Mexico "Under Siege": Drug Cartels or U.S. Imperialism?
Alfredo Carlos

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What is This?
Mexico “Under Siege”
Drug Cartels or U.S. Imperialism?
by
Alfredo Carlos

The dominant discourse in the United States regarding Mexico has long painted it as an unruly place and its citizens as inferior. Most recently this discourse has centered on the drug trade and the violence associated with it. No one would disagree that Mexico has problems of drug-related violence and crime, but the U.S. discourse distorts and misrepresents the country. Its purpose is to provide justification for economic paternalism and a relationship that can only be called imperialism as the United States has sought increased capital penetration in that country.

Hace mucho que el discurso dominante en los Estados Unidos con respecto a México pinta al país como lugar ingobernable y sus ciudadanos como inferiores. Más recientemente este discurso se centra en el narcotráfico y su violencia. Nadie niega que México tiene problemas de narcoviolencia y crimen, pero el discurso estadounidense distorsiona y falsifica al país. Su propósito queda en darle justificación al paternalismo económico y a una relación que solo puede llamarse imperialismo en cuanto los Estados Unidos ha buscado mayor penetración de capital en ese país.

Keywords: Mexico, United States, Discourse, NAFTA, Political economy, Drugs, Violence

According to major U.S. newspapers and policy makers, Mexico is currently waging a “war on drugs.” Former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (quoted in Dibble, 2010) described the situation as “starting to resemble an insurgency” and compared it to Colombia’s crisis some two decades earlier. The Los Angeles Times (February 19, 2009) sponsored a conference with the University of San Diego’s Trans-Border Institute at which it suggested that Mexico is “under siege” by drug cartels. Regular updates on the drug war appear in U.S. newspapers. For instance, on January 20, 2010, the Associated Press ran a story entitled “7 Bodies Linked to Drug Cartels Found in Mexico”; on March 19, CNN had one entitled “Drug Criminals Block Roads in Mexico”; and on June 23 the New York Daily News announced, “Mexican Drug Violence Nears Bloodiest Month, President Felipe Calderon Pleads for Country’s Support.” A simple Google News search will show that Mexican drugs, drug-related violence, and antidrug efforts are front and center in Mexico and the United States and have become the primary issue between the two countries.

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Drug-related violence is not, however, Mexico’s foremost problem, and the reporting on it obscures the more serious and immediate economic and social problems it faces. More important, it masks their origin in U.S. economic foreign policy while providing justification for continued and future U.S. paternalism and domination.

The media and the government in the United States have a long history of constructing and perpetuating this type of discourse about Mexico. It is linked to discourses surrounding the colonization of the Americas, the white man’s burden, the extermination of the native population, Manifest Destiny, the Mexican-American War, racial segregation in the United States, and prejudice against immigrants. While the current discourse regarding Mexico is different in that Mexicans themselves are concerned about what is going on, the way it is shaped and manipulated by the media reflects the earlier ones. Gilbert Gonzalez (2004: 7) suggests that the current understandings and representations of Mexico date back to the 1800s, when “U.S. capital interests sought to penetrate Mexico.” The original discourse was expressly linked to economic processes, and the same is true of the current drug-related violence story. In that regard discourse can be and in this case is extremely powerful.

META-NARRATIVES AND DOMINANT DISCOURSES

Michel Foucault (1972–1977: 120) argues that “discourse serves to make possible a whole series of interventions, tactical and positive interventions of surveillance, circulation, control and so forth.” Discourses generate knowledge and “truth,” giving those who speak this “truth” social, cultural, and even political power. This power “produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault, 1979: 194). For Foucault (1972–1977: 119), “what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is . . . that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.” In essence, power produces discourse that justifies, legitimates, and increases it. Similarly, Edward Said (1994: 14), speaking in reference to literary discourse, says that literature as a cultural form is not just about literature. It is not autonomous; rather, it is about history and politics. He says that literature supports, elaborates, and consolidates the practices of empire. Television, newspapers, magazines, journals, books, advertisements, and the Internet all help construct stories, creating cultures of “us” that differentiate us from “them” (Said, 1994: xiii). They all elaborate and consolidate the practices of empire in multiple overlapping discourses from which a dominant discourse emerges.

