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Insurgent Vigilantism and Drug War in Mexico

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pla**Michael J. Wolff**

Abstract

The proliferation of armed, anti-crime self-defence groups (*autodefensas*) in Mexico since 2013 has sparked renewed scholarly interest in vigilantism and the politics of collective violence more generally. Whilst most of this recent scholarship attempts to explain where and why such groups emerge in the first place, very little attention has been paid to the micro-foundations of vigilante organisation and behaviour. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in Mexico in 2018, and incorporating theoretical insights from the social movements, civil war, and organised crime literatures, this paper examines the political strategies and collection action regimes of contemporary vigilante mobilisation. I argue that vigilante groups in Mexico employ the tactics of popular insurgency both as a negotiating tool to influence government behaviour or policy, and as a primary mechanism to overcome collection action problems in high-risk environments.

Resumen

Tras la proliferación de grupos armados de autodefensa en México desde el 2013, se ha renovado el interés académico en el vigilantismo, además de la política de la violencia colectiva en general. La mayoría de esos estudios recientes pretende explicar en donde y por que esos grupos se forman, pero se ha prestado poca atención a las micro-fundaciones de la organización y comportamiento vigilante. El presente estudio se base en trabajo etnográfico llevado a cabo en México en 2018. Incorporando contribuciones teóricas de las literaturas sobre guerra civil, movimientos sociales, y el

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crimen organizado, busca examinar las estrategias políticas de grupos vigilantes en el estado de Michoacán contemporáneamente. Mantengo que esos grupos han adoptado la estrategia de la insurgencia popular, en primer lugar como herramienta de negociación para influenciar el comportamiento del gobierno, pero también como un principal mecanismo para superar los problemas de acción colectiva en ambientes de alto riesgo.

Keywords

Autodefensas, vigilantism, Mexican drug war, criminal violence, Michoacán

Palabras claves

Autodefensas, vigilantismo, narcotráfico en México, Michoacán, Violencia Criminal

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Introduction

News of a highway murder in January 2018 sparked a popular uprising in Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro, a town of 22,000 inhabitants in the central highlands of Michoacán, Mexico. Their miscellany of weapons ablaze, hundreds of angry residents descended on the home of “El Gastón,” the local *Jefe de la Plaza* and affiliate of the Los Viagras drug cartel, who they blamed for the murder. After a two-hour gun fight, El Gastón’s brother lay dead, whilst he and his lieutenants fled into the nearby mountains. The rebellious townspeople then set up armed barricades at the town’s main entrances and began conducting nightly security patrols. Their lives and livelihoods, they insisted, could not be trusted to “the corrupt government.”

Eight months later, on 8 August, they revolted again. Sparked this time by the kidnapping of three local men, the crowd now fell on City Hall, where they took their mayor hostage along with seven of his aldermen. They also set up roadblocks at the edge of town, hanging banners that read, “They took them alive, we want them back alive!”¹ Now their message called for government action: Investigate (and *solve*) these crimes, or we will make it impossible for you to govern.²

These uprisings were by no means isolated events. Less than fifty miles away, in the town of Cherán, local residents amassed in 2011 to shut down an illegal logging operation and run their corrupt mayor out of town. Two years later, in February 2013, a group of lime growers and cattle ranchers instigated an armed popular uprising against the Knights Templar cartel in the towns of La Ruana and Tepalcatepec, fifty miles in the opposite direction. This time, the flames of discontent rapidly spread, and thousands soon joined the call to arms. The *autodefensas* (self-defence groups), as they called themselves, then launched a general offensive to “liberate all of Michoacán from the tyranny of organized crime” (Mireles, 2017), and within a year succeeded in taking control of half of the state’s municipalities (Guerra Manzo, 2015). Although they have since fragmented and collapsed as a unified movement, some groups consolidated local power and became institutionalised, whilst a plethora of new groups

using very similar tactics and interpretive frames have continued to spring up across Michoacán and in the neighbouring state of Guerrero. Indeed, such uprisings and their associated organisations became embedded in the political process itself. By incorporating armed civilian protest as a strategy of political contention, and by creating semi-autonomous territorial enclaves within Mexico's borders, they have introduced significant new challenges to democratic governance and the exercise of state authority.

Explaining these phenomena is difficult, not least because it is unclear exactly what they are. In line with most attending scholarship, I refer to the various civilian groups in arms as vigilantes, although it is clear they are both less and more than that. On one hand, they are "anti-crime" in only a limited sense, as in many cases they actively protect and/or receive material support from known criminal organisations (Felbab-Brown, 2015; Grillo, 2016). On the other hand, they do much more than just fight crime through extra-legal means. Indeed, many groups have become relevant political powers unto themselves, controlling territory and capturing local governing institutions, and shaping political struggle through the use of organised protest and other shows of force. As such, they share similarities with many other non-state violent actors, including insurgent organisations, paramilitary groups, and drug cartels, but also with protest-based social movements more broadly (see Mazzei, 2017).

Moreover, the literature on vigilantism, still in its conceptual infancy, lacks the tools to adequately explain them. Traditionally understood either as a form of "establishment violence" that is tolerated by the state (Rosenbaum and Sederberg, 1976), or as a natural civilian response to crime where the state fails to provide security (Pratten, 2008; Smith, 2004), most explanations for vigilantism employ a functionalist logic that assumes collective action where there is an apparent collective interest or need. However, we know that collective action problems plague mobilisation of any kind (Olson, 1965), and that they become especially acute where risks of participation are high and rewards uncertain (Wood, 2003). For the various vigilante groups battling deeply entrenched drug cartels in Mexico, these risks are often extreme, such that the consideration of how collective action problems are overcome should be central to any enquiry into their emergence and spread.

