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Homicide as Politics in Modern Mexico

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This chapter is part of a larger attempt to understand crime from the point of view of Mexican civil society. In order to do this, it starts at the intersection of two traditions in the study of violence. One is embodied in the work of historians, such as Eric Johnson, Pieter Spierenburg and the late Eric Monkkonen, who expanded the range of sources, interpretive tools and chronological breadth of the study of crime, proving that a long-term examination of criminal trends is required for any effort to understand the broader impact and contemporary relevance of crime and punishment (Johnson, 1995; Monkkonen, 2001; Spierenburg, 1998, 2008). The second tradition engaged by this chapter consists of the scholarship of historians of Mexico, such as Carlos Monsiváis, Jorge Aguilar Mora and others, who try to look at homicide as an act always invested with meaning in the cultural and political history of the country (Aguilar Mora, 1990; Monsiváis, 1994; Meade, 2005; 'Punishment and Death', 2006). In order to respond to both bodies of scholarship, this chapter deals with statistics of crime, as well as the words and images produced around crime.

The thesis is simple: because of its frequency and its changing trends, crime is a central field in the relationship between civil society and the state in contemporary Mexico. Homicide in particular (how it was perceived, committed, explained) was a key theme in the definition of victim's rights and authorities' obligations, and in the public discussions about justice and transgression. In other words, all homicide in post-revolutionary Mexico is political homicide. The twentieth century saw many creative ways to kill, outside civil war. After the apex of violence, during the revolutionary decade from 1910, homicide rates decreased, yet remained high and prominent in everyday life. Individual and multiple homicides attracted inordinate amounts of attention, bringing together a massive public and generating debates, explanations and narratives in many different media. Discussions focussed on the usual questions (who did it? why? how?), but also on the larger meaning of homicides – as if each one of them contained an important message regarding the state of Mexican society, the legitimacy

of its institutions, and the weaknesses and moral quality of its people. The focus on civil society allows me to bring out that territory of life that is not ruled by the state (in this case, through law, policing and punishment), or by the market, but instead involves the deliberate and critical participation of individual and collective actors. An analysis involving civil society cannot be reduced to psycho-social study of responses to, and performance of, murder; examining crime only as a pathology or as a transgression of the law denies a host of non-state actors any involvement in the resolution of conflict and loss derived from the crime itself (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Braithwaite and Strang, 2001; Forment, 2003).

The main expression of the significance of homicide for civil society is its ability to summon large and diverse audiences and turn them into one single public. This public can judge the performance of institutions and the state of social mores with a great degree of consensus, given the clear moral value of homicide – regardless of the political motivations of the actual crime or lack thereof.[1] Such discussion, open yet based on a shared agreement about 'reality' and moral value, is a central aspect of the process of political incorporation and democratisation, as it allows an increasing number of social actors, even if they are not part of the government and central party structure, to have an effect on politics and policy. Thanks to civil society's response to crime, people otherwise marginalised from public life claim stakes in the quality of governance and justice (Habermas, 1991; Guerra, 2000: 271; Warner, 2002; ICESI, 2010). With some optimism and in spite of many obstacles (including the political manipulation of moral panics), we can say that the process of political incorporation is a central feature of the evolution of twentieth-century Mexican politics, even as violence remains a central aspect of political and social life (Vaughan, 1997; Buffington and Piccato, 2009).

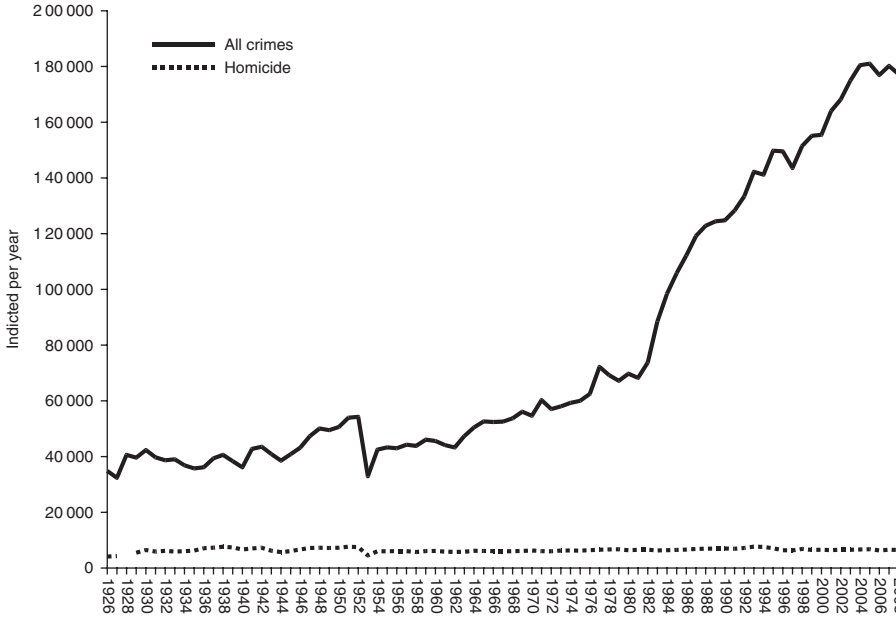
This chapter will specifically address the value of homicide as a source of meaning in the public sphere. A parallel effort, within the concern about civil society, could be developed around non-state prevention of, and responses to, crime (Piccato, 2005). I will examine here three bodies of evidence. The first is statistical, to get a sense of the size and direction of criminality during the twentieth century. The second is more clearly political: the letters written by family and friends of homicide victims to Mexican presidents, from the 1930s to the 1950s. The third kind of evidence pertains more fully in the

1 In contrast to Alan Knight's contribution in this volume, I am focusing on the effects of violence; in that regard, I am proposing that the distinction between political and non-political (or mercenary) violence, or between instrumental and expressive violence, is not essential.

public sphere, although it is structured by the previous two: the images, explanations and narratives that thousands of readers consumed in order to make sense of murder and the debates they generated. These sources, I contend, are not three different windows onto one reality but integral aspects of the study of homicide.