Dominant discourses are constructed and perpetuated for particular reasons. As Kevin Dunn (2003: 6) points out, representations have very precise political consequences. They either legitimize or delegitimize power, depending on what they are and about whom (Said, 1994: 16). Said asserts that a narrative emerges that separates what is nonwhite, non-Western, and non-Judeo/Christian from the acceptable Western ethos as a justification for imperialism and the resulting policies and practices and argues that discourse is manipulated in the struggle for dominance (36). Discourses are advanced in the interest
of exerting power over others; they tell a story that provides a justification for action. For Said, there is always an intention or will to use power and therefore to perpetuate some discourses at the expense of others. It is this intentionality that makes them dangerous and powerful. As Roxanne Doty (1996: 2) suggests, through repetition they become “regimes of truth and knowledge.” They do not actually constitute truth but become accepted as such through discursive practices, which put into circulation representations that are taken as truth.

Dominant discourses, meta-narratives (master frames that are often unquestioned [see Klotz and Lynch, 2007]), and cultural representations are important because they construct “realities” that are taken seriously and acted upon. Cecelia Lynch (1999: 13) asserts that “dominant narratives do ‘work’ even when they lack sufficient empirical evidence, to the degree that their conceptual foundations call upon or validate norms that are deemed intersubjectively legitimate.” They establish unquestioned “truths” and thus provide justification for those with power to act “accordingly.” They allow the production of specific relations of power. Powerful social actors are in a prime position to construct and perpetuate discourses that legitimize the policies they seek to establish. Narrative interpretations don’t arise out of thin air; they must be constantly articulated, promoted, legitimized, reproduced, and changed by actual people (Lynch, 1999). Social actors with this kind of power do this by what Doty (1996) calls self-definition by the “other.” Said (1994: 52) suggests that the formation of cultural identities can only be understood contrapuntally—that an identity cannot exist without an array of opposites. Western1 powers, including the United States, have maintained hegemony by establishing the “other”: North vs. South, core vs. periphery, white vs. native, and civilized vs. uncivilized are identities that have provided justifications for the white man’s civilizing mission and have created the myth of a benevolent imperialism (Doty, 1996: 11; Said, 1994: 51). The historical construction of this “other” identity produces current events and policies (Dunn, 2003). Through constant repetition, a racialized identity of the non-American, barbaric “other” is constructed, along with a U.S. identity considered civilized and democratic despite its engagement in the oppression, exploitation, and brutalization of that “other.” Consequently, dominant discourses and meta-narratives provide a veil for “imperial encounters,” turning them into missions of salvation rather than conquests or, in Mexico’s case, economic control (Doty, 1996). Dunn (2003: 174) suggests that dominant discourses legitimize and authorize specific political actions, particularly economic ones.

Scholars, intellectuals, and academics also engage in the perpetuation of discourses and participate in their construction. There is a large body of scholarly literature that describes Latin America as a “backward” region that “irrationally” resists modernization. Seymour Martin Lipset (1986), drawing on Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, portrays Latin America as having different, “inherently” faulty and “detrimental” value systems that lack the entrepreneurial ethic and are therefore antithetical to the systematic accumulation of capital. A newer version of this theory is promoted by Inglehart and Welzel (2005), who focus on countries that allow “self-expression” and ones that do not. Howard Wiarda (1986) suggests that the religious history of Latin America promotes a corporatist tradition that is averse to democratic and liberal values, a
sentiment more recently echoed by the political scientist Samuel Huntington (1996). Along these same lines, Jacques Lambert (1986) argues that the paternalistic latifundia (feudal-like) social structure of Latin America provides no incentive for self-improvement or mobility. Ultimately, the discourse created by the modernization and development literature focuses on the “backward” values of the “other” and becomes the West’s justification for the continued underdevelopment of the region. These interpretations lead to partial, misleading, and unsophisticated treatment of complex political and economic dynamics, particularly in Latin America. They ignore the long history of colonization and imperialism.

Several notable Latin American intellectuals have countered with a critique of the development literature through dependency theory and Marxist theories of imperialism. Writing on underdevelopment, Andre Gunder Frank (1969) focuses on exogenous factors affecting Latin American economic development, among them the penetration of capital into the region and the asymmetrical trading relationships that were created. Celso Furtado (1986) expands this notion and writes about the international division of labor and Latin America’s weakened position as the producer of primary raw materials for Europe and the United States. Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto (1979) suggest that the domestic economic processes in Latin American states emerged from this relationship of dependency. More notably Raul Fernandez and Jorge Ocampo (1974) argue that the Marxist theory of imperialism provides an explanation for the persistence of “backwardness” and identifies the basic contradictions in Latin America as between imperialism and the Latin American nations.

