

BOOK REVIEW

Claudio Lomnitz, *Sovereignty and Extortion: A New State Form in Mexico*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2024. Tables, notes, bibliography, index, 240 pp.; hardcover \$98.95, paperback \$25.50.
doi:10.1017/lap.2024.49

Over the past two decades, Mexico has been at the centre of academic and political debates in Latin America and the globe because of the impacts of violence related to organized crime, primarily related to drug trafficking, and a controversial state model emerged as a result of the practices of the state and non-state actors. Understandably, existing literature has focused on the causes and consequences of violence, which has been elaborated famously as unprecedented and “gore” by scholars such as Sayak Valencia in *Gore Capitalism* (2018). The Mexican state’s form and capacity have become another hot intellectual subject. Some identified its sovereignty as an ongoing exception process, as in Gareth Williams’s work *The Mexican Exception* (2011).

The distinguished anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz’s *Sovereignty and Extortion: A New State Form in Mexico* is another illuminating interpretation of the new political and sociological context of Mexico, where the prevalent gore violence has almost become banalized and a “way of life” in the author’s terms. The chapters of the volume actually consist of six lectures Lomnitz delivered in 2021 in El Colegio Nacional. The core argument of these discourses is that “a new type of state” has emerged in Mexico with the neoliberal reforms from the 1980s and 1990s. Lomnitz suggests that the drug economy, in tandem, has directly and deeply buttressed the transformation of the Mexican state, and this reconstruction has been fortified with the war on drugs initiated in 2006 during the Felipe Calderón government (3).

During the drug wars, of which the end is nowhere in sight, the Calderón administration and the successor governments have miscalculated the institutional capacity of the state along with their financial and human resources to conduct it and failed to produce alternative economies to the drug economy which fed millions of Mexicans. The most tangible result of the drug war is a tear in the so-called social fabric of the society, of which main pillars have been considered the sacred values such as the family, the Church and other moral values that have preserved not only the socio-political but also the economic order of Mexico. Lomnitz contends that within this configuration, Mexico’s new state is marked by “an excess of sovereignty and a deficit of administrative capacity” (9). He deploys ideas and concepts from social anthropology and introduces a new definition of sovereignty to understand and reveal the nature of the new form of the Mexican state. According to the author, resorting to violence with impunity is a sovereign act which has been bestowed to some “superior groups” in Mexico, a country which has never been egalitarian in practice since its foundation (21).

The second chapter of the volume opens with the Iguala Massacre, where the state was responsible for the kidnappings and killings of 43 students, as Lomnitz construes (29). According to the author, it was one of the most explicit cases in which the state lost its credibility and capacity to establish truths that Mexican citizens would believe (163). The chapter delves into policing in Mexico and elaborates on recurring attempts at police reforms to no avail from the 1990s to the present day. Lomnitz segues and develops the term of “estrangement” (34) and discloses how the Mexican state and governments have become estranged from its own institution, particularly the preventive police, which had become irreversibly corrupt and even “something akin to criminal organizations with a patent” (53). In the end, having failed to modernize and

professionalize the police, which maintained its interior code of conduct, the Mexican state, already estranged from the institution, turned to military deployment in the face of escalating insecurity (64–6).


The third chapter explains how the estrangement of the state from the police in Mexico resulted in indifference to the killing of police officers (70) and practically the dissolution of police forces. The author argues that with the introduction of cocaine in the mid-1980s, the drug markets extended and became more flexible. Consequently, drug traffickers, termed *narcos*, began to control more territories and even organize and regulate public safety and protection businesses in many parts of the country (77). At this juncture, Lomnitz puts forth three theses: 1) “The informal reserve army of the police—the ‘lumpen’ police force that was made up of the so-called *madrinas*—grew hand in hand with the drug trafficking economy.” 2) In the face of the pressures for police reform from 1982 to 2000, “many key police operators moved from selective compliance to quiet subversion.” 3) The final thesis is that due to the transnationalisation of the drug economy, controlling the business became practically impossible for state police and federal Judicial Police, and consequently, the criminal networks and organizations have grown excessively. In a nutshell, Lomnitz contends that the dissolution of the police force and growing criminal networks led to the emergence of 1) the “corporate” or “industrial” branch of organizational crime, which is more sophisticated, “transnationally integrated and with an international scope”; 2) the “artisanal” kind of organizations that consist of gangs and thieves operate more locally; and, 3) a “lumpen criminal” class or a “criminal reserve army” of which of their members are not professionalized individuals who commit opportunistic crimes (103–4).

In the fourth lecture, instead of focusing on a unit of analysis framework, Lomnitz suggests a regional analysis of criminal economies. Following William Skinner’s arguments, the author presents a model that specifies players in a regional system and offers four interconnected “criminal subregions” to elaborate on the violence and criminality in Mexico and its bordering countries. Accordingly, the chapter begins with a detailed analysis of the “Californian regional subsystem,” placing the Mexican Mafia (*La eMe*) to the fore and its drug retail operations. Moving to the second subsystem, Lomnitz delineates the drug production system in the Sinaloa state to disclose the geography of Mexico’s drug economy as a whole (120). In sequence, the third subsystem elucidates how the long history of smuggling across the Mexico-US border area was transformed after the introduction of cocaine to the Mexican market through the examples of Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Even though the “plaza system” is somewhat mentioned during the lecture, this part is one of the most prominent moments where Lomnitz gives short shrift to a spatial zone of power that could enrich his economic geography approach. The fourth subregion system highlights transit zones where Mexican crime networks operate through alliances and rivalries with international gangs, such as *Barrio 18* and *Mara Salvatrucha*. Lomnitz demonstrates that in 2012, changing the hierarchy between the Mexican cartels and these formations, the latter gang became an international drug trafficker (133).

In the fifth and sixth chapters, the economic geographical approach introduced previously is ostensibly advanced, and arguments are comprehensively linked to the main narrative of the volume. First, the author asserts that from the late 1980s, the neoliberal reforms predicted and projected a “rule-governed economic space as ‘the island of rights’”. In the 1990s, this idea was further supported by NAFTA. However, this project, now termed as “NAFTA island,” remained barely an archipelago codependent on the illicit economy that covetously enlarged transnationally and has come to feed the other half of the population (151). In the final chapter, Lomnitz turns to his previous lectures and arguments and explains how the new form state in Mexico, already estranged from police and judicial institutions, applies a teleological discourse that primarily represents the catastrophic effects of its policies and unfulfilled responsibilities to “contingencies” (182). This new code of conduct, “circumventing any governmental responsibility in the matter” (184), vividly materialized during the COVID-19 pandemic when Mexican citizens were forced to

endure an “exit, voice, or loyalty” order as in Hirschman’s model, and hedging in their “strategic bets” to their social networks as a survival strategy (189–90).

All in all, Lomnitz breaks new ground by providing intriguing conceptual approaches and thematic directions as he convincingly fills the content of his arguments with consistent and striking material to those interested in understanding Mexican politics and organized crime in the region in *Sovereignty and Extortion: A New State Form in Mexico* with undebatable expertise. His contribution to the existing literature is appreciated. Nonetheless, despite its powerful and enriching narrative, it is imperative to remember that the volume is a collection of intellectual talks addressing an academic audience primarily; thus, a small quantity of reconnaissance about the modern politics in Mexico would render the reader to follow Lomnitz’s core insights and historical narrative conveniently.

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