How *do* they succeed in mobilising populations and sustaining collective action regimes in the face of extreme risk? Part of this can be explained by looking at rational incentive structures. For example, wealthy patrons may offer selective benefits such as wages, stipends, or even political reward in order to induce and sustain individual participation (Moncada, 2019; Phillips, 2016). However, as I discuss in subsequent sections, such material compensation is often scant and unpredictable, and cannot alone account for successful mobilisation. Drawing on insights from the civil wars and social movements literatures, which have both dealt with collective action problems in much greater depth, I argue that a more compelling explanation lies outside the realm of purely rational calculation.

I begin by conceptualising the uprisings as a peculiar type of vigilantism in which individual vigilante groups are best understood not as isolated entities reacting

uniquely to local conditions, but rather as mutually interdependent local manifestations of a broader social movement within which narrative frames and strategies of contention are shared. For this *Insurgent Vigilantism*, as I call it, a mobilising narrative depicting vigilante justice as an historically rooted act of liberation is wed to a tactical strategy of insurgency (i.e. armed popular uprising), the combination of which helps to overcome collective problems in two important ways. Firstly, the narrative infuses individual sacrifice with deeper meaning by tying it to a greater, culturally resonant cause, whilst stigmatising non-participation as a mark of cowardice or betrayal. Secondly, the strategy of insurgency itself, easily learned and replicated, facilitates collective decision-making whilst also helping to affirm and deepen collective identities that, in turn, intensify the commitment of participants. Transmitted through an important set of pre-existing social networks, Insurgent Vigilantism's mutually reinforcing narrative and tactics have proved successful in mobilising and sustaining collective action in the face of extreme risk, leading in many cases to the overthrow of deeply entrenched criminal authorities.

In addition to the findings of earlier scholarship and media reports concerning popular uprisings in Michoacán, the empirical analysis in this article draws heavily from interviews and ethnographic research conducted in Michoacán between June and August 2018. During this period, the author visited ten municipalities that had been directly impacted or controlled by vigilante mobilisation at some point since 2011, including several where vigilante groups or legalised civilian security regimes continue to be in place.³ Predominantly in these places, but also in the state capital of Morelia, semi-structured interviews were conducted with an approximate total of sixty subjects, including top-and mid-level *autodefensa* leaders, rank-and-file members of vigilante groups, police commanders, government officials, attorneys, activists, religious leaders, and journalists.

The Crux of Collective Action

For three years I tried to convince people here in La Ruana to commit to an armed uprising against the [Knights] Templars, but no one wanted to commit. They all said it was suicide, that the Templars would simply kill everyone.

Hipólito Mora, *autodefensa* leader (La Ruana, Michoacán)

The literature on vigilantism pays surprisingly little attention to problems of collective action, with the bulk of scholarship focussing instead on the motivational rather than organisational attributes of vigilante groups. Rosenbaum and Sederberg (1976) classic typology of vigilantism, for instance, lies upon motivational dimensions only, identifying crime control, social control, and regime control as the key points of conceptual variation. Theoretically, what has followed is a split over the nature of such motives, with most scholarship identifying vigilantism as inherently conservative or reactionary, whilst others have understood it as ideologically neutral or even

progressive (Moncada, 2017). Whichever the perspective, collective action has generally been assumed wherever there is a collective interest demanding it, so long as the state tolerates it.

This lack of concern for collective action problems may be due to an empirical assumption that the victims of vigilante justice are often poor, unorganised, and socially marginalised, and consequently present very little actual threat to their assailants beyond what they represent symbolically. However, the risk-benefit dynamics for participants in Mexico's anti-crime uprisings should compel us to take collective action problems more seriously. In these cases, civilians repeatedly mobilised against deeply entrenched organised crime groups that, in addition to their propensity for killing those who resisted their rule, had developed extensive systems of surveillance and control from within the very institutions of state and society (Felbab-Brown, 2015; Grillo, 2016; Mireles, 2017). Considering the severity of these challenges, how did vigilante leaders convince others to follow them? How did they mobilise and sustain insurgent collective action in the face of extreme risk?

The study on civil wars and social movements, which has dealt with such questions much more extensively, suggests that the collective action problems in high-risk environments can be overcome in one of the two main ways. Rooted in Olson's rational choice assumption, the first relies on the provision of selective benefits to secure participant commitment. In civil war, this may come in the form of soldier salaries, land acquisitions, or a license to loot (Collier and Hoeffler, 2001; Popkin, 1979), or in social movements through the creation of salaried jobs or the distribution of membership benefits (McAdam et al., 1996). The second way assumes that individual decision-making cannot be reduced to purely rational calculation, but is instead rooted in collective identities and social meanings. Here, scholars of both fields agree that shared identity, particularly where it is grounded in a common experience of injustice, facilitates collective action by infusing personal sacrifice with deeper meaning (Goodwin, 2001; Taylor, 1988; Wood, 2003).

For Mexico's vigilante uprisings, selective benefits do tell part of the story. Wealthy patrons in Michoacán's Tierra Caliente region, for example, levied their social and economic power to mobilise lower class recruits during the *autodefensa* uprisings (Moncada, 2019). Correspondingly, Phillips (2016) found that municipalities where vigilante groups emerged in 2013–2014 were statistically also the most unequal, suggesting that collective action may have been more likely where local elites could readily arm and employ their dependent work forces. However, the provision of selective benefits such as wages and stipends typically represent only meagre and often inconsistent compensation for time volunteered to the manning of checkpoints. They do not account for participant commitment during initial group formation or insurgent action thereafter – the highest risk phases of mobilisation – and nor can they account for the active support of non-combatants, which also entails significant risk as well as investments in time and money. Considering this, I argue that a more satisfying explanation for collective action lies in the realm of shared identities and how these interact with culturally meaningful narratives and strategies of action.

