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The Cultural Effects of the Narcoeconomy in Rural Mexico

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Abstract

This essay describes the cultural effects of drug trafficking on a town in rural Mexico. A variety of ethnographic scenes reveal the rapidly changing social imagination as new forms of consumption create new opportunities for identity formation. However, because these new consumer forms are expensive, and therefore inaccessible to the majority of community members, a type of cultural exclusion is at work. In this ordinary town, there are extraordinary forms of consumption: large, lavish houses; high-stakes gambling at local cockfights; a new urban-oriented consumer culture; and new farmer entrepreneurs. All were underwritten by *narco*-activities. These new forms of consumption challenge and subvert older, stable forms of hierarchy and status. Individuals with access to these forms of consumption have new types of economic, cultural and social capital privilege, and such access legitimizes their status and power. The article closes by considering the implications of the rising levels of violence in Mexico's interior and the potential that we are seeing the initial stages of a civil war.

Introduction

This essay analyzes the cultural effects of the penetration of the narcoeconomy into a seemingly pedestrian, rural community in the West-Central Mexican state of Michoacán. It builds upon and updates ethnographic work that explored this penetration as an incipient phenomenon (McDonald, 2005) in which new forms of cultural and social capital emerged or old ones were co-opted by participants in the drug trafficking trade. This data is re-evaluated in the context of an escalated, violent drug war in which these processes result in a reconfiguring of local society and the foregrounding of stark economic inequalities and cultural disjunctures.

Until recently, the focus on Mexico's struggle with drug cartels largely centered on the U.S.-Mexico border region, where the narcoeconomy is pervasive and violent (cf. Campbell, 2005, 2008, 2009; Payan, 2006; Willoughby, 2003). The U.S. has tried to control the "spillover" of drug trafficking through various means, including heightened border militarization and surveillance (Heyman, 1999; Dunn, 1996). There is also a history of high-profile violence involving public officials that has punctuated the more routinized violence between cartels vying for turf and market share. In 1993-1994, a Catholic Bishop was gunned down in Guadalajara; a presidential candidate was assassinated in Tijuana; and the Secretary General of the then-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was shot to death in Mexico City.¹ The suspicion was that these killings were drug-cartel related, though definitive proof has never been uncovered. Nevertheless, the pattern led Andrew Reding (1995) to perceptively warn of an emergent *narco-politics* in Mexico. Other scholars were beginning to argue that Mexico should be labeled a "*narco-state*" or "*narco-democracy*" (e.g., Pasternostro, 1995; Andreas, 1998; Massing, 2000). Most recently, George Grayson (2009a) has strongly suggested that Mexico is on the verge of becoming a failed state. If such labeling was at one time seen as perhaps over dramatized, recent events highlight that the interpenetration of cartels with state politics is deep and pervasive.

At this time, Mexico is the major supplier of cocaine and marijuana for the U.S., where demand seems bottomless. [In 2006 somewhere between 530 and 710 metric tons of cocaine entered the U.S.—an estimated 90% of which came from Mexico (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2007). It is further estimated that Mexico produced 13,500 metric tons of marijuana in 2003 and accounts for the vast majority of that drug that enters into the U.S. (United States Department of Justice, 2005). Mexico is also an important supplier of heroin and methamphetamine. The production and distribution of illegal drugs is controlled by seven major cartels: Juarez, Sinaloa, Los Zetas, Tijuana, Beltran Leyva, Gulf, and *La Familia*. If there was ever any question about the relationship between the cartels and governance in Mexico, the question was answered by events that unfolded in late spring 2009.

On 26 May 2009, the Mexican federal government undertook its boldest move in the ongoing war being waged with the country's drug cartels. Security forces swept into the West-Central state of Michoacán and arrested 10 mayors and 20 other high ranking state officials including the State Attorney General (Wilkinson, 2009; La Voz de Michoacán, 2009). Interestingly, Governor Leonel Godoy was not informed of the operation until it was underway. His brother, Julio Cesar Godoy, was questioned and later sought in connection with providing

protection for the local cartel. Wilkinson (2009) further reports that, “[a]t least 83 of Michoacán’s 113 municipalities are mixed up on some level with the narcos.” Most recently, the state’s Deputy Director of Public Safety was gunned down in Morelia—he had been on the job a scant two weeks (Montero, 2009).

Mexico’s Attorney General, Eduardo Medina Mora, contends that the cartel in control of Michoacán, known as *La Familia*² (The Family), is the country’s most ruthless and violent gang (de la Luz González, Gómez & Torres, 2009; Grayson, 2009b). They announced their presence when 20 gunmen stormed a crowded dance hall and dumped five severed heads on a club’s dance floor in the city of Uruapan in September 2006. Since then, they have moved quickly to marginalize the Sinaloa and the Beltran-Leyva cartels. Subsequent to their auspicious introduction, they have amassed the largest number of arms among the cartels, estimated at well over 10,000 weapons, 60% of which are large (e.g., machine guns, rocket launchers, etc.), and they have conducted the highest number of executions of any cartel in Mexico, along with the carrying out of the more mundane activities associated with cartels, such as kidnappings, detentions, extortion, and robbery (de la Luz González, Gómez & Torres, 2009). Former Presidential candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the left-leaning Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) underscored the gravity of the death toll by saying that the number of drug cartel related deaths was higher than during any revolution (Jiménez, 2009). Though he was trying to chastise President Felipe Calderón’s (National Action Party or PAN) strong military aggression against the cartels, he hit upon an emergent truth—Mexico’s drug war is taking on the profile of a *civil war* whereby cartels have enlisted the nation’s poor and marginal as their foot soldiers; the cartels are creating a social base; they have used their economic power to infiltrate all levels of politics; and they have unleashed waves of violence unseen in contemporary times. Since January 2007, almost 10,000 people³ have been killed and 45,000 military troops have been deployed, along with 5,000 federal police in 18 states—even President Calderón was forced to admit, “[t]his is a war” (Los Angeles Times, 2009).

The U.S.-Mexico border used to be the focus of what most Americans considered to be Mexico’s drug war. Violence used to be synonymous with Juarez, Tijuana, or Reynosa. The interior was largely quiet. Now it is only too clear that places like Michoacán are really more at the drug war’s epicenter. Indeed, Michoacán was the first state to be militarized by President Calderón in 2007, drawing clear attention to the dire problems there.

