Societal Effects of the Drug Economy

A Case Study From Rural Mexico, 1978–2024

Jakob Krusche

Introduction

In several regions of Mexico, societal life is determined by the drug economy and the organizations associated with it. The term 'drug economy' is applied here as an umbrella concept to address all related activities (production, transportation, commercialization, and consumption) and a range of products (poppy, marijuana, cocaine, crystal meth, fentanyl), regardless of variations in their legal status. This socio-historical case study[1] examines how the insertion of production sites into the global drug supply chain affects the respective local society.[2]

The geographical area considered in this case study is situated in the southwestern Mexican state of Michoacán and became the second production site of the Mexican drug economy in the second half of the 20th

1 This case study is part of an ongoing socio-historical research project on legitimization practices of local violent actors in rural Mexico.

2 I want to thank the convenors and participants of the International Workshop "Entanglements of (Il)legality and violence: Drug trafficking and drug policies in the Americas", held in June 2024 at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) in Bielefeld, for their valuable comments on my presentation. Furthermore, I want to thank Philipp Wolfesberger, the editor of this book, for his guidance, as well as Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, Martin Petzke and my colleagues of the Bielefeld Graduate School in History and Sociology for their suggestions on earlier drafts and manuscript versions of this chapter. Special thanks to Erik Downs and Zach Lewis for language editing assistance.

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century, after the so-called "Golden Triangle".[3] The cultivation of poppies and marijuana began here in the 1950s (Guerrero, 2014; Maldonado, 2010, p. 284) and has been one of the central means of earning a living since the late 1970s. By using this moment as a starting point and focusing specifically on a rural municipality in the Sierra Madre del Sur region, the study aims to analyze the development of the local society against the backdrop of the emerging drug economy *in situ*, considering a period of almost five decades between 1978 and 2024. Based on a qualitative approach, the study (1) applies Bourdieu's thought to trace back whether and how the drug economy affects local society, it (2) examines the intertwining of local society with the drug economy, and (3) discusses to what extent the observed societal developments are specific to this economic sector.

The remarkable work of Hubert Cochet (1991) on the Sierra Madre del Sur region describes the early stages and local socio-economic effects of the drug economy during the 1980s, regarding the region's "integration into the international division of labor" (ibid., p. 192, own translation from Spanish). Guillermo Vargas Uribe (1993, p. 66) built on Cochet's work and is considered a pioneer in estimating the share of this economic activity in the region's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) during the same decade. However, since then, little academic attention has been given to this the societal effects of the drug economy within this region, and no studies have covered a period of several decades. Further indispensable references are the scholarship of Gerardo Sánchez Díaz (1988) towards the underlying socio-economic trajectory of the Sierra Madre del Sur region, the work of Enrique Guerra Manzo (2018a; 2018b) about the historical role of violence within the area, as well as the works of Esteban Barragán López (1997) regarding the specificities and heterogeneity of rural societies within the state of Michoacán. Furthermore, the scholarship on the socio-economic effects of agricultural crisis and neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s (Gledhill 1995) within the entity, and

3 "Golden triangle" refers to the three states of Durango, Chihuahua and Sonora in northern Mexico, where the first production sites of the Mexican drug economy were established.

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overarching works on the socio-political effects of violence in the context of the drug economy since the new Millennium (Salvador Maldonado Aranda 2018, 2020; Wolfesberger, 2017) are of contextual orientation for this study.

Socio-Historical Context

The area of the municipality under study is about 2.800 km², which is almost two times the size of Mexico City, while its landscape is described as "heavily forested, mountainous and rugged" (Stauffer, 2013, p. 153). During the 19th century, its indigenous inhabitants were displaced by mestizo settlers (*rancheros*) (ibid., pp. 154–57; Sánchez, 1988, pp. 66–78). Since then, the economic activities within the municipality have been dominated by the timber industry, cattle farming, iron ore mines, and agriculture (INAFED, 2005). Due to its geographical distance from the political and administrative center of the state of Michoacán and the lack of infrastructure, the Sierra Madre del Sur region was, in socio-economic terms, strongly linked to the neighboring states of Jalisco and Colima (Krusche, 2015, p. 152). In the 1940s, the region was subject to policy efforts of the federal government (infrastructure development, agrarian reform, and agricultural subsidies) to enhance its integration into the national economy (Maldonado, 2012, p. 11).