Two causal processes are especially important for this analysis. Firstly, whilst collective identities may emerge in any number of ways, they tend to acquire deeper meaning (a sense of linked fate) as a result of conflict or repression. The success of African-Americans in sustaining protest during the American civil rights movement, for example, has been traced to shared identities born out of the common experience of slavery, state repression, and social exclusion (Marx, 1998; Taylor, 1988). Secondly, social networks – whether pre-existing or forged in the process of protest and rebellion – create social pressures that compel individuals to participate in collective endeavours, whilst also acting as conduits through which mobilising narratives and strategies of contention are learned and acquire symbolic meaning (Gould, 1995). In her study of insurgent peasants in El Salvador of the 1980s, for instance, Wood (2003) found that bible study networks created by adherents of Liberation Theology were not only pivotal for the FMLN's (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional) organisational success but also helped transform a fatalistic peasantry into impassioned protagonists of historical change.

Both of these mechanisms have been at play amongst Mexico's vigilante groups. Indigenous leaders in Cherán and Caltzontzin, the ground zeroes of Michoacán's anti-crime uprisings in 2011, expressly trace their spirit of resistance to the Purépecha's pre-Colombian conflict with the Aztec Empire, as well as more recent conflicts with mestizo-dominated governments (Interviews 1 and 2). The mostly non-indigenous *autodefensa* leaders who emerged two years later traced their movement to the Cristero Rebellion of the 1920s, which pitted Catholic guerilla fighters against the secularist encroachment of the federal government (Mireles, 2017; Osorio et al., 2016). In both cases, collective identities forged through the past experience of conflict and oppression lent symbolic importance to collective resistance in the present. Likewise, social networks have been indispensable for informational exchange, strategic planning, and the shaping of collective identities and narrative frames. As in El Salvador, the Catholic Church played an important role in linking disparate actors to a common cause and legitimising the vigilante call to action in Michoacán (Guerra Manzo, 2015). Various business groups and growers' associations also played a role, as did less formal cultural institutions such as fogatas (weekly neighbourhood campfires), which function as community deliberation forums in many of Michoacán's highlands communities (Interview 2).

In addition to the shared identities and resistance narratives that have helped to mobilise civilian groups in Michoacán, the actual tactics of mobilisation themselves also have played a role in overcoming collective action problems. Chief amongst these is insurgent protest, which I define here as a highly contentious form of political action in which at least a *partially* armed civilian group occupies the public realm. On its surface, insurgent protest is, strategically speaking, a show of force and an occasionally effective tool of political negotiation. More importantly, however, it helps to overcome collective action problems in two key ways. Firstly, by providing a ready-made template for strategic action, it simplifies collective decision-making. Secondly, it functions as an important mechanism by which shared identities are forged and participant commitments to a cause deepened (see Gould, 1995; O'Hearn, 2009). This means that insurgent protest (or, when harnessed by civilian groups to combat criminal organisations, what I call *Insurgent*

Vigilantism) is not only the product of successful collective action but also one of its sources. For vigilante groups facing serious collective action problems like recruitment fall-out, leadership disputes, or internal rebellion – all of which are commonplace amongst groups lacking clear organisational hierarchies – it can serve as an anecdote for organisational failure.

The empirical analysis that follows is broken into three sections. In it I explore how, during three identifiable phases of vigilante mobilisation in Michoacán since 2011, the shared identities of actors became connected to culturally resonant resistance narratives to overcome collective action problems in the face of great risk, and how insurgent protest – the primary strategy of contention embraced by these actors – helped to reinforce and maintain collective action regimes, particularly in moments of organisational strain. The first section examines the Purépecha uprising in Cherán in 2011, which established a precedent and provided a model for strategic action that other communities would soon follow. The second traces the rise of *Insurgent Vigilantism* as a broader social movement in 2013, as well as its decline the following year. Finally, the third section examines the inner workings of Insurgent Vigilantism through a case study of Nuevo San Juan Parangarituro.

Cherán Rising: Networks, Narratives, and Insurgent Protest

El Guëro's men broke into our house in the middle of the night. They yanked us out of bed, and they shot him [my husband] in the head right there in front of me, in front of the whole family[...] I don't know why they killed him, but he was a representative in the Communal Land Use Authority, and they were taking our timber.

Doña Chucha (Cherán)

Early on the morning of 15 April 2011, nearly a year after Doña Chucha's husband was murdered (see above), a small group of women in the Purépecha town of Cherán defiantly blocked the passage of a column of lumber trucks coming down from the surrounding mountains. Under the direction of a Knights Templar-aligned crime boss known as *El Guëro*, the loggers had been illegally clear-cutting the Purépecha's communally owned forestlands for years, buying off local political elites and targeting those who resisted with violence and intimidation. After dozens of execution-style murders, as well as proliferating rumours of kidnappings and rapes, the protesting women – today known by their heroising moniker *Las Mujeres del Calvario*,⁴ decided to take a stand. Just up the hill, someone excitedly rang the bells of the Calvary Chapel, and soon hundreds of townspeople emerged from their homes bearing machetes, sticks, and old hunting rifles. After taking the timber thieves captive, the protesters doused the column of trucks with gasoline and set it ablaze.

A few days later, protesters set upon another column of lumber trucks. This time *El Guëro*'s men came prepared and shot at the protestors, killing three. What had begun as a relatively small affair, however, soon turned into open rebellion across Cherán and the

surrounding countryside. “Men, women, and children—*everyone*—grabbed any weapon they could find and joined the fight,” participants recalled in interviews. “We set up road blocks at all three of the entrances to town, and refused to let anyone come in or go out, not even the army or the federal police.” The protestors then set upon City Hall, occupying the building and forcing out anyone thought to have worked for the timber mafia. Cherán’s mayor, Roberto Bautista (PRI), was forced to flee town. Not long afterwards, *El Guëro* reportedly died by lynching in a nearby hamlet. “They tied him to the back of a truck and dragged him around until it was over,” according to one account.⁵

Facing retaliatory threats from both government forces and the remnants of the timber mafia, the *K’eri* (as the people of Cherán call themselves) persisted with their insurgent protest for the better part of a year, relying on unpaid volunteers to man round-the-clock checkpoints, patrol the communal forestlands, and engage in regular street protests. With scant material resources at their disposal, movement leaders did not have the means to provide selective benefits in exchange for participation in the uprising. Moreover, the individuals who participated in the uprising continuously exposed themselves to serious risk. How, then, did they overcome the problem of collective action?

