2010c)

Of course, by refusing criminals the chance to be anyone, by labeling them as bad or vicious, the President does not distinguish between different criminals, not even among the various participants in the drug chain, as criminalized under criminal law (*mules*, farmers, petty dealers, drug lords, assassins: all alike are disqualified).

The first duty of those who *do* belong to the political community is to defend it, "even if it takes time, resources and, unfortunately, human lives, as in the case at hand." (Calderón, 2010c). Then comes the demand to sacrifice:

Today Mexico's enemies seek to affect our nation's development. **Mexico calls upon us all, to defend it, as always.** **Today we must protect our families** from those who threaten their peace and tranquility; from **those enemies** seeking to harm the life or property that we Mexicans have so painstakingly built, with their criminal actions. Against those who threaten the security and peace of our people, **Mexico reclaims the unity of its children in a clear and concise manner.**

(Calderon, 2007c)

The transformation of the criminal into an enemy in the government's narrative is complete: he is branded as the enemy; located outside the political community; identified as a threat to sovereignty; used as a contrast to identify the citizen; he is depersonalized; and finally, a call is made to the people participating in the "we" to sacrifice "time", "resources" and "lives" to fight him. The President has thus built an "Other" that allows him to request loyalty from "us" to defend not the government, nor its policies, nor its institutions, but sovereignty itself, the Motherland, the Nation. But in doing so, the President necessarily politicizes the criminal, turning him into an enemy. By turning him into an enemy and excluding him from the political community, he positions the enemy in the field of politics (of sovereignty), removing him from the scope of law. The criminal, as an enemy, as a politicized subject, is released from the obligation to obey the law and recovers the "right" to participate in the contest of sovereign wills; thus the enemy acquires enormous political freedom. He is positioned to claim for himself the sovereign character. The explicit use of the war metaphor, which marked not only the beginning of this administration, but the subsequent years, would be shaded and minimized in the last third of his term, when the number of murders linked to drug trafficking at the national level already exceeded 34,000 deaths according to official numbers (Presidency of the Republic, 2012). By then, the wave of violence that afflicted the country looked more like a civil war, both in terms of intensity and territorial expansion, than that of the comparatively modest wave of crime that Michoacán suffered at the end of 2006.¹²

The deletion of the word "war", however, did not change the use of the figure of the criminal as an enemy of society instead of as a part of society. The framework of the war discourse remained even if the word subsided: the offender was still identified in contrast to the citizen, and crime as a threat to the political community. Felipe Calderon clearly expressed this in August of the same year in which the word *war* was suppressed: "It is clear to all of us that Mexico's enemies are the criminals." (Calderón, 2011o).

As late as March 23, 2012, on the eve of the formal start of the 2012 presidential campaign (during which the law forbids him to "promote the achievements of his government"), Felipe Calderon defended what he now calls "the battle for security", and no longer the *war against crime* and/or *drugs*. In doing so, he argued:

"If the federal government had not intervened, if we had not started this comprehensive strategy in time, today, a part of the national territory would

¹² On the 12th of January, 2011, during the "Diálogo por la Seguridad hacia una Política de Estado" (Dialogue for Security: towards a State Policy), a series of meetings organized by the Executive with key players from society, Felipe Calderon affirmed: "**I have not used and I invite you to review all my public and private expressions. You say: You have elected the concept of WAR. No. I did not choose it.** I have permanently used the term "fight against organized crime" and "fight for public security" and I will keep using it and doing it. But independently of the denomination that would like to be given to it, I agree with you: the legitimacy of the government lies in the extent that it act under the law." (Calderon, 2011); Not only that but inclusively, on May 10th of that same year, during a reunion with Hispanic organizations in New York, he declared, "this is not a war against drug trafficking." (Calderon, 2011r)

be dominated by drug lords, of one type or another; there would be no freedom for the people, nor would there be peace or tranquility.

(...)

... Too many Mexicans have already suffered due to the unmeasured ambition of the criminals... "(Calderón, 2012p)

Thus, "the drug lords" threaten the territorial integrity of the nation, and are identified in contrast to "the people"; the "criminals" as opposed to the "Mexicans". The word "war" disappears, but the function of the criminal as an enemy remains.

It seems that President Calderon and his team noticed a problem in the war discourse; perhaps it was the dangers of using it as mentioned in the paragraphs above, but I doubt it; maybe it was the disproportionate importance given to criminals when identifying them as a national threat; perhaps it was the inefficiency in their call for national unity through the call to war. The truth, however, is that the deletion of the word did not change the framework of the discourse and therefore, did not avoid or repair the breakdown between the categories of criminal and enemy along with all its political implications.

Now, let's observe if the official discourse, where the politicization of the criminal occurs, is reflected in the non-official discourse regarding drug trafficking and the drug war.

IV. The criminal and the enemy in the saga of the *narcocorrido*

There is popular tradition, deeply rooted in our country, that through various means such as literature, popular press, oral tradition and music, highlights and records the events of criminal's lives, opposing the official discourse (*see eg* Speckman, 2002). One of the best-known means that materialize this tradition is the popular music genre known as the *corrido*, popular music relating noteworthy events and the daily life of communities. Specifically, the *narcocorrido*, presents itself as a contemporary successor or subgenre of the *corrido*.

The *narcocorrido* is of interest here because it offers an alternative view to the official stance on drug trafficking in our country. Faced with a hegemonic official discourse on drug trafficking, popular culture, and on occasions the drug traffickers themselves,¹³ offer their vision of the phenomenon, through *narcocorridos*.

Luis Astorga points out that some *narcocorridos* are spontaneous products of popular culture, while others are deliberately sponsored by drug traffickers themselves to build their own image. The two variants break the state monopoly of the discourse referring to drug trafficking (Astorga, 1997). With the dawn of the

¹³ "Some did it as interpreters of a daily reality in the world in which they lived, in the manner of spontaneous sociology, others directly by assignment, as unofficial spokespersons. In the era of mass markets, the commercial success of these *corridos* went beyond their economic value: this meant, without it having been proposed consciously by its creators, the beginning of the end of state monopoly of the symbolic production of [drug] traffickers." (Astorga, 5)

narcocorridos, "the identity of the group was no longer subject to the will, imaginary and interest of those who had hitherto managed to impose their classifications, and turn them into official discourse" (Astorga, 1997, 2).

