Chains of dispossession and communities in struggle: the illegal opiate market in Guerrero (Mexico)

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Abstract

In this paper, it is explored the impact of militarized and punitive methods of drug control on indigenous and peasant communities engaged in the cultivation of poppies in Guerrero (Mexico), within a context of neoliberal agrarian counter-reform and state repression, operating through a multi-level range of power brokers. Through the lens of ethnography and mixed methodology, it is examined the dynamics and changing characteristics of the commodity chain of heroin, from field production to consumption and money laundering, and it is analysed the different logics of dispossession involved, as well as the rationales of normative discourses in producing communities and their survival strategies. The framework of analysis behind is drawn from studies regarding the anthropology of the state, the anthropology of the «illicit», and of capitalism, and critical development studies.

Keywords: structural violence, drug policy, illicit crops, rural survival, dispossession, Mexico.

Resumen

En este trabajo se explora el impacto de los métodos militarizados y punitivos de control de drogas en las comunidades indígenas y campesinas dedicadas al cultivo de amapola en Guerrero (México), dentro de un contexto de contrarreforma agraria neoliberal y represión estatal, operando a través de una gama multinivel de corredores de poder. A través de la lente de la etnografía y la metodología mixta, se examinan las dinámicas y características cambiantes de la cadena mercantil de la heroína, desde la producción en el campo hasta el consumo y el lavado de dinero, y se analizan las diferentes lógicas de despojo involucradas, así como sus principales fundamentos, los discursos normativos en las comunidades productoras y las estrategias de supervivencia. El marco de análisis subyacente proviene de estudios sobre antropología del Estado, antropología de lo «ilícito» y del capitalismo, además de estudios críticos del desarrollo.

Palabras clave: violencia estructural, política de drogas, supervivencia rural, despojo, México.

1
Introduction and scope

The poppy flower, which is known scientifically as *Papaver somniferum,* was included within a global framework of control pursuant to the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs in 1961. This resulted in the creation of two parallel markets for opioids: one which was legal, for medical and scientific purposes, governed by state public health regulations and international bodies, such as the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), and another which is illegal, shaped by criminal dynamics. The US is the main world consumer of opiates. Since the dismantling of the Turkey-France-Canada-US route at the beginning of 1970's (Ospina *et al.* 2016, p. 28), the US came to satisfy its demand for illegal opiates through gum harvested in Mexico, which increased at the beginning of XXI century. Drug control measures in the US gradually restricted the excessive prescription of opioids such as oxycodone, codeine, and hydrocodone, leading many patients to attempt to address their continuing needs through the *black market.* Between 2002 and 2016, heroin consumption in the US grew more than 220 % (SAMHSA 2018, p. 18) and Mexican production increased symbiotically, ranking the second in the world for poppy cultivation for illegal purposes (UNODC 2019). Within Mexico, the state of Guerrero, where the ethnographic fieldwork of this paper took place, was considered the origin of approximately 60 % of total poppy cultivation in the country by 2018.[1]

In some narratives, it is argued that the cultivation of poppies by indigenous and peasant communities constitutes an economic survival strategy and a way of life in marginalized regions, in response to structural poverty. Although, this might be not the only cause to cultivate; in this article it is stated that the presence of poppy cultivation implies a high degree of violence and dispossession in Guerrero communities within a context of neoliberal agrarian policies.

Through ethnographic fieldwork and documentary review, in this paper it is examined the introduction and expansion of poppy cultivation in Guerrero's La Sierra and La Montaña regions; the phases in the chain of poppy and heroin production, which is considered yet another commodity and the profits and losses the actors involved in this market experience. Finally, considering the imbrications between hegemonic power and counter-hegemonic strategies, in this article it is aimed to enhance a dialogue between these mechanisms of dispossession and the «everyday strategies of resistance» (Scott 1990) that communities and individuals have developed. Through it, it aims to show: *a)* how poppy cultivation has been a vehicle through which capitalist market logic has penetrated peasant and indigenous communities, which has resulted, to some extent, in the dissolution of their relations of reciprocity, the loss of food sovereignty, the increase of violence and the environmental degradation; *b)* how

1 SEDENA, Congreso del Estado de Guerrero, 2018.

poppy cultivation has been deployed by Mexico's armed institutions, and private paramilitary-style actors, pursuant to the demands of the US' hemispheric approach to national security, to justify their intimidating presence in indigenous and peasant communities; *c)* how community-based normative discourses in Guerrero recognize the importance of poppy cultivation as a way of obtaining incomes, while they have started to critically denounce the damaged caused by armed strategies regarding the control of illicit markets and the consequences of partially setting aside food crops.

2
Material and methods

Mixed methods were carried out, following collaborative ethnographic and research action techniques (Lassiter 2005b, Rappaport 2008, Fals Borda 2013). Twelve in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations following focused coding (Emerson *et al.* 2005, p. 172) was conducted between 2017 and 2019, in *na savi, naua* and *me'phaa* indigenous communities of the municipalities of Tlacoachistlahuaca, Zapotitlán Tablas and Acatepec, in La Montaña region of Guerrero (Mexico). The regional media coverage on the issue between 2012 and 2019 was reviewed, and an analysis and legal frameworks review was conducted, focusing on the narratives of local, national, and international institutions regarding illicit cultivations and drug control strategies in Guerrero. When public data was not available, public information requests were made through the National Institute of Access to Public Information (Instituto Nacional de Transparencia, INAI). Although this paper does not engage in the wide discussion on different of poppy crops eradication estimates between US, Mexican and UN body agencies, the insight to the institutional statistics bears in mind epistemic cautions, which consider the standing point and the colonial structures behind statistics production (Appadurai 1996, Sharma & Gupta 2006). Therefore, statistics are considered as an indication of power representation, but not as an objective truth. Eventually, this ethnographic work was accompanied by the production of journalistic pieces.