According to participants, both their initial decision to fight and their ability to sustain the insurgency were rooted in a broadly shared Purépecha cultural identity and its historical legacy of resistance. In interviews, respondents frequently recalled their “never-conquered” status in reference to the encroachment of Aztec imperial armies, Spanish colonial forces, or the Mexican government. Citing the ethnic homogeneity of Cherán itself, they also purported to know and trust their neighbours more than in other communities. “Everyone who lives here is from here,” interviewees expressed, adding that “we all practice the same traditions” (Interview 3). As such, they considered their neighbours to be “like family,” and that they felt a deep empathy for community members who had been directly affected by criminal violence, even when they did not personally know them. “Here in Cherán,” one interviewee asserted, “if one innocent man is killed, we have all lost a brother” (Interview 4).

By forming the basis for high levels of social trust and empathy, the local Purépecha’s deep sense of shared identity and linked fate thus provided fertile ground for a common mobilising narrative that could wed individual sacrifice to a greater cause. However, social networks were also crucial as a means by which culturally resonant narratives and plans of action could be activated. As suggested above, the Catholic Church played an important role here, not only for its “alarm bells” and its utility as a meeting space but also because local priests openly supported the civilian uprising with both material resources and spiritual approval (Interview 2).

But it was neighbourhood campfire assemblies, known as *fogatas*, that were most crucial for the uprising’s success. A centuries-old tradition in many of Michoacán’s indigenous highlands communities, *fogatas* have long been important loci of social and communicative exchange. During the months prior to the uprising, they acted as incubators of collective rage and as forums through which the Purépecha resistance narrative could be articulated, acquire deeper meaning, and be linked to strategic plans to expel the timber mafia by the way of insurgent protest. According to participants, “It was at the

fogatas where people started saying they were fed up, that they were tired of being afraid. That's where we decided we wanted to fight, and we started to organize" (Interview 5). Ideas shared at small family *fogatas* would then be discussed at larger community gatherings. Over time, a culturally resonant narrative of redemptive justice was embraced more broadly, and a vague strategy to achieve it – insurgent protest – materialised. By April 2011, all that was needed was a spark, which came in the form of *Las Mujeres del Calvario*.

In addition to their pre-existing social networks, the protestors soon created new institutions to help advance their political cause and sustain popular resistance to criminal threats. Shortly after the initial uprising, protest leaders inaugurated an autonomous governing council, the *Consejo de Gobierno*, composed of elders representing each of Cherán's four main neighbourhoods. Citing endemic corruption problems, the Consejo then banned all national political parties and adopted in their place a variety of traditional Purépecha political institutions. Chief amongst these was the elder's council itself, but they also organised a volunteer police force, *Las Rondas Comunitarias*, to help keep order in town and to patrol their communal forestlands (Milstein, 2020). And finally, they formalized the use of *fogatas* as a political institution, where on a weekly basis the council elders would deliberate over the political issues of the day with their respective neighbourhood leaders and organise political action when needed (Interview 2).

The Cherán uprising was, by any measure, a dramatic success. Having drawn the attention of news media and activists' networks from across Mexico and abroad, the Mexican government conceded much of what the protestors demanded. In November 2011, the Federal Electoral Tribunal agreed to cancel local elections, effectively eliminating the old political party system in Cherán. Shortly after, Mexico's Supreme Court ruled in favour of Cherán's political autonomy, citing long-ignored constitutional provisions regarding indigenous communities (Salazar, 2015). Then, following negotiations with the Elders Council, the government also agreed to legalise the *Rondas Comunitarias*, which would later receive state funding for weapons, uniforms, and training.

Beyond these political achievements, however, the Cherán uprising also proved to be a public security triumph. Cowed by civilian resistance, the timber mafia that had terrorised the region for years broke up, and the corruption, intimidation, and violence attributed to it came to an abrupt end. A half decade after the uprising, reported cases of homicide and extortion were virtually non-existent (McDonnell, 2017). The *K'eri* had won the peace.

Insurgent Vigilantism Becomes a Social Movement

We saw what was happening to our brothers and sisters in Cherán. They were taking back their community. We said, 'we are suffering from the same problems—the extortions, the kidnapping, the corrupt police[...]' We said, 'we can take back our community, too.'

Jesus Toral (Caltzóntzin)

The success of the uprising in Cherán was contagious. Thanks in part to the voluminous media coverage it received, communities throughout Michoacán where grievances over rampant crime and corruption were coming to ahead now saw with their own eyes what could be achieved with campfires and a powerful narrative. Over the coming months and years, *Insurgent Vigilantism* – insurgent protest moored in a narrative of vigilante justice – would be embraced time and again from the Purépecha highlands to the *Tierra Caliente*,⁶ evolving into a full-fledged social movement that would fundamentally transform the political order in Michoacán. Polycentric in its structure (see Gerlach, 2001), the movement’s emerging vigilante groups were generally localised in their allegiances and distrustful of other groups. Nevertheless, they shared a common mobilising narrative and tactical repertoire, and they occasionally banded together against common enemies.