Astorga argues that the stories told in the *narcocorridos* focus on presenting facts, rather than justifying them: "There is no justification for their activities, only an affirmation of situations where the primacy of the ethical codes and rules of the game at play are often disputed through gun shots" (Astorga, 1997, 10-1). The stories reflected in the *narcocorridos* are in fact ambivalent: torn between telling the facts and even criticizing them, or praising and vindicating the protagonists. For some, the *narcocorridos* tend more towards the second pole of this spectrum (Benavides *et al.*, 2009, 152). Regardless of whether the stories told in the *narcocorridos* are understood as "documentation" of the popular interpretation of the facts or as a *ladatio* of the patrons of the musicians who compose them, the truth is that in recounting the events from the perspective of those living surrounded by drug trafficking and its profits, *narcocorridos* express cultural counter-values to the official discourse and culture. The *narcocorrido* is presented as the popular voice that contrasts with the discourse of political power; at least that is what it intends (Lara, 2003) (Wald, 2008).

This is not to say that the *narcocorrido* (fully) articulates a political or ethical discourse, but rather it outlines one, providing an epic, but not enough to articulate an ethic¹⁴. It is the epic that is offered by the *narcocorrido* what perhaps allows us a glimpse into the roles of the criminal, authority, the law and the enemy in the popular imaginary of communities living near or in contact with drug-related business and its prohibition.

Both the *corrido* and the *narcocorrido* deal with the heroic deeds of cultural heroes or individuals who are considered to be exceptional or considered to have done exceptional deeds, usually with great bravery and courage in the face of danger: soldiers and revolutionary leaders in the early twentieth century; drug traffickers and smugglers at the end of the same century.

One of the main functions that wields the *corrido* and which made it so popular during the twentieth century, was the broadcasting of events that occurred during the period of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, which were very difficult to transmit from mass media such as newspapers ... for the majority of the population that was submerged in appalling illiteracy ... there was no point in disseminating the news in print ... the *corrido* (...) has definitely served as an important form in broadcasting, that brings us closer to life in the communities ... [In the *corridos*,] the Mexican masses have seen their desires, passions, frustrations and sympathies reflected. (Lara, 2003; 213)

"The history of the *narcocorrido* goes all the way back to the *corridos* of

¹⁴ I owe the idea of the epic as a precedent on which to build an ethic to Ricardo Raphael, who identified the epic as the foundation of the ethic in the presentation of his book "The Other Mexico: A Journey to the land of extraordinary stories" at the CIDE (Región Centro campus), in Aguascalientes, April 12, 2012.

border smugglers in the nineteenth century. In those years it was not marijuana, cocaine or heroin that was being smuggled, but fabrics, spices and clothing, among other goods. The flow of contraband also wasn't like it is today, from south to north, but rather the opposite; goods were transported from the U.S. to Mexico." (Ramírez-Pimienta, 2011; 22)

Alcohol prohibition, established in 1920 in the United States, led to the creation of a smuggling business from Canada and Mexico. For Mexican bootleggers, alcohol smuggling was a task that:

"Was extremely dangerous and difficult, as the smugglers sometimes had to travel hundreds of miles trying to bring the cargo to its destination, whilst confusing the hated *rinches*, the Texas Rangers, who were in charge, along with federal agencies, of combating them. (...) It is in this context that the most important precursor of drug trafficking *corridos* is produced in the nineteen twenties and early thirties... the *corridos* about tequila smugglers." (Ramírez-Pimienta, 2011, 35-36)

From the origins of the *smuggler's corrido*¹⁵, an important feature for understanding the relationships between traffickers and officials can be identified:

"(...) we have found several notions that are still paradigmatic in the current narcocorrido. Namely, we found a strong collusion and transposition between drug dealer, police officer and politician. In other words, we have politicians and police who are traffickers or are protecting traffickers." (Ramírez-Pimienta, 2011; 68)

Specifically, in its origins, the *smuggler's corrido* identifies the foreign U.S. authority, or the national authority subdued to it, as threats to the protagonist: "(...) virtually no one in the *corridística* community would object to representing the American Rangers (be they soldiers, customs police or border patrol agents) in a negative fashion. The Anglo-Saxon with power over the Mexican community (or the Mexican under the services of Anglo-Saxon law) is a target accepted by this community, which perceives itself as victimized." (Ramírez-Pimienta, 2011; 35)

In addition to identifying the U.S. authority as the threat to the smuggler (or the Mexican authority under the US authority), the *smuggler's corrido* outlines another feature imputed to authority figures: their corruption and, consequently, their participation (usually subordinate) in crime.

One of the most famous examples of this type of ballad is the 'Corrido de Mier', also known as 'The Mier customs' and 'The Ward' (...) [what is] narrated makes it clear from the first verses how incredible it is that they managed to mock the entire guard, i.e. all the employees of the customs

¹⁵ Roughly translated from "corrido de contrabando" which is the term used by Ramírez-Pimienta.

office, opening the possibility that customs play the part of accomplices rather than smugglers' incompetent enemies.¹⁶

With the *narcocorrido*, as a subgenre distinguished from the general *corrido* and as its closest ancestor, the *corrido* that specifically addresses contraband, grows the propensity to move from a mere chronicle of events or deeds to the elation of heroic deeds (not necessarily an epistle) of the protagonists of the events:

This new type of *corrido* approves and praises those outside the law. It celebrates the heroism of those who are able to pass to the world of crime. In general, the *narcocorridos* are chronicles of adventure, betrayal, misfortune, love and other acts of individuals involved in the "business", another of the many synonyms of drug trafficking. Be it either through the common language or through key words and phrases, a partial, but credible vision of what drug trafficking is, is being embodied. Some *corridos* deal with the origins of the drug dealer, and others express the economic causes that push the ordinary Mexican to become a drug dealer. (Massard, 2005)

The vision they provide is a criticism to the general context in which the adventure of the drug dealer comes to be, and therefore, it diverges from the official discourse. In speaking of criminals, of the poverty from which they escape, of the crimes and acts corruption, a vision is reflected which cannot but constitute itself as a critique of the world reflected in the official discourse.

The *narcocorrido* reflects the economic crisis and the gradual decline of the system inherited from the Revolution. If it is true that the land reform returned the land to the peasants, today the small farmer has no way out and prefers to replace corn with marijuana, evidently increasing the value of land cultivated and the crop itself. Sociologists agree that *narcocorridos* represent a sample of the rebellion against a political system that not only fails to provides outputs, but has made corruption and impunity the pillars of its survival, since the tentacles of the drug trafficking have reached the echelons of power... (Massard, 2005)

What do the *narcocorridos* say? What do they tell us about the place that drug traffickers, as criminals, play in the popular political imaginary? Do we see a politicization of the drug trafficker, which corresponds to his politicization in official discourse of the *war on drugs*?

