

## Comment on a *New York Times* Article

By **Efrén Sandoval Hernández** / December 1, 2017

*To the editors:*

As an anthropologist and social scientist whose work deals with the contemporary sources of the violence, and with the serious violations of human rights that Mexico is currently living through, I ask you to publish on the LASA Forum the next comment about the “Mexico’s Record Violence Is a Crisis 20 Years in the Making” article (published on October 27, 2017 on the *NY Times*, section Americas, column The Interpreter Newsletter, by Max Fisher and Amanda Taub). With this letter, I would like to contribute with a series of observations and point out the limitations implicit in that article as it is written.

The text attributes the increase in the levels of violence in Mexico to specific and at times fortuitous events. My opinion is instead that the increase in the number of violent acts must be understood as a process, but also in structural terms, on a national and binational level, but also as a global phenomenon. In this process, political changes have been important, but these changes and the Mexican state itself have been overtaken by drastic economic changes and their equally drastic social consequences.

In order to properly analyze the current situation concerning the increase in violence, insecurity and impunity, it is wrong to write about the Mexican state as one that is “failed”, “collapsed”, “fragile” or “weak”, as if the state were a “victim” of a “mafia” or “organized crime”. History and current events show that the Mexican state, as with any other state, is made and remade everyday through interactions and activities of very diverse types, including those of a criminal and mafia nature. Thus, to present the State as an institution that has attempted to act against lawbreakers as if these were an entity distinct from the State, and to furthermore affirm that this State has failed in its honest fight against the lawbreakers, is to give the Mexican state more merit than it deserves.

The actions that the Mexican state has taken in its ostensive fight against the drug cartels has been characterized by the lethal use of violence, the systematic abuse of authority and violations of human rights. There are sufficient elements to deduce that the Mexican state is not acting against supposed “organized crime” but instead in favor of the combined interests of the drug economy, American foreign policy (the Merida Initiative), the economic transformation (“structural reforms”) of the neoliberal project executed at a local level by both the PAN and the PRI but imposed from abroad by international institutions, and the persistence of the *status quo* in a country with some of the highest levels of corruption, impunity and inequality in the world. Within this framework, the increase in violent acts and insecurity is the result of the militarization of social life, the privatization of individual security, the backing of abuse of authority as a tool for social control, as well as the permanent state of fear among the population. Quality of life, and civil, labor, and economic rights are weakened, while at the same time the State reinforces its own control over and exercise of “legitimate” violence. In the end, is it not right to ask if the result of the “drug war” means a “failure”, a “mistake”, or simply “bad luck” for the Mexican state; but rather that it represents the ideal conditions that allow the implementation of neoliberal policies for economic transformation (in Mexico, there are academic studies that show the confluence of lands with rich mineral deposits and gas reserves, the displacement of large sectors of the local population, and militarization. This last one, as it is also demonstrated by other studies, has served as a means to intimidate or to act against outbursts of social protest in a context in which the State has minimum levels of social legitimacy). If seen in this manner,

instead of thinking about a State that unsuccessfully “fights” against “organized crime” we should speak of the State and “organized crime” as acting in unison in the pursuit of common interests far removed from those of the “democratic State” to which the article refers. In the case of Mexico, the real case is of a State that really has everything under control in order to allow the various interests to which it is beholden to act as they see fit. And by the way, perhaps the greatest of these interests, and which it’s not even mentioned in the article (not a word is said about the Merida Initiative or the illegal flow of arms into Mexico) is the help of the U.S. government.

I really hope this letter could contribute to a deeper reflection about this subject.

Cordially,

Efrén Sandoval Hernández, PhD  
Professor and researcher  
Center for Research and Advanced Studies on Social Anthropology (CIESAS), Mexico  
([esandoval@cieras.edu.mx](mailto:esandoval@cieras.edu.mx)). //