Just a few months after the Cherán uprising, residents of the predominantly Purépecha district of Caltzóntzin on the outskirts of Uruapan, Michoacán’s second largest city, took to the streets to protest the arrest by state police of a local teacher, allegedly on trumped-up charges motivated by a plot to confiscate his property. The protesters commandeered a transit bus and set it on fire in the middle of Highway 14D, blocking traffic on one of Michoacán’s most important commercial thoroughfares. After five days of tense confrontation with state security forces, the Secretary of Public Security intervened to release the detained teacher and reduce his charges to a misdemeanour. In response, the Caltzóntzin protesters returned to their homes and the highway was reopened.⁷

The Purépecha resistance narrative that had incubated through fireside discussions over many months in Cherán resonated deeply with the residents of Caltzóntzin. Repeating claims made in Cherán, the leaders of the Caltzóntzin protests asserted that “No one has ever been able to conquer us, not the Aztecs, not the Spanish, not the Mexicans[...]and they never will!” (Interview 1). As in Cherán, they created an Autonomous Governing Council modelled around “Purépecha traditions of self-government” that intended to replace the political party system in representing the community’s interests before the state. Likewise, they (re)adopted the use of *fogatas*, a tradition that had all but disappeared as the community became urbanised, to deliberate political concerns and engage in strategic planning. These deliberations would lead to several more acts of insurgent protest in the years to come, most of which repeated the bus burning and highway blockade of 2011.⁸

The Cherán uprising also helped to inspire the *autodefensa* movement, which made its debut in the Tierra Caliente towns of La Ruana and Tepalcatepec two years later. Increasingly the targets of extortion, kidnapping, and murder at the hands of the Knights Templar cartel, cattle ranchers and lemon growers there had begun to meet secretly three years earlier to discuss possible plans for rebellion, but had trouble convincing their peers to commit. “They all said it was suicide, that the Templars would kill everyone,” *autodefensa* co-founder, Hipolito Mora, said in an interview with the author, later adding that “the Cherán uprising was important, because it taught us that it was possible” (Interview 7). Jose Manuel Mireles, the *autodefensas*’

most well-known leader, wrote on this in his 2017 autobiography, explaining that “the antecedent [to our movement] was Cherán and the other Purépecha towns that rose up in arms three years before to defend themselves against loggers and hitmen in their region” (Mireles, 2017: 148).

The *autodefensa* leaders recognised from the beginning, however, that the largely *mestizo* (mixed-race) populations they hoped to mobilise in the Tierra Caliente would struggle to embrace the Purépecha identity and resistance narrative. To be sure, the region’s indigenous and mestizo populations were in some ways oppositional culture groups, and their attitudes towards one another reflected centuries of racially charged conflict and inequality. Nevertheless, mestizos could still draw substantial meaning from their distant Purépecha roots as long as it did not require them to be “indio” in any present sociopolitical context. According to one account, “they could be ‘savage’ like the Indian because it was in their blood, but still saw themselves as ‘civilized’ like the white man” (Interview 8). Seeing opportunity in this, *autodefensa* leaders consciously tailored their appeals to mestizo recruits in ways that would draw on their ancient indigenous heritage whilst highlighting the more recent feats of their own great grandparents. In order to do so, they pointed specifically to the Cristero Rebellion of the 1920s, which pitted Catholic guerrillas against the anti-clerical forces of Mexico’s federal government. José Manuel Mireles went so far as to dedicate the first several chapters of his 2017 autobiography to weaving the Purépecha and Cristero narratives together into a common historical thread (Mireles, 2017: 1–94). Both celebrated armed popular resistance against the encroachment of nefarious external powers, and both drew on ancestral histories that infused current struggles with deeper meaning.

For mestizo *autodefensa* members, then, it was arguably more a Catholic (rather than Purépecha) identity that undergirded their deepening sense of shared fate. Catholicism was, according to one parish priest in Tancitaro, “the centralizing cultural force” behind the movement, compelling people to see one another as “members of a community rather than as isolated families and individuals” (Interview 9). But as in Cherán, the Catholic Church also played an important social networking role during the *autodefensa* uprisings. Catholic priests provided material support, spiritual guidance, and above all, a relatively safe weekly meeting space where aggrieved citizens could express their frustrations about the criminal regimes to which their towns had become subjugated (Interview 9). In Tepalcatepec, they offered to provide food for “six hundred” people in the event of a popular uprising against the Knights Templar cartel (Mireles, 2017: 151). A few months later, when the *autodefensa* forces had grown into the thousands and marched on the Templar stronghold of Apatzingan, the now famous Father Goyo cried out from his pulpit, “Que viva el Cristo Rey!” in support of the movement (Guerra Manzo, 2015). Even today in Tancitaro, the only municipality in Michoacán where *autodefensa* groups matured into an institutionally structured and apparently stable citizen security regime (Fisher and Taub, 2018), Catholic Church leaders continue to encourage solidarity with the *autodefensa* cause during their Sunday homilies (Interviews 9 and 10).

Both the Purépecha and Cristero resistance narratives prescribed insurgent protest as the central component of their strategic repertoires. Thus on the morning of 24 February 2013, just like Cherán two years earlier, hundreds of aggrieved civilians in La Ruana and Tepalcatepec took to the streets in protest. Their first order of action was to forcefully expel all known Knights Templar leaders, searching for them house by house. Then they detained local government officials and police officers accused of corruption, confiscating their weapons and equipment. Finally, they set up barricades and checkpoints on all roads going in and out of town. According to Hipolito Mora, who spearheaded the uprising in La Ruana:

At that time, we were about two hundred strong[...] Most of us didn't have weapons yet, but we marched on the homes of the *sicarios* [hitmen]. By the time we got there, they had already fled to Buena Vista [neighbouring town], but they left behind them many luxury cars, which we confiscated. Now we poor people drove around town with great pride [laughs]...The day after the uprising, I was contacted by the secretary of public security in Buena Vista, who said he wanted to talk and figure out a solution to our little problem. We all knew he was put there by El Chayo [the head of the Knights Templar], but I told him, yes, but to please come with two trucks full of his police officers for protection. When he got there, I told him right way, 'look, I know who you are and who you work for[...] what we want is your weapons, and you'd better hand them over or otherwise there will be a great *desmadre*.' [shit show] [...]Eventually, they handed over their weapons—AR-15s and good pistols—and their bullet vests, and we put them all in jail for some two months, the secretary included. (Interview 7)

The strategic path taken by the *autodefensas* soon diverged from that of Cherán, however. Firstly, they never sought to form autonomous governing councils or abolish of political parties. "That was what the *comunidades* [indigenous communities] were doing[...]but we were a *pueblo* [mestizo town]," explained José Manuel Mireles (Interview 11), referring to a constitutional provision for indigenous peoples' autonomy. More importantly, the *autodefensas* were up against a much more determined enemy. Two months after the uprising, on 18 April 2013, the Knights Templar launched a major retaliatory attack, which according to those present at the time consisted of 200–300 assailants in pickup trucks armed with automatic rifles and grenade launchers (Interview 12). Although the attack failed, it compelled the *autodefensas* to beef up their military capacity far more than their counterparts in Cherán. Then, citing the need to break the cartel siege, the *autodefensa* leaders began secretly organising with resistance cells in neighbouring municipalities. Their mission, they claimed, was to liberate all of Michoacán from Knights Templar rule (Interviews 7 and 11).

The expansionist phase of the *autodefensa* movement lasted approximately a year. Eventually rallying some 20,000 armed fighters to their cause, they defeated Knights Templar forces in a series of pitched battles throughout 2013, and by December had taken control of 47 out of Michoacán's 113 municipalities (Felbab-Brown, 2015). By mid-2014, the Templars appeared to be a spent force. The *autodefensas*, meanwhile,

seemed to be on the road to institutionalisation. In January of that year, Mexico's Interior Minister, Miguel Angel Osorio Chong, had announced that the government would legalise some of the armed groups, organising them into the so-called *Fuerzas Rurales*, or Rural Police Forces (Informador, 2014).

But these were pyrrhic victories, for they came at the cost of deepening fissures within the movement (Felbab-Brown, 2015). Rival factions within the *autodefensas* soon began fighting each other, and many of their top leaders, including José Manuel Mireles and Hipólito Mora, were imprisoned (Felbab-Brown, 2015; Grillo, 2016). By Summer 2014, most of the "liberated" municipalities found themselves back under the control of other drug-trafficking and extortionist cartels. Many of the *autodefensa* fighters, in fact, had been cartel operatives before the uprisings (supposedly "reformed"), and they quickly reverted to their old professions once their former bosses had been ousted (Interview 13). And due in part to poor vetting practices, several of the *Fuerza Rural* groups turned out to be nothing short of drug cartels in disguise. Such was the case of the Los Viagras, which for at least one year received uniforms, badges, salaries, and weapons from the government whilst continuing to traffic methamphetamines and extort local businesses (Interview 14).

Organisationally fractured and morally discredited, the *autodefensa* movement collapsed. What began as a highly popular insurgency against organised crime had now become synonymous with it. Despite its demise, however, the mobilising narrative and tactical strategies it relied on – what I call Insurgent Vigilantism – have persisted as a recurrent form of political struggle in Michoacán, albeit without the same organisational cohesion or scale. Usually avoiding the now sullied "*autodefensa*" name, new (and sometimes old) vigilante groups have (re)appeared in dozens of Michoacán's municipalities since 2014, in most cases inaugurating their formation with acts of insurgent protest (Interview 15).

The Volatility of Insurgent Vigilantism

No, this isn't the first time. Over the last four or five years, people here in San Juan got crazy like this many times.

Marcos (Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro)

On 26 January 2014, a caravan of diversely armed men sporting white "comunitario"-printed t-shirts entered Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro without firing a shot (Aristegui Noticias, 2014). Fearing for his life, El Gastón, the local *jefe de la plaza* then aligned with the Knights Templar, had already fled along with most of his lieutenants. Two days later, Mexico's interior ministry announced the deal that would legalise the newcomers as a *Fuerza Rural*, such that they could soon expect to trade their white t-shirts and miscellaneous weaponry for government-blue police uniforms and AR-15 rifles (Informador, 2014).

For many residents of Nuevo San Juan, about a third of whom are ethnic Purépecha, the *autodefensas* were uninvited and unwanted outsiders. In fact, resident groups there had pleaded Federal Police officials just one month earlier for help in creating a local community police force of their own (similar to that of Cherán) to defend *against* the expected *autodefensa* incursion (America Economía, 2013). “They were just another cartel,” interviewees explained in 2018, contradicting the *autodefensas*’ claim that they had come to liberate them. As for El Gastón, he had not always “behaved well with the population,” but many residents still preferred his rule over that of outsiders. “He grew up here, everyone knew him” (Interview 16).

In the span of a few months, these sentiments congealed around a popular conspiracy to expel the *autodefensas* and bring the old drug boss back to power. In return for residents’ support, El Gastón promised to rule more fairly than before, to end his extortion of avocado growers and local businesses, and to severely punish anyone who mistreated the local population (Interview 14). That spring, residents amassed to drive the white-shirted *autodefensas* out of Nuevo San Juan, whilst El Gastón, now allied with the Los Viagras cartel, slipped quietly back in. According to local accounts, he arrived just in time to receive the first shipment of *Fuerza Rural* uniforms, weapons, and pickup trucks (Interview 17).