This Latin American scholarship, with rich critiques of mainstream modernization theory, has been dismissed, however, because it comes from non-mainstream academic and professional circles. Doty (1996: 164) views scholarship as an inventory in which non-Western scholarship is excluded because it is not regarded as legitimate. While dependency theory and Marxist theories of imperialism were briefly allowed into the inventory in the late 1980s and the 1990s, they quickly went out of fashion and are now excluded from the canon, easily dismissed and ultimately illegitimate. Dale Johnson (1981) suggests that these theories were rejected for their determinism—the assumption that Latin American nations had no agency in their own economic development. Others criticized them for assuming that economic development in its neoliberal form was a positive goal and still others for providing no prescriptions for change or alternatives to modernization. Scholars critical of modernization theories, including Theotônio dos Santos (1971) and Fernandez and Ocampo (1974), addressed all of these critiques and argued that these theories were not in fact deterministic but, rather, merely sought to highlight exogenous historical processes, including the penetration of industrialized capital, that had affected endogenous economic and political dynamics in Latin America and led to the persistence of “backwardness.” Yet dependency theory and Marxist theories of imperialism and their corresponding discourse remained marginalized, largely because the scholarship itself is not from an industrialized society or from scholars in the mainstream of their disciplines. There is an asymmetrical relationship between scholars from the North (the United States) and scholars from the South (Latin America, Africa, et al.) and even between white and nonwhite (American Latino) scholars. The literature, while rich in
analysis and highlighting critical issues, is read by many Northern scholars from an impoverished, reductionist, and simplistic perspective. Discursive authorship is thus not equal, and clearly Western representations exert hegemony by constructing discourses, representations, and narratives from underdeveloped regions as illegitimate (Dunn, 2003).

It is important, then, to understand and deconstruct discourses, unmasking their political and economic motivations and consequences. The goal, as Lynch (1999) points out, is to expose the material and ideological power relationships that underlie them—in the current case, U.S. imperialism—and to examine counterhegemonic alternatives.

**THE U.S. DISCOURSE ON MEXICO**

The original U.S. discourse on Mexico dates back to the 1800s, when Mexicans were depicted as an “uncivilized species—dirty, unkempt, immoral, diseased, lazy, unambitious and despised for being peons” (Gonzalez, 2004: 8). This discourse set the stage for the creation of what Gonzalez calls a “culture of empire,” in which the United States made a concerted effort to dominate Mexico economically and subordinate it to U.S. corporate interests (2004: 6). This narrative depicted the country as a huge social problem and its people as inferior to Americans, and it continues to dominate U.S. understandings of Mexico. Sometimes this is done with the help of Mexican politicians themselves, as in President Felipe Calderón’s extension of the hegemonic discourse of the “war on drugs.” The problem with this contemporary representation is that it oversimplifies the country’s complex political dynamics and obscures what is really going on. Mexico is suffering much more from extreme economic inequality, caused in large part by U.S. economic imperialism and capital extraction (the North American Free Trade Agreement, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank), than from drug-related violence. The great migration that has occurred since 1994 has been the result of a decimated economy. While some people may leave Mexico out of fear of violence, the vast majority of the millions of emigrants have left because of the necessity to feed their families. The discourse about drug-related violence detracts from the recognition of this fact.

Media coverage of drug-related violence and other negative reporting about Mexico have steadily increased over the past 10–15 years and skyrocketed in the recent past. The *Los Angeles Times*, for example, has dedicated a web site to the series “Mexico Under Siege: The Drug War at Our Doorstep.” It has reported, among other things, that President Calderón deployed 45,000 troops and 5,000 federal police to 18 states (*Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 2010) and that there were 10,031 deaths from drug-related violence between January 1, 2007, and June 5, 2009 (*Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2012). (One may question the reliability of these figures, given that on February 3, 2010, the paper had reported 9,903 such deaths since January 2007 and that on August 18 of that year it had reported a total of 28,228.) As far back as 1997, M. Delal Baer (1997: 138), the director of the Mexico Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, suggested that “skewed coverage is just another example of how the U.S. media, average Americans, and their representatives
in Congress increasingly subscribe to a tabloid view of Mexico.” He asserted that “drug and corruption stories have increased every year in the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal, leaping from 338 in 1991, to 515 in 1996, and 538 during the first eight months of 1997 alone” (138). This was 16 years ago; one can only imagine what the numbers are today as the drug problem in Mexico is depicted more and more as a U.S. national security problem.

