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## Communities and Crime in Mexico City

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In Mexico's capital, understanding the city means understanding crime, and vice versa. More specifically, it means taking some distance from prevailing policy-oriented criminological perspectives and reintegrating the problem of crime into urban history. Asking question to crime from a historical perspective requires a critical use of views of Mexico City as a chaotic, dangerous, dirty city. More useful is asking how is it that people continue to come and stay and build communities in the largest city of the hemisphere in spite of great obstacles. The answer involves a complex picture, where the small detail is as important as the broader landscape.

Sociologists and other social scientists have faced these questions mostly through analyses of penal institutions and quantitative evidence, correlating crime rates with socioeconomic indicators. Although that perspective can be productive, it assumes crime to be a "natural" phenomenon of urban life, and few researchers on contemporary Mexico City question the way in which crime is constructed culturally—beyond, at least, "labeling" theories that establish a direct causal relationship between marginalization and criminal tendencies.<sup>1</sup> A historical understanding of crime looks at change as well as at the different levels of communication, and the sites of negotiation where crime is defined and connected with everyday practices. The following pages will examine crime in the public sphere. Against enlightened views of a rational, abstract public sphere, however, the evidence from Mexico City suggests that there are many terrains and voices involved in the public discussion of crime.<sup>2</sup> One of them is urban communities which not only operate as the primary context for transgression and social responses but also constitute themselves into actors that negotiate with the state.

At the most basic level of historical research, judicial archives document the social practices and public discussions of crime through depositions of witnesses, victims and suspects. Proof of responsibility for a crime was seldom based on material evidence but resided in discussions and negotiations that involved multiple actors. This dialogical exchange is not just an effect of the discursive structure of criminal records. Even before they faced authorities, suspects and victims involved in violent crime knew that their actions were to be judged by an audience that deliberated about its legitimacy. The audience they had in mind was not primarily judicial authorities but their own friends and neighbors. Instead of the random, cowardly aggressions of scientific or literary descriptions of urban-poor life, I found that fights followed rules that resembled, and drew from, similar notions of honor, as elite duels.<sup>3</sup> Lower class men fought outside bars or homes, in neutral spaces, and avoided the intervention of the police, even after the end of combat. Men of all classes, and sometimes women, fought in such a way that witnesses would be able to judge the outcome as honorable or not. Performance mattered as much as outcome in order to establish the reputation of contenders. As in many other urban and rural contexts in Latin America, courage and skill with a knife in hand determined who was a man.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the police or a judge decided after the fact had little import in the eyes of the urban communities that saw or heard about these fights—just as it did not matter for the educated men who used violence to protect their honor.

In cases of theft, lower-class neighbors were also the usual victims, and they also avoided the intervention of the police. They knew that official intervention usually meant that, even if the suspect (who in most cases lived close to the victim) was arrested, the stolen property was bound to be lost in police stations or courts. For people living in poverty, recovering whatever money or goods were missing was more important than achieving justice—an elusive idea, anyway, since everyone knew that money could buy the way out of court. Before the police came, victims and neighbors would try to corner the suspect and shame him or her into returning the property through negotiations that were not directly registered by judicial sources. The suspect had to weight the benefit of keeping the loot against the bad reputation, or, in other words, the loss of social capital incurred by being considered a thief by neighbors. In one case the victim dropped the charges after an uncle of the suspect promised to pay back the value of the stolen goods, suggesting the involvement of broad networks of family and neighbors in these negotiations.

Photojournalism presents the clearest evidence of the public and contested character of crime in Mexico City. Pictures portray the complexity of the relationship between suspects and representatives of the state in Mexico City in a straightforward way that is uncomfortable for textual sources. In photoreportages from the mid-fifties in Mexican police stations, photojournalist Nacho López showed a suspect making a point with his eloquent hand and eyes to the prosecutor, who usually faced away from the camera. Next to the suspect, a policeman raises his finger, probably to correct the suspect's story.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1** - Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez, Paying the Police  
Vélez-Ibáñez, Carlos G. 1983. *Rituals of Marginality: Politics, Process, and Culture Change in Urban Central Mexico, 1969-1974*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Used with the author's permission.