Allegedly under intense pressure from his new bosses to produce cash, and fearful of the ambitions of his own lieutenants, El Gastón soon abandoned most of his promises. He thus began again to charge local avocado growers a protection fee for each acre under cultivation, and to force the *Comunal*, a locally managed timber collective, to allow his men to operate methamphetamine labs on its protected forestlands. Additionally, he failed to punish his own lieutenants for their mistreatment of locals or do anything about the delinquency problems associated with the increasing numbers of *rateros* (“junkies”) around town. According to those who would later overthrow him, this issue fuelled resentment more than anything else:

The extortion was a big problem, and several growers were killed around that time, but it was the theft and the violence, the total lack of security, that brought us to the breaking point. Back then, there were five to ten assaults or burglaries every day! Nobody could go out after dark anymore because the *rateros* would be out terrorizing the community, stealing cars, mugging people, breaking into homes, intimidating people[...]the police wouldn’t do anything about it because they were in with the *narcos*[...]and the *narcos* wouldn’t do anything, because the *rateros* did favors for them. (Interview 18)

Hoping to “teach the *rateros* a lesson,” a group of eight local men began conducting night patrols in Nuevo San Juan sometime in 2015 (Interview 18). Formally calling themselves MOVIL, or *Movimiento de Vigilancia*, locals referred to them as “los pale-ros,” for the sticks they carried. They would later earn another nickname, “los lumbres,” for the nightly campfires they maintained at neighbourhood checkpoints. Although they had few financial resources, and participation was strictly voluntary, their organisation grew rapidly. Within months, hundreds of others had joined. As their mission scaled

up to include all of Nuevo San Juan, they organised themselves into special neighbourhood watch groups, created scheduling mechanisms to manage an expanding web of checkpoints, and developed a communications system to facilitate mass collective action in case of need (Interview 19).

Initially, the vigilantes restricted their ambitions to going after *rateros* directly, but as they grew in numbers, they also began to pressure El Gastón to keep his promises, especially with respect to controlling the *rateros*. According to participant accounts, this tactic worked for a while, and security began to improve. However, sometime in mid-2017, a leadership dispute erupted within MOVIL, provoking a split in the organisation. A parallel vigilante group calling itself the *Consejo* then formed, taking several hundred MOVIL members with it. Their co-existence moving forward would be marked by tension and distrust, such that, no longer facing a united front of civilian resistance, El Gastón reneged on his promises once again (Interview 17).

Tensions between MOVIL and Consejo leaders grew steadily over the coming months, as did residents' frustrations with the deteriorating security situation. It was in this context that, in early January 2018, a local man was found gunned down on a nearby highway, igniting the popular outrage that would soon lead to the ousting of El Gastón and his criminal organisation (see the "Introduction" section). However, the two rival vigilante groups in Nuevo San Juan were not initially in agreement about the uprising. According to participants, Consejo leaders urged caution and compromise, whilst MOVIL leaders demanded immediate action. Eventually, on 5 January, MOVIL acted unilaterally, firing on the homes of El Gastón and his lieutenants until they fled into the mountains or were killed. Only in the midst of this rebellion, faced with the possibility of losing relevance, did Consejo leaders join in the fight (Interview 14). When local journalists began reporting on the incident over the following days, the vigilantes presented themselves as a unified organisation (El Debate, 2018).

Despite the appearance of a unified front, relations between MOVIL and Consejo leaders soured again in the months after the January uprising. A decision to divide Nuevo San Juan into two separately controlled security zones ameliorated tensions temporarily, but in July 2018, the election of a new mayor, Eshter Ortiz Dimas, provoked new tensions as the two vigilante organisations began jockeying for influence in the forthcoming administration (Interview 17). It was in this context that, less than a month later, three local men were kidnapped by unknown assailants, sparking general outrage. Repeating the pattern established in January, MOVIL leaders then spearheaded the action on 8 August to storm City Hall and hold the outgoing mayor (Gabriel Campoverde) hostage along with several aldermen (see the "Introduction" section). Interviewees at the time reported that Consejo leaders originally opposed the uprising, but were compelled to support the action after it began in order to keep control of their own rank and file members who supported MOVIL's strategy (Interview 20).

The uprising lasted nearly a month. During this time, MOVIL and Consejo members worked together to block vehicle traffic through town and keep their public officials on lockdown at City Hall in the hope of pressuring the state government to respond decisively in the case of the kidnapped local men. It was to little avail. The government opted

to ignore the protesters, as did most of the region's news media outlets, and in early September, when the captive mayor's electoral term was scheduled to expire, the vigilante leaders conceded defeat and released him. A year later, in mid-2019, the whereabouts of the three men who had gone missing the previous July were still unknown (Interview 21).

As a strategy of political negotiation, the uprising in Nuevo San Juan was clearly a failure. However, it is likely that there were other, more subtle motivations for the uprising than to pressure the government to investigate the kidnappings. Specifically, leadership disputes and the possibility of recruitment fall-out amongst the town's two rival vigilante organisations threatened to upset a delicate balance of power upon which the informal security regime created by the vigilantes in years prior depended. In light of this, the decision by MOVIL leaders to spearhead the uprising may have been a success, as it helped to secure their own leadership status, whilst forcing Consejo leaders back into a loose alliance under their higher authority. Moreover, the act of insurgent protest itself appears to have intensified both groups' identities as "protectors" of their hometown, and in doing so, increased the commitment and loyalties of rank-and-file members.