The U.S. State Department sent out travel warnings in 2009, 2010, and 2011 to all U.S. universities regarding spring-break travel to Mexico, cautioning them about the increase in crime and spreading fear about Mexico (Gomez, 2010). The same was done with the outbreak of H1N1, originally referred to as the “swine flu.” Within days of the outbreak Mexico was under pressure from the world community and especially the United States to close down schools and heavily populated areas in order to avert the spread of the flu. The association of a disease named after swine with Mexico reinforced the “dirty,” “unkempt,” and “uncivilized” representations that Gonzalez discusses. Lost on the majority of the U.S. media and, consequently, on average Americans, however, was the fact that the outbreak originated in a town where the Smithfield Corporation, an American company with massive hog-raising operations known to improperly handle its waste, had a factory farm (Morales, 2009). The CDCP (2010) reported that only around 11,000 people died of the H1N1 virus between April through December of 2009, in comparison with the average of 36,000 people dying in the United States each year of the “regular” seasonal flu. If the H1N1 flu was such an epidemic, why was no one reporting on the deaths from the regular seasonal flu in the United States, which were clearly more numerous?

A large portion of the U.S. Department of State web page on Mexico is dedicated to warning Americans about such crime, safety, security, and health issues (U.S. Department of State, 2011). It currently advises citizens to delay unnecessary travel to Mexico because of the drug war. One may expect this type of warning from an agency concerned with its citizens’ welfare, but it is disturbing when the negative narrative becomes “common knowledge” and is included in government military strategic reports. In 2008 the U.S. Department of Defense published a report entitled The Joint Operation Environment offering perspectives “on future trends, shocks, contexts, and implications for future joint force commanders and other leaders and professionals in the national security field.” Part 3, Section C, of the report, entitled “Weak and Failing States,” describes the “usual suspects” in this category—in Sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Discussing the concept of “rapid collapse,” it asserts that while, “for the most part, weak and failing states represent chronic, long-term problems that allow for management over sustained periods, the collapse of a state usually comes as a surprise, has a rapid onset, and poses acute problems.” It goes on to suggest that “two large and important states bear consideration for rapid and sudden collapse: Pakistan and Mexico.” The discussion of Mexico is as follows (U.S. Department of Defense, 2008: 35):

The Mexican possibility may seem less likely, but the government, its politicians, police, and judicial infrastructure are all under sustained assault and pressure by criminal gangs and drug cartels. How that internal conflict turns out over the next several years will have a major impact on the stability of the Mexican state. Any descent by Mexico into chaos would demand an American response based on the serious implications for homeland security alone.
Among the many things that make this statement problematic is its simplification of Mexico’s political dynamics. First, it assumes that politicians, the police, and the judiciary are separate from and therefore adversaries of criminal gangs and drug cartels. Jorge Chabat (2002), a Mexican expert on drug trafficking and national security, challenges this assumption, arguing that the drug cartels buy off politicians and are imbedded in political structures and institutions. While the Mexican state has sought to clean up its politics and provide more transparency, historically the political elite and government technocrats have used their positions of power to increase their wealth, turning a blind eye to illicit operations. The Department of Defense statement is noteworthy because it goes on to lay the groundwork for potential military intervention in the event that Mexico descends into chaos. The problem here, of course, is who gets to define “chaos.” The Drug Enforcement Administration is already preparing for such an event, maintaining a presence in Mexico (see Toro, 1999).

Representing Mexico as a potential “failing state” in the midst of violent anarchy provides the U.S. justification for continued economic paternalism. The U.S. media and government have become extremely effective in representing a strange and threatening foreign culture for the American audience and thus manufacturing consent as it is considered necessary for action in Mexico, whether it be further neoliberal economic development or military intervention. It is therefore not surprising to see the rise in negative reporting parallel the time line of increased U.S. capital penetration into Mexico in the mid-1990s.

**DECONSTRUCTING THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE**

Since the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the United States has historically operated as if it had the moral high ground in the international community. It has contrasted its supposed traditional commitment to human dignity, liberty, and self-determination with the barbaric brutality of the “others” (Said, 1994). This American exceptionalism has been used to legitimate its domination over other countries. The notion of “world responsibility” is the rationale for its economic or military endeavors. Because of this, it may be instructive to look at its track record on some of the issues for which it criticizes other countries. Because the current negative discourse about Mexico is constructed around crime, comparing crime statistics in the two countries is helpful in deconstructing it.

In 2010 there were an estimated 23 million reported crimes of violence and/or theft in the United States. Of these 1,246,248 were violent crimes, 403 per 100,000 people, and of these 14,748 were homicides (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010a). A murder is committed every 31 minutes (Watt, 2008). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1.35 million high school students in 2009 were either threatened or injured with a weapon on school property at least once, while approximately 1.2 million acknowledged having carried a weapon on school property (CDPP, 2009). In the 2007–2008 school year, a record 34 Chicago public school students were killed (IOSCC, 2008). The proportion of prisoners to its population in the United States is at an all-time high, with 1.6 million criminals behind bars, more than any other nation in the world; 1 in every 31 adults is in some part of the criminal justice system (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010b). This proportion of prisoners to the total population is six.
times the world average (IOSCC, 2008). This snapshot does not include crimes committed or provoked by U.S. military aggression abroad. However, these statistics clearly do not justify any assertion that the United States is a “failing state.” Yet such data and observations are used to perpetuate a discourse that jumps to that conclusion about Mexico.