Statistical Evidence

Figure 4.1 reveals that homicide is indeed a long-term and serious problem in Mexico. The graph shows a generally stable number of persons indicted for homicide, which contrasts with the growth in the total number of crimes during the period for which we have consistent figures (Piccato, 2003); it should be noted that the database has been updated with data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (National Institute for Statistics and Geography) (http://www.inegi.org.mx), and also that 'indicted', or *presunto*, refers to those suspects charged and imprisoned but not yet sentenced. Their cases constitute the most reliable figure available for compiling long-term series. Even though they may not represent the entire number of homicides, as



Source: Estadísticas del crimen en México: Series históricas, 1901–2001. [WWW document]. URL http://www.columbia.edu/~pp143/estadisticascrimen/EstadisticasSigloXX.htm. [accessed 29 April 2008].

Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, [WWW document]. URL http://www.inegi.org.mx [accessed 29 April 2008].

Figure 4.1. Indicted for all Crimes and for Homicide. Mexico, 1996–2009

we will see below, indicted suspects are more important in public perceptions of crime than those found guilty, and certainly more visible than those not arrested. The contrast between the recent increase in violence, associated with the so-called 'war on drugs' and the stability of the total number of homicide indictments is striking. However, this impression can be deceiving on two accounts: first, as we will see below, the recent violence is not necessarily reflected by national judicial statistics and, second, public perception of the crime as an all-too-frequent problem in Mexican society is not new but was sustained throughout the century.

Figure 4.2, giving national rates for the most important crimes per total population shows a clear decline in homicide during most of the twentieth century. Although rates are high today, they are much lower than in previous years and immediately after the Revolution. In the capital, where the information is available, the rate of homicide sentenced per 100,000 inhabitants was 46 on average between 1885 and 1871 (only in Mexico City, contained by the Federal District), 31 in 1909, and rose to 37 in 1930 for the Federal District, decreasing thereafter (Dirección General de Estadística, 1890; *Anuario Estadístico*, 1895; Piccato, 2001: 79). This decline corresponds with that of criminality in general in the country, as can be seen in the trends of other

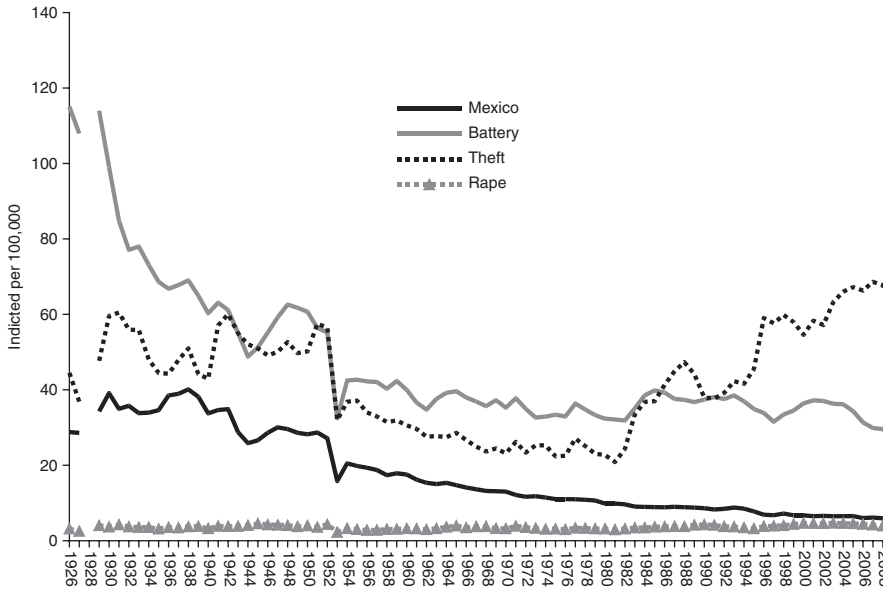


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Figure 4.2. Indicted per 100,000, Selected Crimes. Mexico, 1926–2009

crimes. As in other contemporary societies, multiple socio-economic factors explain this broad phenomenon; education is one that I found to be strongly correlated with rates in Mexico. Literacy increased throughout the century, its correlation with lower rates seeming to reinforce the common notion that links violence with poverty and marginality. Yet this explanation is too broad and the link between poverty and violence is problematic, particularly when it refers to the notion of a 'subculture of poverty', associated with Mexican *machismo* (Lewis, 1961; Gutmann, 1994). By contrast, theft seems to have responded more directly to the socio-economic deterioration of the last decades of the twentieth century (Beltrán and Piccato, 2004). As Figure 4.2 shows, homicide seems to have continued a steady decline until the present.

Figure 4.3, in which selected states are compared, suggests that, even if homicide has been a stable problem throughout the twentieth century, it has changed places and trends in recent years. The Federal District, which had lower rates for most of the century, now has rates at the same level as the national rates, while states such as Sinaloa and Baja California, both clearly affected by the expansion of the drug business and correlated violence, seem

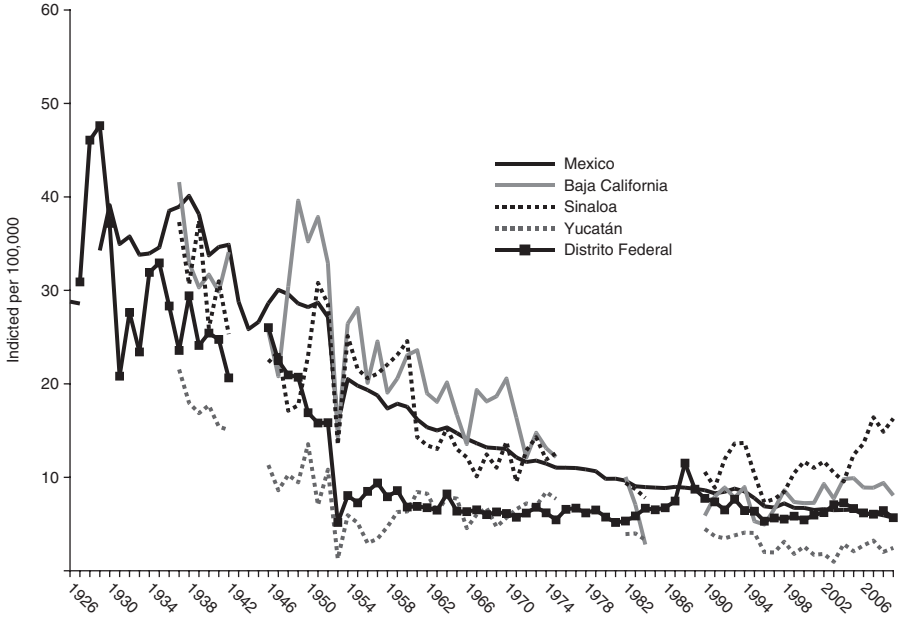

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Figure 4.3. Homicide Indicted, Rates per 100,000 Population. Mexico and Selected States, 1926–2009