In Figure 1, from Ciudad Netzahualcóyotl in the early 1970s, we see two men at the police station. One is arguing, on the right, while the other is simply handing some crumpled bills to an out-of-frame official—suggesting the routine quality of police and judicial corruption.<sup>6</sup>

The truth about a crime was the product of public discussions and informal arrangements involving several parties. These negotiation had different outcomes according to the actors' resources, which included not only money or status but also honor and eloquence. Yet the higher the level of the discussion within the state apparatus the more difficult the odds for suspects. The inequality reflected in Figure 2 (a suspect facing trial in the earlier decades of the last century) explains why most actors involved preferred to conduct negotiations without the intervention of the state, or in front of

the police rather than the judge. Some famous cases involved the media and high-profile lawyers, but neither helped even the field except for well-connected suspects.<sup>7</sup> The image also shows the limits of an approach, centered on judicial sources, in which institutions are central to define transgression. Crime in Mexico City cannot be understood in strict law-enforcement terms: criminals against law-abiding citizens, or backward practices against a modern and rational state. Event today, the boundaries between illegality and proper behavior are very difficult to pin down. The challenge for a historical perspective is to go beyond the judicial archive and reconstruct other terrains for the negotiation of crime in the public sphere.

This terrain is that of urban communities. I should warn here that I do not believe communities necessarily have stable identities and clearly delimited borders. But they do have histories. I would like to focus on one community in Mexico City that illustrates the complexity of urban identities and their relationship with crime and law enforcement, the *barrio* of Tepito.

The relationship between Tepito and the Mexican state is fraught with tension and unholy bonds. Since the late nineteenth century, the civilized city both rejected and absorbed Tepito as urban authorities established an open market for used and, some said, stolen products that would become the center of the area's economy. Since then, space has not been used for commerce only: many people sleep in the market stalls, many continue to work in their trades, usually as shoemakers. At first, physical distance from



**Figure 2**  
Fondo Casasola, Fototeca Nacional-INAH, Mexico.

downtown was larger: neighbors of the barrio had to build bridges over water canals in order to reach downtown. Later in the twentieth century, mass transportation and pavement brought Tepito closer to the central area of political and economic power. Tepito is today a densely populated zone where space is used for residence, commerce, storage, and production.<sup>8</sup>

Crime and violence are central elements of Tepito's reputation. In the early twentieth century, elite "explorers" paid guides to take them to the sites of heinous crimes in the barrio. Violence related to organized crime continues there today, with dozens of executions every year. In Mexico City's urban folklore, according to Carlos Monsiváis, the legendary Tepito is a combination of narratives, poverty and "congregación de rateros, encrucijada de la 'mota' y de lo 'chueco', de la droga mínima y del robo artesanal."<sup>9</sup> Tepiteño identity has been a site of struggle involving multiple voices and media, including movies celebrating local wit and libido ("Lagunilla mi barrio" and many others), defiant artistic movements ("Tepito arte acá"), literature (*Chin chin el teporocho*), and the complex narratives gathered by anthropologist Oscar Lewis. A skill for fighting has been part of the barrio's identity, along with commerce and a specific accent.<sup>10</sup>



While Tepiteños, particularly young men, frequently fought each other, they did so to consolidate loyalties and hierarchies that strengthened the social networks embodied in gangs. As documented by the famous interviews conducted by Lewis, fighting always happened in the context of alliances that, in a perverse way, from educated perspectives, reinforced communal identity—although Lewis subsumed such effort under his rather narrow thesis of the “subculture of poverty.” Thus the importance of boxing in the *barrio*. Tepito has been the home of many Mexican boxing champions like Rubén “El Púas” Olivares, Kid Azteca, Raúl “Ratón” Macías, José “Huitlacoche” Medel, Octavio “Famoso” Gómez, and Rodolfo “el Chango” Casanova.<sup>11</sup>