3
Discussion

3.1. The trips of poppy-based heroin in La Montaña and La Sierra (Guerrero)

Within the context of the irruption of transnational capitalism the Guerrero fields, opium gum derived from poppies and intend-

ed for illegal markets came to be considered yet another commodity. However, the production of this opium gum is determined by a legal regime of prohibition; therefore, its market is not only shaped by cultivation, harvest, distribution, manufacture and consumption, but also by criminal rents and laundering of resulting profits and revenues, which feed into the cycle of production in the legal financial markets.[2] While Guerrero's La Sierra region is a territory under surveillance which has been fragmented and disputed by armed groups that impose quotas, rents and extortions, La Montaña region experiences lesser flows of direct violence due to its stronger community governance structures, such as the assemblies for the administration of communal goods *(asambleas de bienes comunales).* In this context, substantive differences must be addressed as to the modalities of cultivation of poppies between the peoples of La Sierra and the ones of La Montaña. The first are mostly mestizo peasants connected to extractive, forestry, and cattle production. In La Montaña, people are mainly of indigenous origin (*naua, me'phaa, ñuu avi* and *amuzgo*) and are dedicated to a quasi-autarchy of agricultural production, combining the labor in their familiar and communal plots with the precarious income resulting from their experiences as migratory agricultural laborers and government subsidies. These structural differences impact the relationships between poppy cultivation and poverty, the degrees of intensity of agricultural practices, and territorial and market dynamics.

Ethnographic observation in La Montaña showed that the labor related to the planting and harvesting of poppies and opium gum involves at least four months of work, depending on the type of poppy that is involved. The seed of this plant, which can be bought or disposed of from previous years, is planted in fistfuls, fertilized, and the soil is treated with vitamins. Red poppy seeds, which are the ones typically used for this purpose in La Montaña, take three months to grow and can be scraped about eight times before the gum is exhausted. In general, from this kind of cultivation approximately a kilo of gum can be extracted from each hectare. Additionally, according to an interview with a *me'phaa* peasant in Acatepec, in 2018, in La Montaña, there were two other types of poppy: a purple poppy and a mottled (white and red) variety, which take about six months to grow and, once grown, permit about 30 scrapes.

During the growth process, as the poppies develop, it is important to separate the plants from each other so that they can «grow well», to spray them with water and use pesticides and fertilizers as necessary, which, according to field testimonies, have an approximate cost of 200 *pesos* to cover a surface of 0.2 hectares. Once the plants are ready, their bulbs must be scraped and harvested. The scraping is done with a sharpened surface, which is usually a small razor wrapped in a wooden handle that softly scrapes the bulb once or twice. Then, the bulb immediately expulses latex drops that are

2 In May 2019, the cultivation of *Papaver somniferum* is considered a criminal act, according to Article 198 and Chapter 1 of the Mexico's Federal Criminal Code, pursuant to Chapter 5 of Mexico's National Health Law and by the Federal Code of Criminal Procedure.

permitted to settle for a day, and which once oxidized take on a gummy texture, with a brown coloring. Once the latex appears on the bulbs, rain or water can cause the harvest to be lost, so it is important to manage each phase attentively and quickly.[3] The harvest, 24 hours later than the scrape, is usually handled with a small metal bucket such as, for example, an empty juice can, a soda bottle cap or an empty box of batteries which each contain between 50 and 100 grams of gum. These cans are even locally retailed. Once harvested, the gum can also be stored in balls in plastic bags, but this is not advisable for transport because of their strong odor. Subsequently the poppy flowers are collected, and their seeds extracted and stored for the next harvest. Typically, it takes about a minute to scrape eight poppies and another minute to recover the gum of six or seven plants. Depending on the dexterity of the laborer and the quality of the gum, it takes about eight hours of labor to harvest a plot of 0.2 hectares, which can fill one, or a maximum of two, buckets with about 100 grams of gum.

Considered in the terms stated by Polanyi (1957), who understood the market as an omnivorous agent, that transforms land, labor, and money into commodities, and marked in Mexico by the neoliberal agrarian counter-reform (Valtonen 2000, Bartra 2000), poppy is yet another commodity engaged in market dynamics in these rural areas. This commodity-feature makes it part of a process of market, but at the same it is cultivated and harvested by rural families, making it part of a survival strategy of the «rural family economic unit» (Chayanov 1974, p. 99). As a result of its illegality, the risks cultivators face, the militarization, and the disputes for its market, which benefit margins are bigger than other crops, this plant is surrounded by fetichism, violence and dispossession. Those peasants who plant it are not the ones enjoying most profit out of it. Following the harvesting, irrigation, and care of plants during at least three months, the investment in fertilizers, pesticides, and vitamins (in some cases obtained from government farming subsidies), the scraping of the bulbs and the harvesting of the gum, families from La Montaña that grow poppies barely extract about 600 or 800 grams, which was sold for between 12 000 and 16 000 pesos in 2017, when the price of gum was at 20 *pesos* per gram. On top of this, peasant and indigenous communities experienced a high risk that their harvest was destroyed by the Mexican Army, as well as the risk of harassment and imprisonment, the impact of this cultivation on the water, soil, flora, and fauna, and the effects of chemical eradication measures.[4]

Within this production process, significant differences between the socio-economic contexts of La Montaña and La Sierra poppy production, perceived in fieldwork and partially reflected in data, must be highlighted. In La Montaña region, several municipalities leading the list of those with the highest rates of poverty in 2010 (CONEVAL 2010) were also among those where the largest numbers

3 Interview conducted by the author in February 2019 in Zapotitlán Tablas.

4 *Gramoxone*® or *paraquat* was utilized by SEDENA in its drug supply control operations, even though it is included on the list of herbicides designated for restricted use in Mexico, as of DOF, April 12, 2013. Scientific reports indicate that *1,1′-Dimethyl-4,4′-bipyridinium dichloride* is a wide spectrum herbicide, with acute toxicity and chronic effects (Isenring 2006). In December 2018, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission also recalled in its Recommendation 2018-082 that the Center for Research and Advanced Studies (CINVESTAV) had suggested that it use should be restricted as soon as possible (CNDH 2018).

