Lynching and States of Fear in Urban Mexico

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Abstract: On 23 November 2004 people in San Juan Ixtayopan, an urban community of Mexico City, lynched three agents of the Federal Preventative Police, accused of attempting to kidnap children attending the Popul Vuh elementary school. This article discusses how the state assumed a "law-and-order" approach to the lynching, missing an opportunity to interrogate critically the broader impact of neoliberal policies. While any particular lynching is the partial product of social and historical relationships on local social fields, neoliberal political economy establishes a broad context for grasping the recent spate of lynchings in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America.

Keywords: popular justice, neoliberalism, state and society, urban Mexico

Résumé : Le 23 novembre 2004, la foule de San Juan Ixtayopan, une agglomération urbaine de la cité de Mexico, a lynché trois agents de la Police fédérale préventive, accusés de tentative d'enlèvement d'enfants fréquentant l'école primaire Popul Vuh. Dans cet article, nous discutons de la façon dont l'État a abordé les lynchages selon la grille de « la loi et l'ordre », passant à côté d'une occasion d'interroger de façon critique les impacts élargis des politiques néolibérales. Alors que chaque lynchage particulier est partiellement le produit de relations sociales et historiques sur les terrains sociaux locaux, l'économie politique néolibérale crée un contexte plus large pour appréhender la recrudescence récente de lynchages au Mexique et ailleurs en Amérique latine.

Mots-clés : justice populaire, néolibéralisme, État et société, Mexique urbain

On 23 November 2004 a large crowd in San Juan Ixtayopan in Tláhuac *delegación* (borough) in Mexico City, lynched three agents of the Federal Preventative Police (*Policía Federal Preventiva*, henceforth PFP), presumably for attempting to kidnap children attending the Popul Vuh elementary school. These strangers had appeared in San Juan several weeks earlier, their presence noted by local residents as they carried out surveillance around the school and took photographs of children and nearby buildings. On the day in question, a rumour spread quickly and widely that three men had kidnapped a child (or perhaps two) from the school and were preparing to flee; a crowd numbering 300 or more amassed and converged on the agents' vehicle. Though no kidnapped child was discovered in their possession, subdirector Víctor Mireles Barrera and officer Cristóbal Bonilla were pulled from the car, beaten senseless over the course of two hours and eventually doused with gasoline and burned. Officer Edgar Moreno Nolasco was beaten and dragged a kilometre or more downhill to the town kiosk, where he might have met the same fate as his colleagues had he not been rescued late that night by federal judicial agents and the Federal District's Special Immediate Reaction Group in a hastily organized operation that involved liberal use of tear gas and threats to open fire on the crowd. Despite life-threatening injuries, including severe damage to his kidneys, Moreno survived the ordeal that claimed the lives of his colleagues on the police force.[1]

Lynchings are not new to Mexico, particularly since the advent of neoliberalism. Antonio Fuentes documented 331 lynchings between 1984 and 2003, over 30% of which resulted in the death of one or more persons. Although concentrated in rural areas of south and centre south states such as Puebla, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Chiapas, Fuentes' sources registered at least one lynching in 25 of 32 states (including the Federal District[2]). Indeed, the Federal District led the statistics with 71 lynchings (Fuentes 2007:115, 122). Some of the incidents are striking

in their details. In Veracruz in 1996, an amateur videographer taped the five-minute trial of an accused murderer-rapist and his subsequent immolation. A few years later in Huejutla, Hidalgo, state governor Jesús Murillo made a dangerous, late night, over-the-mountain helicopter trip in a futile effort to halt the lynching of two travelling stamp salesmen erroneously accused of child kidnapping and organ theft. There the mob shouted the governor down before dispatching the captives (Quinones 2001). Albeit spectacular, neither incident exercised the Mexican press for more than a few days, probably because they occurred in communities remote from the capital and were perpetrated by people whom most Mexico City cosmopolites consider only partly civilized.

The lynching in San Juan Ixtayopan differed from many others for at least four reasons: first, it occurred within the boundaries of the capital and the victims were federal policemen; second, television crews called to the scene by the perpetrators broadcast the grisly proceedings live; third, the lynching became another chapter in a long-standing dispute between Mexico City mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and President Vicente Fox Quesada of the ruling National Action Party (PAN), which López Obrador and the PRD hoped to unseat in the July 2006 presidential elections; and fourth, if violence and politics were not enough, the drug trade and even guerrillas found their way into the mix, resulting in a volatile ideological cocktail that gave rise to endless political manoeuvring, public commentary and much uninformed speculation. *La Jornada*, Mexico's principal centre-left daily newspaper, devoted more than 200 articles to the San Juan Ixtayopan case and its aftermath during the two months following the tragedy in Tláhuac.