Against the backdrop of national and international developments (e.g., railway strike, agrarian conflicts, *Guerra sucia*, Cold War) during the 1950s and 1960s, expressions of political opposition to the federal government became visible within the region. The suppression of uprisings and the fight against the incipient drug economy came along with the militarization of the Sierra Madre del Sur region and its municipalities (Maldonado, 2010, pp. 284–85). In the 1970s, state agricultural subsidies did not achieve the desired outcome, leading to the end of the so-called *Mexican Miracle* (an import-substitution-based period of economic development) (Sherman, 2000, p. 605). Follow-up food assistance programs were eliminated because of the 1982 debt crisis (Stephen & Werner, 1997, p. 1315), and the cultivation of marijuana and poppies expanded massively during this period, becoming one of the primary

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sources of income in the municipality during the 1980s (Maldonado, 2010, pp. 394–95). According to a study conducted by the Facultad de Economía of the Universidad de Michoacán, up to 20% of Michoacán's GDP during this period was related to the drug economy, whereas in the Sierra Madre del Sur region it represented an estimated 50% (Vargas, 1993, p. 66). In the municipality under study, this economic activity thus contributed to overcoming the economic challenges of the 1980s, the so called "lost decade" (Ibid., p. 64), alongside employment in the timber industry and in the local government, as well as the receipt of remittances (La Redacción, 2002) sent by locals who had migrated to the USA. However, already at the end of the 1970s, the drug economy was one of many issues that required regulation by the local administration, besides the supply of drinking water[4], the building of drainage systems and roads, the electrification of the municipality[5], dealing with territorial disputes[6], high crime rates[7], the implications of the inept behavior of a local district attorney[8], and the maintenance of reliable prison facilities[9].

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4 See AGHPEM: Request from the Local Water Committee on July 17, 1978, to the General Secretary of the State Government for financial support to build filters for water purification.

5 See AGHPEM: Request from the local mayor on August 9, 1979, to the regional unit of the Federal Commission of Electricity, to extend the public lighting network in several streets of the town.

6 See AGHPEM: Request from the local mayor on February 9, 1978, to the General Secretary of the State Government to send an engineer to the municipality, to resolve problems of demarcation between different agrarian communities.

7 See AGHPEM: Request from the local mayor on January 18, 1978, to the Commander of the Regional Military Zone to send a group of soldiers [partida militar] to the municipality to restore "peace and tranquillity" in a settlement with high crime rates.

8 See AGHPEM: Report from the local mayor on March 15, 1978, to the General Secretary of the State Government about continuous abusive behaviour of the local district attorney [Ministerio Público] towards inhabitants of the municipality.

9 See AGHPEM: For the late 1970s and early 1980s, several escapes from the local prison are reported. In a letter to the state persecutor on March 5, 1978: the local

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By the end of the 1980s, political violence escalated[10] as the state of Michoacán became a stronghold of factions opposing the decades-long rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Maldonado, 2010, pp. 407–08), which reached one of its peaks in the 1989 local elections, marked by electoral fraud (Nava, 1990, p. 124), and the subsequent occupation of several mayoral offices by protesters. The municipality became a power base for the newly founded Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD),[11] electing one of its first mayors who took office in 1993 (INAFED, 2005).

Since the turn of the new millennium until the present day, the territory of the municipality has been a frequent venue for disputes between different local violent actors, accompanied by waves of displacement, forced disappearance, and extrajudicial killings. Whereas some of these organizations are openly associated with the drug economy, others allegedly oppose them, e.g., the initially citizen-supported uprising of a local self-defense group in 2013, known as *grupo de autodefensa* (autodefense group). At least since the open declaration of the so-called "war on drugs" in 2006, the municipality has faced continuous interventions by the security forces, e.g. in the context of the so called *Michoacanazo*, the detention of local mayors who had apparently colluded with criminal structures in 2009, or during the interim takeover of the state functions of Michoacán by the federal government in 2013 and 2014. Following those events, the police forces at the state and municipal level were reformed, as well as the presence of national security bodies in the region, which have been strengthened, e.g., by the permanent allocation of a military battalion in the municipality in 2015 or the settlement of the National Guard in the neighboring district in 2021. Despite this, the

mayor reports that six inmates had escaped through a hole in the prison wall, presumably with the help of the municipal police.

10 According to John Gledhill (1995, p. 70), 68 militants of Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) were killed in the state of Michoacán between 1988 and 1994, which represented "a quarter of the national total" (ibid.) killings of PRD-militants during this period in Mexico.