In the wake of the unprecedented arrests of public officials in Michoacán, a wave of extreme violence shook that state. *La Familia* reacted with swift vengeance over the loss of its operatives in the political system, along with the arrest of one of its Chiefs of Operations, Arnoldo Rueda Medina. Twelve military intelligence officials were kidnapped, tortured, and killed in what was the single deadliest attack on Mexican security officers; in all 16 officers were killed in a four-day period that saw a coordinated attack on security forces in eight Michoacán communities and two others in Guerrero and Guanajuato (de la Luz González, 2009; Gómez Leyva, 2009). Attacks against police stations, military barracks, and hotels occurred elsewhere in Michoacán and other states, leading to the deaths of two more soldiers and six federal police

(Castillo, 2009). Even Bishops within the Catholic Church have been threatened by *La Familia* to enforce the clergy's silence on the criticism of drug trafficking (Rodríguez, 2009). It is estimated that among Mexico's 15,000 priests, 1,000 have received threats from cartels, and particularly outspoken clergy have been murdered (Castillo, 2009). In what has to be the most surreal dimension of the latest surge of conflict and violence between the cartels and government, the purported head of *La Familia*, Servando Gómez Martínez (otherwise known as "La Tuta") sent a communication to President Calderón requesting that they wage a "clean war." By that he meant to invite the president to conduct a war in which collateral damage to family members (e.g., wives, children, etc.) be kept to a minimum (cf. Lacey, 2009a). To demonstrate the professional nature of his operation, La Tuta closed his message with, "[w]e are not kidnappers, nor do we kill for money" (El Universal, 2009a).

Given that Michoacán is one of the central locales in the Mexican drug war, it is important to ask how the narcoeconomy affects rural communities with long histories of otherwise mundane economic activity. I will begin with a general description of one such place, a small town to which I apply the pseudonym "Buenavista." This initial orienting section will be followed by a series of ethnographic examples of the manner in which the narcoeconomy has been woven into the local social fabric, both materially and conceptually. The community is, in fact, in many ways very ordinary. Many residents are dedicated to dairy farming or dairy processing, activities through which few, if any, get rich. Most are lucky to just get by. Yet, immersion in the place reveals odd anomalies: large, expensive houses; cybercafés; urban-oriented clothing stores; high-stakes cockfighting; a day spa; and a new cadre of entrepreneurial *narco*-farmers who purchase lavish ranches. This newly emergent consumer culture simply does not describe the poor, agrarian roots of the place or the day-to-day experiences of most of its inhabitants. The stark contrast between poverty and opulence begs for further analysis of a rapidly changing cultural dynamic and how this shapes the lives and imaginations of the majority population of hard working, often impoverished, residents.

The Place

Buenavista is a small town of about 10,000 people nestled in a valley between mountains that constitute part of the neo-volcanic axis that cuts across the center of Mexico. It is a community with a long agrarian history and a regionally important dairy industry. Indeed, my research there explored problems of globalization and agricultural development. This essay emerged out of long-term research projects that specifically focused on the political economy of dairying in Buenavista and adjacent regions (e.g., McDonald, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006). During the course of my research, the area's narcoeconomy, however, formed a persistent backdrop and a tangential, yet sustained, narrative theme among the many farmers, dairy processors, and government officials that I have interviewed and worked with since the mid 1990s. The topic came into sharper focus in the 2002 field season as part of on-going research exploring the social and cultural dynamics of organizational initiatives by area farmers. This essay is based upon interviews and observational data that accumulated over the past decade.

A Profile of Buenavista

Buenavista is hardly at the end of the road in the mountains or down a lonely jungle path in the lowlands. It is a rural community that once had a thriving ranching economy and is well connected to the rest of the world. The town's older residents still embrace the values of a traditional *ranchero* (rancher) culture (cf. Baisneé, 1989; Barragán López, 1989, 1997; Cochet, 1991; Barragán López et al., 1994; Léonard, 1995). For *rancheros*, wealth was measured by the quantity of land they owned and the number of cattle they held, scrawny or otherwise. Men prided themselves on their horsemanship, gallantry, and thrift. They were aggressively independent and self-sufficient (Quinones, 2001) and highly adaptive to new and changing economic circumstances (Barragán López, 1997). The main use for money was to buy land or cattle. Since the 1880s, life revolved around the dairy economy and a Spartan lifestyle. It was only from about 1940 onward that people invested in anything that might be construed as a luxury. As Lomnitz-Adler (1993) aptly points out, *rancheros* create a culture of individual dominance packaged in populist rhetoric. They are self-made and have conquered their once isolated, inhospitable, and marginal region. Their narrative of migration and conquest also primes them for, what is for many, their latest role as poor migrants in search of economic opportunities in the U.S. (cf. Farr, 2006). Overall, the *ranchero* narrative, of course, erases others, be they indigenous peoples, *ejidatarios*, or peasants. Lomnitz-Adler (1993) underscores two dimensions of difference that are used to distinguish *rancheros*: (1) class or wealth and (2) race. *Rancheros*, as a category, are wealthier and they are whiter than those surrounding them. Together, this combination of class position and racial identity creates a powerful regional cultural hegemony.

Like many other towns in the region, Buenavista is characterized by brick and block houses that are interspersed with old adobe structures—reminders of a bygone era. On the surface, the main economic anchor for the region is dairy farming and the complementary activity of processing milk into dense white cheese, yogurt, and a variety of milk-based candies. Over 80% of the farmers are small in scale, milking fewer than 20 cows in their daily milking routine. Production methods are often traditional. Farmers milk in the fields by hand, have limited access to water, and use few medicines. Their milk cows are poor in quality and have low productivity, in part because of endemic diseases such as mastitis, but also due to lack of water and poor quality diets. All of this activity occurs against a backdrop of increasingly deforested mountains and valleys that suffer from severe overgrazing, the associated environmental consequences of which further threaten farmer livelihood. Dairy processing, in what are locally known as “creameries,” complements the farming activity in Buenavista. Of the 60 dairy processors in this town, most are small and family-run. A few medium-sized operations process over 10,000 liters of milk daily, and only one large-scale operation processes over 27,000 liters daily.

Thus, it would be incorrect to think of Buenavista as a town wholly defined by the narcoeconomy (cf. Fineman, 1996). Indeed, I have visited one such place elsewhere in Central Mexico, a town off the beaten path that I stumbled onto as I drove over dirt roads on what was

supposed to be a short cut. Suddenly, I came upon a town, by all appearances, with a cluster of buildings forming a central plaza of store fronts and offices. A couple of high-end late model trucks were parked in the shade. Yet it was empty of people, except for the occasional furtive glance by someone through a doorway. At one end of the plaza was a massive compound. Peeking above its high walls was a richly tiled, pagoda-style roof—a complete anomaly, especially in that part of rural Mexico. Seeing no one from whom to ask directions, I rang the bell at the house compound, which was quickly answered by two burly men in dark glasses who told me no one was there and, effectively, to hit the road. On my way back to my truck, I was met by a man in a dusty suit who identified himself as a manager of a large, nearby ranch. He pointed me in the direction of the highway. He bid me farewell and made sure I left.

Buenavista, in contrast, appears to be rather commonplace. It is its ordinariness that forms a powerful front. On a day-to-day basis, people go about their business. That business is usually related to dairying, either as a farmer, dairy processor, hired hand, veterinarian, cattle-feed seller, or extension agent. The town also has a bank, a church, a few small restaurants, several dentists and doctors, and a number of stores and small food markets. It is institutionally complete. The town's rhythm follows those of the dairy cows—up early to milk, a midday break, and afternoon milking again. After 6:00 p.m. and a shower, farmers and their families flow into the town's plaza where they socialize and pass what is left of day.