In comparison, Mexico’s rate of homicides per 100,000 inhabitants as recently as 2007 was 8.1 and has only risen in response to a heavy government crackdown in what Youngers and Rosin (2005) call the “cockroach effect.” The most recent data suggest that in 2011 the rate was 23.7, still middling and actually low compared with those of other Latin American nations (see Table 1). The United States, with a rate of 4.8, is barely better than Uruguay and much worse than Canada, France, Italy, Spain, and Germany. Compared with other industrialized countries, it lags behind, closer to “chaos.” While proportionally more people are victims of homicide in Mexico than in the United States, Mexico is far from being an extreme outlier. It is safe to say that there are many countries in Latin America that have similar if not much more serious problems of crime and violence, while at the same time the United States faces similar issues within its own borders. Yet, Mexico is scrutinized much more closely and is the only one viewed with concern as a possible “failing state.”

Furthermore, while more people are killed in Mexico, more people kill themselves in the United States. Are we to conclude, then, that people in the United States are more self-destructive or psychotic? No one would argue that U.S. society is disintegrating into chaos because a sizable number of its citizens want to end their lives. Yet similar figures are used to arrive at this very conclusion when regarding Mexico. Some argue that Mexico is scrutinized because it borders the United States in a post-9/11 world or because of corruption or the ineffectiveness of the Mexican judicial system. And while these critiques have some merit, the negative discourse that dominates is about the violence, not about Mexican corruption or their ineffective institutions. If looked at historically, Mexico’s violence problem has remained relatively constant over the

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<td>Spain</td>
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<td>Honduras</td>
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course of the past 25 years, while the negative discourse has grown exponentially in this same time period.

The condescending discourse perpetuated in the United States makes it seem as though Mexico were becoming uninhabitable, when in reality this is far from the case. While many residents do have concerns about the violence and it has in fact affected tourism, there are still people in Mexico going about their daily lives. There is a web site called “The Truth about Mexico” that is dedicated to making this very point. It was created by Americans who have moved to Mexico to live but is now used by Mexicans as well to challenge the dominant discourse. One story, entitled “Mexico Murder Rate Reality Check,” suggests that, according to the Mexican attorney general in 2009, “the drug-related violence has scared away tourists and prompted some commentators to warn that Mexico risks collapse . . . but the country registered about 11 homicides per 100,000 residents last year, down from 16 in 1997” (quoted in Brown, 2009). This was at the height of the negative reporting and was still a decrease of 30 percent since 1997 at that point in time. An article regarding the U.S. State Department’s spring-break advisory by Frank Koughan (2009), a former CBS News 60 Minutes producer who has been living in Queretaro since 2006, suggests that “consumers of American media could easily get the impression that Mexico is a blood-soaked killing field, when in fact the bulk of the drug violence is happening near the border. (In fact, one way of putting this would be that Mexico is safe as long as you stay far, far away from the US.)” While there may have been an increase in the numbers since 2009, the dominant discourse at the time was at least as horrific as today’s, even though the statistics show that between 1997 and 2009 homicide rates had actually fallen and have since grown in proportion to the expansion of the war on drugs.

There has also been strong public pressure and civic engagement regarding the violence. One example is the Marcha por la Paz, a march led by the poet-journalist Javier Sicilia seeking to draw attention to the government’s militaristic tactics for fighting narcotrafficking, which have only increased and intensified the violence (Samano and Alonso, 2011). The march in 2011 attracted tens of thousands of participants from 38 cities in different states in Mexico and from 26 other countries. Yet, the average television viewer in the United States never hears about events like this or about the people who have been fighting to end the violence.