In this article we examine these particularities in the context of two decades of neoliberal capitalism, which has produced profound changes in the "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977) in Mexican society. Liberally drawing on newspaper accounts of the incident, we discuss the production of information and misinformation about San Juan Ixtayopan, its inhabitants, the men lynched and the response of the state, all within the larger frame of a neoliberal political economy that has contributed to weakened state authority, growing income concentration and the erosion or disappearance of compensatory mechanisms—generating anxieties around control over physical and social bodies. We begin by positioning lynching in Mexico within a broad regional and historical context, in the course of which we offer both a general interpretation of the phenomenon as well as methodological suggestions for comparative analysis. The essay then examines the San Juan Ixtayopan incident through its coverage in the press and the state discourses assembled and disseminated in order to "explain" the actions of both perpetrators and state agents. In a later section we discuss the fear of loss of control of the body—illustrated through concerns over child kidnapping—as a general manifestation of neoliberal capitalism. Finally we mark the limits of this exercise and call for intensive fieldwork as the only means of situating local social fields within broader processes in the service of grasping lynching in contemporary Mexico.

Lynching in Latin America

Godoy limits lynchings to "incidents of physical violence committed by large numbers of private citizens against one or more individuals accused of having committed a 'criminal' offense, whether or not this violence resulted in the death of the victim(s)." She exempts "confrontations between armed groups, military actions, disputes over land which may result in murders, individual settling-of-accounts or vengeance killings, and other types of violence" from her definition (Godoy 2002:640-641, n1). As such, she presumably excludes many of the executions in Northern Ireland and South Africa committed by members of the Irish Republican Army and African National Congress, respectively, in the service of maintaining social order in areas under day-to-day insurgent political control (Munck 1995; Scheper-Hughes 1995).

This definition also has the merit of focusing on the act and the actors without overly restricting the motive, as does Mendoza (2004), or prejudging the result, as in the case of Goldstein (2004), for whom lynching necessarily results in death. In contemporary Latin America local, state or federal police forces, the town priest, mayor or other locally respected persons, or even members of the crowd may intervene to save the victim.[3] Broadening the concept to encompass "incidents of physical violence" short of death seems warranted under these circumstances, which are quite different from those that predominated in the post-Reconstruction U.S. South, where lynching of African Americans—accounting for 85-90% of the more than 3,000 lynchings registered for the 1889-1931 period—were generally supported by local law enforcement officials and politicians (Corzine et al. 1983; Tolnay et al. 1989).

The highly varied circumstances that surround lynchings in contemporary Latin America problematize their analysis, certainly as compared to the post-Reconstruction U.S. South. The predominantly inter-racial character of historic lynching in the United States gave rise to a large sociological literature, much of which has been devoted to

testing hypotheses purporting to explain differences in the rates and timing of lynching in terms of boundary crises, power threats and even cotton prices (Beck and Tolnay 1990; Corzine et al. 1983; Inverarity 1976; Reed 1972; Stovel 2001; Tolnay et al. 1989). While some of this literature may be useful for historic and perhaps contemporary analysis of some lynchings in Latin America—the lynching of Chinese by Mexican nationals during the Mexican Revolution comes to mind (Sato 2006)—much of it will have to be "recoded" in order to inform the analysis of situations in which both perpetrators and victims usually share similar class and ethnic identifications (see for example Castillo Claudett N.d.; Guerrero 2000; Huggins 1991).

One form of recoding attributes lynching to subaltern groups—Mayans in Guatemala, Quechua speakers in Peru and Ecuador, Afro-Brazilians in Brazil, et cetera—incompletely incorporated into modernity, a perspective manifest in early press reports of the San Juan Ixtayopan incident. Speaking of urban Brazil, de Souza Martins states, "I am thinking particularly about those people on the 'razor's edge' of incomplete transition, in the space where property, work and authority relations are disintegrating" (1991:22). But far from being pre-modern holdovers or evidence of an incomplete incorporation to modernity, contemporary lynchings are better viewed as *specific effects of modernity*, which is to say the distinct ways that rural and urban communities *have* been incorporated into capitalist underdevelopment. Godoy notes that in Guatemala and elsewhere, lynchings

> have made painfully present the contradictions of capitalism: while globalization produces polarization, it also pulls the poles together in geographic proximity, making the markers of exclusion sharper as many realize the depth of their own deprivation. It is not only the poverty and disruption of community engendered by globalization, but also the attendant revelation of its deep divides that lays the groundwork for lynchings. [2004:634]

This form of collective violence also comes across as "a perverse form of community empowerment" in which "embattled communities [seek] to reaffirm values they see as threatened," thus representing "a 'dark side' of democracy,...indicators of a struggle between citizens and the state, a struggle in which communities use collective violence to impose their authority and assert their autonomy in affairs about which they are extremely concerned, but on which the state has been utterly unresponsive" (Godoy 2002:623, 636, 640, 641).

Seventy-eight percent of the 331 lynching reports Fuentes (2007) culled from the Mexican press for the years 1984-2003 occurred *after* the 1994 peso devaluation, which was largely a result of the uncontrolled opening of Mexican financial markets to short-term international portfolio investment. Indeed, reports of lynchings throughout Latin America multiplied during the last decade of the 20th century, where deepening contradictions of neoliberalism coincided with a growing exhaustion of pre-existing social and economic defense mechanisms (Castillo Claudett N.d.; Goldstein 2004; Guerrero 2000; Godoy 2004, 2006; Vilas 2001). This is so even where, as in the case of Guatemala (and perhaps Peru), the messy end of a lengthy civil war introduced additional complications (Cifuentes 2004; Fernández 2004; Godoy 2006, 2002).