Too much emphasis on a violent sub-culture to understand Tepito is bound to neglect a key component of the barrio's importance in the history of crime: its economic function within the capital's economy. Since the late nineteenth century, thieves were thought to live and hide in Tepito, largely because street commerce

Figure 3  
was already the dominant activity. Later in the twentieth century, street commerce came to be centered in smuggled imports, *fayuca*: cassettes, electronics, tennis shoes. Trade liberalization in the 1980s replaced *fayuca*

with other illegal products: drugs, weapons, pirated software, music and movies, probably with investment from outside criminal organizations. Along the way, the decline of salaried jobs made informal commerce an even more important part of the urban poor's domestic economy.

Since street commerce is a poorly regulated activity, merchants have been the object of police extortion from the *barrio's* beginnings; all street sales are in one way or another illegal. Corruption has shaped the interactions between *barrio* and state, generating an acute perception of the police and judiciary as brutal, dishonest, and ineffective—more so than in other areas of the city.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the Federal District's police, smuggling attracted Finance Ministry (Secretaría de Hacienda) inspectors and, more recently, production and distribution of drugs and weapons interested federal agencies. Large operatives with hundreds of agents have been a staple of the last twenty years. They are even called *tepitazos*. One of those operations caused looting and a 10-hour battle between local residents and 1800 policemen in November of 2000. Federal police served multiple warrants on contraband warehouses, but they found them empty (probably because of a leak) and proceeded to break into other buildings. The resistance became generalized violence; the federals left and the local riot police came to reestablish order. But only in appearance: *tepiteños* announced their readiness to arm themselves and actively resist new operations. In spite of the scale of the 2000 confrontation, the economy of the *barrio* was not fundamentally altered, and the police still lack a strong foothold in the area.<sup>13</sup>

Raids most often fail because the density of commerce and space seems to swallow illegal goods before authorities reach them.[Figure 4] A common resource to avoid police raids was to hide VCRs and cameras inside homes or under drainage covers. The contemporary belief in the existence of a network of tunnels under the *barrio* evokes colonial legends. In any case, using the sewers to evade the police seems a fitting revenge for the state's delay in installing them when the *barrio* was developed.

Law-enforcement interventions do not really intend to eradicate illegality from Tepito. Beyond graft, there is a clear political dimension to this interplay between law and illegality that secures the stability and expansion of street commerce in Tepito. In the post-revolutionary era, the official party protected illegal commerce through clientelistic alliances with street merchants associations. In exchange for lax enforcement, *tepiteños* paid bribes but also demonstrated their loyalty to the government in meetings and elections. Organizations worked, according to Guadalupe Reyes Domínguez and Ana Rosas Mantecón, as "mafias" that sold protection.<sup>14</sup> It is not clear whether or not these links have been completely eliminated since the first victory of an opposition governor in 1997, and president in 2000.



**Figure 4**  
Fondo Casasola, Fototeca Nacional-INAH, Mexico.

At the same time, however, *tepiteños* have spent considerable energy trying to dispel the reputation of their neighborhood as a place of crime. Their testimonies explain crime as something of the past or brought by outsiders, even as they acknowledge that the inhabitants of specific streets or tenements within the *barrio* "were all crooks, the flower of the underworld."<sup>15</sup> This is interesting because there is no systematic articulation of *Tepiteño* identity outside the struggle with the law. References to class appear only in a very general way (around poverty and hard work rather than unionization or confronting employers). Neither is ethnicity a commonly used marker of local identity: although oral tradition in the *barrio* traces its history to pre-Hispanic Tenochtitlan, the massive arrival of immigrants from different regions of the country since the 1930s has diluted the emphasis on a common past. Crime and illegality seem, by default, to occupy the center of the *barrio's* identity. The most persistent component of *Tepiteño* identity is a reference to the struggle for survival, an ethics of solidarity and a skillful and aggressive response: "no te dejes." To cite Monsiváis again: "la existencia es como un ring." Passivity is costly because "Dejarse es definirse: aceptarse como débil, como frágil, como tarugo."<sup>16</sup> Rather than a stable identity, *tepiteños* place themselves in a permanent, conflictive, very public relationship with the rest of the city and the state. Just as