For Ramirez-Pimienta, the emergence of the *narcocorrido* subgenre links itself with one of the most politicized figures in drug trafficking, a figure that intended to define himself as the opposition to the state: Rafael Caro Quintero.

¹⁶ "To corroborate with this idea, the *corridista* names two corrupt customs officials, Arnulfo and Zechariah, who <<protected smuggling>>. Rendon also said and he was right, that everything was informed little by little, I knew when Arnulfo and Zechariah protected smuggling every day". (Ramirez-Pimienta, 2011; 31)

"(...) The case of Rafael Caro Quintero was the catalyst that started the epistemological shift that would hasten the genre to its narcocorrido side. (...) In 1985 he was charged and imprisoned for the murder of Enrique *kiki* Camarena, a DEA (U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency) undercover agent. Almost immediately [Caro Quintero] became a hero in the midst of a maelstrom of emotions, nationalist and xenophobic actions, and the official and popular reactions to the accumulation (and distribution) of the capital raised by this young entrepreneur who allegedly stated that if they let him work his marijuana crops, and other businesses two years without being disturbed, he would agree to pay Mexico's foreign debt. While this Sinaloan drug lord would later deny having made such a statement, if he did or did not make it, the truth is not important; what is important is what people thought possible, and, even more so, desirable (...). Another thing that was also mythified was his willingness to spread his money not only with his accomplices, but with the people in general (...) he was very aware that his legitimacy in the eyes of the people would increase in the extent that he, and others like him, occupied the void left by the Mexican State (...)" (Ramírez-Pimienta, 2011; 138)

The politicization of the figure of Caro Quintero, the height of his public presence amid an international scandal that strained official relations between Mexico and the United States, his proposed replacement of the deficiencies with which the State addresses the shortcomings faced by the population, seem to point to the politicization of the drug trafficker. My impression, however, is that if indeed there is a process of a politicization of the criminal, this is only now beginning to be articulated and it has more to do with the current *war against drugs* than with the figure of Camarena. The discourse reflected in the majority of *narcocorridos* offers a non-antagonistic, alternative version, of the official discourse of the *war on drugs*. The counter-discourse of the *narcocorrido* does not "buy" the official discourse in which the criminal is presented as a threat to the political community; this discourse does not see the criminal as an enemy.

In its verses, drug trafficking is not the main threat to national security, but simply the lifestyle of a few seasoned guys who can play hardball. It is the world of family alliances, the escape from poverty, the traitor's punishment, the exaltation of manhood. This is what is sung, but rather than judging, it is told with humor. (Massard, 2005)

These are good news: if popular culture bought into the narrative of official discourse and the drug dealers were assigned the role of the enemy where it places them them, then violence would have to be understood as an existential struggle between two political communities, and a side would have to be chosen. If the criminal accepted his role as an enemy of the political community, he would be understood as the armed forces of a political community antagonistic to the political community represented by the State; he would perhaps reclaim the *right* to face his rival in a battle, in a civil war. But by not assuming the role assigned in the official discourse, the drug dealer maintains his

criminal position; in general (and up until very recently), however, he maintains –in the popular imaginary embodied in the *narcocorridos*- his participation in the political community.

However, there is a part of counter-discourse of the *narcocorridos* that is worrying and for which Kahn cautioned: the criminal violence is provided as a source of self-expression and, consequently, of autonomy (at least a claim to autonomy). However, a key element is lacking: in most of the *narcocorridos*, violence is a source of individual – not collective- self-expression and autonomy. Then again, as we shall see, a collective dimension *is* present in some *narcocorridos*, especially in the more recent and even marginal ones, such as the "*movimiento alternado*", involving artists such as Alfredo Rios "the Komander", or the "*corridos progresivos*" of Gerardo Ortiz, younger and more obscure artists.

In this section we review some *narcocorridos* contrasting them with the central points of the official discourse concerning the criminal: his role as a threat to the political community, his location outside the political community, his dehumanization and the need to sacrifice in order to contain him as an existential threat to the Nation.

Drug trafficking and authorities

We can begin to explore the relationship between drug trafficking and the political community through the relationship between drug trafficking and political authority. In the *narcocorrido*, drug trafficking, far from representing a threat to the political authority, is a part of the political system. In other words, drug trafficking coexists with the political authority; it brokers agreements with political authority, and is even confused with it. Drug dealers and authorities come to be identified (especially in the high end of society) or find accommodation through corruption (further down the hierarchy, in which case the authority appears as a subordinate instrument of the drug trafficker). Ultimately, the relationship can lead to violence, but it appears as personal, not collective or institutional. In other words, this is not about violence between different spheres, but between persons who move into spheres that overlap. As far as the community is concerned, the drug trafficker is presented as part of the community, usually in an important and often benevolent manner, but as we shall see, the borders of the community that the drug trafficker identifies with do not overlap with those of the political community.

The confusion between drug trafficking and the political authority in high places is clearly illustrated with two *corridos* written by *Los Tigres del Norte*. "The Successor"¹⁷

¹⁷ Tenemos ya mucho tiempo/ Comprando y vendiendo todo./ Tú, como el sucesor/ Tendrás que seguir mis modos/ Así pase lo que pase/ Vas a controlarlo todo.
Como es grande la familia/ Cambiamos de presidente/ Cada 6 años lo menos/ Y tenlo tú muy presente/ Si no se cierra la tienda/ El pacto sigue al corriente.
Que disfrutes de tu puesto /La tienda queda surtida. /Nomás tapa el ojo al macho /Por si algún día te investigan./ Al primero que la pierda /Le puede costar la vida.
No puedes vender la tienda,/ Tampoco cambiar de socios, /Recuerda que por cien años /Ha sido nuestro negocio/ No te vaya a suceder/ Lo que le paso a Colosio.

refers to the presidential succession every 6 years and understands drug trafficking as coextensive with the political system, not opposed to it:

*We've been Buying and selling
everything for a long time now.
You, as the successor,
Will have to follow my ways
So whatever happens
You must control it all.*

*Because the family is large
We change president
At least every 6 years
You, be very aware
If the store is not closed
The pact is still current.*

*Enjoy your post
The store is stocked.
Look away
in case you are ever investigated.
The first to loose the store
can loose his life.*

*You cannot sell the store,
Or change partners,
Remember that for a hundred years
It has been our business
Let's hope that what happened to Colosio
Doesn't happen to you.*

"The Successor" reflects not only the intimate relationship between politics and drug trafficking, but the prominence of the latter on the former. What is inherited is a "store" that cannot be closed, "nor change partners." The activity is to buy and sell (drugs) and to this end, we must "control it all" (politics). Violence, when it occurs, is personalized ("Let's hope that what happened to Colosio doesn't happen to you"¹⁸), not institutional or political.