In Mexico since 1982, and particularly 1985, fiscal austerity, the privatization of state enterprises, tariff reductions, incentives to foreign investment and the elimination of import quotas have reconfigured basic economic and social relationships. In gross statistical terms, neoliberal capitalism has been accompanied by income concentration, declining real incomes, reduced formal sector employment and the concurrent expansion of informal sector work, cuts in government health and education budgets and the replacement of entitlement programs with targetted poverty alleviation programs advocated by the World Bank (see Portes and Hoffman 2003; Portes and Roberts 2005). In the process the "resources of poverty" represented by informal loans, mutual assistance and household economic diversification succumbed to the crisis of a "poverty of resources," resulting in the deterioration of relations of neighbourhood and community solidarity and a "turn inward" that often led to the abandonment of responsibility toward ill, infirm and elderly members of extended families (González de la Rocha 2001, 2004). In Mexico and elsewhere unease and discontent grew as labour unions were disarticulated, weakened and eliminated and citizens' committees and other organs of mediation were repressed, bought off or neutralized by the state (see Zermeño 1996).

Finally, crime, both violent crime and, especially, crime against property—often a form of "forced entrepreneurialism in a context of widespread relative deprivation" (Portes and Roberts 2005:75)—has increased throughout the country.[4] In Mexico City homicides went from 10.2 (26.3 for males) per 100,000 inhabitants in 1990 to 19.5 (34.6 for males) in 1995, and robberies rose from 866 per 100,000 in 1990, to 1,017 in 1994 and 1,831 in 1997. Overall crime grew by 35.4% from 1991-97 following a much slower growth of 2.2% for the decade of the 1980s (Portes and Roberts 2005). Street assaults, home invasions, auto theft, kidnapping for ransom and the *sequestro exprés*—"express kidnappings" in which the victim is

driven around the city and forced to withdraw money from banks or ATM machines before being released—led the U.S. Embassy to alert travellers to the danger in the late 1990s. Crime figures declined after the turn of the millennium but remained above pre-devaluation (pre-1994) levels (Pansters and Castillo 2007). The security forces and judicial system have proven incapable of coping with this situation, being both undermanned and easily corrupted. The generalized belief in the incapacity of the government to deal with crime finds sustenance in the low rates of apprehension, indictment and conviction for crimes reported to the police. Indeed, many crimes are never reported because of a complete lack of confidence in the interest or ability of authorities to take effective action.

It seems likely, though, that lynchings are "not about crime qua crime so much as the social anxiety produced by it" (Godoy 2004:628). Albeit fixated on crime and the fear of victimization, anxiety responds to a broad range of uncertainties about the future of the self, family and society in general: the insecurity of steady employment, income, family and household well-being, and at least in the Mexican case, the withdrawal of an already feeble state from the arena of social welfare. In this sense, lynchings are and should be understood as over-determined events, referencing first, the social relational precipitates of past state and non-state violence in the context of, second, contemporary social crises that, according to Fuentes, "upset people's life plans [and] modify the basis of social reproduction" (2007:11-12).[5] Third, they respond to specific histories as enacted in and through local social fields, which is merely to say that the "disposition to lynch"—if indeed such a disposition exists—need not be spread evenly across all rural communities and urban neighbourhoods (see Castillo Claudett N.d; Fuentes 2007).

Placing lynchings and other forms of vigilante justice at the intersection of micro and macro processes and in the context of historical and contemporary relationships—with the state at the centre—has not been the norm in public discussion, yet this is the grey area that begs historical and ethnographic interrogation in order to account for the tremendous growth of popular (in)justice. Journalists who reported on the event in San Juan Ixtayopan failed to inquire into the roles that broader social conditions or the local social field—everyday life and community relations—might have played in the violence: Who were the men who were murdered? What were they doing in the town? What townspeople were involved? Why some and not others? What power did they exercise to make things happen as they did? And more generally: What was the history of community-state relations? How had different groups of residents negotiated the social, economic and ideological transformations of the last decade or more, and at what costs? Satisfactory responses to these questions cannot be obtained on the basis of short journalistic forays into the community. We can, however, follow the public debate as it unfolded in the press, noting how government officials, politicians and the press combined to generate confusing discourses that clouded as opposed to clarified the causes, enactment and aftermath of the lynching, and that mirror in many ways the very atmosphere of rumour and innuendo that shrouded San Juan on 23 November. We can also point to some local concerns in San Juan Ixtayopan, captured by journalists and official and unofficial testimonies to the events, that suggest links between broad-based social anxieties rooted in neoliberal political economy and this episode of popular (in)justice.