Is there drug violence in Mexico? Yes, but this does not make Mexico a “failing state.” While people are victims of drug violence in Mexico, in the United States they are also victims of drug, gang, or random violence and more recently of mass shootings. Both countries experience senseless violence that stems from complex societal and political dynamics that cannot be easily simplified. It is essential that the dominant narrative be deconstructed in order to see why such narratives are perpetuated to begin with, which in the case of Mexico brings us back to continued economic domination.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE

The importance of the drug-related violence story lies in its masking the nature of U.S. involvement in Mexico’s social and economic problems. It
perpetuates a relationship of imperialism between the United States and Mexico that manifests itself in NAFTA, International Monetary Fund and World Bank lending policies, and direct intervention in Mexico’s “sovereign” internal politics disguised as economic development and military assistance to help bring order to Mexico. Mexican politicians have bought the story and have been willing collaborators with economic development to “help” Mexico. Former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari and his Institutional Revolutionary Party vigorously pursued NAFTA as a mechanism for injecting foreign capital into Mexico’s ailing economy (Castañeda, 1993). Jaime Serra, a former secretary of trade, and J. Enrique Espinoza, an economist formerly on the council of economic advisers to the president of Mexico, have fervently proclaimed NAFTA a resounding success (Serra and Espinoza, 2002a), pointing to increased foreign direct investment as evidence. However, free trade has led only to the enrichment of a few monopolistic corporations in the United States while the economic situation of Mexico’s people deteriorates (Robledo, 2006). Gilbert Gonzalez and Raul Fernandez (2003: 54) argue that “NAFTA is just one of the most recent examples of U.S. domination over Mexico and how it continues to misdevelop and tear apart the socioeconomic integrity of that society.” They describe NAFTA as having two purposes: to “guarantee a free hand to U.S. enterprises willing and able to invest in Mexico to take advantage of that country’s cheaper wages” and to “deny in various forms and degrees to other economic powers the advantage of operations in and exporting from Mexico.” In effect this means continuing Mexico’s long history as a U.S. economic colony, providing cheap labor, raw materials, and manufactures for consumption in the United States while restricting Mexico’s access to the U.S. market. NAFTA called for the privatization of state companies and the flexibilization of the labor market through “restrictions on wage increases, curtailment of vacations and sick-leave time, extensions of work-week, and increased management powers” (Gonzalez and Fernandez, 2003: 55). This process was supposed to lead to an opening for investment, economic growth, and access to diversified export markets for Mexico.

The effects of NAFTA on Mexico have, however, been overwhelmingly negative. While foreign direct investment has increased from US$3.5 billion to about US$13 billion annually, as Serra and Espinoza point out, this does not necessarily translate into growth for the Mexican economy. This is in part because money invested in Mexico comes mainly in the form of loans that have to be repaid, often with high interest, and is invested with the aim of extracting capital rather than allowing it to circulate within the Mexican economy—a concept known to economists as the multiplier effect, also considered a major factor for growth. So while foreign direct investment has in fact increased, it is not an accurate measure of the impacts of NAFTA on the Mexican economy because it does not automatically translate into Mexican economic growth. Mexico has the largest trade deficit in Latin America, a mediocre annual growth rate of 1.1 percent of its gross domestic product, and inflation of 15 percent from 1994 to 2003, placing it sixteenth out of thirty-two countries in Latin America in annual growth (Arroyo-Picard, 2005). Since the passage of NAFTA, Mexico has averaged 10 percent inflation annually while having a growth rate of 0.76 percent from 1994 to 2013 (Trading Economics,
As far as opening its markets is concerned, Mexico remains the least diversified exporter in Latin America, with 89 percent of its exports going to the United States (Arroyo-Picard, 2005). NAFTA has largely led to deindustrialization. Of Mexico’s 1,100 capital-goods plants, 396 have closed down, while 17,000 enterprises of all kinds went bankrupt shortly after the crisis (Gonzalez and Fernandez, 2003: 57).

The impact of NAFTA on Mexican agriculture has been greater because agricultural production was once the foundation of Mexico’s national development. State investment in agriculture was reduced by 95.5 percent and credit made available to the rural sector by 64.4 percent (Quintana, 2004: 251). Disinvestment in Mexican agriculture has meant that agricultural enterprises are unable to compete with subsidized U.S. commodities. The United States maintains domestic subsidies that allow it to export corn at 30 percent below the cost of production, wheat at 40 percent below, and cotton at 57 percent below—a practice known as “asymmetrical trading” and “dumping” and deemed illegal in world commerce (Fernandez and Whitesell, 2008). Serra and Espinoza (2002b) suggest that this is a nonissue because of NAFTA’s tariff-rate quota system, which charges tariffs for exceeding the import quotas. However, Cavanaugh and Anderson (2002) point out that under NAFTA the tariffs were mandated to be phased out in 2008, and even while they were intact the Mexican government declined to collect them. The outcome has been the disappearance of profitability for Mexican national agricultural producers. Five years after NAFTA, corn had lost 64 percent of its value and beans lost 46 percent while at the same time prices of staple consumer goods rose 257 percent (Quintana, 2004: 256). Despite these figures the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative (OUSTR, 2006) points to the growth of Mexican agricultural exports to the United States by US$5.6 billion during the past 12 years as proof of the success of NAFTA. However, producers continue to abandon agricultural endeavors en masse, vacating 1.6 million previously cultivated hectares (3.95 million acres) in the first eight years of NAFTA (Quintana, 2004: 256). Peter Goodman (2007) tells the story of Ruben Rivera,