11 See interviews with Ignacio, June 2023, and with Darío, February 2024.

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state appears to have left the security situation within the municipality unresolved, as its territory was difficult to access for several months in 2021 and 2022. Due to a dispute between local violent actors, many connecting roads had been cut off by trenches.

For my analysis, I was compelled to return to the late 1970s, when the municipality under study had a depressed and barely diversified economy and the local administration was working at its limits. The local society of the area had long been separated into different societal realities, which created conditions favorable for the drug economy. Within this rural municipality, these societal realities can be divided into those of the ranch-inhabitants and those of the town-inhabitants. The former can be considered as independent, self-sufficient, and small-scale agricultural units, often difficult to reach, whose surplus production is distributed at local and sub-regional levels (Stephen & Werner, 1997, p. 1314). Meanwhile, the latter is home to the municipal government's seat, offering public employment, and is also where small private businesses, shops for daily needs, and businesses that supply the surrounding agrarian communities and ranches are located.

Modus Operandi

The study is based on three primary methodological sources: interviews, archival material, and chronologies, which I gathered during two research stays in Mexico in 2023 and 2024.[12] The corpus of verbal data considered for this case study consists of 14 eyewitness accounts, collected *in situ* by employing narrative life-history interviews (average duration: 2.5 hours) with 11 residents of the municipality under study and three inhabitants of other districts within the Sierra Madre del Sur and Tierra Caliente regions of Michoacán. Although the retrospective narrative technique of the life-history approach is regularly

12 The field research was funded by CALAS (2023, partial funding) and Erasmus+ (2024, total funding). The field research in 2024 was institutionally supported by the University of Guadalajara, and by Marcos Pablo Moloeznik Gruer's tutoring, for which I am very grateful.

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limited by individual biases (e.g. class, gender, age, political affiliation, status group), by established anecdotes and memory gaps, as well as by personal considerations about how to recount the respective lived experiences, it offers insights on "how people explain their world to themselves and give meaning to (historical) events" (Althaus & Apel, 2023, pp. 12–13, own translation from German) and processes, with reference to a considerable time span. The possibility of covering several decades in one interview is one of the reasons I specifically approached people of retirement age. The eyewitnesses are on average 60.5 years old, mostly male[13] (86%), married, have a university education, and have migration experiences to the USA. While only two of them have spent most of their working life in an agricultural-related occupation, the interviewees describe themselves either as ranchers, their descendants, or as townspeople. Due to ethical considerations and the contextual conditions[14] of the field research, the informed consent with the interviewed counterparts demands the anonymization of the cited individuals and any traceable references within the included materials.

To approximate how the growing drug economy affected society at the production site, the interview data were submitted to content analysis by using MaxQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021). The initial deductive coding of the data focused on the development of the interviewees' lives since the end of the 1970s. Then, it was extended by the inductive subdivision into the 'ranch' and 'town' perspectives. On this basis, aspects of each person's self-perception and perception of others were coded. The coded units were synthesized in accordance with Philipp Mayring (2010, p. 605) through paraphrasing, generalization, and reduction, which thus

13 Women who were asked for interviews often refused on the grounds that they would know too little. Some of them preferred to refer to their husbands instead.

14 The main part of the verbal data was gathered during the ongoing in-situ-presence of organisations related to the drug economy and before the 2024 presidential and municipal elections, which were accompanied by violent incidents within the state of Michoacán (e.g. extrajudicial killings of mayoral candidates). This is also one of the reasons why the municipal district referred to in this study is not named directly within the text.

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laid the foundation for the inductive reconstruction of the societal realities of 'ranch' and 'town' referred to in the following.

The information obtained from the interviews is complemented by archival materials such as official correspondence of the municipal administration (1978–1986) and the regional military command (1970–1994), collected in the *Archivo General e Histórico del Poder Ejecutivo del Estado de Michoacán* (AGHPEM, Morelia) and the *Archivo General de la Nación* (AGN, Mexico City). Whereas the former may refer to administrative requirements of civil institutions, at that time wholly controlled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the latter may represent the fulfilment of duties within a military structure. Even though the communications of the respective mayors and army commanders are intended to meet the known and imagined expectations of the superior authority while bargaining for their own interests (personal/professional) as well as for those of the administrative entities they belong to, they contain valuable information to put the eyewitnesses' narrations on historical events and processes into perspective. Furthermore, the Encyclopedia of Mexican Municipalities was included. Located at the Library of the *Instituto Nacional para el Federalismo y Desarrollo Municipal* (INAFED, Mexico City), the encyclopaedia serves as a fundamental source for structural information about the municipality and political developments at the local level, besides its official historiographical character.