with the Cretan shepherds studied by Michael Herzfeld, *Tepiteño* pride includes the ability to beat to the punch, cheat, lie and steal their way around authorities they perceive as foreign.<sup>17</sup>

My thesis is that this collective identification with illegality does not mean an anomic lack of concern about crime and living conditions. In spite of the profits that came from urban development of lower-class residential areas in the late nineteenth century, landowners and the city council were slow to give Tepito the services that other areas were receiving, particularly sewer, drinking water, street lights, pavement and security. The diseases caused by open drainage were a recurrent theme in letters from neighbors to authorities. Although conditions improved much during the twentieth century, the struggle to obtain services was at the heart of a long tradition of local organization whose most visible moment was the movement to obtain housing after the 1985 earthquake.<sup>18</sup>

Local organizations have also been concerned with crime prevention, particularly regarding juvenile delinquency, in the face of government lack of interest. The approach of Tepito neighbors emphasized the need to offer treatment and alternatives to young people who committed crimes because of drug addiction—although little could be achieved without systematic state support. Communal self-protection from theft does not exclude violence, or at least the threat of it. A banner I saw at the entrance of a busy commercial district in the colonia Morelos, part of Tepito, greets customers: “Welcome customer. If a *ratero* [petty thief] tries to steal from you, let us know. The merchants of this market will gladly beat the crap out of him.” Against pickpockets, contemporary *Tepiteños* use, according to Gustavo Esteva, an effective combination of shame and violence: those caught stealing from clients in the market have their heads shaven and their shoes taken away; thus clearly identifiable, they have to run away, and receive a smack or two from the other merchants who see them go by.<sup>19</sup>

The place of Tepito in the landscape of Mexico City cannot be reduced to one of resistance to state or class domination. Although neighbors have fought to maintain security and other services in order to preserve a viable community, it would be naïve to say that Tepito is not a territory of illegality. The use of space reflects this tense relationship between Tepito and Mexico City. One only needs to drive a car through Eje 1 Norte to see that the law means something different there: sellers offer everything from drugs, guns to bootleg or snuff films, people cross the street without even looking for cars, stalls overflow the sidewalk and invade the avenue. The avenue, which split the barrio's space when expanded in the late seventies, is the symbolic site of the barrio's complex relationship with the city. In November 2000, and after other *tepitazos*, local residents have closed the avenue and played soccer.

Tepito is a central place in the discussion of crime in Mexico City, which is itself a central theme in the public sphere. Specialists and authorities still characterize it as a naturally “criminogenic zone.” In late 2002 and early 2003, Rudy Giuliani and Bernard Kerik, who advised the local government on how to achieve New-York-City success against crime in Mexico City, surveyed Tepito from a helicopter and on foot—although briefly and surrounded by an army of guards.<sup>20</sup> One can imagine they were prompted by the obvious question: How do you expect to turn this place into midtown Manhattan? Giuliani's cautious expedition suggests the insurmountable limitations of a technocratic approach: even well-paid foreign consultants will have a problem arguing that recipes like “zero tolerance” can be applied without regard for the local dimension of crime; even an army of policemen would not be enough to cut the multiple connections between Tepito and the rest of the city.