Table 4.1. Average Homicide per 100,000. Selected States

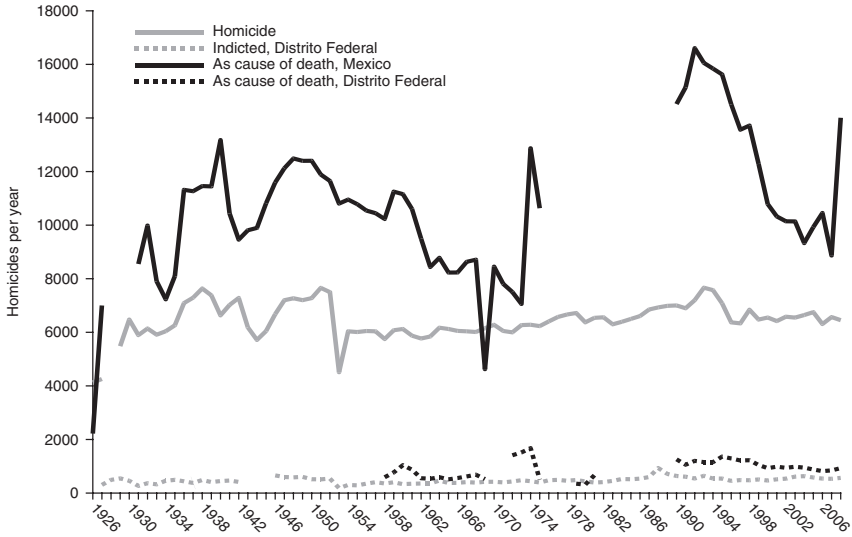
Period	Mexico	Baja California	Sinaloa	Yucatán	Distrito Federal
1990-2009	7.06	7.94	11.55	2.74	6.37
1926-2009	17.71	17.34	16.27	6.4	12.43

Sources: Pablo Piccato, ''Estadísticas del crimen en México: Series históricas, 1901–2001,'' http://www.columbia.edu/~pp143/estadisticascrimen/EstadisticasSigloXX.htm; data Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, http://www.inegi.org.mx

to have followed an upward trend since the 1980s, similar to that noted for Central America by Orlando J. Pérez in his chapter in this volume. Yucatán has remained, by contrast, a state with very low rates. In all of these states, and in the country as a whole, as shown in Table 4.1, the averages for the last twenty years are still lower than those recorded since 1926.

These figures are only a partial representation of the problem. Homicide is commonly held to be a good index of quantitative criminal tendencies, on the assumption that police and judicial authorities are more diligent in prosecuting it, while other crimes such as theft and rape can easily escape the attention of institutions. In the case of Mexico we have to take this with a pinch of salt. Many homicides are not investigated and go unpunished. Figure 4.4 compares the evidence from judicial sources with that from health authorities counting homicide as a cause of death. The number of deaths reported as homicide by forensic sources is consistently higher than that from judicial statistics. Part of this might be the result of cases in which a corpse leads to an investigation but not to an indictment. In any case, the difference, an average of 65 percent more for the country between 1926 and 2005, and 91 percent more for the Federal District, suggests that justice only reaches a limited number of cases. This is a greater problem in certain places, such as the northern border in recent years: in Nuevo Laredo, during 2004, there were 130 reported cases of homicide but only eleven indicted for the crime (INEGI, 2005; INEGI, 2006a; INEGI, 2006b). The work of other researchers suggests that the number of crimes never reported or prosecuted is very high, although it is not clear whether this situation has worsened in recent years because of the lack of long-term victimisation surveys (Greenberg, 1989; Zepeda Lecuona, 2004; Escalante Gonzalbo and Aranda García, 2009).

Table 4.2 presents all indicted rates and the rate of homicide as cause of death, according to public health authorities. It suggests a steep increase in 2008 but represents the same long-term decline – although at levels comparable to other countries in Latin America, as noted by Pérez. There is no evidence, however, that the lack of prosecution for murder could explain this recent rise: most likely, if we consider the contrast between homicide as cause of death against judicial indictments and the qualitative evidence of the sections



Source: INEGI, Sistema para la consulta del Anuario Estadístico del Distrito Federal, Edición 2006. [WWW document]. URL http://www.inegi.gob.mx/est/contenidos/espanol/sistemas/aee06/estatal/df/index.htm [accessed 29 April 2008].

Figure 4.4. Homicide According to Judicial and Public Health Sources, Mexico and Federal District, 1926–2009

that follow, the problem of impunity has been constant throughout the century.

This lack of investigation and punishment for murderers explains in part why the decline in murder rates is not echoed by a decrease in public concern about the problem throughout the century. If we examine the ways in which homicide has been depicted, explained and discussed, famous cases and the evidence of impunity seem to have had more impact than any statistical analysis. The increasing use of guns, rather than the traditional knives, also partly explains the difference between trends and perceptions (Quiroz Cuarón Gómez Robleda, and Argüelles Modína, 1939).