of forced eradications of poppy areas were reported by SEDENA in the same year (Metlatónoc, Acatepec, and Atlixtac). This correlation between poverty indices and poppy cultivation is less conspicuous in La Sierra, where the highest number of eradications reported by SEDENA in 2010 was in municipalities which are not the ones with the highest poverty indices, although abandoned by the State is conspicuous.[5] In the communities of La Montaña where poppy is cultivated and harvested, it is done in small parcels, generally smaller than 0.2 hectares. By contrast, in La Sierra communities, field testimonies, media coverage and data estimates reflect that in La Sierra poppies are usually planted in larger areas.[6] While in La Montaña, harvesting was done once or at most twice a year, in La Sierra, plantations tended to count on propitious levels of farm technology (irrigation, fertilizers, agrochemicals, grafts, hybrids and even genetic improvement), for the intensive cultivation of three harvests per year.[7] In terms of work force, both in La Montaña and La Sierra, on a daily basis, the cultivation and harvesting of poppies has been a task for families, to which municipalities and some assemblies for the administration of communal goods have tended to turn a blind eye. In La Montaña, many family units are integrated by women, children, and elders, who participate in the cultivation, and wage laborers were hired for one or two day to assist this task for a payment between 150 pesos per day ($5-$7.50). In La Sierra, family units were less common, and some rumors talk about force labor in intensive quasi agro-industrial fields.

Since the end of 2017 and beginning of 2018, both in La Sierra and La Montaña, the purchasing price of opium gum in regional markets plummeted to four *pesos* per gram. Media narratives attributed this to the introduction in the US of illegal fentanyl, a synthetic opioid, which started arriving to the US from China through Mexico, principally by way of Port of Lázaro Cárdenas, on the coast of the state of Michoacán (which is adjacent to Guerrero).[8] Although no empirical evidence was directly analyzed, this makes much sense if we consider the decrease on socially necessary labor time at natural resources involved in the production of fentanyl, in comparison with poppy-derived heroin. The first consequence of this crisis in the rural market was the reduction of the daily laborers wage from 150 or 100 *pesos* to about 50 *pesos.* Soon, peasants decided not to grow poppy anymore, and massively migrate as wage laborers instead. This move reflects the great dependence on the money obtained by the sale of opium gum experienced by communities and expresses one of the prevailing ways of dispossession: «exclusion and expulsion» (Sassen 2014). At the other side of the border, the variations of this market as the result of the introduction of fentanyl into the market and lack of control over what is consumed nowadays resulted in the dramatic increase of deaths due to overdoses in the US (CDC 2018). This is seen from some peasant and indige-

5 SEDENA, through information request #0000700048519, February 2019.

6 Estimates based on a calculus between the territory that, according to information provided by SEDENA through information request #0000700048519 in February 2019, was eradicated between 2006-2016 and the number of plantations in the same years. Law-enforcement data need to be considered cautiously, as they are a compilation made by different army battalions, which report data without stating the methodology behind their compilation. However, they provide an approach to the State vision on the territory.

7 Most of the innovations in agricultural technology as to poppy cultivation have been developed in La Sierra. For example, there is a variety of poppy that growers in La Montaña region refers to as «armoured» *(blindada).* According to a *mephaa* peasant interviewed by the author in February 2019, it resists the effects of fumigations carried out with *gramoxone*® or *paraquat* (the commercial name for *dicloruro de 1,1'-dimetil-4,4'-bipiridilo*), which is used by SEDENA for aerial fumigation. Local testimonies describe how local peasants that used to go periodically to poppy fields in La Sierra as wage labourers in 2017 and 2018 brought this variety of poppy to La Montaña.

8 See, for example, Steven Dudley. *The Fentanyl Trade in Mexico Explained in 8 Graphs 19,* February 2019, available at https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/fentanyl-trade-mexico-explained-8-graphs/ and Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, Nathaniel Morris, and Benjamin T. Smith, *No More Opium for the Masses,* February 10, 2019, Noria Research.

nous people interviewed in La Montaña from a particular point of view, as a signal that, «after all, the fatalities produced by the Chinese drug, people will realize that [our drug] is healthier and will buy poppy gum again».[9]

As most peasants only grow and harvest the plant, the transformation of opium gum into heroin, through the «acetylation of morphine chlorhydrate» is conducted by other actors, closer to higher structures in the organized crime. There is some discussion around the main locations of the clandestine laboratories where this process is carried out. Historically, this was handled by labs in northern Mexico or in the US, but press coverage based on SEDENA reports note that the municipality of Heliodoro Castillo (Tlacotepec) was one with the largest number of clandestine laboratories dismantled in the country between 2010 and 2016. Considering neoliberalism flexibilization and market efficacy organized crime is prone to, it would be more efficient to transform the plant into heroin close to the fields, to reduce distribution weight. For this, some chemical precursors, mainly acetic anhydride (CICAD n.d., p. 15), are needed. This can be obtained easily from drug and chemical products stores. A local testimony explains the laboratory process in the following terms:

> Water is boiled in a recipient. When it is boiling, the gum is mixed and dissolved. A brown liquid is made that mixes with alcohol, salt in tablets, which they bring from Chilpo, from doctors or nurses […], and lime, the same we use for the *nixtamal.*[10] It sneaks a first time, with a blanket, and in it the salt remains; then, it is cast a second time, in an especially fine satin sheet, which is dried in aluminum foil, for about two hours. Then, 100 grams sachets are made.[11]

The distribution of the poppy commodity is one of the most lucrative and violent moments of these markets. Since the control of distribution routes itself facilitates criminal rents, various sectors of organized crime fight over their control. These routes are related to the socio-political patterns involved in distribution and can be connected to the transport of other goods and commodities with a legal status such as minerals. As elsewhere in Mexico, in Guerrero these routes are intertwined with the interests of political, military, and police sectors, local power brokers *(caciques),* self-defense groups and criminal groups. They deploy differentiated, hierarchical structures of territorial control, which exercise power through use of force, collect taxes, arbitrarily distribute resources, and implement semblances of justice. They are closely related to formal, legal structures, «including the financing of electoral campaigns and political parties, and parallel payrolls of police and military personnel at different ranks» (Márquez Covarruvias 2016, p. 15).[12]

The distribution of opium gum in La Montaña is operated and disputed by armed criminal organizations, especially since the disarticulation of the Beltrán Leyva criminal organization in 2009 and its atomization into several different criminal groups, including

9 Remarks made by indigenous peasants in interviews conducted by the author in February and September 2019 in Acatepec and Zapotitlán.