Conclusion

The successful mobilisation of armed civilian groups in combatting violent and deeply entrenched criminal organisations in Michoacán since 2011 challenges our understanding of vigilantism in a variety of ways. The primary goal of this article has been to tackle one such challenge, all too often ignored in the academic literature on the subject, which concerns how vigilante groups overcome collective action problems in the face of extreme risk. Drawing on other literatures that have dealt with such concerns in greater depth, I have argued that the provision of selective material benefits plays some role in mobilising individuals, but that a more satisfying explanation lies in the realm of shared identities and culturally resonant narratives that infuse personal sacrifice with deeper meaning. Specifically, cultural communities that have been able to draw on historical legacies of resistance against outsiders have had success in mobilising individuals on the basis of shared identity. These shared identities and the narratives that emanate from them, moreover, have been reinforced by the particular kinds of actions they prescribe, especially that of insurgent protest, which facilitates collective action not only by providing an easily replicable blueprint for strategic action but also by deepening a sense of shared identity amongst those who engage in it. I have called this combination of narrative and strategic action *Insurgent Vigilantism*.

Beyond questions of theory and concept, the armed civilian uprisings in Michoacán also present serious real challenges – and also perhaps opportunities – for democratic governance and political stability. One clear negative consequence has been the de facto fragmentation of national sovereignty (see Davis, 2010), whereby non-state armed actors unaccountable to national judicial institutions increasingly lay authoritative claim over their own territorial enclaves. This means not only that the populations living within

those domains may be effectively excluded from full national citizenship but also that basic government (and market) organisation may be stymied by an increasingly complex process of informal negotiations amongst territorially embedded and politically autonomous actors. This has already been a source of political and economic inefficiency. In a worst-case scenario, it could lead to internecine warfare between entire communities, who absent an effective central authority, might come to see themselves as locked into a zero-sum conflict.

On the other hand, the insurgent protest that is part and parcel to vigilante mobilisation in Michoacán has in some ways had a very positive impact on democratic governance. Firstly, despite their use of non-institutional and sometimes violent means, the various uprisings have helped to put a check on government corruption and other abuses. Certainly, they have on occasion compelled the government to respond to citizen demands. Secondly, the simple act of participating in the uprisings has arguably had a democratising impact on individual participants, infusing them with a sense that they, like Woods' (2003) insurgent peasantry during El Salvador's Civil War, can become protagonists of historical change. To the extent that corruption and fatalism are at the centre of Mexico's security crisis, such forces may, in the long run, provide an important counterbalance to what in the present threatens a deepening fragmentation of national sovereignty.

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Notes

1. Translated from the Spanish original: "¡Se los llevaron vivos, los queremos vivos!"
2. Narrative compiled from interviews and observations conducted in Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro between July and August 2018.
3. See Appendix 1 for the list of municipalities visited and a summary list of interviewees.
4. "The Women of the Calvary [Church]".
5. Narrative compiled from multiple interviews in Cherán between 13 and 16 July 2018. Quotes are from anonymous sources unless otherwise specified.
6. Tierra Caliente, or "hot lands," refers to the lower altitude mountains and plains that stretch from central Michoacán to the Pacific Coast. This is also the epicentre of the Cristero Rebellion in the 1920s.
7. Narrative compiled from group interviews in Caltzontzin on 21 July 2018.
8. Narrative compiled from group interviews in Caltzontzin on 21 July 2018.

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Appendix I

Interviews for this research were conducted in the municipalities listed below:

Municipality	VG status	Interviews
Aguila	Active	6
Caltzontzin (Uruápan)	Active	7
Cherán	Active	5
Jesús del Campo	None	7
La Ruana	Semi-active	4
Lázaro Cárdenas	None	3
Mapeco (Uruápan)	Active	4
Morelia	None	3
Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro	Active	14
Pénjamo (Guanajuato)	None	2
Tancítaro	Active	5

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Interview 1: Jesús Toral, Autonomous Governing Council. Interviewed on 21 July 2018. Caltzontzin, Mich.

Interview 2: “Xotzil,” community leader. Interviewed on 13 July 2018. Cherán, Mich.

Interview 3: “Maria,” community leader. Interviewed on 13 July 2018. Cherán, Mich.

Interview 4: “Dona Chucha,” community leader. Interviewed on 14 July 2018. Cherán, Mich.

Interview 5: Anonymous, group interviews, 14 July 2018. Cherán, Mich.

Interview 6: Anonymous, group interviews, 21 July 2018. Caltzontzin, Mich.

Interview 7: Hipolito Mora, autodefensa leader. Interviewed on 26 July 2018, La Ruana, Mich.

Interview 8: Montiel, Carlos. Criminal defense attorney. Interviewed on 6 July 2018. Morelia, Mich.

Interview 9: “Padre Felipe.” Parish of Tancítaro and Pareo. Interviewed on 24 July 2018, Tancítaro, Mich.

Interview 10: Iran Lopez. Jefatura de Tenencia, Pareo. Interviewed on 23 July 2018, Tancítaro, Mich.

Interview 11: Jose Manuel Mireles Valverde. *Autodefensa* movement leader. Interviewed on 11 July 2018. Morelia, Mich.

Interview 12: Anonymous, group interviews, 26 July 2018, La Ruana, Mich.

Interview 13: “Jesús,” autodefensa leader. Interviewed on 14 July 2018. Jesús del Campo, Mich.

Interview 14: “Marcos,” *Movil* member. Interviewed on 8 August 2018. Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro, Mich.

Interview 15: Molina, Arturo. Journalist at *La Voz de Michoacán*. Interviewed on 5 July 2018. Morelia, Mich.

Interview 16: “Rafael,” *Movil* member. Interviewed on 9 July 2018. Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro, Mich.

Interview 17: Anonymous, group interviews, 10 August 2018. Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro, Mich.

Interview 18: “Pepinas,” *Movil* leader. Interviewed on 8 July 2018. Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro, Mich.

Interview 19: Anonymous. Interviewed on 10 August 2018. Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro, Mich.

Interview 20: “Jesús,” Consejo leader. Interviewed on 9 July 2018. Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro, Mich.

Interview 21: “Marcos,” *Movil* member. Interviewed via internet, 14 June 2019. Nuevo San Juan Parangaricutiro, Mich.