Murder and Petitions

Homicide was a consistent presence throughout the twentieth century, and it was often associated with impunity by the public. Murders had political repercussions because they invited civil society to question the response of the state. This gave a kind of political agency to victims that is not found in other crimes – not until recent times, at least, with police abuse, rape and kidnapping the clearest examples, as we will see below. These demands, usually addressed to the president, came from individuals (the aggrieved

Table 4.2. Indited for Homicide and Homicide as Cause of Death per 100,000. Mexico, 1926-2009

Year	Indicted	As cause of death	Year	Indicted	As cause of death	Year	Indicted	As cause of death
1926	28.80	15.49	1961	16.20	29.24	1996	6.89	15.70
1927	28.59	47.02	1962	15.35	25.26	1997	6.76	14.48
1928	N.A.	N.A.	1963	15.02	21.68	1998	7.21	14.44
1929	34.27	N.A.	1964	15.34	21.82	1999	6.73	12.77
1930	39.11	N.A.	1965	14.73	19.80	2000	6.72	11.07
1931	34.96	50.71	1966	14.11	19.19	2001	6.51	10.47
1932	35.76	58.13	1967	13.65	19.51	2002	6.60	10.16
1933	33.82	45.21	1968	13.19	19.12	2003	6.49	10.04
1934	33.95	40.65	1969	13.12	9.86	2004	6.51	9.14
1935	34.59	44.73	1970	13.02	17.52	2005	6.54	9.61
1936	38.52	61.46	1971	12.13	15.65	2006	6.00	9.95
1937	38.95	60.17	1972	11.64	14.56	2007	6.15	8.30
1938	40.11	60.20	1973	11.79	13.27	2008	5.94	12.89
1939	38.15	59.17	1974	11.46	23.47	2009	5.67	N.A.
1940	33.75	67.04	1975	11.03	18.82			
1941	34.64	51.48	1976	11.02	N.A.			
1942	34.88	45.30	1977	10.99	N.A.			
1943	28.77	45.63	1978	10.85	N.A.			
1944	25.85	44.76	1979	10.65	N.A.			
1945	26.61	47.60	1980	9.84	N.A.			
1946	28.62	49.67	1981	9.85	N.A.			
1947	30.05	50.62	1982	9.64	N.A.			
1948	29.60	50.84	1983	9.04	N.A.			
1949	28.60	49.25	1984	8.96	N.A.			
1950	28.21	48.09	1985	8.90	N.A.			
1951	28.68	44.52	1986	8.85	N.A.			
1952	27.15	42.18	1987	8.98	N.A.			
1953	15.81	37.87	1988	8.89	N.A.			
1954	20.50	37.20	1989	8.78	N.A.			
1955	19.80	35.52	1990	8.62	17.87			
1956	19.34	33.72	1991	8.29	18.19			
1957	18.76	32.46	1992	8.45	19.49			
1958	17.37	30.91	1993	8.79	18.41			
1959	17.87	33.08	1994	8.49	17.77			
1960	17.54	31.95	1995	7.77	17.14			

Sources: Pablo Piccato, ''Estadísticas del crimen en México: Series históricas, 1901–2001,'' http://www.columbia.edu/~pp143/estadisticascrimen/EstadisticasSigloXX.htm; data Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, http://www.inegi.org.mx

relatives, many of them mothers) but also from corporative organisations, such as unions or neighbours' associations; examples include a mother denouncing a policeman freed after killing her son (Estrada Aguirre, 1969), and letters from taxi drivers (González, 1959), chauffeurs (Lucero, 1955) and Trabajadores de Caminos (1936). Letters usually centred on justice, the oldest trope in the petitions of Mexican subjects to their authorities, yet the individuals or associations that demanded justice never failed to mention the

political implications of their appeals. The archives of Mexican presidents, particularly from Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940) to Adolfo López Mateos (1958–1964), held at the Archivo General de la Nación, contain a large number of letters demanding justice after homicides that went unpunished. They come from all states and they make for a large number of documents: an average of 1,189 files per six-year presidential period. If we take the number of indicted persons as a reference, 3 percent of all homicide cases found their way to the president's desk. While President Porfirio Díaz, before the 1910 Revolution, usually limited himself to responding to similar letters by stating that he could not intervene in judicial matters, post-revolutionary presidents took a more active role, forwarding the letter to the Procuraduría (Attorney General's Office) of each state, following up on certain cases, and even offering additional security for relatives of victims threatened by freed murderers. Thus, Manuel Avila Camacho instructed the Mexico City Chief of Police to instruct a suspect, Manuel Sáenz de Miera, to stop bothering the mother of a homicide victim (Romo Castro, 1942).

Letter-writers ranged from the wealthy foreigner demanding justice to the humble mother, such as Balentina Esquevel, who denounced the local bosses who killed her son and shot her in the leg, yet escaped punishment because they offered 'beer and a good lunch' to the prosecutor (Esquivel, 1940). Some of these letters offer detailed narratives of the aftermath of the crime – in contrast with judicial records only concerned with its causes. Refugio Carbajal, for example, wrote to president López Mateos in 1961, demanding justice for the murder of his son Antonio by one Luis Barrón. Referring to his deceased son, Refugio wrote that 'he told me himself' the details of the murder and the attempts to make it look like an accidental electrocution. The son asked the father to use his entitlement as a veteran of the Revolution to have the murderers pay for the education of his orphaned children. The letter quotes the ghost of the son: 'do not forget this, dear father, because until there is a solution I will continue bothering you' (Carbajal Flores, 1961).

Testimony from the spirit of the victim could perhaps seem the only certain truth, because complainants and most local judicial and police authorities were powerless in the face of violent individuals , local *caciques* or wayward officials. Everyone knew that policemen, prosecutors and judges could be bought. The figure of the *pistolero* (in reality part bodyguard, part policeman, part pure criminal) was widely associated with unpunished violence during the middle decades of the century. Even when *pistoleros* were involved in incidents of common crime, the implication was that they acted with the support or complicity of well-connected patrons. A lawyer characterised them as the 'best defined type of the born criminal', yet they were an essential element of the 'micropolitical violence' that pervaded the post-revolutionary period, according to Alan Knight in this volume (Langel, 1942: 1).