10 *Nixtamalización* is the process by which the corn is cooked with water and quicklime, to obtain the nixtamal that, after grinding, gives rise to the nixtamalized dough used to make *tortillas.*

11 Interview conducted by the author, September 2019.

12 Key routes in Guerrero include the one that connects Acapulco, Chilpancingo, and Mexico City, the one between Acapulco, Zihuatanejo, and Lázaro Cárdenas, and the one between Marquelia and Acapulco. In La Sierra, these include the route between its hill municipalities, with Petatlán and the port of Lázaro Cárdenas through Atoyac (particularly, through Xochipala), the one between Carrizalillo and Mezcala (which connects Coyuca with Arcelia) and the Cocula-Iguala route. In the highlands region there are other less traveled routes, which include those that connect Acatepec with Chilapa de Álvarez and then with Chilpancingo, as well as Acatepec with Tlapa and from there through Huamuxtitlán, to Mexico City.

most notably Los Rojos. Indigenous peasants that were interviewed reported that, at harvest time, it was customary for designated buyers *(burreros)* to go from house to house or with a loudspeaker announcing the purchase of opium gum. At the beginning of 2019, it is still relatively common for groups involved in drug trafficking in these rural areas to constitute a system of functional exchange that operates primarily upon the basis of reciprocal trust and money, although field testimonies report a substantial increase in violence associated with people who «loose themselves» with quick money. In contrast, peasants and cattle ranchers who cultivate poppies in the municipalities of La Sierra region have tended to be more controlled by the hierarchical structures of organized crime. Since the total alignment of the Mexican State with the US view on national security, and the approbation of the Mérida Initiative in 2008, law-enforcement policies focused on the presumed elimination of the chiefs of criminal groups that control these routes and «disturbed the balance of power among the DTOs and their ability to control territory and smuggling routes and project power to deter challengers» (Felbab-Brown 2013, p. 3). These policies had two primary effects: the fragmentation of cartels, increasing the number of groups competing for key markets, and the promotion of alliances between criminal groups, to enable them to survive both territorial disputes and repressive police and military actions (Pérez Dávila *et al.* 2016, p. 9). A paradigmatic example of this trend are the consequences of the execution the head of the Beltrán Leyva cartel in Cuernavaca by the Mexican Navy (SEMAR) in 2009, which produced an implosion of small groups of organized crime in Guerrero and the realignment of their alliances with national and transnational counterparts. However, these actions have not diluted the existing links between organized crime and state authorities, neither reduced their existence: according to geo-criminal mapping conducted by Guerrero's state authorities, between 2012 and 2019, more than twenty different organized crime groups have persisted in the state. In 2020, this groups raised up to 40 (International Crisis Group 2020). The range of activities of these groups has diversified, including their entry into the private security market, the human trafficking, the transport of minerals, and the charging of fees for passage or the use of territories within their zones of control.

In La Sierra region, this militarization process was characterized by an atmosphere marked by the violent penetration of practices and imaginaries at the service of local power brokers *(caciques)* and of their interests connected to logging. Additional factors might have promoted mechanisms of parastatal control within the overall social fabric and violent disputes among large criminal organizations for territorial control. The different violence management between La Montaña and La Sierra around poppy cultivation might be related not only to different historical traditions,

but also to geo-strategic reasons, as La Sierra is situated between the logistical enclave constituted by the port of Lázaro Cárdenas and the open-pit mining activities of the Golden Belt. This may make this territory prone to disputes over the allocation of goods driven by economic interests[13] and led to the emergence of «criminal phantom-states», where the theatrical nature of pre-modern power is crafted on to «complex transnational networks», which generate apparatuses of ever more implicit, internalized, capillary kinds of discipline (Comaroff & Comaroff 2006, p. 276). This is further exacerbated by the complicity of local elites *(caciques)* and military or policing entities that kick off the formation of parastatal killers for hire and armed gangs. Local testimonies report that:

> The price of gum opium fell in 2017-2018 and we thought that things would improve, but no: they worsened instead, because the bullets flew constantly, month after month […]. They [organized crime] occupy spaces and know well that people will do whatever is necessary when they need money […]. They offer them money and projects and besides that what can be looted from any town they occupy. Armed groups of hired killers are being paid anywhere from 3,000 to 4,000 pesos per week or every two weeks, depending on their rank within the group […], and [when major combat occurs] the government, that is several kilometers away, doesn't intervene, because they say that their struggle is not against them, but the civilian population is caught up in the middle […] and, by the time the military arrive, nothing is left for them to do but to gather death people.[14]

Regardless of the level of community consensus or of disruptive violence stimulated by parastatal groups,[15] both in the markets of La Sierra as well as in those of La Montaña, the market of opium gum tends to function as a kind of monopsony or oligopsony, under the control of one or a few criminal enterprises that define the price. This leaves little or no margin for manoeuvre and negotiation by peasant and indigenous communities. The results include an extreme form of dependence of local producers and suppliers on major buyers, who wields all power and can unilaterally modify prices without much resistance, in a similar way to what has been defined as a «captive chain» (Wilson & Zambrano 1994). As Smith (2016) shows, wherever oligopsonies of this kind prevail, the «good health» of the global economy will be linked to processes of super-exploitation (Mauro Marini 1972) in «low-income countries», as normally operates a transfer of benefits from producing countries to entrepreneurial global elites, US, and European countries.