The confusion between political authority and drug trafficking, and not its antagonism, is also present in "The Circus"¹⁹, by the same group:

¹⁸ Referring to the assassination of the PRI presidential candidate in March 1994

¹⁹ Entre Carlos y Raúl/ Eran los dueños de un circo./ Carlos era el domador/ el hermano más chico./ Raúl el coordinador/ con hambre de hacerse rico.

Se hicieron tan influyentes/ Que empezaron a trincar/ Los circos por todos lados/ Hasta hacerlos fracasar/
Pa' quedarse con las plazas/ Y libres pa' trabajar.

El circo que había en el golfo/ fue el primero que cayó./ Los circos de Chihuahua/ Fue Carlos quien los cerró./
Quedando el de Sinaloa/ Y al frente su domador.

*Between Carlos and Raul
They owned a circus.
Carlos was the trainer
the youngest brother.
Raul the coordinator
hungry to get rich.*

*They became so influential
That began to trick
Circuses everywhere
Until they made them fail
And kept the towns
And are now free to work.*

*The circus in the Gulf
was the first to fall.
Chihuahua Circuses
It was Carlos who closed them,
Leaving only the one in Sinaloa
And at its head its lion-tamer.*

*Raul became a millionaire
They say by being the magician
Money he disappeared
From the hands of his brother.
Now they say it's in banks
In Switzerland and everywhere.*

*Carlos disappeared
The circus came down on them.
They caught the Sinaloan
After that plane crash.
That is how Raul and Carlos
lost their jobs.*

*Raul is in jail
His magic ran out.
Carlos on a tight rope
Now people rest*

Raúl se hizo millonario/ Dicen que por ser el mago/ Desapareció el dinero/ De las manos de su hermano./
Hoy dicen que está en los bancos/ De Suiza y por todos lados./
Carlos desapareció/ Se les vino el circo abajo./ Aprenden al sinaloense/ Después de aquel avionazo/ Fue
como a Raúl y a Carlos/ Se les acabo el trabajo.
Raúl se encuentra en la cárcel/ Ya se le acabó la magia./ Carlos en la cuerda floja/ Ahora la gente descansa/
Hasta que llegue otro circo/ Y otra vez la misma tranza.

*Until another circus comes
And again comes the same swindle.*

As is evident to anyone who knows Mexico, "The Circus" refers to the brothers Carlos and Raul Salinas. The first, President of Mexico from 1988 to 1994, the second sentenced for murder and money laundering shortly after the departure of his brother from power. The interesting thing is that Carlos and Raul are presented here as entrepreneurs, not politicians (although both had public office careers, until their "fall"). They lead a circus, and the circuses –"the Gulf", "Chihuahua" and "Sinaloa"— refer to cartels, not political parties or communities. The chief, "coordinator", is Raul, who "became a millionaire"; Carlos, "the younger brother," who in fact was the one who held political power, is only "the trainer" –we assume- in charge of keeping the beasts in place in order for the business to operate.

In the *narcocorrido*, drug trafficking does not threaten the political power; it nurtures it. Or, more precisely, political power is the one that feeds the drug trade, it is its instrument. What is important is the "work", "our business", drug trafficking; politics is incidental, instrumental. When the drug dealers pose a threat to politics, it is personalized, "Let's hope that what happened to Colosio doesn't happen to you." The threat, in any case, is focalized: it affects certain people, not the whole system.

At a lower level (police officers, prosecutors and judges), the authority appears as a subordinate and used by the traffickers. Coming from the older *corridos*, authority has always appeared as corruptible. Thus, "The Night of the underworld"²⁰ says:

*That is punishment from above,
Today the law does not punish.
Because money and influence,
Nobody can deny,
Saves any prisoner
[...]
For if law punished
with a long sentence,
and money was rejected
and influence finished,
the jail would be full.*

More recently, "The Ballad of Juan García",²¹ from the seventies, reads:

*In order to get rid of him,
Since it suited them,
Through betrayal he met death
At the hands of the Rangers' infantry.*

He is killed by treachery and because "it suited them," not because it was their

²⁰ Eso es castigo de arriba./ Hoy la ley ya no castiga./ Pues la influencia y el dinero./ Nadie lo podrá negar./ Salva todo prisionero. [...] Que si la ley castigara/ con una larga condena./ el dinero rechazara./ la influencia se acabara/ la cárcel estaría llena.

²¹ Para poder liquidarlo./ pues así les convenía./ A traición le dieron muerte/ los rinches de infantería.

duty. If the police do their "work", as suggested by the *corrido*, it is because of a personal interest and for reasons other than their role as policemen, it is not to fulfill their duty. Thus, the element of betrayal, perhaps the most recurrent theme in *narcocorridos* indicates a supra-subordinate relationship: if the authority betrays the drug dealer it is because he was owed allegiance.

Betrayal explains death. Whether it is the one who betrays or the betrayed that is killed, the invulnerability of the hero in the *corrido* falters due to the motives of the betrayal. "Smoke Signal"²² by Gerardo Ortiz, if we are to believe internet sources, speaks in the first person about the shocking and violent death of trafficker Arturo Beltran Leyva in the hands of the Navy, in December 2009, attributing his death to treason he perpetrated:

*It was expected
That I be hit
When there are errors
There are corrections
And I failed the misters
I did business
With the other side
I jumped from side to side.*

Once more, when the authority apprehends drug dealers, even ones as notorious and publicized as Beltran Leyva, the role of the authority is minimized: it is not the police expertise, or, in this case military, which explains Beltran's fall, it is his own betrayal to the drug lords. It is not a political betrayal, but a personal one; it is not a political relationship but an economic one (I did business / with the other side).

Finally, there is the image of authority as cowardly and useless. This is very clear in the songs of smuggling in which there is talk of the U.S. authority, the *rinches* (Texas Rangers), as seen in *smuggler's corridos* such as "Tequila"²³:

*If the Rangers were men
And they faced us,
Another song would play
For the tequileros.*

Drug trafficking and the communities

The facts, deeds and characters of the *narcocorridos* are not located outside the political community, as the official discourse wants to place them. The communities spoken of however, are often distinct from the political community, even though they are identified at some point with the political community, especially in contrast to the threats or abuse that north American's represent.