Politicians and the Press on San Juan Ixtayopan

For months after the lynching, the press devoted enormous attention to accusations and counter accusations levied by different groups charged with security in the Federal District, among them the Federal Preventative Police (PFP), the (Mexico City) Federal District Security Secretariat (SSPDF) and the Federal Security Secretariat (SSP). Whose responsibility was it to respond? Who was on the scene first and why did they not prevent the lynching? Why were helicopters not employed? Were police ordered to stand down by their supervisors? And who was at the top of the chain of command that evening? What roles did traffic, distance, the size of the lynch mob, the narrow streets and limited access to the site, and more ominously, politics play in determining the outcome? The discussion was contained within a volatile political space where a PAN-dominated federal government faced off against a PRD-dominated Federal District administration, and President Vicente Fox opposed PRD Federal District mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Both PAN and PRI (Revolutionary Institutional Party)—equally fearful of López Obrador's impending presidential run—attempted to use the lynching as evidence that he was soft on crime and tolerant of unrest, for them clear evidence that he was not presidential material. Unwilling to accuse López Obrador directly, President Fox dismissed Marcelo Ebrard, the mayor's Secretary of Public Security. Then, in a kind of trial by proxy of López Obrador, the PAN-dominated Attorney General's office indicted Ebrard for dereliction of duty.

From one side of the political divide and then the other, commissions were organized, officials subpoenaed to tes-

tify and field exercises were carried out to show that this or that rescue force could (or could not) have gotten to San Juan Ixtayopan in time. The Mexico City Attorney General's office even spent a hundred thousand pesos (over nine thousand dollars) financing a mock run from ten different police posts to San Juan Ixtayopan, under traffic and weather conditions similar to those of the night of 23 November in order to "prove" that the trip could not be made in the minimum 40 minutes claimed by the federal Attorney General's office on the basis of *its* trial. At 2,600 pesos per hour (roughly US$230), a notary public accompanied each motorcade in order to certify travel time between the two points (Castillo 2004a; Servín 2004b).

The lynching's containment within party politics impeded a more profound investigation of the relationship between neoliberal-based social and economic crises and citizen (in)justice. A few early news articles discussed weakened institutions and alluded to the role that the perpetrators' "social exclusion" played in their actions. But other journalists, "experts" and public officials (including President Fox) attributed the lynchings to *usos y costumbres* (traditional law), belying the fact that San Juan Ixtayopan is a large, urban mestizo community and not a small, rural indigenous one (Áviles 2004; Saldierna and Herrera 2004). The usos y costumbres argument also demonstrated ignorance that "traditional law," where intact in Latin America, generally emphasizes compensation over retribution (Fernández 2004). Speaking of indigenous Guatemala, Godoy affirms that "lynchings did not occur in any regular fashion until the 1990s." Had they been part of traditional Mayan justice, she says, "they surely would have surfaced earlier" (2004:630).

The hegemony of what Godoy refers to as "a law-centred vision of social and political change" (2002:641) dominated press reports. But within a few days a more ominous figure was pushed onto centre stage in the form of armed rebels seeking to overthrow the state, and what began as a spontaneous act came to be reinterpreted in some quarters as the result of a planned operation. By the time the dust settled on a convoluted and serpentine public discourse that purported to explain the lynchings, the crime scene could no longer be investigated, compromised as it had been by the passage of time, collective community shame and the myriad and roundabout explanations that had been thrown out haphazardly by state officials, as if to see what might stick.

Guerrillas and Narcomenudeo

Early reports had it that the agents lynched in San Juan Ixtayopan had been investigating street-level drug sales, or *narcomenudeo*. But on 4 December, Gabriel Regino García, the undersecretary for Public Security in the Federal District, raised the possibility that they had been pursuing either the Peoples Armed Revolutionary Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias del Pueblo* or FARP) or, alternatively, the Popular Revolutionary Army (*Ejercito Popular Revolucionario* or EPR). The EPR is a small, armed guerrilla organization that made its public debut in Guerrero on 28 June 1997, the first anniversary of the Mexican army's massacre of 17 unarmed peasant protestors at Agua Blanca (Ross 1998:265). Francisco Cerezo Contreras, a suspected EPR leader, fugitive from justice and father of three young men jailed for ERP sympathies, had lived for a time in San Juan in a house near the Popul Vuh elementary school, though according to his brother, he had left the area some 15 to 20 years earlier. That EPR affiliates or sympathizers might have been in San Juan also raised the spectre, bandied about for weeks in the press, that the lynching was not a lynching at all but the culmination of an EPR plan to assassinate members of the state security forces. This scenario displaced initial claims about peasant-Indian brutality inscribed in customary law[6] at the same time that it legitimated the intervention of armed police and military forces.

During 15 years after the winding down of the government's "dirty war" against opposition groups, the state's neoliberal project had progressed without the aggravation of a real armed opposition. The brief Zapatista uprising garnered substantial national and international attention and support, but the Zapatistas were ensconced in remote Chiapas and lost little time in distancing themselves from armed struggle, opting publicly for the nonviolent road to the "nontaking" of state power. The EPR posed no real military threat either, despite the arms and Leninist diatribes, both amply displayed on its web site, but it did index the state's increasingly tenuous hold over Mexican national territory and a pervading concern with the potential impact of domestic insurgencies on foreign investment. Then, in July and August of 1996, the EPR carried out a series of brazen assaults on police posts and other objectives in Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla and the Federal District, and conducted armed propaganda actions in Chiapas and Tabasco. A decade later in 2006 the government attempted, unsuccessfully, to tie the EPR to the campaign of the Oaxaca People's Assembly (*Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca*, APPO) to unseat corrupt PRI governor Ulises Ruiz. In July of 2007, the EPR blew up three state-owned gas pipelines in retribution for Governor Ruiz's jailing of two of its members in Oaxaca, a possible harbinger of more attacks on the country's fragile economic infrastructure. Although the most

recent EPR actions transpired several years after the San Juan Ixtayopan lynching, the government has been worried for years about the havoc this small guerrilla group might provoke, and perhaps concerned as well that successful challenges to the state on the part of the EPR might enlarge the ranks of the group's militants and sympathizers. One PAN federal deputy even claimed the discovery of "links between Al Qaeda and the ERP," which provoked a colleague to ask, sarcastically, "and Osama Bin Laden ordered the lynching, right?" (Méndez and Garduño 2004:42).