A View Down the Valley

My own second-floor lodging in a small *pensión* (boarding house)—built with migrant money by a man who had spent years in California—looked down the main valley and provided a lofty vantage point to survey the town. The accommodations were, like the town, squeaky clean with no frills. I had stayed at this place many times. It was from this vantage point that I was able to observe physical changes in the town over time and from which the inequalities that characterize Buenavista initially became evident. Significant new construction—mostly residences and warehouses—increasingly emerged on the landscape. Closer scrutiny revealed that many of those warehouses were extremely large, and the houses were often lavish. Numerous trips down the valley into the communities of the more humid and productive lowlands found no similar analogs. An interview with a PANista federal congressman was instructive in this regard. He was in the midst remodeling his own home. He noted that he made a very good salary and was investing everything he could into his renovation project. He invited me to compare his house and what he was doing with many of the construction projects around town, about which he then said:

We all know what construction costs these days; it's sky high. I will tell you and you can repeat this, much of what you see around town is *narco*-money. And I don't just tell you this out of suspicion.

Poverty, Wealth, and the Narcoeconomy

The modified and new cultural forms and practices found in Buenavista were emerging in a place where local farmers were losing their struggle for a decent livelihood in a rapidly globalizing economy. Indeed, I have rarely met a wealthy farmer in this region, and many were grindingly poor. The rhetoric of neoliberal reform and trickle-down prosperity aside, times are not likely to get any better. Recent reports out of Buenavista suggest that efforts begun in the early to mid 2000s aimed at organizing farmers to produce higher quality milk for a just market price have failed for a variety of reasons. Extension agents working with those organizational projects, furthermore, were not paid for over three years by the state's agricultural ministry. Not surprisingly, then, this region, and Michoacán in general, fuel Mexico's migrant pipeline to the U.S. Rural people are being rendered obsolete and are displaced in a faltering agrarian economy. This has resulted in widespread migration, unemployment, and underemployment among those left behind. Those who left for the U.S. did so to obtain what I refer to as "dollar power." That is, they earned highly valued U.S. dollars and pumped them back into the local economy. (The value of the Mexican peso, by contrast, has eroded markedly over the past 30 years.) Those U.S. dollars were earned through jobs that paid far higher wages than those that migrants could find at home. Migrant remittances, thus, brought massive sums of money back into the state and helped keep the rural economy afloat.⁴ However, with the global economic downturn in 2008-2009, the Mexican economy has been battered on two fronts. First, Mexican GDP shrank 10% in the second quarter of 2009. Second, migrant remittances have also plummeted—down virtually 18% in the second quarter of 2009 from the previous year, and off 12% during the first six months of 2009 (Ellingwood, 2009). Overall, broad-based rural decline and poverty continues to create fertile conditions for the narcoeconomy to flourish.⁵ This, in turn, creates further forms of cultural and economic displacement.

Even early on in my research, what caught my attention was the dramatic inequality in Buenavista, most easily seen in large, ostentatious houses, massive warehouses, and fancy apartment buildings that contrasted with modest brick and block affairs or dilapidated adobe structures. Inequality was further foregrounded in leisure activities, such as cockfights, where a wealthy few participated, and bets were often in the thousands of dollars. Several different things drove inequality: successful local entrepreneurship, migrant money, and drug trafficking. A number of community members, knowing very well the cost of new construction, argued that the most marked inequalities were underwritten by *narco*-money. Others commented on the ostentatious bets being made at the local cockfights. Still others noted how the agricultural land prices had inflated over the last ten years. They too concluded that an infusion of *narco*-money was at the root of these inequalities. Drug money is now routinized in daily discourse and materialized in architecture, cars, clothes, champion cattle, and leisure activities. As Andreas (1998) poignantly observes, the narcoeconomy provides poor people with a kind of economic exit option.

The narcoeconomy is also far more than drug production; it has a huge multiplier effect in the vast array of other jobs it generates both directly (e.g., transportation, security, banking, and communication) and indirectly (e.g., construction, the service sector, and spin-off businesses). It

is this everyday integration that I would like to explore in considering how rural communities and culture are being reshaped in subtle and not so subtle ways. In part, this integration is experienced directly through various material manifestations. It is also experienced through a dimension that is indirect and imagined (Long, 1995). Both are powerful forms of displacement and disjuncture that are transforming what it is to imagine and to be a rural community member. In Bourdieu's (1984) terms, new forms of cultural, social, and economic capital are forming a complex triad that is altering the local dynamic. Modernity is being reconstituted, as is the way people pursue their economic livelihood. Here I use the concept of "modernity" advisedly and with no small amount of ambivalence. I do not wish to imply that the region is characterized by some sort of traditional-modern divide, as implied by Robert Redfield's classic folk-urban continuum. Despite numerous critiques, Redfield's concept of the 'traditional' town lingers on in the anthropological and popular imagination. Buenavista, however, has never been stuck in time. Indeed, it has always been modern, albeit in a rural, *ranchero* way. The history of the place underscores the dynamism of its multiple modernities. Early on, there were economic innovations: bees wax and honey production, sheep and wool production, dairying, poultry, etc. Later came the radio, then the highway, followed by large-scale migration, and now the *narcos*, who usher in new forms of consumption and ways of conceptualizing being rural. What flows into Buenavista now is, in part, a Western urban variant of modernity. The area, then, is best characterized as having multiple, competing modernities that may or may not be reconciled and institutionalized into a new form.

At this stage, it is unclear what the overall effect of the new elite's cultural colonization of this small community will be. In a modernist vein, Mintz (1985) argues that elite practices of consumption may, under the right economic conditions, become broadly infused into everyday culture through processes of "extensification" and "intensification." Extensification, according to Mintz, occurs when once scarce and expensive commodities become cheap enough that they extend to regular usage by common people. In the process, the commodity's meaning is recast within its new, everyday context and slowly loses its historic connection to elite practices and attenuated set of meanings. Intensification, in contrast, projects older elite meaning and practice forward, more deeply into society among people who then reproduce formerly elite activities. Mintz, however, notes that while old meanings and actions may get carried forward, they also lose some of their earlier significance.

Following a somewhat similar modernist approach, de Certeau (1984) notes that elites may overlay and impose foreign elements onto new locales and peoples. This creates a kind of slippage in consumer culture in which elites and average citizens differently enter into acts and rituals of consumption. De Certeau sees this as creating a possibility for forms of resistance among the average citizenry—" [average citizens] escape the colonizing effects without leaving it" (1984, xiii). Of course, the other side of the de Certeau argument is that the average citizen is constantly reminded of what he or she lacks. The result may be a profound sense of relative deprivation wherein the vast majority is relegated to the consumption sidelines as bystanders in an institutionalized form of cultural exclusion.