These geoeconomics and local exploitation along these lines are inscribed within a local history characterized by hoarding. In Guerrero, following the redistribution of land in the wake of the Mexican Revolution, local markets continued to be controlled by speculators, intermediaries, landowners, and power brokers who manipulated the production of coffee, copra, or sawdust, among many other things (see Bartra 2000, Sánchez Serrano 2014). Peasant and indigenous memories are also marked by the dreadful

13 The port of Lázaro Cárdenas is one of the principal trade ports on Mexico's Pacific coast. In 2018, its port authority (Comité de Operación de la Administración Portuaria Integral de Lázaro Cárdenas, APILAC) reported the transit of 15,897,361 tons of minerals there (APILAC 2019). Regarding open-pit mining in La Sierra and the Central region of Guerrero, media coverage from local media such as *El Sur Acapulco, Proceso* and *La Jornada,* report that violence has intensified as extractive activities have increased, including alliances between criminal groups and transnational corporations.

14 Interview conducted in March 2019 by a civil society activist with a displaced person from the municipality of Leonardo Bravo, within a context of massive internal forced displacement and the increasing concentration of profits from land use.

15 For the purposes of this paper, I define «parastatal armed groups» as those which fall outside of the scope of the regular military or Guerrero's state militia, but which mobilize and operate with the assistance of key allies that include factions within the state (Mazzei 2009, p. 4, in Correa-Cabrera 2017, p. 92).

and traumatic remembrance of the contra-insurgency war of the 1970's, the so-called «dirty war» (FEMOSP 2006, Navarrete Gorjón *et al.* 2014), that took place in the US fight against communism. This State repression influenced the structure of local and regional power brokers, limited the peasant possibilities to negotiate prices and survival practices and reaches present fear.

Beyond Guerrero, the moments of production related to the transformation of gum into heroin and its distribution and transport implicate many social actors at different levels. These include buyers, police and military personnel, informants, transport sectors (such as bus companies, taxis, motorcyclists, drivers of local transports, private planes, motorboats, and even bodies of smugglers), political authorities, customs agents, border patrol agents, owners of properties where drugs are warehoused, U.S law-enforcement agents, and dealers. In this phase, the price of heroin continues to rise sharply. Once the gum has been transformed into heroin and has been transported from Guerrero to other states in Mexico, its market price increases up to $35,000 per kilogram (CENAPI, PGR, information request #001700089210, July 15, 2010).[16] Once it crosses the border, the kilogram transformed into heroin is sold for a bigger price. It was sold on the streets of US for $77,383 dollars per kilogram in 2006, $65,750 per kilogram in 2010 and for $53,333 in 2016. If the drug was adulterated, it is divided and sold per gram, with correspondingly substantial increase in price. In 2006, a gram sold of pure heroin at retail markets in the U.S (price is offered by UNODC adjusted for purity) had a median cost of $470 dollars, $565 in 2010 and in 2016 of $491.[17] The distribution of revenues from drug dealing is such that the retail price of a kilo of heroin on the street in the US —the chief world consumer— is around 549 times greater than the price of opium gum in Guerrero. Although, other costs of production and distribution (from precursors needed for production to gas involved in transportation), this enormous gap between the price of opium gum in the communities of Guerrero and at the U.S retail-market of heroin is a paradigmatic example of the effects of a radical neoliberal and prohibitionist market. It is influenced by criminal rents and extortions, facilitated by the increase of digital communications and transport, lack of transparency in banking, unequal free trade accords, and normative frameworks, whose emphasis is on strategies to reduce drug supplies, instead of imposing greater controls on the flows of laundered money in the financial sector. At the same time, it uses peasant labor forces, leaving them without a considerable piece of cake in this market and hampering other crops, that could set up their basic diet, allowing their food sovereignty.

In addition to consumption, this market requires money-laundering activities to flourish. They infuse the money generated by the production and trafficking of illegal commodities into the formal,

16 «During 6 years 31 clandestine opium gum labs have been dismantled: 13 elsewhere in Mexico and 18 in Guerrero», in: Rosalba Ramírez García, «La industria de la heroína, viento en popa: Guerrero ahora agrega valor, con más laboratorios», *El Sur/Sin Embargo,* May 25, 2016, https://www.sinembargo.mx/25-05-2016/1664611, access February 20, 2019.

17 Prices adjusted according to purity and inflation and drawn from: «Heroin retail prices (street prices) in the United States, in US$ per gram» and «Heroin wholesale prices in the United States, in US$ per kilogram», drawn from UNODC (n.d.), *Stadistics and data,* https://dataunodc.un.org/es/node/495.

legal, financial, and entrepreneurial circuits. Although, no investigation particularly has been found on the financial track of opiate markets in Guerrero, UN estimates state that the illicit market of heroin generated around 68 billion dollars per year (UNODC 2005, in UNODC 2011, p. 32), generally speaking. This UN agency considered the money existent in illegal markets derived from the black market and criminal networks amounted to 2.7 % of the global GDP (UNODC 2011, p. 33). Some other studies state that countries where criminal revenues are laundered are mainly US (where 18.9 % of these global flows coming from the black market are integrated into the formal economy) and European countries, where institutional mechanisms that make it possible to absorb and secure capital flows from black markets prevail, as well as the legal security measures necessary to launder them and convert them into legal assets (Buscaglia 2016, pp. 47-51). Despite lack of concrete evidence, which is out of the scope and possibilities of this paper, this might imply that, while indigenous and peasant communities, micro-traffickers moving along conflictive routes and marginalized consumers from Global North countries bear the brunt of the labor, risks and damage of this market (which even jeopardizes life itself), the gross benefits that it generates are transferred towards entrepreneurial elites through money laundering of criminal revenues, which, as a last resort, fed the GDPs of US and European countries. Further research is needed to sustain this.