As of April 2008, the agents' motives for being in San Juan Ixtayopan have not been clarified by any state security organization. In the wake of the tragedy, spokespeople for the federal security forces who ordered the surveillance operation changed their stories several times. At first, the agents were investigating narcomenudeo, then they were seeking out cells of either the FARP or EPR, soon settling on the latter. Later, officials claimed that the investigation embraced *both* drugs *and* guerrillas, because, they said, the EPR finances its organization and purchases arms with profits from narcotics sales. One account had it that the agents' investigation of street level drug sales was a cover for their real mission, which was "to locate and photograph presumed guerrillas who financed their activities by selling drugs" (Castillo 2004b:31). Public confusion heightened when *La Jornada* published a summary of a document—that it later determined to be falsified—that affirmed the presence of guerrillas in San Juan (Urrutia 2004). In a statement noteworthy mainly for its vagueness, Francisco Labastida, 2000 PRI presidential candidate and former Interior Secretary under President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), said that in 1998 the EPR operated in "marginal neighbourhoods, rural zones and those near to Mexico City" and that "quite probably Tláhuac was among them" (Salgado and Méndez 2004:37). The lawyer for the director of the PFP in the Federal District added to the confusion when he explained that his client had not attempted to rescue Mirales, Bonilla and Moreno earlier in the evening of the 23rd because he believed at the time that they had been *delinquando* (engaged in delinquent acts), such as child kidnapping—the same rumour that rippled through the crowded streets of San Juan Ixtayopan (Méndez and Castillo 2005)!

Those who accepted the claims of EPR involvement and manipulation reduced San Juaneros to a mindless mob easily swayed to action by strong, charismatic personalities. Such portrayals are not uncommon. Ethnographic and journalistic reportage of lynchings elsewhere highlight the roles of one or two people who whip a crowd—senses often dulled by alcohol—into "lynch mob" frenzy, with adult women urging on younger males, showering the captive(s) with abuse and calling for the death sentence (see Goldstein 2004; Quinones 2001). The leader is frequently portrayed as an otherwise forgettable figure that seizes, in Warholesque manner, her 15 minutes of fame. The Huejutla, Hidalgo lynching of two stamp salesmen, mentioned above, was ostensibly led by Martín Hernández, characterized by Sam Quinones as "an unlikely figure to lead a movement but an appropriate one for a lynching" given that he was "sixty-five...poor, lumpy, and balding, with a healthy appetite for sugarcane rotgut" (2001:43).

In San Juan, witnesses identified the leaders to be Alicia Zamora, known as *La Gorda* (Chubby) or *La Güera* (Blondie), and her spouse, local policeman Eduardo Torres Montes. In the aftermath of the lynching, both were accused by state security agencies of involvement in drug sales, subversive groups or both (Castillo and Méndez 2004). Several police who arrived early on the scene alleged that Zamora exercised a Svengali-like control over hundreds of (mostly) young men: she was said to have "egged on" the inhabitants to attack the federal officers and set herself against those authorities who attempted to calm the crowd. Officer Gloria Guadalupe Hernández testified that when she arrived at the site where Bonilla and the others were being held captive, La Gorda approached her and said

> "Chief [*Jefa*], I've got three detainees," and in asking who they might be, she replied: "they say that they are from the PFP [Federal Preventative Police]." She [Zamora] took her [Hernández] to them and she was able to speak to them, and when she suggested that they take them to the Police Station [*Ministerio Público*], the response she received was "no, we are going to mess them up [*los vamos a madrear*] because they are kidnappers." She mentioned that at the same time they [the crowd] began to throw various objects at the detainees, and saw that some...brought sticks and pipes with which to beat the agents; she protected one of them, but was herself attacked. La Güera stood out as the one who gave the orders, and it was she who told the crowd when to stand down and when to rush the three detainees. [Llanos and Romero 2005a:41]

The witness portrays Zamora—alternately reported to be a drug trafficker and EPR militant (or both)—as a master of dangerous beasts: it is *she* who moves the masses to action and reins them in. The belief that the agents' deaths resulted from a clever insurgent plot enacted upon an impressionable crowd deprives San Juaneros of independent will, and at the same time,

obscures the tensions that characterize contemporary state-civil society relations. While authorities held individual San Juaneros legally responsible for killing two PFP agents and injuring a third, the belief in an insurgent plot has their actions being driven forward by the lynching's intellectual authors—the *Eperistas* (EPR members) who planned the assault and duped locals into participating. An underlying assumption seems to be that in the absence of EPR instigators, cooler heads would have prevailed and tragedy would have been averted.