Taking a more postmodern perspective, Wilk (1999, 2007; also see Colloredo-Mansfeld, 1999) invites us to question and critique the binary arguments concerning consumption (e.g.,

emulation/resistance) that characterize the modernist approach. He offers a nuanced, postmodern-oriented perspective and argues that we conceptualize consumption as a creolized or hybrid experience that will carry quite different meaning for individuals depending on their position within a consumer culture. Whiteford (2002) picks up on this theme in his analysis of war-torn Colombia, where people are confronted with rapid, often chaotic, socio-cultural change. They manage to find a variety of ways to “normalize the aberrant” (Whiteford, 2002, p. 108). In Colombia, as in the Mexican case, local people learned how to appropriately read and operate within the new social reality: “Thus, everything from the chemistry of social comportment to understanding who has money and where power resides has been altered” (Whiteford 2002, p. 109). Accordingly, the cultural adjustment process that is underway among the average citizens of Buenavista will likely result in the adoption of some of the new commodities and activities flowing into town. A hybrid consumer culture will likely emerge, coupled with an acceptance, on some level, of the abnormal.

Scenes from Buenavista

Opulent Homes and Security Systems

In the summer of 2002, Buenavista was experiencing a construction bonanza. This was curious given the region’s failing dairy economy. Construction materials and labor were expensive; the latter largely because so many construction workers had left for the U.S. and better wages. An average multi-story, middle-class house might cost upward of \$85,000 to \$100,000 USD. Some of the larger houses in town easily would have cost \$300,000 or more; massive sums of money by rural Mexican standards. Recall as well that unlike the U.S., there are no loans available to finance construction costs. Construction is strictly a cash business, which explains why Mexicans often build in stages with projects going on for years, with portions often left unfinished.⁶

The fresh construction included all manner of residential housing, from small, humble dwellings to massive houses and apartment buildings. The larger structures attracted the eye because of their scale and bright, contrasting colors—orange, yellow, green, and blue. They were meant to be seen. One of the more stunning of these structures was a walled compound with gates and doors inlaid with copper, expensive wood, and glass, giving it a jewel-encrusted look. It provided anyone on the street with a tantalizing hint of what must lay behind its walls. All that could be seen, however, were treetops and a large, stained-glass dome in vibrant reds and greens. On closer inspection, surveillance cameras hovered over all entryways into this villa-like affair. As we drove by, an extension agent with whom I have been working noted the “*narco-house*” and laughed.⁷ It was beyond further comment, which was telling. On the one hand, this seductive materialization of place and power left so much to the imagination. On the other, it was the manifestation of an alien social world with which most local people had little direct engagement and over which they had no control. If my companion did not like this new social

form in the neighborhood, there was not much he could do about it. In this way, the narcoeconomy is a colonizing phenomenon (Appadurai 1996).

Such ostentatious, conspicuous consumption also wove its way into leisure activities that were once the domain of the town's average citizenry. One of the most visible of these arenas was the local cockfight, staged on a regular basis on the outskirts of Buenavista.

Cockfights and the High-Stakes Status Game

Cockfighting has a long history in Mexico as a legal leisure activity. Although not Bali, Mexican cockfighting exudes many of the same gender and power implications as its Southeast Asian counterpart (cf. Geertz, 1972). The aesthetics of the event should not to be underestimated—trainers have a stunningly intimate relationship with their birds, going so far as to suck their heads to clear their eyes to prepare them for battle, and then again when they are fouled with blood during the match. The intimate relationship between man and bird is built on years of breeding and developing prized fighters—trainers take great pride in their birds beyond anything that can be bought and sold. At stake is the trainer's reputation and that of his community. This contrasts with the relationship of bettors to the fight. In terms of personal status accrued from the act of betting, it is an entirely different game. It is high macho theater in a pleasurable context that allows the bettor to publicly display and commodify his status.

An arena that was once accessible to a much wider array of local players is now restricted to an elite few. As we shall see, the betting structure is such that most rural peoples attending are relegated to the status of observing those few who actually participate. Large bets not only exclude the poor, but also the rural middle class, from entering the game.

Cockfights were advertised well in advance and always drew large crowds. As we entered down a muddy road to the arena, parking seemed to be spatially organized, to some degree, by social class. Just outside the arena was a small fleet of late-model Chevy Suburbans and even a Cadillac Esplanade. Farther down the slick, red clay road, one found an array of vehicles, mostly pickup trucks ranging from 1960s era models to more contemporary ones, all well used. The arena itself was spare in style. It was an unpainted red brick building with a metal roof that seemed to sprout out of the hilly landscape. Inside, a packed dirt ring was surrounded by about 10-15 rows of tiered, blue-plastic seats, a small version of a Greek odeum. Around the upper perimeter of the arena was a wide walkway with a bar and take-away food stands in two of the corners. The clientele was largely composed of people from the surrounding *rancherías* (small ranching villages) whose birds were competing in the night's events, which would run from 7:00 p.m. to about 2:00 a.m. For a small cover charge we entered to a place abuzz mostly with onlookers. It was only the first two rows of seats that held the serious bettors and their retinues.

A single bet was quite high: \$100 USD to lose and \$80 USD to win on a favored bird, with the reverse holding true (\$100 USD to win and \$80 USD to lose) for a bet on a less-favored animal. Bettors obtained *fichas*, a slip of colored paper signifying a single wager, from the odds makers who worked the ring. The color of the *ficha* indicated whether the bet was placed on the favored bird or its less-favored challenger. If a bettor won, the odds maker from whom he

obtained his *fichas* paid up, with the reverse happening if the bettor lost. Simply put, if a bettor placed one bet (one *ficha*) on a favored bird and had the good luck of that bird winning, the bettor would collect \$80 USD from the odds maker; if the bird had the poor fortune of losing, the bettor would have to pay the odds maker \$100 USD. Unlike the Balinese cockfight, it did not appear that bettors were making complex hedging calculations by placing bets on both birds (cf. Geertz, 1972). Rather, large wagers were placed on single birds (bettors might obtain upward of 20-25 *fichas* or more), with impressive sums of money changing hands.

A couple of rows in front of my seat, a young twenty-something fellow from a nearby ranch consumed copious amounts of Courvoisier and Coke. He was sharply dressed in what might best be described as “ranch modern” style—khaki pants, a colorful rayon shirt, and a baseball cap (in his case, one with a Miami Dolphins logo). The odds makers paid close attention to him and it quickly became clear why, as he peeled off numerous \$500 peso notes (then roughly equivalent to \$50 USD), along with \$100 USD dollar bills, to pay off a bet he had just lost. Later in the evening, he enjoyed a winning streak and at one point won \$27,000 USD on a single match. He always bet against the favorite.

This was the ostentatious betting of which I had heard rumors in Buenavista. A farmer who accompanied me leaned over, shrugged, and commented, “[i]t’s the marijuana or perhaps the powder,” in order to explain the young man’s source of money.⁸ A long-standing pastime was being remade into a status arena for the newly rich.