As the emerging drug economy encounters pre-existing societal structures within the municipality, the analytical processing of the inductively coded material uses Bourdieu's theories as an underlying framework. Thus, I apply the concepts of habitus and distinction as analytical lenses to trace back whether and how the drug economy affects local society during the period of study.

'Habitus' is understood here as a social-context-driven (Krais, 2015, p. 100) "result of incorporated experiences which informs our perceptions, ways of thinking and behaviors" (Schroer, 2017, p. 317, own translation from German). As a basic individual pattern, it "suggests certain decisions and makes others unlikely" (ibid.) or develops creatively new behaviors in new situations (Krais, 2015, p. 99). Regarding the specifics

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of daily practices, e.g., in the economic or educational sphere (Schroer, 2017, p. 317), habitus is furthermore seen as an indicator of belonging to certain societal entities, and thus applicable as a matter of "distinction between different societal entities and their respective members" (Guttandin, 1995, p. 262, own translation from German). Based on this function, it is additionally understood here as a marker for those "behavioral patterns and ways of thinking", which lead to the reproduction of "the unequal principles of the societal structure" (Kraemer et al., 1995, p. 148, own translation from German). However, alongside these useful features, the concepts referred to above also imply the risk of viewing individuals as prisoners of their social background, thereby underestimating their potential for transformation that enables social mobility (Wickert 2025). Disregarding this emancipatory potential in habitus research contributes to the consolidation of the status quo and leads to the reproduction of established structures of domination (Sonderegger, 2010, p. 33).

To analyze the development of the relationship between society and the drug economy within this chapter, (1) the societal realities of 'ranch' and 'town' are contrasted against the backdrop of the growing drug economy in a period encompassing approximately five decades (1970s to 2020s). Subsequently, (2) the progressive intertwining of local society with the drug economy is traced back by considering emblematic developments in law enforcement, government, and promotion of social activities. Finally, to assess the explanations given based on the primary sources, (3) the preliminary observations are analyzed according to their specificities regarding the drug economy and by considering the constraints of the study's methodological approach.

(1) Societal Realities and the Drug Economy

Carrying out the inductive reconstruction of the 'ranch' and 'town' realities, I first contrasted them descriptively and adapted them in the chronological order of the synthesized narrations, from the 1970s until

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the 2020s, and finally summarized and analyzed them by focusing on education, behavioral conventions, and means of earning a living.

The Seventies – Distant Realities

The people from the ranches remember life there as being busy: six days of work, eating, praying, sleeping. Everyone helped. There was mass on Sundays, and the rest of the day was free. Time of day was irrelevant; the parameters of daily life were daylight and physical strength.[15] The people were self-sufficient and consumed what they had produced. Every six months, a calf was slaughtered; the meat was prepared and dried in the sun.[16] Ranches were places without electricity or sanitary facilities[17], and they were up to 500 hectares in size. Cattle farming and maize cultivation required a lot of space.[18] By foot or on horseback, the ranches were usually several hours away from the main town, and there were often no paved roads.[19] Several ranches were completely without any means of communication during the rainy season.[20]

Carrying a gun was considered a normal part of a rancher's attire. A typical *charro mexicano* wore a sombrero and carried a pistol.[21] Once or twice a year, ranchers and farmers[22] came to town to sell their products (chayote, prickly pears, peaches) and to buy necessities (blankets, pots, soap)[23] or possibly have their children baptized.[24] Families were usually large.[25] The morals and values came from the Bible. The parents'

15 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
16 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.
17 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
18 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.
19 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
20 See Interview with Darío, February 2024.
21 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.
22 Here, and in the following, the word "farmer" is used as a non-specific translation of the Spanish word "campesino".
23 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.
24 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
25 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.

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generation had little or no school education.[26] There were a few primary schools outside of town, and it was difficult to find teachers for them.[27] The town was the birthplace of respected politicians and academics[28] and was therefore known on the ranches as the "Athens of the region", a place where educated people lived. If schoolchildren from the ranches wanted to attend secondary school, they had to stay at a boarding school in town. On Sunday, some pupils walked up to five hours from the ranch to the town and back again on Fridays. More and more ranchers were beginning to consider whether they could get further with the cultivation of marijuana, which was in demand in the USA, than with conventional agriculture, such as cattle farming or maize cultivation. The geographical conditions of the municipality were considered favorable for the cultivation of marijuana.[29]

Townspeople recall the town as isolated but cultivated, with younger people frequently leaving for studies in larger cities and then returning.[30] Contact between the people from the town and the inhabitants of outlying settlements was concentrated on the logging areas, which supplied the sawmills in the main town[31], or during celebrations of public or religious holidays, when the ranchers came to town.[32] Although townspeople say they knew that marijuana was grown in the mountains, they remember no manifestation of this in town[33], besides a few young

26 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.