3.2. Community narratives, forced eradication, and violent outburst

Although some studies state that opium poppies have been in Guerrero's Sierra Madre del Sur since at least the 1940s (Padget 2016), declassified files from SEDENA, the Federal Security Directorate (DFS) and Political and Social Investigations section (IPS) document its systematic production for transnational markets in the early 1970's. According to some testimonies collected in fieldwork conducted for this article, it was Mexican military personnel and/or others with origin in Sinaloa who brought poppy seeds to La Sierra and Guerrero, and taught the techniques for its planting and harvest,[18] with the connivance of local power-brokers *(caciques)* and cattle ranchers, such as the Rogaciano, Montúfar, and Figueroa clans, whose territories were characterized by illegal and indiscriminate logging, sometimes controlled by quasi-state enterprises (Bustamante 2003). Poppy would come to be cultivated in territories that had been fragmented by the over-exploitation of logging and cattle production, within a context of armed conflicts and state repression, which included indications of circumstantial counter-insurgent alliances between the Mexican military and drug trafficking groups against local guerrilla movements (FEMOSPP 2006, p. 50).[19]

18 Interviews conducted by the author in November 2018 and February 2019, with peasant and indigenous interlocutors from Leonardo Bravo and Tlacoachistlahuaca.

19 FEMOSPP (2006, p. 50) reports a letter from November 8, 1969, included in the file SDN 76/231/30 of the General Archive of the Nation, which states: «In November 1969 […] the first reports that mention the army alliance with drug traffickers against the guerrillas». Other key publications on the so-called «dirty war» or «contra-insurgency war» in Guerrero are Calveiro (2012), COMVERDAD (2014), Ovalle (2018), and Aviña (2018).

In La Montaña region, poppy cultivation spread by the end of the 1980's and early 1990's. This tends to be related to the agrarian crisis generated by neoliberal agrarian counter-reform, as well as with the way Guerrero's rural sector was inserted in neoliberalism, which resulted in intensified poverty, exclusion from formal labor and the transformation of peasant into wage laborers *(jornalero/as).* Within an overall frame of open markets and the irruption of agricultural commodities, the prices of the products of Guerrero's rural sector fell below the costs of production and transport. Participant observation research shows that, in 2018, the monetary income of peasant and indigenous people in highland communities had come to be derived practically from three sources: the cultivation of poppies, the government subsidies and the migration of agricultural laborers, either towards agricultural fields in Mexico's northern regions (Sinaloa, Baja California, San Luis Potosí, or Michoacán), and towards the US, if savings, credit capacity or agreements, with labor recruiters were available. Local testimonies point that poppy cultivation techniques were bring from La Sierra, and some rumors point to the Army as being the actors behind the introduction of the seeds. Although no document found could confirm this, rumors might be at least understood following the «Scottian» paradigm, as «vehicles through which powerless people insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity» (Scott 1990, p. 14).

As Estefanía Ciro has argued, one of the effects of the experience of «illegality» is the «dispossession of the face, voice, and diversity of those who are submerged in that category […], imposing silence on their voices, as it stamps a "negative identity" upon them» (Ciro 2018, p. 7). These apparatuses of state power operate principally through mass communication media and state security institutions but are also expressed through the normalization of a punitive legal framework, focused on the drug supply reduction strategies, whose level of social acceptance is still high, despite a progressive shift towards the decriminalization and the regulation. As a result, the survival strategies of the poor are embedded in creative practices and imaginaries, which unfold in daily life; for instance, the indigenous and peasant narratives referenced here incorporate linguistic strategies (ellipses, metonyms, metaphors…), to avoid openly naming illegal cultivation practices and crops. Examples include references to «planting», which implicitly refer to poppies, which are also known in La Montaña as *maíz bola* (literally, a «ball of corn»). In terms of practices, poppy plants can also be found amidst other legal crops, such as *milpa* cultivation, which combines corn, beans, and squash. This reflects both an integral worldview as to methods of cultivation and a strategy to hide plants from law-enforcement agents.

As shown by Pearse (1971), in communities where manufacture for home consumption and arrangements for the exchange of labor are falling into disuse, money becomes increasingly important

for the purchase of manufactured and processed goods of prime necessity, and the relative importance of commerce, transport, and credit increases. This has been the case of rural regions in Guerrero recently, where discourses deployed by indigenous and peasant communities to justify the production of poppies pragmatically incorporate developmental tropes regarding poverty (in the sense intended by Escobar 2007). The strategies of negotiation employed by these communities regarding illicit drugs tend to appeal to notions of exchange value as an organizing principle of economic life in the local system, which has become embedded into a global frame. Reference is made in this context to the absence of markets for their agricultural goods, the low prices they receive for them, and the poor condition of infrastructure as to roads, which make it difficult, if not impossible, to sell them. At the same time, indigenous and peasant communities emphasize their sense of abandonment by the state, and articulate demands for infrastructure improvement, as well as their right to have, and enjoy, rights, such as the need for educational supplies in local schools. As a *me'phaa* peasant in Acatepec noted:

> For me, this plant is especially useful both economically and to generate food for people, because everything must go towards the family's expenses, both for school supplies and for the children's clothing and sandals *(huaraches)* […]. Many of us here were able to build little houses for ourselves, to buy animals, to improve our economic means, our dress, and our food […]. Many people had money to cover their daily expenses and did not suffer so much anymore […]. Because here there is no work, and this is the reason why people dedicate themselves more to getting some money: because, when we speak of corn and beans, the prices are low.[20]

Those community leaders who «in a Janus-like manner» (Wolf 1971, p. 57) fulfill their dual role, as a kind of joint or connection that links the local system with a larger one, strategically highlighted in their interviews the role of mothers and widows as heads of households. As these leaders are aware of the state's development programs intentions to address poverty, they know how strategic is to emphasize their extreme economic needs and their role as caregivers, as a reason that pushed them to grow poppies. Indeed, these children that the community must provide for are essential for the social and biological reproduction of the community and its culture. As highlighted by a community leader in Tlacoachistlahuaca:

> More than 200 women are widows and have many children —8 or 10—. This is the reason why they plant. That work and that sacrifice are for the sustenance of their children, to buy school supplies, uniforms, and other children's needs. Because of this, they invest the little they earn in the education of children and in the purchase of food.[21]