Here a return to Balinese cockfighting is useful. Part of Geertz’s analysis of the Balinese cockfight—a fascinating critique of Jeremy Bentham’s notion of “deep play”—becomes especially relevant. Bentham (1882) argued that high-risk, high-stakes economic transactions (e.g., gambling) were irrational and immoral insofar as they often did not benefit the participating parties. Geertz astutely contends that the key to understanding the rationality of big-money betting is in its sign value in a status game. This occurs most incisively when the transaction centers on people of similar status and, additionally, those who have high status (Geertz, 1972). When those conditions are met, solidarity and status among the players will be legitimized and confirmed. He notes the transformative, almost magical quality of the cockfight when he says, “What makes the Balinese cockfighting deep is thus not money itself, but what, the more of it that is involved the more so, money causes to happen: the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight” (Geertz 1972, p. 17). Status hierarchy is, thus, materialized through the spectacle of economic play.

New Forms of Everyday Consumption for the Elite

Buenavista also had more everyday forms of consumption, though they too were stages upon which the town’s new elite constructed status and identity. A number of novel stores had opened, especially for higher-end, urban-style clothing that contrasted markedly with the items available in the more traditional, and less expensive, stores in town. Indeed, these new stores were so numerous that some even specialized in such low-volume niches as children’s wear or

slinky lingerie. A new mall was about to open, and there was a cybercafé with surprisingly fast internet service, as well as a day spa. These had all bubbled up within the last two or three years, and all were located within a couple of blocks of the town's main plaza. These new stores catered to the town's elite. The majority of townspeople may go by these stores and gaze into their windows, but they do their shopping in the more traditional stores. Here we have yet other forms of conspicuous consumption, but also a new source of ideas and ways to actively construct identity for elites and ways to imagine identity for the average citizen.

Trading on Bourdieu's (1984) notions of capital, Richard Wilk (1999; also see Wilk 2007, Chapter 7) has explored similar themes through the lens of food, taste, and class in Belize. The knowledge of things foreign is, he argues, a form of cultural capital. Wilk (1999) contends that the diffuseness of "things foreign" may render it a less crisp distinguisher of upper and lower class in Belizean context. For Buenavista, in contrast, access to economic capital still clearly demarcates who has access to new and exotic consumer items from the outside. Things are clearly more fluid in Belize, where strict hierarchies of taste have eroded and are more blended. In Buenavista, the process of change is far more incipient and hierarchies more obviously differentiated. Thus, if we walk down the streets away from the main town plaza, there are stores that sell an urban style that contrasts markedly with the garden-variety consumables and sites of consumption that are part of the average citizen's everyday life. In Buenavista, these new stores were innovations rather than the objects of banal urban consumer drudgery. All of them flowed into a common symbolic crucible of Western, urban-oriented style. While it was not possible to determine that *narco*-money had either bankrolled these new enterprises or fueled consumption in them, the average dairy farmer was clearly not their clientele. These businesses survived on disposable income that was in short supply among most of the farming class. They may have sold very little of their merchandise to the majority of townspeople. Still, by their very presence, they altered what it was to be part of rural *ranchero* society. As Wilk (1999) has underscored in the Belize example, they suggested a new openness to the outside world of ideas and practices that will eventually infiltrate Buenavista and become an unconscious part of local culture and practice.

The Narco-Farmer Entrepreneur

The final dimension of the narcoeconomy's penetration into everyday life that I will explore is through the repatriation of a particular subset of migrants back into Buenavista society. These are the young, male migrants who have worked in U.S. drug trafficking networks. Typically these men work through their late twenties or early thirties in the U.S. and then return to the community, invest in a ranch, and take on the farming life. Extension agent colleagues remarked many times, "They say that X is a *narco*, but he's one of the hardest working farmers in the area. He's really serious."

It is interesting that many of these returnees chose to invest in farming since it was both hard work and not terribly lucrative. They could easily have opted for a line of work that required less toil and sweat, such as opening some sort of business venture. Farming, however, was a sign of legitimacy and a traditional means for attaining social status, and these young men took on the

material trappings and practices of a respectable life that reflected local norms and values. Baseball caps were shelved and replaced with new *tejanos* (cowboy hats). Whiteford (2002:109) suggests that this is an “attempt to buy respectability.” However, it also speaks to the powerful symbolic value of farming.

Most of these young men came from farming families and had some basic knowledge that helped them get started. Unlike their fathers and grandfathers, however, they did not have to start at the bottom and work their way up. Because they had cash resources, it was not uncommon for them to pay inflated prices for ranches, artificially driving up local land values. It was becoming harder for other farmers to afford to buy land, while at the same time making it lucrative for those who owned choice pieces of land to sell out.

These new farmer entrepreneurs, furthermore, have been socialized in a patronage-based political culture. This politicized culture was typical of the region in general and the narcoeconomy specifically. Often, the new farmers found ways to tap into the resources of the state, through their network of *caciques* (political bosses), in order to subsidize or otherwise draw resources to their ranches. Because of the local *narco*-political networks, they frequently had success in gaining access to development resources. As with most money laundering schemes, those launching them need to be successful and make a profit.⁹ Though it was impossible to confirm, my impression was that these individuals not only sought legitimacy, but had also invested everything they were able into their new enterprises without much left in reserve. Thus, the stakes were high, and they had to make their new farming operations successful. This made them very interesting players on the local agricultural development scene—committed members of the farming community struggling against a dying way of life. In sum, economic capital is important, but, following Bourdieu (1984), the cultural and social capital associated with new farmers is equally so. These new farmers control the symbolic objects of status (land and cattle) and the social networks that help them politically. Nonetheless, the control of these powerful forms of capital does not provide them with ultimate legitimacy or respect.

Specifically, because of their connection to local *narco*-political networks, some townspeople were suspicious of the new farmers’ motives for participating in local development efforts. The question the townspeople raised was whether these new farmers were operating on their own behalf or on that of their *narco*-patron. Consequently, the new farmers’ position was always ambiguous and a bit suspect. As one farmer noted in reference to a local development initiative, “[Fulano] was participating in the project, but he dropped out to go back with [his patron].” In this case, his patron was promoting a competing project. Everyone seemed very clear on how these individuals came by their money, yet they participated relatively seamlessly in the local dairy economy. This was a sign of the routinization of this pathway to land and other resources. (Notably, because they have spent considerable time in the U.S. where they were exposed to new ideas and had honed their business skills, these new farmers were often inclined to be early adopters of innovations. The extension agents I have worked with always found them open and willing to seriously consider new ideas, practices, and technologies.)

Discussion

New Forms of Cultural and Social Capital

Bejeweled houses, new types of consumer culture, rich young farmers, and wild extravagance infused into leisure activities all led to new forms of desire and imagined ways of being that can be highly seductive (or highly repellant depending on one's perspective). Buenavista had become a resonating chamber for the reverberations of the different cultural and material forms that were reconstituting local culture and practice. While many of the new forms of consumption may have appeared out of place, only the most ostentatious of them received comment. These new forms of consumption were being rapidly routinized. Ironically, most members of the community were unable to actually participate. They simply could not afford to do so. In this way, new forms of modernity were being institutionalized, as were the inequalities they established and signified. They, further, made the *narco*-life appear to be a potentially desirable strategy for economic success. Grillo (2009), for example, reports that *La Familia* will pay their employees a basic starting salary of \$2,000 USD per month—10 times the minimum wage.