²² Era esperado/ Que me arrimaran un golpe/ Cuando hay errores/ Hay correcciones/ Y le falle a los señores/ Hice negocios/ Con los contrarios/ Fui un chapulín...

²³ Si los rinches fueran hombres/ Y sus caras asomaran,/ También a los tequileros/ Otro gallo les cantara.

Narcocorridos talk about state or local family ties, and the drug dealer is usually proud to belong to the community, presenting himself as a benefactor:

*A bloody deed, a heroic deed
The audacity of a patriotic community
A very manly man, wounded by a female
He has put his name in our corrido.
("El Corrido," Los Tigres del Norte)²⁴*

As for ties and loyalties, the community with which he is most frequently identified is the local community more than the national one, but without implying antagonism between both of these:

*My pride is to be Tlaxcalteca
I'll say it where I want
State of many roosters
Who are found prisoners
But this rooster is bravest
He commands where he wants to.
("Private key", Banda El Recodo)²⁵*

Localism, in any case, results in an antagonism between localities or regions, not between local and national communities. This is particularly evident following the emergence of *narcocorridos* in other regions, other than the border region where it originated.²⁶

(...) In recent years the border itself seems to have moved north of the North (Chicago, Detroit, etc..) And to the south of the South (Michoacan and Oaxaca), where northern groups emerge and a northern identity that clearly respond to a need or popular taste (...). (Ramírez-Pimienta, 2011; 191)

The case of the state of Oaxaca illustrates the phenomenon of regionalism in the *narcocorrido*, specifically, in its potential to reflect the regional rivalry. The *narcocorrido* has, in Oaxaca, its own roots, but it seems to have been reactivated by interaction between Oaxaca and Sinaloa as a result of the seasonal migration of farm workers (who go from the former to the latter to pick tomatoes).

There is, however, a *corridística* tradition in Oaxaca that was born way before the northern tradition, a o traditional *corrido* played by bands that have one of their primary locations in the *Costa Chica* (small coast) (...).

Although this is not the only way in which northern music and the people of Oaxaca meet, it seems to be clear that this union was

²⁴ Un hecho sangriento, una gesta heroica/ El atrevimiento de un pueblo patriota/ Un hombre muy hombre, por una hembra herido/ Ha puesto su nombre en nuestro corrido.

²⁵ Mi orgullo es ser Tlaxcalteca/ Lo digo donde yo quiero/ Estado de muchos gallos/ Que se encuentran prisioneros/ Pero este gallo es mas bravo/ Les canta en su gallinero.

²⁶ The *corrido* has been extended all the way to Colombia.

forged primarily during the trips people from Oaxaca took to the North (Sinaloa, Baja California, United States) in search of work. Extreme poverty forces thousands of people from Oaxaca to emigrate each year. It is mainly in the displacements, then, that Oaxaca is exposed to the northern music and *narcocorridos*. That explains the knowledge of the genre but not the taste and / or need for it. (Ramirez-Pimienta, 2011; 191.194)

The narcocorrido from Oaxaca illustrates the regional rivalry, as the *corrido* "The Oaxaco"²⁷ by Alvaro Monterrubio says:

*In the north many people
nicknamed us oaxaquitos.
Must be because of the state
or because we are small.
But many have already died
Because they did not take care of what they said.*

The verse reflects not only the violence of regional rivalry ("many have already died...") but the ethnic component ("or because we are small"). The ethnic component is illustrated in "The heavy Oaxaca"²⁸ by Northern Eclipse:

*Also the coastal race
Is worthy of admiration
Because they are warm-blooded
Very sincere and very real,
A heavy race
They must be respected.*

Thus, the *narcocorrido* unites a regional or ethnic community, but not a political one. This is not about political rivalries:

In many of the bands that play the *narcocorrido* from Oaxaca, there is an effort to claim their origin from an ethnic perspective and not only a geographical one, as is the case elsewhere with the *narcocorrido*. [...] It is because the *corrido* in Oaxaca has to do something that would be unthinkable in their counterparts in other states: affirm that they are not ashamed of their origin. (Ramirez-Pimienta, 2011; 206)

At the national level, there is also an important vein affirming belonging and vindicating through the denouncement of the *war on drugs* as an illegitimate intrusion by the U.S., or of the hypocrisy of a United States that tolerates traffic and consumption inside its borders, or of the fact that it uses Mexicans and then betrays them. For example, in narrating the value of a commander who tried to

²⁷ En el norte mucha raza/ nos apoda oaxaquitos./ Ha de ser por el estado/ o porque nos ven chiquitos./ Pero muchos ya se han muerto/ Por no cuidarse el pico.

²⁸ También la raza costeña/ es muy digna de admirar/ porque son sangre caliente/ muy sinceros y muy real./ raza de agalle y pesada,/ palabra, hay que respetar.

stop a drug shipment, "Under Water"²⁹ by the Tigres del Norte, denounces the cover-up of the event and the subsequent circulation of the drugs:

*And in the hospital he was dying
The commander lay suffocated.
Well below the water
I have brought this issue to light
Out of the journalist's file
Because it was not reported.
And the load is now on sale
On the American side.*

But the accusation becomes even more explicit as it pulls on anti-American, nationalist fibers, found deeply rooted in the Mexican political consciousness (and from the tradition of the *corrido*, as *smuggler's corridos* pointed to, specifically that of the tequila), openly defending the interests of the political community before whom it presents the real enemy, the real threat: the United States. The *narcocorrido* denounces:

*Different countries are
Certified by the gringos
They do not want drugs there
For they say that is a danger
Tell me who certifies
The United States.*

*To catch the narcos
Mexico has been straight.
The Americans buy coke
The pay it at any price.
They do not want drugs to exist
But give themselves privileges.
("The General", Los Tigres del Norte)³⁰*

The drug dealer as a human being

As for the dehumanization of the drug dealer, it would be absurd to expect to find it in the *narcocorridos*, even if the counter-discourse retook the other elements of official discourse. However, it is important to note that a substantive portion of *narcocorridos* talk about everyday and humane aspects of drug traffickers: their fears, their anxieties, their claims, and their reasons for entering the business.

²⁹ Y en el hospital moría/ Asfixiado el comandante./ Muy por debajo del agua/ Este asunto ya he sacado/ Del archivo periodista/ Porque no lo denunciaron./ Ya la carga está a la venta/ En el lado americano.