But who is La Güera and her policeman husband? How long had they lived in San Juan Ixtayopan? Where were their families? What social group or class do they belong to? What relations did they maintain with their neighbours and with teachers and administrators at the Popol Vuh school? Who else was involved, and how are they socially located within this community? How could one person, this Güera, instigate dozens, if not hundreds, of her neighbours and fellow-townspeople, to behave "out of character," and outside routine and collective norms? Given what we know about the phenomenological status of everyday life, this would seem to be improbable if not impossible, unless some kind of disposition already existed, some set of ideas or relationships that could *not* be integrated with everyday knowledge and practice, and thus constituted the generalized sense of social anxiety that Godoy identifies.

Most poor and working-class Mexicans manifest a combination of loathing, fear and distrust of state (in)security forces, which are viewed as inefficient, incompetent and abusive of their authority. Judicial agents, in particular, use torture and forced confessions to secure convictions against those lacking money and influence, even after numerous reports criticizing them for doing so (see Human Rights Watch 1999; Amnesty International 2007). Confronted with unknown men hanging around the Popul Vuh school, San Juaneros could not be certain that they were PFP as they claimed to be, false identities and documentation being common occurrences. But even if they were, this does not mean that they were not participating in a child kidnapping ring. Mexicans might object to the violent, neocolonial tropes that predominate in *Man on Fire*—the 2005 movie in which an ex-U.S. "black-ops" agent detonates a load of C-4 explosive in the spectacular assassination of "Fuentes," a Federal District Judicial policeman involved with a kidnapping ring—but they have no difficulty accepting the premise of the latter's involvement in crime and corruption. In the state of Morelos in the late 1990s, PRI Governor Jorge Carillo Olea was forced from office by President Zedillo for allowing the state judicial police to protect *Moche Orejas* (literally, Ear Hacker), a notorious kidnapper known for sending an ear—and other body parts if that failed to do the trick—to the victim's family in order to expedite ransom negotiations . In Mexico City and elsewhere, hundreds of members of different agencies (state and federal preventative police, judicial police, the public security secretariat and elite police groups assigned to combat narcotrafficking or protect migrants from criminal bands) have been dismissed, though seldom prosecuted, for corruption, kidnapping, theft, assault, murder and the transport and sale of illegal drugs. During a community meeting in San Juan Ixtayopan three days following the lynching, the press reported that one young man asked: "we know that agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and members of the Federal Preventative Police are daily involved in narcotrafficking and kidnapping. How can we be certain that those people [the lynched agents] weren't among them?" (Salgado 2004b). Five hundred Mexicans polled in 1998-99 regarding their opinion (good, bad or indifferent) of 16 different social "positions" rated the judicial police above only drug traffickers, drug addicts and alcoholics, and below prostitutes, politicians and homosexuals (Reguillo 2002).

In San Juan Ixtayopan, state officials aggravated rather than assuaged residents' concerns. Journalists reported that on two and perhaps three occasions between 11 and 17 November, local inhabitants, *including Alicia Zamora*, were rebuffed in their attempts to confirm the identifies and mission of the strangers hanging out around the school. They asked the men to identify themselves, and receiving unsatisfactory responses, spoke with local authorities and even requested in writing a meeting with Fátima Mena, the Tláhuac delegate to the Federal District congress, in which they expressed concern that "presumed members of the PFP had been filming 'children in the streets and schools'" (Llanos and Romero 2005b:40; see Castillo 2004b). None of these efforts bore fruit. The agents' claim to be from the PFP was affirmed by local police, but a phone number provided one resident by the officers was answered by someone who claimed to have no knowledge of them. Fátima Mena's office perceived little urgency in scheduling the requested meeting, postponing it until the 24th, which turned out to be the day *after* the lynching. Some San Juaneros claimed that even as the three agents were being detained and abused by the angry crowd, the lynching could have been prevented, because the captured officers succeeded in communicating with the central PFP office. However, "'someone' [who answered the phone] told them that their commanders were 'in a very important meeting' and could not attend to the call" (Méndez 2004:35).

"State" of Fear

People practise the epistemologies of everyday life at the immediate level of home, street and school. Socialized into this world—albeit a world readymade in and through the social relations of capitalism—most people come to assume a "natural attitude" in interacting with others, one that allows for communication, movement and the satisfaction of daily needs (Schutz 1967; Berger and Luckmann 1966). Changes in this familiar, face-to-face environment guided by repetition, pragmatism and habit in thought and action (Schutz 1967; Heller 1984) are duly noted. Strangers taking photos of school children is not itself a sufficient condition for a lynching, but may become so in the context of shifts in what Raymond Williams calls the "structure of feeling"—manifest in the social anxiety discussed by Godoy.