Buenavista is a town of stark contrasts—poverty pitted against the conspicuous consumption of the newly rich. It would be tempting to see this extravagant consumption as a form of hyperconsumption, as conceptualized by Jean Baudrillard (1989, 1995) or George Ritzer (2009). It is enticing because day spas seem to bizarrely out of place and fantastic in a working-class farming town on Mexico's margins. Regardless of how odd these may seem, we are still dealing with real brick and mortar structures and not the often virtual simulation and spectacle of Las Vegas or Disneyland.

We have seen, however, that the denizens of Buenavista are confronted with markedly new forms of cultural and social capital that are subverting old forms of status and power, and to which the average citizen has no access. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital rests on knowledge—the learning of those signs and activities that signify taste, success, and power. We have seen a number of these in the various ethnographic scenes presented above. The new *narco*-farmer buys his way into the existing status and prestige system of the community by purchasing a premier ranch and stocking it with top-quality cows.¹⁰ He does not achieve this through years of experience, but rather through his new dollar power. In so doing, he inflates the local land and cattle markets, making it even harder for any legitimate farmer to aspire to afford such a luxurious ranch, thereby subverting the existing system.

The *narco*-farmer is also well situated in social networks that ensure access to state resources. Those networks act as a form of social capital. This is a classic form of differential privilege found in Michoacán, whereby patronage systems are mobilized to gain political access in ways that are not possible for average citizens.

The cockfight is a particularly interesting example of both cultural and social capital intertwined in a single event. Again, we see *narcos* coming to dominate a traditional system of status and leisure. They know where and how to insert themselves to gain and legitimize their status. By virtue of their economic power, making bets so large that the average citizen cannot

participate, they become the observed by a crowd that cannot hope to participate. In the process, they develop the recognition of status legitimacy by onlookers and also develop social capital by creating networks of solidarity with other *narco*-gamblers. As Geertz (1972, p. 22) observes, “[t]he more the match is (1) between near status equals [and] (2) between high status individuals, the deeper the match...the greater the emotion that will be involved and the more general absorption in the match.” In sum, focus is shifted from an economic game to a far more symbolic and status-oriented one.

Finally, the new urban-oriented consumption patterns, the cybercafé, and the day spa all point to the importation of the foreign into the local. To access these, one must know what they are and value them, as well as have sufficient buying power. They too are forms of cultural capital that most Buenavisteños do not understand very well, let alone have much interest in.

While these new forms of social and cultural capital may prove to have their seductions for the average citizen, the likelihood that these citizens will ever have or experience them is remote, especially given the current state of the Mexican economy. At least for the foreseeable future, there is little chance that there will be a blending of the new dominant form of status and power into the old one.

As such, there is strong potential for a willing and able reserve labor pool, mostly of young men, who will be eager to gain access to these new forms of capital. This will be especially true as farms continue to fail, jobs dry up at an even faster pace, and older forms of prowess become less valued (e.g., horsemanship, gallantry, thrift).

The Development Vacuum in a World of Escalating Violence

Young men form the primary labor pool for the area’s narcoeconomy, and they have few viable economic options. First, they can be farmers with little or no land who can only reconcile to a life that will result in poverty. Second, they can migrate, most likely to the U.S., in search of jobs and higher wages. Third, they can get involved with the local narcoeconomy, sometimes in conjunction with being a migrant. The final option will have an increasingly strong attraction for young men living on the poor margins as the rural economy continues to collapse and the U.S. economy continues to falter, further constricting the job market for U.S.-bound migrants. Women in this area typically remain behind to maintain homes, care for families, and work at whatever poorly paid job they can find.¹¹

In a development vacuum, the narcoeconomy has certainly infused an otherwise moribund rural economy with cash and jobs. In part, then, from a neoliberal perspective it might be argued that some of the effects seen from the narcoeconomy in Buenavista are positive. The narcoeconomy ushered in certain forms of consumption into an otherwise stagnant, marginal community; it brought money back into the community in various forms of legal reinvestment activities, such as farms and businesses; and it provided many people with all manner of jobs. At the same time, it has also exacerbated existing inequalities; created gross spectacles and rituals of excess; underwritten the construction of ostentatious houses; inflated land values; raised levels of

interpersonal violence and fear; and increased problems with local drug addiction. All of these features, good or bad, are being shaped within a larger political-economic context that has been dominated by policies and practices stemming from the opening of the Mexican economy, which was formally institutionalized by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The pressures of poverty and globalization are poignantly addressed in a *narco-corrido* (drug ballad)—“Michoacán Harvest”—by El Cejas y su Banda Fuego (Brown Eyes and his Fiery Band¹²):

The product we offer is first quality
You can sample it if you want
Harvest in Michoacán
It's pure goat's tail

It's part of the best product
We have picked from our land
In Michoacán soil
We harvest tons of it

In our green meadows we plant the “evil weed”
And it's transformed into millions in the United States

The say the mafia dies
And this is a big lie
The product has been “internationalized” to a large scale
And our Mexican land gets more and more famous

In La Ruanda and El Aguaje
They have changed their crops
They used to plant corn
But those times are gone

Today, you can see the green tops
Of that very expensive grass

There are many who criticize us
I am going to give them some advice
If this was an easy business
Everyone would be involved in it
It is not a matter of having pants
One has to wear them well

With these lines, I say goodbye

They are expecting me in Tijuana
As I finishing delivering this parcel
And I am back in La Ruana
To prepare another load for some friends in Atlanta

Despite this and other popular culture valorizations of drug trafficking (cf. Edberg, 2004), many Buenavisteños were both disgusted and frightened by the blossoming of the narcoeconomy in the late 1980s and 1990s. The level of anger and frustration, though perhaps not surprising, is interesting when compared to other cases. In Michoacán's *tierra caliente* (hot, semi-tropical lowlands), local "insiders" distinguish themselves from *narco*-traffickers, who are largely "outsiders" and who have moved into their community and altered it. Those who are local frequently attain the label of "good narcos" who are said to exhibit greater support and concern for the community (Malkin, 2001). In contrast, Buenavista has no such convenient scheme for differentiation. Participants in the narcoeconomy come from families with long histories in the region and robust kinship and friendship networks within the community. To heighten local frustration even more, this is a highly conservative community, a former stronghold of the *Cristero* movement, which pitted devout Catholics against the federal government's anti-clerical reforms during the mid 1920s into the early 1930s. Strong religious conviction and the accompanying values of hard work, thrift, and moral living conflict directly with the narcoeconomy and its associated lifestyle.