Homicide, however, gave enough courage to enough people to tell the president about some ugly realities. In 1958, a relative of his victim claimed that air force pilot Sergio García Núñez bragged that a judge was going to acquit him soon because he had received 50,000 pesos. Javier Torres Pérez wrote to President Ruiz Cortines that García Núñez was an example of those 'well-connected abnormals, *pistoleros*, inveterate murderers on the salary of your friends, who commit crimes every day and who, when they finally fall into the hands of justice, its action is impeded by corrupt judges and orders from powerful men that send such social degenerates as García Núñez to privileged prisons for the military [. . .] instead [. . .] of a true prison for dangerous schizophrenics' (Torres Pérez, 1958). Another suspect was paying 9,000 pesos per month to avoid indictment. All letters were more or less explicit about a basic political reasoning: the legitimacy of the president himself depended on his handling of such cases. Or, in the words of the letter just cited, 'the people get tired, Mr. President, of so many García Nuñezes' (Torres Pérez, 1958; Vélez, 1948). The difficulty in reaching the truth and justice through institutions, and the belief in the great power of the president, inspired these letters and prompted the half-hearted reactions of national authorities.

Only since the 1980s, as documented in the presidential archive of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), have these petitions come to be understood as human rights violations and associated with the mobilisation of 'civil society', particularly in the form of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) dedicated to seeking justice against sexual violence and the repression of dissidence. Even before the denunciation of 'dirty war' disappearances, torture and murder, scandalous police abuses in the 1980s put the language of human rights at the centre of political debates in the Mexican press. Feminist organisations raised the profile of rape (a persistently underreported component of police abuses) and, more recently, child prostitution (Monsiváis, 1994: 44; Lang, 2003; Cacho, 2005). Yet even in the earlier era, the letters examined above cannot be interpreted as anything other than critical expressions by civil society about the failure of the state's protection of citizens' security – but couched in the traditional language of petitions to the sovereign rather than the modern language of human rights. The continuity is clearer in contrast with other cases, such as that of Argentina, examined in this volume by Emilio Crenzel, where an institutional break and alternative narratives about terrorism provided a clear before-and-after for the use of that language.

Presidents responded in some cases because these letters were not mailed to them alone. Some complainants copied their letters to the press, for example Florencio Rodriguez Cárdenas, whose son died after a beating at the police station (Rodriguez Cárdenas, 1959). The growth of presidential power is the main thread of the narrative of presidential archives and of

much of twentieth-century political history. But homicide opened up debates that were not easy to integrate into the political discipline built by the post-revolutionary regime (Gillingham, 2010). Even if relatively few murderers were at large because of their official position or connections, they were a stain on the reputation of the police and the judiciary, and a symptom of a president's limited power. When a case of grievous impunity was mentioned in the pages of newspapers, the game shifted in favour of victims. Keeping homicides quiet was therefore useful for suspects. The aforementioned García Núñez bragged that 'by explicit orders of the Presidency newspapers remain silent about everything concerning his case' (Gómez Pérez, 1958). He did not have an alibi, but he did have a media strategy. This was not always easy to achieve. Newspapers were the first place where one learned about a homicide, where murderers confirmed what only they knew, and where justice, or its failure, could be documented. Indeed, one man read a newspaper about the crime he had committed, although nobody had interrogated him (Anonymous, 1958), repeated in a similar case (Alexa et al., 2003).

Chapters by Christopher Boyer, Víctor Macías, Renato González Mello and the present author in a recent book on Mexican crime stories reveal how common cases of murder were invested with strong political meanings during the 1920s. Some of these cases led to further violence (as in the murder and kidnapping of the son of a Catholic leader in Zamora, Michoacán), or to public challenges to the legitimacy of a government (as in the jury trials of women who killed their husbands and were acquitted in Mexico City). Newspaper and radio audiences followed the jury debates and fiery defence speeches that led to the acquittal of María del Pilar Moreno in 1924 and María Teresa de Landa, Miss Mexico 1928, in 1929. The trial of José de León Toral and Concepción Acevedo, for the assassination of president-elect Alvaro Obregón in 1928, was staged and absorbed by public opinion in much the same way as the common crimes of Moreno and de Landa. This surely was a factor in the elimination of the popular juries in 1929, but police news continued to follow homicide investigations and trials with the same disregard about the proper distinction between politics and crime, as seen in the extensive coverage of the 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky (Buffington and Piccato, 2009; Luna, 1993; Monsiváis, 1994: 18).

Before the 1929 consolidation of a fragmented political system under a single party, and the effective control of Congress by the presidency, public debates were quite open about themes that would later become harder to discuss. Although national political news remained contained by the main newspapers' loyalty to the presidential figure, local news media could be highly critical of local authorities. The national political elite remained largely in control of what the press said about them, but that was not always the case at the state or municipal levels (Scherer García and Monsiváis, 2003;

Piccato, 2010b). Media coverage and informal discussions about famous crimes shaped a field of public discourse that maintained a considerable autonomy from political power in subsequent years. In a few cases, these would involve members of the political class, particularly if they were killed, as in the murder of Senator Rafael Altamirano in 1959, at the hands of a former lover. The case was widely covered in *La Prensa* and other newspapers in Mexico City in March of that year.

Through the detailed information provided by police news (or *Nota Roja*), some particularly scandalous cases incorporated multiple voices and extended public discussion into multiple fields of public culture. The unanimous condemnation of those murders, recounted and photographed in gory detail, and the fascination with criminals' minds, explored in depth by reporters, created a broad public sharing a common sense of 'the facts' of reality – something not always available in other areas of public life. Indeed, Mexican newspapers of the twentieth century devoted much attention to crime news, and their coverage was not radically different, in terms of this moral consensus, across the ideological spectrum; interestingly, the opposite was the case in the German Empire (Johnson, 1995: 58–61).

