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The local bureaucrat in the making of urban power

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a perspective on urban power using the Gramscian concept of hegemony. In particular it focuses, on the coercion–consensus binary encompassed by the concept. The discussion is framed within Mexico's national security policy and reforms that feed into its war on drugs. It is argued that the militarization of the police illustrates the violent coercion of the State, whereas the concept of citizen security illustrates the consensual side of the hegemonic binary. Based on previous debates, the paper argues that unpacking coercion into its different types is important in acknowledging the role of the bureaucrat within the study of (urban) security. Through the understandings built between local bureaucrats (beyond police forces) and citizens, it is argued that the 'complicit' and 'neglecting' types of coercion may work as mechanisms that undermine the consensual discourse of citizen security and its implementation.

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The local bureaucrat in the urban-power conception

This paper contributes to the special issue by presenting a perspective on urban power based on the Gramscian concept of hegemony. This approach is useful for understanding how power is developed and contested within Mexico's security policy. By focusing on the local bureaucrat, the paper offers a distinct perspective on how agency can undermine or challenge the security discourse.

Hegemony is understood as the combination of State and civil society and how the former, in maintaining its dominating role, uses a mix of coercive and consensual mechanisms to govern society and perpetuate the power of ruling elites. The dialectical relationship between coercion and consensus renders hegemony a dynamic process, and a fruitful conceptual lens for understanding power. This dynamism is analyzed through national security and judicial reforms in Mexico, which have been promoted to counter activities led by criminal organizations or other armed groups threatening the social order envisioned by the State. A case in point is the security reforms derived from the 'war on drugs' and their emphasis on the militarization of the police providing public safety. The study of these reforms has neglected the role of local government – its coordination across policy sectors and tiers of government, its bureaucracy and the relationships with civil society – in promoting or tackling levels of violence highlighted by the broader war-on-drugs discourse.

In attempting to fill this gap in the study of security reforms, the paper argues that coercion can be multi-faceted when paying attention to the social relations found between the State and civil society. Coercion can be classified into three types: repressive, complicit and neglecting (Davies, 2014; Pearce, 2010). Through the practices built in the relations between local bureaucrats and citizens particular attention is paid to the complicit and neglecting types.

These two forms of coercion are important because both bring to the fore the role of bureaucrats in shaping the understanding of violence within the localities they serve. Like citizens and communities who contribute to reifying or changing understandings of crime and violence (Arias, 2006; Rodgers, 2006), the paper argues that local bureaucrats (beyond the police forces) also contribute to this understanding through their working practices and relations with citizens, whilst providing services.

The paper begins by discussing the typology of coercion and how this helps to understand the exercise of power. Then it presents the context in which security policy is developed, contending that coercion takes place through the militarization approach of federal government. The latter is accompanied by a consensual strategy developed through the implementation of citizen security programs developed at the local level. Through the department of trade in a Mexican municipality, the scenario of Las Truchas is analyzed as a case where the coercive types of complicity and negligence are used by local bureaucrats. The paper argues that these types of coercion may offer room for negotiation between bureaucrats and citizens, which undermine or challenge citizen security and its implementation.

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Domination, coercion and consensus

Academics who have built on Gramscian theory (Davies, 2011; Ekers & Loftus, 2008; Jessop, 2002) have unpacked the differences within the consensus–coercion binary. Consensus has been understood as a subtle way of making society accept and legitimize the interests pursued by the State in daily practices materialized in education curricula, media, political rhetoric or leadership. The subtlety of consensus works as an invitation to accept and adopt the elites' interests, but is accompanied by a 'threat' if society resists or reacts against the consensual strategy used. Within the security debates, this threat has been enhanced by fear of the other (criminals, terrorists), which permeates the collective consciousness and allows the security discourse to be accepted more easily (Bang, 2011; Graham, 2012).

In contrast, coercion is the repressive act of the state. But like Pearce (2010) and Davies (2011, 2014), I agree on the importance of recognizing the multi-faceted nature of coercion. Although both authors' arguments come from different angles, they are complementary in analyzing security policy and programs in Mexico. On the one hand, Pearce develops her argument from a historical analysis on violence in Latin America and how this impacts democratization through agency practices and beliefs. For Pearce coercion unfolds in the State's own violent acts, the State's complicity in the violent acts of others and the State's negligence in addressing atrocities or ceding space to privatized expressions of violence. On the other hand, Davies acknowledges multi-faceted coercion through a Gramscian critique on theories of governance used in public policy and public administration. Like Pearce, Davies unpacks coercion into State violence and the 'laissez faire' or negligence by the State towards specific groups who have fallen into ghettoization or experienced de-investment or famine. He argues that coercion is also seen through a third way: the 'administrative domination' of State forces and bureaucrats in their management of governing institutions.