In the early to mid 2000s, there had been relatively little violence in Buenavista, unlike the bloody drama occurring along the U.S.-Mexico border. Indeed, people could recite the relatively few violent or threatening events that people felt were *narco* related. For the most part, then, violence or its fear was part of the local imagination far more than a regular experience. Those occasions of violence that had occurred in Buenavista were part of local lore. For example, there was an oft-told story about the owner of high-profile business who was gunned down in broad daylight a number of years ago by men carrying *cuernos de chivo* (goat's horns), as AK-47 automatic assault rifles are known. Everyone knows that AK-47s—illegal in Mexico—are the weapons of choice for drug traffickers.

In Buenavista, the rare spectacle became inserted into the ongoing flow of events sporadically punctuated with less immediately dramatic occurrences: a drug-related arrest; a murder; or the kidnapping of a local businessman in order to extort money. Taken as a whole, these cumulative events created a constant, low-intensity anxiety that lurked just below the surface of daily life.

This has changed dramatically with the militarization of Michoacán in 2007. Levels of violence throughout the state have escalated rapidly. A former lawyer from Michoacán laid out the basic outline of events (personal communications, 1 May and 7 June 2009) *La Familia* was formerly a home-grown cartel operating within Michoacán only. In 2006, they extended their operations into the nearby states of Guerrero, Jalisco, and Mexico. The Gulf and Sinoloa Cartels, whose turf was now challenged, pushed back violently. This set off a wave of inter-cartel

violence that still rages. When the military made its bold move against the cartels, that aggression was turned against the government as well. He argues that violence was formerly contained within a small subset of politicians and cartels, which rarely involved the public at large. Today, cartels, politicians, corrupt security forces, caciques, and paramilitaries are all involved in complex ways. For the average citizen, this is especially frightening because the sources of violence are so varied and unpredictable.

In Buenavista, a son from one of the town's wealthiest and most influential families was shot to death in Guadalajara several years ago. More recently, one of the new *narco*-farmers in town was the subject of a failed assassination attempt in 2007. He was seriously injured, but survived. In 2008, a former municipal police officer, having left her job only months previously, was arrested as part of a regional kidnapping ring, one of whose victims was from Buenavista (Alertaperiodista 2008). In a nearby community, gunmen killed the town's mayor, perhaps in retaliation for his recent firing of the police commander and an officer (CNN, 2009). What was once a low-intensity anxiety, has now blossomed as the threat of violence takes on a new, far more immediate reality. As Lacey (2009b) observes:

These days...those offering the biggest mordidas [bribes]...are the traffickers, who Mr. Calderón's administrations acknowledges have thousands of police officers, small-town mayors, and even high-level government officials across the country on their payroll, something now regarded as a full-fledged national crisis.

One unnamed government official noted ominously, "Anyone could be a narco" (Lacey, 2009a).

Conclusion

Consider the following scene from an 18 February 2009 video report from the border city of Reynosa, which had erupted in a firestorm of violence that day (El Universal, 2009b). A reporter and his cameraman are atop a bridge where they are taping Mexican troops in what appears to be fierce street fighting. Both are crouched and suddenly gunfire escalates from all sides. The two men dive to the ground but keep taping. Finally the gunfire subsides. The reporting crew descends to the scene of the crime. What is left are numerous dead cartel soldiers, similarly dressed in white shirts and khaki pants, their AK-47s and AR-15s at their sides. Troop carriers and patrol cars speed off to the next engagement in what looks like pure chaos.

Michael Whiteford's (2002) essay on Colombia captures the essence of a world turned culturally upside down by an entrenched civil war in which the abnormal is normal people live in a cloak of fear and everyday threat. It is a world of mimetic fragments in which the large and small details of life's scenes are constantly askew. I would argue that trends in Mexico are following suit. The scene from Reynosa is now being repeated regularly across the country.

Thus, in the Mexican version, violence is now part of daily life with casualties on all sides, including the innocent. The death toll mounts to nearly 10,000 since 2007 as drug traffickers battle each other and government security forces with impunity. That the violence is associated with all sides, including shadowy paramilitary groups, further erodes any confidence

in the possibility for public security and civil authority. Troops are met with heavily armed cartel members, 80% or more of whose weapons come from the U.S. (McKinley, 2009; McLemore, 2008). It is a world where in which is also a rapidly collapsing political authority structure—congressman-elect from Michoacán, Julio Cesar Godoy (half brother to the state’s governor) is on the run and accused of providing protection to *La Familia*; Saul Solis, a failed Green Party candidate in Michoacán is also accused of aiding and abetting the same cartel. Others are mentioned regularly as having *narco* ties, including gubernatorial candidate from Colima, Mario Anguiano (banner from drug hitmen endorsing his candidacy); Michoacán Governor Leonel Godoy (evidence that he may have received Gulf Cartel money in support of his 2007 campaign); Mauricio Fernandez, who ran for mayor of a wealthy suburb of Monterrey (on tape saying that town security is controlled by a cartel); Governor Fidel Herrera of Veracruz (allegations he cut a deal with the Gulf Cartel to lower violence); a Senator from Zacatecas, Ricardo Monreal temporarily stepped down after 14.5 tons of marijuana was found on property owned by two of his brothers. Even former President Fox (2000-2006) has entered the fray, accusing former Sonoran governor and current senator, Manlio Fabio Beltrones, of links to the cartels. Regardless of the truth to these claims, the claims themselves create a resonating chamber of fear, mistrust, and a crisis of faith in the political system.

The May 2009 arrests of 30 politicians and state functionaries in Michoacán is the *de facto* admission by the federal government that the *narcopolitica* (narcopolitics) is, in fact, deeply rooted in Mexico. Corruption, in sum, seems to be riddled throughout the system. “While Mr. Calderón dismisses suggestions that Mexico is a failed state, he and his aids have spoken frankly of the cartels’ attempts to set up a state within a state, levying taxes, throwing up roadblocks, and enforcing their own perverse code of behavior. Across the country, the Mexican government has identified 233 ‘zones of impunity’ in which crime is largely uncontrolled, a figure that is down from 2,204 zones a year ago” (Lacey, 2009c). One can only hope the government is making the progress that is claimed.

The view from Michoacán renders a grim picture. The coordinated attack on security forces and facilities in eight communities across Michoacán and two communities in neighboring states on 11 July 2009 sent a clear message to the nation. *La Familia* had conducted a highly coordinated offensive against the government and exacted the highest single-day death toll in Mexico’s drug war. This has led some journalists to call this “El Tet michoacano” (Michoacán’s Tet) after the 1968 communist offensive in Vietnam (Gómez Leyva, 2009). While the comparison is considerably overextended, the intention is clear. Mexico’s drug war is looking increasingly like a civil war. Indeed, cartels are fighting it with furious impunity and coordination. The invocation of the “Tet” signifier underscores, on one level, the perception that the cartels are fighting with fearless impunity and coordination. Far more importantly, however, it suggests that (1) an active civil war is now being acknowledged and (2) there is a profound loss of faith in the government’s ability to stop the cartels (Llana, 2009). While President Calderón forcefully proclaims, “We cannot, we should not, we will not take one step backward in this matter,” a recent poll shows that only 23% of the Mexican public feel that the government is

winning, and 56% feel that they are losing the war against the cartels and that President Calderón's popularity is eroding (Ilf & Corchado, 2009). A reasonable reading of these data suggests a broad-based social exhaustion with the worsening civil war violence, and the everyday fear and dis-ease that accompanies it. This is more than just perception. The federal government admits that the cartels control an estimated 62% of the country's police officers, at least a portion of whom are grouped into 200 cartel-loyal "brotherhoods," along with heavy penetration of federal, state, and municipal governments (Castillo García, 2009). Together these data signal a rapidly advancing legitimacy crisis for the government. Perversely, it would appear that cartels have gotten the upper hand in the dystopian world they have created.