³⁰ A diferentes países los/ Certifican los gringos/ No quieren que exista droga/ Pues dicen que es un peligro/ Díganme quien certifica/ A los Estados Unidos.
Para agarrar a los narcos/ México a sido derecho./ Los gringos compran la coca/ La pagan a cualquier precio./ No quieren que exista droga/ Pero se dan privilegios.

*I was poor a long time
Many people humiliated me
And I started making money
Things have now turned
Now I'm called boss
I have my private key
("Private key", Banda El Recodo)³¹*

The *narcocorrido* from Oaxaca, "Zorro of Oaxaca",³² by the Black Devils, clearly states:

*To get money
School is not important.
To God we ask for luck.
The skill we have already.*

In the narrative of violent acts, the human component of the characters is once again presented. In "The plane of Death", Los Tigres del Norte tell of a drug dealer's revenge against his captors. At the beginning of the *corrido*, the lyrics speak of suffering ("tortured / without mercy") and of the protagonist's friendship ("they locked his friend in"). "Facing Death"³³, referenced above, is insistent in emphasizing the protagonist's personal ties when he dies, "the affected":

*Murder had surrounded me
In my mind, my family
Within minutes my life flashed before me
[...]
Poor and without tears
And many rosaries
Good Friends
Dear children
I failed them along the way.*

The sacrifice

Sacrifice is one of the most interesting aspects, not because it fulfills the function that the official discourse gives it, as input for the defense of sovereignty, but because in *narcocorridos*, self-sacrifice when facing the antagonist is bound to honor, loyalty and revenge. For example, in the *narcocorrido* already quoted, "The plane of death"³⁴, self-sacrifice makes sense as a vindication of the person,

³¹ Ya mucho tiempo fui pobre/ Mucha gente me humillaba/ Y empecé a ganar dinero/ Las cosas están volteadas/ Ahora me llaman patrón/ Tengo mi clave privada.

³² Para hacerse de billetes/ El estudio es lo de menos./ A Dios le pedimos suerte./ La maña ya la traemos.

³³ Asesinato me tenían rodeado/ En mi mente, mi familia/ En minutos repasé mi vida [...] Pobre y sin llanto/ Y cantidad de rosarios/ Buenos amigos/ Hijos queridos/ Ya les falle en el camino

³⁴ De la nave recordó/ todo lo que le habían hecho/ Que con pinzas machacaron/ Partes nobles de su cuerpo/ Y que estrellaría el avión/ Aunque muriera por eso.

not of the political community.

*From the ship he recalled
Everything they had done to him
Crushed with forceps
Noble parts of his body
And he would crash the airplane
Even if he died doing it.*

*In the control tower
Everything was recorded
There were shouts of terror
And three men crying
Atilano laughed and threatened them.*

*The lieutenant and the soldiers
Repent from their action [having]
Tortured an important man
I think they did not know [that]
On the plane of death
They got on that day.*

*The lieutenant said
My wife is waiting
Atilano said now we're going to
Crash
I also I have a wife
And she will be crying*

*Reaching Badiraguato
helicopters rose
It was going to crash into the barracks.*

Violence against oneself, self-sacrifice, or violence against others, is perhaps the most disturbing element of the counter-discourse. Here, we see violence as a source of identity, self-expression: as Kahn cautions, this would imply the transition from the criminal into an enemy. When the violence makes sense per se and not because of the benefit it offers, the categories of criminal and enemy break down.

Violence becomes a source of self-expression and autonomy; it is the prelude to violence as a source of identity (only missing the collective dimension). The

En la torre de control/ Todo aquello se grababa/ Se oían gritos de terror/ Y tres hombres que lloraban/ Atilano se reía y más los amenazaba.

El Teniente y los soldados/ De su acción se arrepentían/ Torturaron a un gran gallo/ Pienso que no lo sabían/ En el avión de la muerte/ Se subieron aquel día.

El Teniente le decía/ Mi mujer me está esperando/ Atilano contestó ahora vamos a estrellarnos/ Yo también tengo mujer/ Y se quedará llorando.

Llegando a Badiraguato/ helicópteros se alzan/ Iba a estrellarse al cuartel.

criminal, when exercising violence, is becoming an enemy. And this is the element that is present in *narcocorridos*: violence as an expression, violence as autonomy and as identity.

*Because those who fired
Tortured unmeasuredly.
The weed that they stole from me
They will pay dearly.
Why did they let me live?
They should have killed me
Well they are going to get what they deserve
When I have them in the trunk
I feel hatred and anger toward them
I swear I'll eat them alive
("The Shot" Larry Hernandez)³⁵*

If violence is a source of autonomy and self-expression, that is, as an identity, what else is needed to be before an enemy? I think what is missing is the sense of community. In other words, it is necessary for the violence to be a collective expression of the community. If the discourse goes beyond the narration of events, beyond the registration of deeds, and it moves to a conscious and broad critique, there are reasons for thinking that the idea of community is developing from the marginalized position of the criminal. This is where the presence of the criticism of the current status quo by the *narcocorridos* becomes more worrisome. And perhaps the most obvious example of this emergence of critical consciousness is precisely one of the most famously censored *corridos* in recent times: "The Farm"³⁶ by Los Tigres del Norte.

*If the bitch is tied
Even if she barks all day,
Do not release her
My grandfather told me,
They might regret doing it,
Those who did not know her.*

³⁵ Porque los que balacearon/ Torturaron sin medirse./ La mota que me robaron/ Me van a pagar muy caro./ Porque me dejaron vivo/ Mejor me hubieran matado/ Pues no se la van a acabar/ Cuando los traiga encajuelados./ Les traigo un odio y rabia/ pues los comeré lo juro.

³⁶ Si la perra está amarrada/ Aunque ladre todo el día,/ No la deben de soltar/ Mi abuelito me decía,/ Que podrían arrepentirse/ Los que no la conocían.

Por el zorro lo supimos/ Que llego a romper los platos,/ Y la cuerda de la perra/ La mordió por un buen rato./ Y yo creo que se soltó/ Para armar un gran relajo.

Los puerquitos le ayudaron/ Se alimentan de la granja./ Diario quieren más maíz/ Y se pierden las ganancias,/ Y el granjero que trabaja/ Ya no les tiene confianza.

Se cayó un gavilán/ Los pollitos comentaron./ Que si se cayó solito/ O los vientos lo tumbaron./ Todos mis animalitos/ Por el ruido se espantaron.

El conejo está muriendo/ Dentro y fuera de la jaula./ Y a diario hay mucho muerto/ A lo largo de la granja./ Porque ya no hay sembradíos/ Como ayer con tanta alfalfa.