The paradigmatic case is that of Francisco 'Goyo' Cárdenas, who strangled and buried four women in his Mexico City house in 1942. Housewives wrote to the president and newspapers, congressmen gave speeches demanding the reinstatement of the death penalty, and even female prisoners demanded swift justice. Psychiatrists, doctors and criminologists claimed authority over the penal law. Cárdenas was declared, in spite of his intelligence and education, mentally unfit to stand trial. Everyone knew and discussed his case, even if disapproval of the crimes seemed unanimous. Experts and lay people joined in a true 'interpretive feast', to use Carlos Monsiváis apt words (Monsiváis, 1994: 26; Meade, 2005). People insulted and threw stones at him as he was taken to the hospital or to prison, while some reporters treated him like a celebrity (Salgado, 1942). Political authorities remained cautiously silent: the death penalty was not reinstated, but he was not released until 1976, when he received applause in Congress as an example of a 'regenerated' criminal. The general balance of this case, in which, like many others, the guilty verdict was a minor aspect of the story, was to raise the profile of police news, in contrast with the uncertainty of the judicial process. While newspapers could follow a story over several days and provide readers with a wealth of detail about the case, judicial procedures were slow, recorded in writing, and taking place in the uninspiring location of court offices. Thus, newspapers tended to lose interest in a case after the suspect had been indicted or if the case was otherwise concluded. There was a narrative closure in the image of the suspect behind bars that was

never found in the uncertainty of a long-postponed sentence issued by a judge.

Talking and writing about the crimes and mind of Goyo Cárdenas was not a veiled way to criticise President Manuel Ávila Camacho – as it was when defending María del Pilar Moreno, in her 1923 trial, during a massive military rebellion against President Alvaro Obregón. Yet the case of the serial killer provided broad publics the ability to talk about and judge the performance of representatives of the state, science and the law.

Press Images and Narratives

Why was the press able to amplify the political implications of murder? Homicide became the centre of public debates because it gave photographers, reporters and writers a clear grammar, many readers, and a relative autonomy to talk about Mexican society and government. Thus, we can best understand the political significance of homicide if we examine the rules and limits of Mexican journalistic depictions of murder (Kalifa, 1995; Pelizzon and West, 2010; Piccato, forthcoming).

Homicide attracted the interest of the mass media because its consequences could be depicted in a visual way impossible to emulate in other crimes. The twentieth century in Mexico, as in other places, witnessed the development of a visual language that filled newspaper pages with naked or decomposing cadavers, 'mug shots' of the suspects, and crime scenes with the objects and traces of death. Most researchers agree that photojournalism was the key to the popularity of newspapers such as *La Prensa* and weeklies such as *¡Alarman!*, and explains why police news was the journalistic genre that attracted most readers during the twentieth century. Their illustrations echoed the stark contrasts and frontal framing of forensic shots, but they added a sense of drama in conjunction with written narratives (Figure 4.5). Blood is abundant (thus giving its name to the genre: *Nota Roja*), but there is also information about the relatives of the victim (his brother in Figure 4.5) and the murder weapon (Monsiváis, 1994: 30–31; Stavans, 1993: 76–78).

These images were not just gore, but have a complex genealogy. Besides drawing heavily from the style of police investigations, police photographers also borrowed from other uses of the medium. Photography, along with mural painting, had developed a clear and effective political language since the 1920s, documenting and creating iconic images of the mobilisation of the Mexican masses and the inequalities of Mexican society. To illustrate that exchange we can compare Manuel Alvarez Bravo's 1934 photograph of a murdered worker (an image full of political meaning, taken from a political context) (Figure 4.6) with the image of a victim of a routine hotel murder in *La*

Source: La Prensa, 5 Jan. 1953, p. 23.

Figure 4.5. Images of Nota Roja

Prensa twenty years later (Figure 4.7). Both are basically images of the crime scene. Even if Alvarez Bravo's photo was published in political magazines of the left, readers could not have failed to connect it with many similar images in which the dead body was the opening image of stories that often led to impunity – as suggested by the caption of Figure 4.5: 'the murderer, an unknown man, was able to escape without a problem'. Similar examples abound – a beaten victim's face (*El Universal Gráfico*, 1 September, 1942: 16), a naked female victim (*El Universal Gráfico*, 19 September, 1942: 1) – and the 'problematic' nature of the image within Alvarez Bravo's oeuvre has been analysed by John Mraz (2002) and Lerner (2007).

The Revolution, particularly since the 1913 military coup against President Madero, also provided plenty of images of death, for consumption in Mexico and abroad, as shown in the postcard in Figure 4.8. Many of these were published in *Nota Roja* magazines as part of historical articles about the Revolution. These stories usually dealt with assassinations and executions in the context of civil struggle, yet had many graphic and narrative traits in common with normal crime stories. Semi-interred bodies, like those of the victims of Goyo Cárdenas shown in Figure 4.9, also reminded readers of the many homicides in which the discovery of bodies was only the beginning of complex and uncertain investigations.

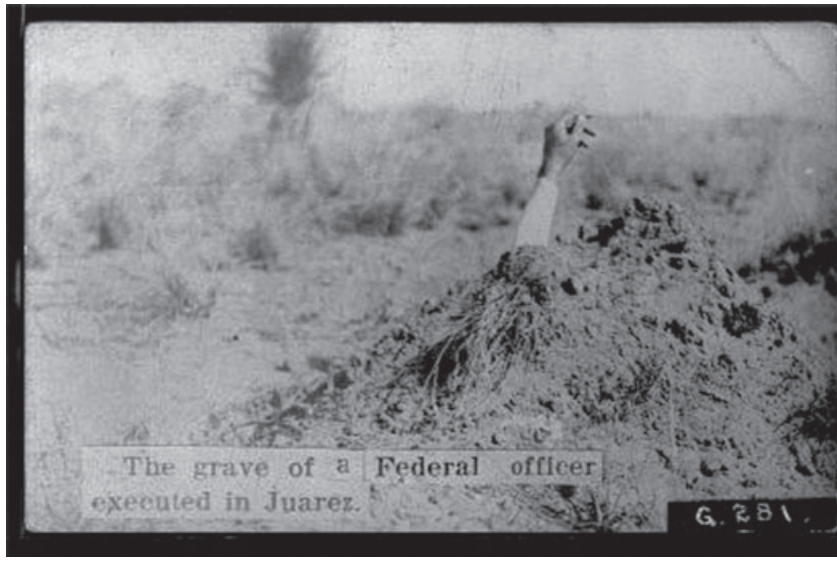
Not only police photographs but also *Nota Roja* articles had the ability to condense multiple, high and low influences, in a language that became accessible and popular, yet engaged readers in a critical exchange with

Figure 4.6. Manuel Alvarez Bravo: 'Obrero en huelga asesinado', 1934 © Colette Urbajtel/Archivo Manuel Álvarez Bravo, SC

Source: La Prensa, 8 Jan. 1953, p. 1.