Within the framework of a national conference in Mexico regarding drug policy, some female peasants from a community of the Leonardo Bravo municipality, in La Sierra offered their testimo-

20 Interview conducted by the author, February 27, 2019 in Acatepec.

21 Interview conducted by the author, November 25, 2018 in Tlacoachistlahuaca.

ny to an audience that was already aware of these topics. Their statement was backed up by data derived from their own experiences, as well as by state reports on security issues, particularly reports from SEDENA. This reflects the circularity of the discourses that prevail in Mexico, regarding these issues and how subaltern communities subvert official data, originally produced, and used to justify a militarized response, and deploy them for their own purposes. These purposes are, in this case, arguing that the all-pervasive penetration of the illicit cultivation of opium poppy has been destructive within the context of a punitive drug policy, but has helped make survival possible in a territory marked by predatory practices and scarcity. References to data were also embedded in a discourse that argued that the communities affected by military drug supply reduction strategies should benefit from the legalization and regulation of poppy cultivation, as the most viable option that would make it possible to integrate families and communities involved in its cultivation in La Sierra into the formal economy. As a community leader expressed later in an interview:

> More than 1,200 communities in La Sierra live from the production of poppies. About 100,000 people, and 10 % of those who work in this context are women. In 2014, an organization of commissaries was created to improve their situation. This organization brought together 18 commissaries, but each year these changed, and the organization became very volatile […]. Six years ago, there was an attempt to substitute these plants with avocado production, but plagues ensued, and vitamins were needed so that the trees could produce. Indeed, they consumed a lot of water. So, this ended up being too expensive. Many despaired and said that this did not work. Those that persisted now must find a way to get their products out on the roads, which is especially difficult, and they are cheated by those who try to monopolize the market, forcing them to sell at a disadvantage […]. As an independent municipal candidate [in the June 2019 elections], I spoke out in favor of legalization. The PRI won here […] because of the violence. Recently, the peasants have called for the deployment of the military here.[22]

When questioned about the negative impacts of poppy cultivation on community dynamics at La Montaña region, there are varied responses. In all instances, there is an insistence that cultivation is not for local use, but for export, except for small amounts that might be used to alleviate tooth aches but just because poppy plants «are already there». This focus on export is perceived as an important source of money, but also as a misguided swift that sets aside food crops, and food sovereignty. When increased violence is referenced, it is attributed to people «who don't think right», «who get lost», «who are won over by money», «who have lost their way».[23] Thus what prevails is focused more on individual than on collective factors: how personal goals and blindness end up destabilizing the equilibriums prioritized by the familial and community-based systems of reciprocity due to a kind of ambition that is considered reproachable.

22 Interview with independent woman candidate in municipal elections held in June 2018, conducted October 30, within the framework of the VII Latin American y II Mexican conference, regarding drug policy.

23 Interview conducted by the author in February 2019 in Zapotitlán Tablas.

> What is bad is those places *where* people must not be thinking correctly: instead of buying for their families and better things for them and their homes, where people buy guns, that is bad because they have lost their way.[24]

Others who were interviewed emphasize the impact of the environmental degradation, that is principally caused by military eradication programs, which are increasingly, opposed by communities that have broken their historical silence and clandestine anonymity towards the defense of their land. They also emphasize their right not to be harassed and, eventually, the right to cultivate poppies for reasons of economic survival; for example, after a series of helicopter operations conducted by SEDENA in February 2019, which flew over indigenous communities spraying *paraquat* killing not just the poppy plantations but also subsistence crops (plots of corn, squash, and beans, fruit trees, etc.), a commissioner of one of the affected *me'phaa* communities claimed, together with other members of his community:

> It is 20 days since helicopters have come but *already* the trees are drying up. They were for two afternoons beginning roughly at this hour [12 pm]. What you see in front of you there, the Capulín, was damaged too. And it is from that canyon that the animals drink. They are dying […]. Many people from Acatepec have chickpeas, coriander, radishes; all was wiped out, since the military do not distinguish where there are poppies; they just target what is green. For them, everything is drug. This is the problem we experienced here in Acatepec. The vegetables are gone; the water and the trees are damaged. The air is contaminated, and many children pass through places where the helicopters fumigate and get sick because of this.[25]

After decades of forced eradication of poppy fields, this policy tends to be understood by peasant and indigenous communities within a framework that incorporates the hegemonic discourses of prohibition. «They've told us that we poison the world», noted an indigenous *me'phaa* resident of Acatepec; «we understand that the military have to do their work and spray», said another *naua* woman resident of Zapotitlán. However, rural communities tend to nuance this narrative, noting that «but they destroy other crops», «they damage the water supply», «they dry everything up», «but we are left with nothing». This conjunction of adverse circumstances leads to censure of state practices, as well as the articulation of an urgent need for a comprehensive understanding that must be incorporated into drug and agrarian policies. This is how a *naua* indigenous woman put it in Cuixapa (Zapotitlán):

> But they fumigated all the people who planted anything. They dried everything up in this town: coriander, *papalo,* corn…, everything! But here, as people say, we are always afraid of the government when the military comes. The people are afraid, so they do not say anything. They are sprayed, and then they plant their corn and their beans again, whatever was dried up. So, this is what happened this year: many people were left with nothing, and many get by with what they plant […]. We plant beans, corn, green beans too, to eat, and sell whatever we can, but right now we were left with nothing.[26]

24 Interview conducted February 27, 2019, in Zapotitlán Tablas.

25 Extract from interview conducted to the Vice Commissioner of a community affected by fumigations (probably of paraquat) in January 2019 in Acatepec.