En la orilla de la granja/ Un gran cerco les pusieron./ Para que sigan jalando/ Y no se vaya el granjero./ Porque la perra lo muerde/ Aunque el no este de acuerdo.

Hoy tenemos día con día/ Mucha inseguridad./ Porque se soltó la perra/ Todo lo vino a regar./ Entre todos los granjeros/ La tenemos que amarrar.

*It is because of the fox that we learned,
[When]He came to break the dishes,
And the rope of the bitch
He bit for a while,
And I think he released her
To make a big mess.*

*The piglets helped him
They feed on the farm,
They want more corn daily
And they lose the profits,
And the farmer who works
No longer trust them.*

*A hawk fell
Chicks commented,
Whether alone he fell
Or whether it was the winds that pushed him,
All my animals
Were frightened by the raucous.*

*The rabbit is dying
Inside and outside the cage,
And every day there are many dead
Throughout the farm,
Because there are no crops
Like yesterday with so much alfalfa.*

*On the edge of the farm
They put up a big fence,
So the famer continuse working
And does not leave,
Because the bitch bites him
Even if he does not agree.*

*Today we have every day
A lot of insecurity,
Because they let the bitch out
Everything came undone.
Between all the farmers
We need to tie her down again.*

Some of the metaphors in this *corrido* are clear: the farm is Mexico, the great fence is the U.S. border, the hawk is Juan Camilo Mouriño (former Minister of the Interior who died in a mysterious plane crash in 2008), the farmer is the working class, the piglets is the political class, the fox is (former president) Vicente Fox. Other metaphors are less clear: Who is the bitch? Is it the war (on

drugs)³⁷? Is it organized crime? Is it the army? Speculations abound and interpretation need not be unique. What matters above all is the focus of the *corrido*: it is so much about the particular deeds, particular events or specific heroes, but rather a general diagnosis of the malaise in the country, a representation of what is going on in the political community currently in Mexico. First, it understands the current situation as a threat to the community but there is also a call to collective action: all farmers need to work together to tie the bitch down, not someone particularly brave or violent.

If you move from the established *corridistas* such as *Los Tigres del Norte*, and you look at young people who are still marginal, the collective dimension openly acquires a confrontational tone between enemies, blatantly military. For example, "Here I affirm"³⁸, by Gerardo Ortiz:

Here I present a new proposal
Here we have a couple of answers
Here I warn that we are not playing
Here we fully cross borders
Here I affirm that I am the owner
Here I mention the new rules of the town
And the plan of attack
(...)
Here I show my armed team
Here we have men ready
There are no excuses
Or fear of the blood that must spill
Here we have a closed deal
(...)

The power that rules the cartel de la Juana
respect is given to
Here we demonstrate
Here I warn
Here I present a new Tijuana
Where a couple of battles
Are expected
Here I warn you that I have the command
In each word
I know what I mean
Here I affirm that I have
The backing.

Ortiz does in fact present a new proposal that clearly speaks to a context of war

³⁷ "Bitch" (perra) and war (guerra) rhyme in Spanish.

³⁸ Aquí les presento una nueva propuesta/ Aquí les tenemos un par de respuestas/ Aquí les advierto que no somos juego para trabajar/ Aquí les cruzamos fronteras de lleno/ Aquí les afirmo que yo soy el dueño/ Aquí les menciono las reglas de plaza/ Y el plan de atacar (...) Aquí les demuestro a mi equipo armado/ Aquí les tenemos hombres preparados/ Aquí no hay pretextos/ ni miedo en la sangre para ejecutar/ Aquí les tenemos un pacto cerrado. (...) El poder que reina el cartel de la Juana/ se da a respetar/ Aquí les demuestro/ Aquí les advierto/ Aquí les presento una nueva Tijuana/ En donde se espera/ Un par de batallas/ Aquí les advierto que yo tengo el mando/ En cada palabra/ yo sé lo que hablo/ Aquí les afirmo que tengo/ el respaldo/

(“crossing borders”, “plan of attack”, “armed team”, “couple of battles”), but also of an exaltation of the collective, and no longer individual deeds (“we have men ready”, “we have a closed deal”). Even more so, the collectivity is understood as organized (“rules in place”, “we have men ready”, “I have the command”) and hierarchical (“rules in place”, “I have the command”).

“Pecheras Antrax”³⁹ by Alfredo Rios confirms these features:

*Breastplates grenades and horns
Bazookas and armored trucks
Caring for chief's terrain
Mayo Zambada's town
The kids have nicknamed me “El Chino”
I command and direct team with “Anthrax”*

*Vincent made a request
and I do not wish to disappoint [him]
I bring experience and rank
my team is already organized
the ground is well marked
Those that oppose and scourges
don't try to jump it
Thinking, planning and acting
searching for the best way
I like to do everything calm
I like to use intelligence
but some people do not understand
and it becomes better to use violence
(...)
Sinaloa, what a beautiful state
because in battle I was created
What a beautiful land Culiacan
that has given me everything
women, money and friends
everything I am, everything I've been.*

Once again we find the issues of military belligerence (“fronts, grenades and horns, bazookas and armored trucks,” “the field is well defined”), organization (“command and direct,” “I bring experience and rank” “my team is already organized”), the identification of enemies (“Caring chief’s terrain”, “those that oppose and scourges, don’t try to jump it”). In addition, this *corrido* has two elements present in *narcocorridos* by already established performers, worth stressing: a calling to the regional and local (the exaltation of Sinaloa and even

³⁹ Pecheras granadas y cuernos/ Bazucas y trocas blindadas/ Cuidando el terreno del jefe/ la plaza del Mayo Zambada/ el Chino me apodan los plebes/ comando y dirijo al equipo los Antrax. Vicente ha dejado un encargo/ y yo no pienso defraudarlo/ traigo la experiencia y el rango/ mi equipo ya está organizado/ el terreno está bien marcado/ contrarios y lacras/ no quieren brincar/ Pensando planeando y actuando/ buscando la mejor manera/ me gusta hacer todo calmado/ me gusta usar la inteligencia/ pero hay gente que no comprende/ y es más preferible usar la Violencia (...). Sinaloa qué bonito Estado/ porque en la batalla fui creado/ Culiacán qué bonita tierra/ que todo me lo ha regalado/ mujeres, dinero y amigos/ todo lo que soy todo lo que he sido.

more local, Culiacán) and violence as a means of expression ("Some people do not understand and it is better to use violence"). This last point seems particularly important because if they are using *corridos* as a notice, the use of violence as a collective expression is at play.