Although the typologies of both authors differ in origin, for the purposes of this paper I am treating the 'complicity' type of Pearce and the 'administrative domination' of Davies as equivalent. This is possible because both authors acknowledge the importance of the daily practices of State agents in reinforcing the elites' domination beyond the sphere of production. Pearce argues that these daily practices can be observed in politicians and officers' acts of corruption – to which I would add their links to criminal organizations. Davies argues that these daily practices are observed in the management of governing processes and regulation.

The paper argues that domination is observed through the State's promotion of militarization as the coercive arm and through the promotion of citizen security programs as the consensual arm. The paper focuses on the practices and beliefs of front-line bureaucrats, which are commonly molded by their degree of discretion in making decisions affecting service users and by the access to resources that bureaucrats have (e.g. information and grants), which is likely to be limited to citizens (Lipsky, 1980). As a consequence, bureaucrats become 'enforcers of values' in so far as 'they help to create and maintain the normative order of society' (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000: 356).

Following a Gramscian approach, the ruling elites seek other agents' discretion, resources and values to reinforce the dominant ideology, but as the next sections highlight these tools or mechanisms that maintain domination can also work in a counterproductive way in the development of security policy. In dissecting the multi-faceted nature of coercion this counter-productivity can be observed.

There is a risk of interpreting the more subtle types of coercion – complicit and neglecting – as tactics of consensus. To minimize

this problem, consensual mechanisms are understood as those directed to subordinate groups so they align to the elite's discourse; whereas the subtle types of coercion are mechanisms used by local State agents to align their working practices to the dominating national ideology. However, the bureaucrats' degree of discretion and interaction with society can undermine the implementation of a policy, which was designed originally to enhance domination. In underlining these subtle differences it is illustrated, to an extent, how individual discretion challenges hegemony in everyday experience.

The security State: building violent coercion

The security State is defined as a neoliberal State which, whilst promoting free global markets and de-regulated economic policies has, on the one hand, overlooked welfare and redistributive policies but, on the other, greatly invested in criminal justice or policies against crime (Bell, 2011; Wacquant, 2010). Like other Latin American countries, Mexico has been highly exposed to neoliberal reforms and over the last 30 years it has even become a proponent and defender of neoliberal economic policies at an international level through its membership in the OECD. In particular, its interdependent socio-economic relationship with the United States has prompted it to invest in the reform of its security policy as a means of demonstrating that it is not a 'failed State'.

Critics of Mexican neoliberalization have argued that the retreat of the State in providing welfare has been accompanied by economic policies that have exacerbated social and regional inequalities. Such policies have accentuated the size of the (informal) black market economy, whilst favoring the agro-industry connected to international trade at the expense of local agriculture (Holzner, 2010; Watt & Zepeda, 2012). In relation to the latter, migration rates into the US peaked between 2000 and 2007 (www.pewhispanic.org), and transit migration of Central Americans into Mexican cities along the route toward the north has become in recent years an issue of concern for both countries.

Democratization and decentralization, two other discourses that have accompanied neoliberal reforms since the 1980s, have contributed to enhancing democratic institutions designed to overcome the authoritarian approach to policymaking. Amongst the changes achieved, some governing powers were decentralized to states and municipalities and more transparent accounts and practices by the federal administration were developed. These reforms targeted the national executive and its administration, leaving untouched legislative and judicial powers. In particular, the lack of structural reform within the judicial system has turned out to be very costly for the country's implementation of its war on drugs since front-line police, military, general attorneys, prosecutors and politicians have been involved in negotiations with criminal organizations (Astorga, 2005; Beith, 2010; Jones, 2011).

The weak institutional capacity in the country's judicial system has prompted the State to adopt a 'hard hand' in security policy, in particular against organized and street-level crime (Chevigny, 2003). This hard-hand approach emphasizes brutality rather than effective law enforcement (Chevigny, 2003: 84), and it has recently been observed through militarized policing on a day-to-day basis, in many cases accompanied by human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2011; Watt & Zepeda, 2012; Zavaleta, 2012). However, the hard-hand approach has not been applied consistently or extensively throughout the country. For example, self-defense groups emerging in the last few years along the Pacific Coast to protect local communities against injustices by drug organizations, show the extent of the State's negligence in establishing order. Unlike the previous administration, President Peña (2012–18) has

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