Although there is much we do not know that would help us understand this lynching, the presence of outsiders near the Popul Vuh school and their photographic surveillance of Education Technology Street surely unsettled local residents. Child theft occurs frequently in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, and has served as the popular justification of a number of lynchings over the course of the last 20 years (see for example Quinones 2001; Shadow and Rodríguez-Shadow 1991). Scheper-Hughes traces the pervasive belief in child kidnapping (and organ theft) to deaths, disappearances and defilement of bodies on the part of authoritarian states from Brazil to Guatemala and El Salvador. She considers them to reflect the "ontological insecurity of poor people to whom almost anything could be done...reflecting everyday threats to bodily security, urban violence, police terror, social anarchy, theft, loss and fragmentation" (2000:203). By way of illustration, during the above-mentioned lynching of the travelling stamp salesmen in the state of Hidalgo, the rumour circulated that "the men weren't salesmen at all but foot soldiers in a Texas-based ring of child kidnappers who not only trafficked in organs but had a liver or two in the cab of their truck, for which they were said to receive the awesome sum of $1,500 apiece" (Quinones 2001:33).

Eyes, livers and other bodily organs were not mentioned in the stories that circulated among the crowd in San Juan Ixtayopan, but kidnapped children were. *It was said*—note the use of passive voice—that the accused men had kidnapped one young girl (or perhaps two), that they had been taking notes on young people, had photographs of children and "were the ones going around kidnapping in the borough" (Servín 2004a:38, 40). Investigation of this rumour yielded no evidence of anyone "going around kidnapping in the borough." But even if lacking in precision and exaggerating the magnitude of the threat, the fact remains that poor Mexicans encounter a plethora of supporting evidence in their immediate environment in the postings of missing persons in bus stations or the crime sections of tabloids avidly consumed by the urban working classes. Read through the frame of daily life, in which people have a limited behavioural and cognitive repertoire for incorporating the unknown and unexpected into the *doxa*, the taken-for-granted, something as extraordinary as kidnapping a child or stealing and selling an organ would be certain to heighten the general anxiety that people already feel due to employment and income insecurity, poor-to-nonexistent public services, rumours of narcotrafficking and the failure of the combined forces of the police and army to control both drug production and sales as well as daily, drug-related executions; many of these problems can be attributed in part to the bipolar disorder of the state—absent in the daily, basic functions that support civil society, but present in the form of heavily armed, anonymous forces when a "threat" presents itself, as in the alleged appearances of guerrillas. We believe that in these ways a case can be made that child kidnapping rumours materialize in people's minds, even as they also incorporate and refract sometimes inexpressible apprehensions about loss of control over economic, social and even biological affairs (see Scheper-Hughes 1996).

Before this community could begin to cope with what it had done and why, the state invaded in a military-style action involving as many as a thousand agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Federal Attorney General's Office. Without a single arrest warrant, but armed with folders full of grainy images obtained from the previous night's television broadcasts of the lynching, officials conducted a house-to-house search, explaining to those who opened their doors that they "were going to inspect the premises" (*que se realizaría una inspección*).[7] They detained 35 persons whose images supposedly matched those in the archive, shortly thereafter releasing 13 and holding the remaining 22 as "materially responsible" for the murder of officers Mireles and Bonilla and the injuries sustained by officer Moreno (Méndez and Vargas 2004:45; see Salgado 2004a). Later incursions, involving helicopter flyovers, caravans of vehicles and large numbers of police and Federal Bureau of Investigation agents, netted an additional seven suspects, although a number of the key people for whom the judicial apparatus eventually issued warrants—Alicia Zamora among them—evaded the dragnet.

On 3 December, nine days after the arrests, the 29 defendants accused uniformly of "qualified homicide, theft, property damage and crimes against public servants," were convicted and sentenced to prison. President Fox congratulated the judge and declared that "criminals who shame our country will have to confront justice and receive the punishment they deserve...Now they are in jail...the ones who lit the fuse, who sprayed gasoline, who beat and detained those honourable, diligent public servants" (Pérez 2004:37).[8] But in his eagerness to applaud the work of the courts, Fox overlooked cases such as that of Julio César Roa Hernández, an airline employee, sentenced with the others, who, during the lynching, made two telephone calls to Televisa (a national television station), two to the Federal District Human Rights Commission and four to the National Human Rights Commission, all "with the object of requesting assistance so that the PFP agents might be rescued" (Méndez and Salgado 2004).[9]

Conclusions

Neoliberal political economic policies and practices have altered the contours of daily life and intensified myriad fears and apprehensions about the present and future of self, family and society. We believe that the post-1994 increase in lynchings objectifies these fears and apprehensions on the body of the victims, generating a transitory sense of collective relief, a social catharsis as it were. In the process of carrying out citizen (in)justice, the participants critique the state for inaction and pose "popular justice" as a necessary substitute. The young man cited above as questioning the possible activities of the lynched agents, was quoted as stating, during the same community meeting, that "all the authorities of our country are corrupt"; he insisted that "we won't be led by a bunch of politicians who spend their time passing the buck [*no nos dejemos llevar por una bola de políticos que nada más se la pasan echándose la bolita*]. I would ask them: 'What would you do if your daughter was raped? Would you stand around with crossed arms?' I bet not. They would close in, stab him and kill him" (Salgado 2004b:36).