Groups such as *La Familia* do not just control through fear and violence. They have established a parallel system of governance. They provide the social services and support in poor communities that the government and the Catholic Church do not. In other words, they are creating a popular social network of support. One supporter of *La Familia* summarized the situation: "I know they [*La Familia*] are really crazy. In fact, I think they are really sick sometimes, but they are the only people in town who can help you if you get in trouble, so that's why I joined the group" (Tuckman & Vulliamy, 2009). As Samuel González, Mexico's former top anti-drug prosecutor in the mid-1990s, stated prophetically: "These attacks show *La Familia* has a social base. They are warning the government that if it doesn't change its strategy, there could be a social revolt" (Tuckman & Vulliamy, 2009). Thus, the rapidly devolving political situation and looming legitimacy crisis finds disturbing parallels with Colombia (despite the more ideological bent to the struggle in Colombia), or the efforts of the Taliban in Central Asia.

The view from Buenavista is equally disheartening. The cultural changes going on there—founded on the cultural effects of the narcoeconomy—will eventually have an indelible impact on thought and practice, though how and in what form remains unclear. It is certainly difficult for *narco*-elites to convert their cultural capital into other forms of capital because of their distant juxtaposition with poorer ranchers and farmers. However, *La Familia* has made some inroads by claiming divine and Revolutionary legitimacy powerful forms of symbolic capital. They have further used their economic power to develop a parallel government and a social base. In Buenavista, *narcos* have, to some extent, pulled together cultural and social capital in ways that have fortified their efforts. For the average citizen, confronting violence and its threat, new forms of cultural and economic domination, and the on-going erosion of state authority does not suggest any reconciliation of these various forms of capital in the near future, if it at all. What of a world in which there is a normalized abnormal and where regular citizens are relegated to the status of bystander to and consumer of the cultural spectacle of the narcoeconomy yet are otherwise rendered silent as they embody the tragedy of Mexico?

Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to the hard-working people of Buenavista who confront the fear of violence on a daily basis, and must today live in a world largely not of their creation. That they endure is testimony to their courage and character. Thanks go to a number of readers whose efforts are greatly appreciated: Donald Kurtz, Barry Isaac, Dion Dennis, and Randle Hart. Thanks

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¹ Indeed, Raul Salinas, brother of former President Carlos Salinas (1988-1994), was charged with masterminding the plot to kill Francisco Ruiz Massieu, the Secretary General of the Institutional Revolutionary Party. He remains in jail.

² *La Familia* appears to combine an extreme form of evangelical Christianity in combination with sloganeering reminiscent of the 1910 Revolution and such iconic figures as Emilio Zapata and Pancho Villa (Grillo, 2009; Grayson, 2009a, 2009b). This is not some facile devotion to “Santa Muerte” (Saint Death). This powerful ideological framework should not be underestimated, for it trades on two simulacra that resonate deeply with Mexicans: the divine and the Revolution (cf. McDonald, 1993). As such, it also serves to expose the class war being waged between the cartels and the government. They were initially the local gang in an evangelical Catholic community of Nueva Jerusalem, Michoacán (cf. Quinones, 2001, Chapter 10). They were then taken into the Beltran Leyva organization. From that humble origin, they have moved quickly since the mid 2000s to marginalize the other cartels that formerly controlled the state.

³ In a macabre statistic, from 1 January 2007 to 29 May 2009, Chihuahua state leads in the number of narco-related deaths (2,502), followed by Sinaloa (1,257), Baja California (894), Guerro (779), Durango (679), Michoacán (629), Mexico (620), Federal District (364), and Jalisco (312), Sonora (305)—in all 9,903 deaths (Los Angeles Times 2009). It is important to recall, however, that the running tab on deaths stops just before the major upsurge of violence in summer 2009 (see, for example, El Universal, 2009c).

⁴ In the early 2000s, it was estimated that as much as US\$14 billion dollars flowed into the Mexican economy through migrant remittances (Rosemberg, 2003).

⁵ Merton’s (1968) classic “strain theory” long ago argued that social forces cause crime. The working poor are most vulnerable to the strain caused by the disjunction between economic aspirations and their legitimate ability to meet them. Crime, then, flourishes in that gap.

⁶ The intermittent construction of homes is seen as a highly legitimate process because everyone knows that money, especially money that comes through migrant remittances, is highly variable in amount and timing. Colloredo-Mansfeld (1999) notes something similar in his field site of Otavalo, Ecuador. Otavalo is a tourist town where successful merchants and artisans slowly renovate their houses in a process that demonstrates their entrepreneurial skills and prowess; thus legitimizing them as successful entrepreneurs.

⁷ Payan (2006:49-50) makes a similar observation about the lavish “narco-mansions” of Juárez.

⁸ His comment is reminiscent of some of James C. Scott’s observations in his classic ethnography, *Weapons of the Weak* (1985). In this case, the use of rumor and innuendo could be seen a kind of resistance and a form of social critique.

⁹ While it might be argued that all businesses need to be successful, if a money laundering scheme is set up solely to provide its owner with a front of legitimacy, they may not be under the same economic pressure to produce a profit as a legal, legitimate business.

¹⁰ A contrasting example will further clarify the power of the traditional status system. Another community member, who had done serious time in a U.S. jail for his illicit activities returned to Buenavista, lived quite well, but had no visible means of support. He, like most everyone else, lived in a dense web of kinship and so went about his business (whatever it was) fluidly and amicably. It is worth noting that he was very likeable and had a rather serious interest in organic farming. We would occasionally get together over coffee and discuss what was happening with the organic movement in the U.S. Again reminiscent of Scott (1985), I would later hear hushed scornful sidebar comments about him, along with the suggestion that it was best not to be seen socializing with him.

¹¹ In this very conservative area, women were under the strong control of their parents. I came across a number of examples of young women who were eager to go off to the university in the nearest big city. Few ever got the chance. Many ended up working in the local wedding ornament industry or take on farming duties.

¹² It is worth noting that multi-dimensional concept of “Banda Fuego” is not done justice when translated into English. While the more literal translation of the term is “fire” or “fiery,” what is also alluded to is the notion of combustion, gunfire, and violence.

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