who sat on a bench in a forlorn plaza, rather than working on his seven-acre farm. He used to grow tomatoes and onions, hiring 150 workers to help at harvest. Now he doesn’t even bother to plant. He can buy onions in the supermarket more cheaply than he can grow them. A crop of tomatoes yields less than the taxes. He lives off the $800 sent home monthly by his three sons, who run a yard work business in Macon, Ga.

Stories like this have become all too common. As Quintana (2004: 256) puts it, “One of the historically great agricultural civilizations of the world [now places] its food supplies in foreign hands.” Mexico now imports 95 percent of its edible oils, 40 percent of its beef, pork, and other meat products, 30 percent of its corn, and 50 percent of its rice. NAFTA has resulted in the “complete inability of the Mexican nation to produce the food required to feed its own people” (Gonzalez and Fernandez, 2003: 57).

In the end, “free trade” has made Mexico a completely open market for U.S. products while U.S. producers are guarded against Mexico’s products by subsidies and tariffs. NAFTA was never meant as a development policy for Mexico.
or a policy to help cure its social ills. It was a policy of U.S. economic expansion for the purpose of deepening U.S. hegemony while allowing the continued extraction of capital. It was promoted by huge U.S. multinational corporations as benevolent economic development to allow them to integrate themselves into the Mexican market without having to deal with that country’s requirements and legislative issues. Mark Weisbrot (2004) of the Center of Economic Policy Research in Washington suggests that, had Mexico’s economy grown at the same pace from 1980 to the present as it did in the period from 1960 to 1980, today it would have the same standard of living as Spain. . . . To have 25 years of this rotten economic performance, you’d have to conclude something is wrong. . . . It is hard to make the case that Mexico’s aggregate economic performance would have been even worse without NAFTA.

Not only has NAFTA not accomplished the growth propulsion its supporters promised in Mexico but it has had devastating social costs for Mexican society. Poverty in rural areas has risen significantly from 37 percent in 1992 to 52.4 percent in 2002, with 86.2 percent of rural inhabitants living in poverty (Quintana, 2004: 257). NAFTA has left nearly half of Mexico’s 106 million people, 51 percent of the total population in 2010, living in poverty, causing the mass displacement of workers and forced migration (Dickerson, 2006; World Bank, 2013). Since 1994 an average of 600 peasants a day (at least 1.78 million people) have migrated from rural areas, many to northern cities along the U.S.-Mexican border and others into the United States (Quintana, 2004: 258). Migration means family disintegration and the destruction of the social fabric of Mexico. Many of these jobless displaced workers will try their luck at crossing a militarized border into the United States. Peter Goodman (2007), interviewing Luz Maria Vazquez, a tomato picker from Jalisco, reports that six of her brothers and sisters are in the United States, most of them without papers. More than 11 million Mexicans (a conservative estimate) now live in the United States without documents, and 7 million of them immigrated after NAFTA, between 1994 and 2005 (Passel, 2006). Clearly the politics in Mexico are much more complex than the drug story in the United States makes them out to be.

CONCLUSION

The dominant discourse about Mexico in the United States has a long history and has affected the way Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos are viewed and treated. While much has changed since the 1800s, the current discourse about Mexico serves the same basic purpose. The United States legitimizes its expansionist economic foreign policy in terms of the burden of civilizing, uplifting, and promoting development in less developed countries, beginning with its neighbor to the south (Gonzalez, 2004: 185). It employs a foreign policy that advances its imperialist interests. U.S. government and media agencies generate a representation of Mexico that has provided avenues for very specific courses of action. Promoting a discourse of a “chaotic,” “unruly,” “failing state” has provided justification for direct U.S. military intervention, especially along the border, now potentially with armed drones (O’Reilly, 2013), and legitimized the penetration of U.S. capital interests in
Mexico at the expense of Mexico’s own economy and, more important, its people. Even at its most basic level, we can only call this imperialism.