Figure 4.7. Crime Scene, Victim, Suspects

the representatives of the state. As Monsiváis has noted, the narratives of *Nota Roja* continue the popular forms of transmission of information of the revolutionary *corrido* and oral tradition. According to Monsiváis (1994: 14, 42), the key to the success of the *Nota Roja* is the open-ended nature of its stories, similar to classic tragedies, in that speculations on motivations and fate are more attractive than any search for objective certainty about guilt or



Source: The Grave of a Federal Officer Executed in Juarez, Postcard, 1913.

Figure 4.8. Postcards of Violence in Mexico

innocence. Yet the stories centred on homicides, often lasting several days, were not epic, chronologically direct narratives, as Monsiváis suggests, but more complex artefacts. They provided a wealth of detailed information gathered by the reporter and the photographer as soon as they entered the crime scene – often on the heels of police agents. Multiple articles, captions and images presented all the information to the readers, even if to do so they had to gather testimonies and evidence in advance of the police.

The 1954 image of the victim of a hotel murder in *La Prensa* mentioned above also exemplifies the effective combination of narrative and images in the *Nota Roja*. Closely cropped are the female suspect, held by a police officer, the administrator and owner of the hotel where the events took place, the two other suspects, also surrounded by police agents, the exact place where the victim fell and the body of the victim. The ensemble combines the gory shock of blood, the objectivity of the crime scene investigation and the shaming effect of 'mug shots'. The events, the consequences and the responsibility could not be depicted in a more direct and economical way. This case was quite straightforward, as the suspects were caught immediately and the victim was not a famous person. In others, where the initial mystery required the labour of detectives and reporters, these resources were also used and included diagrams of the crime scene and interviews with different actors.

The hotel staff were portrayed in an unflattering way in this image because they 'obstructed the job of reporters'. The illustration not only referred thus

Source: Undated press clipping in Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal, Sección Jefatura de Policía, Serie Investigación y Seguridad, Servicio Secreto, caja 7, exp. 53.

Figure 4.9. Victim of Goyo Cárdenas Disinterred

to the text (where the hotel administration tried to avoid the scandal and delayed calling the police after the crime) but also to the implicit role of the *Nota Roja* reporter, a that became central in the genre. Some reporters became famous with their coverage of sensational cases, like that of Goyo Cárdenas, which promoted reporter Güero Téllez to a position of considerable fame in the profession. His reports were well written and included rapid dialogues, similar to novels or short stories. The police reporter was closely identified with the police; suspects sometimes took Téllez for a detective. Judges showed reporters documents of the trial, allowed them to handle and photograph evidence, and gave them complete access to imprisoned suspects (Téllez Vargas and Garmabella, 1982). In one case, a reporter took hold of a fleeing suspect. Other depictions of reporters presented them as young, modern and well dressed, but the reality was that the police beat was not the most productive in a profession where those journalists covering the federal government could receive thick cash payments and other incentives to remain loyal. Police reporters, in contrast, were so close to the police that they often were associated with the abuses of policemen against citizens, when they did not become detectives themselves, or carry police badges and guns (Marín Castillo, 1964: 28; Scherer García and Monsiváis, 2003; Rodríguez Munguía, 2007).

Source: La Prensa, 17 March 1959.

Figure 4.10. Reporters of La Presna Capture a Criminal

It is commonly argued that the *Nota Roja* is a genre where moralistic opinion combines with scientific methods and morbid images to avoid dealing with the full political and social implications of crime. If we look at the specific stories of homicides, however, we find detailed narratives that faithfully convey the diversity of voices and opinions surrounding objective events. Readers had the right to know every detail and to have an opinion about the case based on fact, just like any detective or judge.

The political dimension of the *Nota Roja* is easy to see if we also read the columns and other news associated with it. Police pages contained opinions, reports and letters from readers about insecurity, police corruption and the failings of the justice system. Editors encouraged the active participation of readers in the course of stories. *La Prensa* interviewed readers, to ask them, for example, about the possibility of applying the death penalty, even in the extra-judicial form known as the *ley fuga* (shooting the prisoner while allegedly trying to escape, another trait of post-revolutionary 'micropolitics of violence', according to Knight). In the case of the Tacubaya barber shop,

Source: El Gráfico, 18 April 2007.

Figure 4.11. Murder Victim with a Note

La Prensa offered a prize to the reader who submitted a 100-word letter containing the hypothesis about the killer's motivation that most resembled the truth, which was going to be revealed as soon as he was captured (*La Prensa*, 1934: 3). As one reader put it in a letter about an abusive landlord in 1952, *La Nota Roja* was 'the magazine that has defended the people of Mexico

the most'.[2] Involuntary manslaughter, a staple of police news in the form of traffic accidents, reminded readers of the precarious safety of the streets and the ease with which those responsible escaped punishment and even the payment of damages to victims (*El Universal Gráfico*, 1947: 5). Recurrent 'purges' of the police were extensively covered starting in the 1920s.

In a way that was casuistic more than systematic, loaded with detailed information rather than broad programatic statements, yet in an effective language that reached thousands of readers every day, the *Nota Roja* became a space in the public sphere where civil society's concerns about justice and citizens' demands for state action against criminals found expression and, perhaps, a degree of impact on authorities' concern for efficacy.

