

Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 400pp.

This novel but flawed study of *los Zetas* – one of Mexico’s most infamous drug cartels, or, as the author classes them, ‘transnational criminal organisations’ (TCOs) – is timely indeed. Published during the bloodiest year in recent Mexican history, during the run-up to elections over which the Drug War and state energy reform loom large, the book stakes a claim for *los Zetas* both as agents of neoliberal economic change, and as the violent progenitors of what Correa-Cabrera, an associate professor of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, classifies as the ‘modern civil war’ raging across Mexico.

Both of these arguments depend on the idea that *los Zetas* ‘function in a different way’ to what the author portrays as ‘traditional’ Mexican cartels, and can therefore ‘be better understood by utilising different analytic frameworks’ (p.54), especially ‘business administration academic literature,’ and recent studies of the phenomenon of ‘modern civil wars’ fought for economic rather than political gain. Correa-Cabrera sets out the case for the *los Zetas* as narco-pioneers in the first section of the book. Here, she describes their evolution from the armed wing of the ‘traditional’ Gulf Cartel in the northeastern border state of Tamaulipas, to an independent TCO battling its former masters and other rivals throughout the country, both physically and in cyberspace. She argues that *los Zetas* are more violent than older drug-trafficking organisations, because they depend on terror to enforce their control of large territories to an extent previously unheard of in Mexico. This facilitates their smuggling of drugs and people to the US, and, even more importantly, alternative activities apparently shunned by ‘traditional’ cartels, such as the extortion

of local businesses, and the exploitation of natural resources, such as hydrocarbons, in which los Zetas' strongholds are especially rich.

The book's second section attempts to explain the 'militarisation' and subsequent 'paramilitarisation' both of Mexican cartel tactics, and of the government's own anti-cartel campaign. Here, Correa-Cabrera applies various theories of 'modern civil wars' – defined here as struggles between multiple state and non-state actors for control of resources – to the Mexican Drug War. Based on a comparison of the latter with the longer-running Colombian conflict, she argues that the violence of los Zetas pushed the government to adopt similar tactics in 2006, which have to date resulted in more than 200,000 deaths and another 30,000 disappearances.

The third and final part of book outlines how 'business administration academic literature' can be used to better understand los Zetas' organisational structure, aims and activities. It presents detailed case-studies of the Zetas' forays into Tamaulipas' oil and gas industries, as well as briefer sketches of their interests in coal mining in neighbouring Coahuila, and the involvement of other TCOs supposedly influenced by los Zetas, such as the *Caballeros Templarios*, in resource-stripping operations in Michoacán. Correa-Cabrera argues that the division of these organisations into autonomous cells, or 'subsidiaries', and their willingness to 'franchise out' their criminal activities to smaller local groups, facilitates their 'looting' of natural resources. The latter has become so important to their business models that the author asserts that today, 'Mexico's modern civil war seems to be more like a war for hydrocarbons' (p.155).

The third section of the book is the strongest, offering a novel counterpoint to common analyses of the current Mexican conflict as no more than a particularly

bloody 'war on drugs.' Her studies of Tamaulipas and Michoacán outline the ways in which 'legal' and 'illegal' economic activity in Mexico are often intertwined, and how much of the fighting in these regional 'fronts' of the Drug War is bound up with struggles over *legal* natural resources. Correa-Cabrera's analysis also indicates that multinational corporations benefit from such conflicts, which push terrified local people to sell them resource-rich lands at bargain prices.

However, the author's frequent claims that her analysis applies to Mexico as a whole are, given the book's regional focus, somewhat overblown. The original case-studies presented here only concern areas dominated by los Zetas, or by groups they have 'inspired'. Thus Correa-Cabrera ignores key drug-producing zones in Sinaloa, Durango, and Chihuahua controlled by 'traditional' criminal organisations. This omission allows the author to continuously stress the importance and originality of los Zetas, ignoring the fact that groups such as the Sinaloa cartel are often no less violent than los Zetas, are similarly active in cyberspace, and have long been involved in the extraction of resources such as timber, minerals and water in the areas under their control, whether to launder illegal assets or turn additional profits.

Correa-Cabrera's analysis is also hamstrung by its dependence on journalistic and social media sources. Taking only a small sample of the book as an example, a lack of engagement with historical sources leads the author to make hyperbolic statements (such as the assertion that thanks to los Zetas, Tamaulipas is now experiencing its bloodiest ever period (p.35), ignoring the violence of the Revolution or the genocides that accompanied the Spanish Conquest), and to fall into anachronism (as in the ideas, expressed on p.48, that 'extortion, kidnapping, and other practices' were 'introduced by the Zetas' to Michoacán, where such practices are actually as old as the bandit-ridden hills, or that los Zetas were the inspiration for

other TCOs forming alliances with ‘municipal authorities and state law enforcement officials,’ despite such links having been key to the business models of cartels across Mexico since the 1920s).

Neither does Correa-Cabrera convincingly demonstrate the existence of causal links between the violent tactics used by los Zetas in Tamaulipas and Veracruz, the similarly violent regional responses of the Mexican state, and the advent of neoliberal energy reform across Mexico as a whole. The author tries to compensate for this problem via the excessive use of headings and subheadings, which in many cases distract from, rather than clarify, the flow of her arguments.

Ultimately, then, this is an interesting but sometimes frustrating volume. Despite its flaws, however, it will still be useful for students and scholars interested in Mexico’s Drug War, or, more generally, in the relationship between ‘development’ and the violence that so often accompanies natural resource booms.

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