A Mexican state that cannot provide for the basic needs of civil society expects challenges to its legitimacy, and in the last few decades, this has come in many forms, including social mobilization against development projects (state plans to expropriate agricultural land in Atenco for the construction of a new international airport) against government corruption (APPO), and for the provision of public services. There have also been legitimate political challenges from parties outside the two major power holders, as in López Obrador's PRD run for the presidency, and more seriously, armed struggle in the form of the EPR, EZLN and other groups. When we add to this unstable mix the open defiance of the state's pretensions of controlling the violence that has accompanied the spread of narcotrafficking, and then throw in the ever-present rumours of child kidnapping, sex trafficking and organ theft, the structures that support the certainties of everyday life suddenly seem unstable indeed. Far from discouraging lynching, the massive use of force in San Juan Ixtayopan and the arrest and conviction of local residents merely reinforced existing views of the undemocratic, corrupt and repressive nature of the Mexican state in its dealings with the working classes and the poor. Like the brutal torture and quartering of the 18th-century regicide Damian, documented in gruesome detail by Foucault (1977), the contemporary Mexican state sought to use raw power in order to intimidate into silence and inaction those who would challenge its authority by harming its representatives.

Under these conditions, the "stock of knowledge" that guides everyday thought and action is rendered irrelevant (Berger and Luckmann 1966). And if the contours of the close, social world in which people live, raise their children, go to work and do their daily shopping can no longer be counted on, anything can happen. It is for this reason that we insist that investigations of lynchings like that in San Juan Ixtayopan need to begin with a global analysis that can link changes in the contours of everyday life with alterations in the economic structures that govern employment, wages and benefits, state responsibilities for reproduction of the labour force, and institutional rights and obligations from law enforcement and legal systems to health, welfare and education. The press is incapable of carrying out the kind of deep interrogation required to get at these issues, not the least because, in the capitalist market, speed and novelty trump depth and analysis. Influenced by the dominant position of television journalism, "fast thinking" journalists offer up "cultural 'fast food'—predigested and pre-thought culture," precisely the opposite of what one requires in order to actually understand anything (Bourdieu 1998:229). We drew liberally upon press reports in this interpretative essay, linking them with empirical material and theoretically informed analyses of lynching in Latin America (and elsewhere). However, we acknowledge the limitations both of our sources and the lessons that might be extracted from any single case study (such as this one), and urge ethnographic investigation of this phenomenon, as well as the compilation of systematic databases. Both are necessary means for developing a deeper analysis and gaining a comparative perspective on this lamentable phenomenon.

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Notes

1 Earlier versions of this essay benefited from close, critical readings by Gavin Smith, Lesley Gill and two anonymous reviewers, none of whom is responsible for the final content.

2 The Federal District is a political entity with administrative standing as a state. The Mexico City metropolitan zone today, however, extends well beyond the limits of the Federal District, into independent towns in the state of Mexico.

3 Lynching (*linchamiento*) is a vernacular term widely used in Latin America to denote the exercise of unauthorized and generally unorganized collective violence against individuals or small groups with or without the complicity of the authorities, who in some circumstances are themselves lynching victims. In Mexico the term is also used metaphorically to refer to journalistic and political campaigns to discredit public figures.

4 That is to say that property crime in Mexico City and other urban zones of Latin America "frequently involves young men from [poor] areas going to where the wealth is [wealthier urban zones], and where some of it can be appropriated without undue risks of arrest and incarceration" (Portes and Roberts 2005:75).

5 Contemporary social displacements and crises resulting from the implementation of neoliberal policies generate a "hysterisis effect" in Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu 1990). Hysteresis refers to the situation in which a habitus formed under one set of objective conditions finds itself in radically different circumstances where its socially inscribed strategies do not work. Hysteresis can occur in a variety of circumstances—rapid social change being one of them (disasters, such as Katrina, another)—but the specific responses to hysteresis will depend on the particular habitus, on the one hand, and the new or altered social fields in which it must operate, on the other.

6 That many residents of San Juan were migrants from more densely populated areas closer to the city centre and not part of the growing population of urban indigenous fleeing the ruined countryside meant little. Saner heads pointed out that San Juan housed a stable working class population, that there was no historical precedent for the lynching and that crime rates in San Juan and in the Tláhuac borough of which it formed a part were lower than other areas of Mexico City. Even so, the unconscious association of lynching with Indians and Indians (and lynching) with customary law manifests some of the ways that race and class (or ethnicity and class) meet up in the cerebral cortexes of otherwise progressive Mexican intellectuals.

7 Later the government claimed that four local witnesses volunteered to identify the lynchings' perpetrators and participants (Méndez 2005).

8 Lawyers for the defendants argued that Fox pressured the judge. On 2 December, the day before the judge announced her verdict in the case, Marisa Morales, co-ordinator for the Attorney General's Office, met with the judge for ten minutes. Morales denied that they discussed the Tláhuac case, but the timing of the meeting suggests otherwise (Méndez and Salgado 2004).

9 According to *La Jornada*, which obtained access to the court depositions filed by the defendants, 6 of the 29 defendants admitted having participated; another 8 denied having taken part but, according to the correspondent, could be definitively linked to the lynchings by photos and video recordings; the remaining 15 claimed that they were either not present or were merely onlookers (Méndez and Salgado 2004).

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