Conclusions

Reading the secondary literature on *Nota Roja* in Mexico, I often came across references to Thomas de Quincey's ideas about murder as a fine art (Monsiváis, 1994: 87–88). At first, I dismissed the notion of murder as art as the facile device of taking an aesthetic approach to a phenomenon that needs first to be understood as what it is: a social problem with political and, yes, cultural implications. Certainly the *Nota Roja* has found increasing attention in recent years from a different audience: the photographs of Enrique Metinides are displayed and sold in art galleries, performance groups like SEMEFO play with forensic materials and references, and criminal stories inspire lavishly illustrated coffee table books (Villadelángel Viñas and Ganado Kim, 2008; Servín, 2010; Metinides, 2012).

Further research led me to think that there was something useful about de Quincey's provocative ideas. Beyond the possible attractions of blood effusion, homicide was a form of expression, an act full of meaning that sought and even created an audience, an object of criticism and multiple interpretations. Rodolfo Usigli's *Ensayo de un Crimen*, from 1944, the first

2 AHDF, GDF, Oficina central de quejas, caja unica, primer folder, clipping from *La Nota Roja*, no. 17, 13 September 1952, p. 2. See list of political achievements of *La Prensa* in one year of publication, 1.ene.1929, 2a sec., p. 5. Manuel Buendía's 'Red privada,' perhaps the most influential political column in the twentieth century and the reason for its authors assassination in 1984, was already published amid police news in *La Prensa*, 18 March 1959, p. 10. The arrest five years later of a police chief has not satisfied public opinon about the depth of the investigation (Monsiváis, 1994: 47). See also 'Mirador del D.F.' por Jose Angel Aguilar, also published in *La Prensa*. 'Vox Populi', published anonymously in *La Prensa*, reproduced neighbours' complaints about many urban themes and even their letters to the president demanding justice. *La Prensa*, 25 March 1959, p. 9.

and perhaps the best Mexican crime novel, explored the implications of this aesthetic view of homicide in the face of the ineptitude of the police: the main character, Roberto de la Cruz, imagines perfect murders but his victims are killed just before he can execute his plans. His work of disinterested art is never recognised by the press – a constant reference in the novel, sometimes quoted at length. De la Cruz decides to confess to the crime he did commit, but he is sent to a mental institution (the novel was based on actual cases, including that of Gallego: Stavans, 1993: 97–100). He is a frustrated author in a country where so many other, humbler people have the opportunity to achieve fame and power through crime. De la Cruz knew that homicide reached more readers than any other kind of news. Perhaps aesthetic value was not in the mind of most criminals, but they were certainly aware of the communicative value of the crime, and its broad repercussions in the relationship between state and civil society. The 'perfect homicide' is a fantasy, perhaps owed to de Quincey. A large number of offenders – around half in the United States, according to Monkkonen (2006) – get away with murder without any artistic pretension. A similarly high proportion of unsolved murders in Mexico has fuelled, during the twentieth century, the public perception of an increasing problem of murder, in spite of its decreasing rates. As the evidence discussed in the first section suggests, the frequency of murder was never so low as to be considered an acceptable and 'natural' aspect of Mexican life.

Homicide provided legitimate occasions to discuss the state, justice, society. The *Nota Roja* was an influential journalistic genre, beyond its gore and moralism. It forced the government to be responsive to civil society's demands in a way that preceded greater accountability in other realms. The increasing importance of human rights in the public sphere – first in political opposition, now in regards to the 'collateral damage' of the war on drugs – should be interpreted as part of this broader history of public debates about crime.

I would like to end with two by-products of this political history of common homicide. First, the massive demonstrations that took place in the summer of 2004: intended to protest against insecurity and rampant crime, they forced President Fox to respond, although in his characteristically tepid way. Strongly supported by business organisations and extensively covered by the media, the demonstrations conveyed the indignation of the Mexican public in the face of growing crime rates and several well-publicised instances of violence. 'A bunch of guys kidnapped my cousin and the bastards killed him', one participant in Mexico City declared, 'now what I'm asking for is the death penalty against them and if no one does anything we're going to take justice into our own hands'. Another warned that 'from this mobilisation onward, the ones that ought to be scared are the politicians, because they will see the power that civil society has when it demands attention to its problems' (*La Jornada*, 2004: 1–13; Buffington and Piccato, 2009: 3–21).

The other by-product is reproduced in an image from contemporary *Nota Roja*: a murder by *narcos*, one among thousands in recent years, communicates a clear message to rivals through a careful composition of the scene: the naked body, the dog and the note with large letters in the foreground. In another highly publicised case, the heads of executed victims were thrown into a restaurant in Michoacán. *Narcos*' deliberate use of media coverage is a counterpart to their frequent attacks against journalists – another increasing trend in recent years (Monsiváis, 2006; *Reforma*, 2 June 2007, 6 June 2007; Rodríguez, 2007; Piccato, 2012). The note in the image described above probably has to do with the internal struggles among drug trafficking organisations. Disputes among cartels have put a premium on perceptions of who controls the business in a city. But there was a broader message in the image: the state could do nothing about this and, we can be almost sure, the author of this homicide will not be punished.

This image summarises the changes in the practices of homicide that explain the gap between quantitative trends and the perceptions of public opinion. From the old *cantina* knife-fights of the early twentieth century, through the proliferation of guns after the Revolution and the exceptional but highly visible killings such as those of Goyo Cárdenas, all the way to the war-like violence of recent years, homicide has increased the sense of impunity. Petitions for justice by victims are no longer invested with the sense of political urgency that they used to have when presidents were considered more powerful. This does not mean, however, that the indirect victims of violence – a large sector of the population – no longer consider public safety important: the victim in the image described above might have been a *narco* himself (nobody will bother to clear his name in any case), but the collateral damage of images such as these reaches everyone.

Both middle-class protests and *narcos*' use of media stories and images of homicides anchor political disputes, incorporate large audiences, and reveal the limits of an historical perspective centred on the state. Stories and images made all homicides political because they expressed, when examined historically, changes in the state, corporative organisations and civil society. These changes, as other historians have suggested, had an impact on personal behaviour, specifically violence, but also on citizenship. The language of statistics, petitions and particularly *Nota Roja* created a field of public discussion that we would be too strict to call apolitical.

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