The problem is that Tepito's reputation, particularly in the form of the communal dimension of crime and crime prevention, prevents a rational discussion of the positive aspects of the *tepiteños'* struggle for security, because the logic of prohibitionist and punitive strategies excludes all others in the public sphere. David Garland has pointed out the contradiction within contemporary law-and-order discourse between a state-centered rhetoric of “war on crime” and an increasing use of privatized schemes of local (although upper and middle-class) security.<sup>21</sup> Neighbors in lower-class areas like Tepito have been depending on private (communal, to be more precise) security for a long time while struggling against repressive strategies.

Nothing new here. Latin American cities, like Angel Rama showed us, are places where the educated *letrados* have sustained a tense conversation with popular practices for centuries. Indignant discourses about the barbarism of the lower classes were always read under the light of everyday realities that proved difficult to reform by decree.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, people continued to survive, gradually adapting to changes that had more to do with social, economic and demographic factors than with any project of moral reform.

The current centrality of crime in the public sphere may change that long-term *diálogo de sordos*. An obvious negative consequence of that centrality is the politization of punishment which translates not only into electoral promises of a strong hand against “criminals” but also into the political use of law-enforcement agency—as

illustrated in the recent failed attempt by the federal government to eliminate a popular candidate, the mayor of Mexico City, from presidential contention with dubious charges. Although moralistic in form, this politization of punishment is often articulated in terms of class and ethnic difference, in a language that is easy for voters to digest.<sup>23</sup> A positive consequence of the entrance of crime in the public sphere, however, is the possibility of contrasting the experience of urban communities against punitive discourses. This would hopefully attract greater public attention to the local dimension of crime and crime prevention, and produce a more balanced dialogue between generalizations and anecdotes, as attempted in this paper.

**Notes**

- 1 For a review of existing literature and the challenges of a quantitative approach see (Beltrán and Piccato 2004). David Shirk and Wayne Cornelius, at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, have coordinated the most recent and systematic multidisciplinary project on crime and justice in Mexico. For studies that emphasize the role, and failure, of institutions see (Ruiz Harrell 1998; Zepeda Lecuona 2004).
- 2 Although they do not address the issue of crime, useful references are (Habermas 1991; Lomnitz 1995; Warner 2002).
- 3 This section contains results discussed at length in (Piccato 2001) On dueling, (Piccato 1999)
- 4 See for example (Chasteen 1990)
- 5 (Mraz 2003)
- 6 (Vélez-Ibañez 1983)
- 7 See (Macías González 1999; Moheno 1925, 1928) For a reflection on the possibilities of judicial sources for social history see (Joseph 1992)
- 8 Two excellent studies on Tepito are (Aréchiga Córdoba 2003; Reyes Domínguez and Rosas Mantecón 1993) On social expansion and “social distance” see (Lira 1995; Morales 1987; Jiménez 1993)
- 9 (Monsiváis 1970) [p]
- 10 (Lewis 1959, 1961; Ramirez Rodríguez 1972)
- 11 See for example (Garibay 1978)
- 12 A fruitful approach to these problems in Guadalajara in (de la Peña 2000)
- 13 See *La Jornada*, 17 November 2000; (Aréchiga Córdoba 2003)
- 14 (Reyes Domínguez and Rosas Mantecón 1993)
- 15 (Lewis 1961; Borrás 1987)
- 16 (Monsiváis 1970) [p]
- 17 (Herzfeld 1985)
- 18 (Aréchiga Córdoba 2003; Borrás 1987; Gutmann 1996; Lewis 1961) ; Archivo Judicial del Distrito Federal (hereafter AJ-RS), 781323; *ibid.* 434207; *ibid.*, 1074715, 1-2; *ibid.*, 518295; *ibid.*, 430159; Archivo General de la Nación, Secretaría de Justicia (hereafter AGN, SJ), vol. 891, exp. 3691 [1914].
- 19 (Esteve 1991)
- 20 *La Jornada* , 24 Oct. 2002; *idem.*, 15 Jan. 2003. For a critique of the project see (Arroyo 2003)
- 21 (Garland 2001)
- 22 (Rama 1996)
- 23 *La Jornada* , 28 Jun. 2004.

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