26 Interview conducted by the author with *naua* indigenous *campesinos* in Zapotitlán, October 2017.

Finally, poppy cultivation in Guerrero has consequences for the configuration of an order of illicit «otherness», which is assembled through the normative apparatuses of the state and deployed by the military and other intelligence and state security agencies. In doing so, these state actors justify their pervasive presence in indigenous and peasant communities, by conducting practices of extortion, which sidestep the mechanisms of local governance. These military operations have left an indelible mark on the memory of these communities:

> Because we see the armed men, that is why… People were afraid of the federal agents because of that little plant, which is cultivated, even just a little piece of it; they were afraid because, before, when they were found there amid, *what was planted,* they were taken and beaten, and their sandals *(huaraches)* were taken…, because of this that people were afraid […]. This has not affected me much, because I hardly go there, but for sure, when they pass near my house, well, we lock ourselves up.[27]

In the face of these conditions, some warn, to avoid confrontation, that it is better to seek safety at home. They seek protection in houses that were, in fact, designed architecturally to serve as places of refuge and isolation against the outside world: with few windows, and with the acoustic and thermal isolation, that is provided by adobe (sun-dried brick). Others mention situations in which it was not possible to remain in their home communities, and it was necessary to opt for forced displacement and diaspora to nearby canyons and communities. This phenomenon is anchored deeply in the collective memory of many indigenous communities, grounded first in the impact of counter-insurgency strategies of the seventies and beyond and, most recently, in a context characterized by the proliferation of parastatal and/or paramilitary actors (Correa-Cabrera 2017, p. 91), who rely on terror and extortion to insure the control of territories and their resources:

> In 1988, the military began to fire bullets from the riverside until they came here to the community. And they ate everything they found in their path —chickens, goats, deers […]—. Back then, our houses and roofs were made of foraged wood, and the army would burn the houses as they advanced […]. That was when we were displaced. We were displaced from here to San José…: several of us went to San José Yosocañú; others went to Putla, to Los Mesones, El Rancho, La Trinidad […]. See, this also happened in March, the first of March in 1988. It was for two months […]. [On other occasions,] they turned the community's chapel into a corral, where they put their horses, in that chapel that is up there. This is how it was in those years, in 1988.[28]

4
Conclusions

The insertion of Guerrero's rural sector into the transnational neoliberalism economy is characterized by a struggle for survival. Although poverty is a triggering factor of poppy cultivation, it is not

27 Interview conducted by the author in October 2017, in Zapotitlán Tablas.

28 Interview conducted by the author in Zapotitlán in February 2019 in Tlacoachislahuaca.

the sole cause of this overall process. It is also of key importance to consider the geographic isolation of these territories and the recent and repressive history of Guerrero, which make it possible to activate strategies of parastatal control, based on networks of political actors and *caciques,* who are colluding with regular and irregular armed groups. The enormous gap between the price of opium gum in Guerrero and the retail price of heroin in the US streets cannot only be explained by the value added to the merchandise added by the transportation costs. Prevailing drug control policies, that both deny and profit from illicit economies; also intensified poppy farmers precarious insertion into capitalism, with day laborers earning dramatically low wages, without any social benefits, and at a great cost to their health, life, and security. The pressure downward on irregular wages paid to the producers of gum, operates through the monopsonies that impose a non-negotiable price and even tax the use of land and roads, obtaining what is commonly named as «criminal rents» and, through the competition of more technologically advanced products (synthetic opioids), has increased the gap between the almost non-existent profit rate of local producers and the profit rate of those actors at the highest levels of the heroin market, particularly hoarders that benefit from criminal rents and financial speculators, which are rarely investigated by law-enforcement apparatuses. In this context, transnational elites might be profiting out of the associated production costs and externalities assumed by community-based indigenous and peasant economies.

Although the cultivation of poppies from year to year helps to address the immediate needs of indigenous and peasant families, it has not generated the conditions to overcome the structural character of their poverty. Instead, poppy cultivation has intensified the precariousness of rural agrarian systems, has deepen the loss of food sovereignty initiated by the agrarian counter-reform started in the 80's, and environmental degradation. The entrance of capitalist dynamics and criminal rents and the proliferation of armed actors in common lands also threaten historical and fragile socio-cultural systems, increasing violence, vulnerability, and precarious lives. In this context, peasant and indigenous narratives of daily resistance increasingly emphasize the damaged caused by current drug control systems, which pay particular attention to reduce drug supply through forced eradication. The structural violence of drug control in Guerrero is much deeper, as zones of ambiguity and illegality, are not points apart from the state but a substantial part of it. With the significant financial support of the US through Merida Initiative, the punitive drug control system stimulated the teeming of a series of political and military apparatuses, whose armed operations have led to the atomization of organized crime groups. Through drug control operations and the punitive legal framework, peasant and indigenous communities have been pushed towards illegality, encouraging a short-term culture of secrecy and the proliferation of

private armed groups, which have also increased dramatically private and parastatal violence, evoking the memory of the repressive state machinery of the past. In comparison with the counter-insurgency wars of the 1970's, at present, the outburst of violence is experienced in a much more capillary and chaotic way, but some field evidence points to a nexus between past and present forms of militarization. Within this context, practices, and narratives of land resistance to dispossession, and pacification need to address not only the deep, historically rooted, factors of agrarian and state violence, but also the large-scale geo-economic factors and mechanism of dispossession, pointing at those transnational investors that profit from chaos.

From the local perspective, discourses regarding poppy-growing practices and decision-making tend to be complex and diverse. Peasant and indigenous communities try to build up consistent narratives for global and national audiences, which appeal strategically to developmental tropes, such as economic needs in the face of the abandonment of the state, market demands and the need for money to satisfy their basic needs, which often arise after their incorporation into the state. This is notable in refugee areas or «shatter zones» from La Sierra and La Montaña of Guerrero, where quasi-autarchy economies, combine the labor in familiar and communal plots with the precarious income resulting from their experiences as migratory agricultural laborers. In these speeches, it is used subaltern appropriation strategies of state legitimated narratives, reflecting the circularity of information originally produced by the state control structures, and used to advocate for alternative responses to the drug market, such as regularization of poppy cultivation. Local tropes emphasize that poppy has brought money, houses, and food into the community, as well as children education linked to their incorporation to the state and to «the road to progress». Nevertheless, they also emphasize on the loss of peace and tradition, mainly by individuals driven by personal goals and blindness that ends up destabilizing the equilibriums prioritized by the family and community-based systems of reciprocity.

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