While Mexico has an ineffective justice system, government corruption, and crime and drug-related violence, these are problems that most modern nation-states also face. In fact, the United States is itself heavily implicated in the drug trade, holding by far the largest stocks of cocaine in the world and being Mexico’s primary market (INCB, 2008). It is also the largest supplier of arms not just to Mexico but to all of Latin America (Chomsky, 2012). Latin American countries are working together toward the decriminalization of drugs, which has produced very promising results in Portugal, while, in stark contrast, “the coercive procedures of the 40-year U.S. drug war have had virtually no effect . . . while creating havoc through the continent” (Chomsky, 2012). But the conversation doesn’t revolve around what the United States can do to clean up its own act; it is about “othering” Mexico.

The United States has had a tremendous impact on Mexico’s internal dynamics regarding migration, unemployment, poverty, and crime. Its economic imperialism has contributed to the weakness of Mexico’s economy and as a result its internal politics. NAFTA has stunted Mexican economic growth and led to the mass displacement of workers, forcing them into job markets that they would not have considered had they had access to jobs with dignity. For many it has led to migration to the United States, while for others it has meant lives of crime and violence. But no one discusses this, and it gets no media coverage because the focus is not on the failed U.S.-imposed neoliberal economy but on drug-related violence. This is done purposefully, since the story does specific work and is perpetuated because it benefits U.S. economic interests and works as a mechanism of justification for continued U.S. imperialism.

For the most part, the concerns that the vast majority of people experience the vast majority of the time on a daily basis are not about these drug-violence outrages. Instead they are economic—how they will pay their bills and clothe, shelter, and feed their families. Even in the conversation about immigration reform, no one discusses the fundamental right that people have to live and grow in the place they consider home. No one discusses that people choose to migrate only when they have no other options. U.S. imperialism has led to people’s having no other option. Representing Mexico as a “failing state” allows the United States to evade responsibility for creating many of these problems in Mexico while also providing a powerful story to convince American citizens and Mexican politicians that U.S. economic intervention in Mexico is necessary.

The irony of it all is that NAFTA continues to be justified through a narrative of a chaotic and violent Mexico needing economic programs of development to solve its social problems, when in fact it is the penetration of U.S. capital that has caused many of those problems. The meta-narrative helps to perpetuate an asymmetrical power relationship between Mexico and the United States. The dominant discourse provides the veil for this “imperial encounter” to become a mission of salvation rather than of economic conquest. In the end, the way Mexico is represented in the United States has little to do with its actual internal political or social dynamics, instead it is a means to expand and maintain U.S. imperialism in Mexico. Over the past 150 years, one thing that has stayed the same is Mexico’s position as an economic colony of the United States, a place
to go for cheap labor, raw materials, and cheap manufactures for consumption at home. Focusing on drugs and violence obscures this. While Mexico does have serious issues of drug-related crime, this crime is not the most severe of Mexico’s problems. Those problems are poverty and unemployment and the country’s inability, for the first time in its history, to feed its own people. Mexico is indeed “under siege”—not by drug lords but by U.S. economic interests—and this has had disastrous social costs for the Mexican people. This is not, however, the discourse we engage in. That discourse is purposefully absent.

NOTES

1. For this discussion I will use the terms “West” and “Western” to refer to the political and intellectual tradition that stems from the United States and Western Europe. “West” and “Western” are also used synonymously with “North” and “Northern” because the United States and Western Europe are in the Northern Hemisphere.

2. Murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

3. Considering that the United States has 750 military installations in foreign territories (U.S. Department of Defense, 2010) and is engaged in two active wars, a discussion of its overwhelming military power, the use of that power, and the casualties and conditions it causes might be appropriate here.

4. For further reading on Mexican workers displaced because of NAFTA, see Colombia Report at http://colombiareport.ss.uci.edu/archive.html. This archive provides a rich source of critical material and reports that examine the effects of free-trade agreements from various perspectives, including their human, social, economic, and political costs.

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Mexico Under Siege. By Mary Anastasia O'Grady. Updated Feb. 25, 2008 12:01 a.m. ET. Mexico City. Perhaps it is a sign of a maturing electorate that Barack Obama's past drug use has not become a disqualifying factor in his bid for the presidency. It may signify that Americans are beginning to view the intake of mind-altering substances as a private decision. Donald Hodges & Ross Gandy: Mexico Under Siege: Popular Resistance to Presidential Despotism. London: Zed Books 2002. The book by Hodges and Gandy deals with events and personalities that are for the most part familiar to those interested in the post-revolutionary Mexican history. It is a cavalcade of the diverse leftist resistance movements in the decades following the Cardenas government, that is, from the 1940's onwards, beginning from the independent Mexico: Guerrero under siege. A medic explains the mental health services offered during one of MSF’s mobile clinics in a village in Guerrero state. Ongoing conflict has left the population traumatised, isolated and vulnerable.