However, the direction in which this collective war impulse is going is still up in the air. In short, who is the enemy? In the last two *corridos*, one can infer the opposite side is the rival cartel. Most likely this is the case, or more precisely, it is in most cases. However, one last *corrido*, "I am family, I am [from] Michoacan"⁴⁰ by Gerardo Ortiz, points us in a different direction:

*They did not respect
They got mixed up and aren't coming out alive
They are paid for by the news
and Calderon gives them power
it is a way to damage
They better respect the family
They will pay for those affected
we gave them truce and they didn't help us
from mouth to mouth it was announced
the tragedy of Mr. Nazario
If they want war, we'll screw them here
I have elements and people under my command*

*It is a fight that has not ended
good and evil is said everywhere
I don't find out, I just keep working
I will find a way to get revenge*

*We already found what they put
And with the note they had fun
They took it to the blonde boys
That with blows they cannot resist
We exchanged mode
against government force
Indiscriminate killings continue
Wars in town squares without end, don't end
and when its over they'll do their numbers
the family is not respected
they conditions are on the table
they're still in time to use their head.*

⁴⁰ Se hicieron cochi no respetaron/ De esta no salen ya se revolcaron/ por la noticia vienen pagados/ y Calderón los trae apoderados/ es una forma de perjudicar/ a la familia van a respetar/ van a pagarla por los afectados/ les dimos tregua y no nos ayudaron/ de voz en voz se fueron anunciando/ de la tragedia del señor Nazario/ Si quieren guerra aquí los atoramos/ tengo elementos y gente a mi mando
Es una lucha que no he terminado/ el bien y el mal se dice en todos lados/ yo no averiguo, sigo trabajando/ ya encontraré la forma de vengarlos
Ya descubrimos que lo pusieron/ y con la nota ya se divertieron/ que lo llevaban para con los güeros/ que a los putazos no se resistieran/ intercambiamos la modalidad/ contra la fuerza gubernamental/ siguen matanzas indiscriminadas/ guerras de plazas sin final, no acaban/ y cuando acabe sacaran las cuentas/ que a la familia cero se respeta/ las condiciones están sobre la mesa/ están a tiempo de usar la cabeza.

In short, one may tentatively conclude that the counter-discourse found in *narcocorridos* in its most widespread and popular form *does not correspond* with the official discourse and in many ways, disables it: it refuses to place the criminal *outside* of the political community; it does not consider it a *threat* to the political community, but instead humanizes it. However, the prolific violence used to express, to affirm, to identify is present... and there is already an emerging awareness of the need to act in defense of a collectivity. And the threat, *the female dog*, was unleashed by the politicians. This tendency increases in *corridos* sung by younger musicians. Gerardo Ortiz is 22 and he has developed his career almost entirely *during* President Calderon's *War against drugs*.⁴¹ This is without a doubt worrying and even more so, when it appears as a response to the presidential strategy.

V. In conclusion (in progress)

President Felipe Calderon's discourse looks to the exclusion of drug traffickers from the political community, and makes a call to the "citizens" (of course, excluding offenders) to rally behind government. The violence that the state carries out is in self-defense and what is at stake is the nation itself. In his effort to make the criminal an enemy, he has turned him into an existential threat to the nation, comparable to the invasions of foreign powers in the nineteenth century.

In contrast, the discourse embodied in the *narcocorrido* normalizes the relationship between criminals and authorities, placing these either as accomplices or as a threat. Generally, confrontations are explained by personal decisions, such as treason, and according to particular circumstances. In other words, the conflict is particularized and does not extend to the community.

When there is a confrontation between drug dealers and the authority, the role of the "rival" (the authority) is minimized, not exalted. The authorities (police, army) are marginalized in the confrontations, defeated; or if they are successful, it is not due to their expertise or skill, but because of the errors of drug traffickers themselves or of betrayals (among themselves or by other corrupt cops or drug traffickers).

Collective rivalries that do appear in the discourse of the *narcocorrido* exist, but not as projected in the official discourse. National rivalries exist between drug traffickers/smugglers, as was the rivalry between Mexicans and the [Texan] Rangers, initially. Later it appears between regions or, in any case, races. Authority is the subject of reproach when it betrays or kills the drug traffickers, or else is the object of ridicule, when it does neither. The drug lords mock authority, but do not see it an enemy that poses a real threat.

The two ways in which we see the collective rivalry appear -as the Mexico / USA rivalry or else the regional rivalry- may point to a different type of conflict, other than a political one. In the case of the two collective rivalries pointed out here (Mexico/USA and Sinaloa/Oaxaca) it is a context of economically motivated migration, where marginalized and racially distinct migrant

⁴¹ http://gerardoortiz.net/tundras/?page_id=3

populations are exploited when migrating, and use the *narcocorrido* as a way to form a cohesive identity and a symbolic reversal of the exploitation and humiliation to which they are subjected.

The resurgence of trafficking in *corridos* is simultaneous with the dismantling of the social, political and economic fabric in Mexico that started mainly in the late sixties and continued in the following decades. Because the Mexican state's social contract, which promised social advancement and economic development through the training of young professionals, was unfulfilled - and being a lawyer or doctor did not guarantee access to middle and upper middle class - the figure of the criminal as a trafficker, increasingly took hold in the social imaginary. (Ramirez-Pimienta, 2011; 84)

Perhaps in the imaginary of the "traditional" (as opposed to "altered" or "progressive") *narcocorrido*, the enemy does not belong to a political community, but rather to a particular group that benefits from a context of economic exploitation. This question deserves a much deeper study, but given its relationship with another of the recurring themes in *narcocorridos* –economic necessity as a reason to start a life of crime and crime as an opportunity to achieve wealth, and with it social prestige— it seems important to point it out here.

Having said that, we cannot lose sight of the troubling aspects of the political imaginary embodied in the *narcocorrido*, and in particular the younger (drug) *corridistas*, those who grew up during the recent wave of violence. Violence as a manifestation of identity (an old and recurring topic in *narcocorrido*) and the problem of violence unleashed by the war on drugs as a collective problem that requires collective action (just emerging), indicate the possibility of the politicization of the drug dealer before the State in the popular political imaginary. We're not there yet, but some key elements are present and, indeed, this notorious and insistent politicization in the imaginary of official discourse is starting to show up in the most violent *narcocorridos*. It would be prudent for the government to refrain from signaling the criminal as an enemy, to refrain from politicizing him. May not be the case that, through repetition, the criminal ends up taking the President to his word. Or worse still: that the population in general comes to interpret the current events as a civil war.

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