27 See AGHPEM: Report from the local mayor on February 9, 1978, to the General Secretary of the State Government on people's complaints about educational problems on the ranches, due to the lack of teachers.

28 The town is birthplace of (1) an academic and politician who served as ambassador of Mexico to a foreign country; (2) a state governor; (3) a secretary in the federal government, (4) a senator to the Congress of the Union, (5) and an historian and university professor.

29 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.

30 See interview with Emilio, February 2024.

31 See interview with Darío, February 2024.

32 See interview with Emilio, February 2024.

33 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.

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consumers.[34] The town inhabitants remember that some larger ranch communities outside the town had a boarding house for primary school, a small church, and a clinic of the Social Security Institute.[35] Catholic priests and representatives of the municipal administration regularly visited these well-populated, but still hard-to-reach, ranches and cut-off agrarian communities.[36] The latter delivered parcels with basic foodstuffs (sugar, beans, corn flour, oats, dried milk) and warm blankets. They also gave gifts to the children on Children's Day and Epiphany, and gave cooking and sewing machine courses to farmers' wives. Talking about the gift-giving activities, a contemporary witness recalls people's gratitude for these acts of charity.[37]

The Eighties and Nineties – Becoming Neighbors

The cultivation of marijuana proved to be profitable for the people on the ranches.[38] They bought pick-ups and tractors, and many ranchers no longer rode on their horses to town. There was consensus that drugs are cultivated but not consumed.[39] A ranch-descendant describes that one person had usually bought the harvest from everyone and then transported it to the USA. If the military found the crops, they were destroyed, sprayed with herbicide, or the harvest was taken away by helicopter.[40] More and more families were moving from the ranches to town, buying houses or building on the outskirts of town. An interviewee reports that

34 See interview with Iván, February 2024.

35 See interview with Anita, March 2024.

36 See interviews with Daniel, February 2024, and with Anita, March 2024.

37 See interview with Anita, March 2024.

38 Hubert Cochet (1991) describes the profitability of marihuana cultivation during this period as follows: "The sale of 50 kilos of marihuana generates as much as the sale of 50 steers weighing 250 kilos each. It represents a year's salary on Californian farms and ten years' work for a farm employee working in the fields of Mexico." (1991, p. 193, own translation from Spanish).

39 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.

40 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.

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arriving as a ranching family in town, which was perceived as more civilized, was initially challenging.[41] Mothers and grandparents would live in town with the children who went to school there, while fathers commuted between the ranch and town or worked seasonally in the sawmills. The economic integration of the ranchers was difficult due to the lack of jobs outside the timber industry.[42] In the afternoons, the children sold products from the ranches on the streets in town: peaches, apples, avocados, pumpkins, milk, cheese, and cream.[43] Ranch-descendants recall cultural adaptation as problem-free: although they had come from the countryside, they were also Catholic, spoke no dialect and were not from an indigenous area.[44] The town was growing steadily as people kept moving in from the ranches. After some time, and due to the financial contributions of family members from the USA, the first sawmill was established by ranchers, an economic sector that the townspeople had originally dominated.[45] Apart from the routes built for the timber industry, the road network and other paths were extended, allowing people from the ranches to reach town more quickly, even in medical emergencies. A witness of these developments describes the cars going to town as public transport lookalikes, with many people asking them for a lift.[46]

Generally speaking, the townspeople have always perceived themselves as noble but envious in business competitions.[47] In a letter, a local mayor describes the ranchers who were coming to town as "rough" and "almost impossible to deal with", and as "people who openly display their weapons"[48]. Longstanding inhabitants of the municipality's polit-

41 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
42 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
43 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.
44 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
45 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
46 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
47 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.
48 See AGHPEM: In a letter on August 27, 1981, to the Governor of the state of Michoacán, the local mayor describes the people from the ranches as "[...] rough people, used to bring weapons with or without a permit, [...] they prefer to bring their firearms than to take their food, they rarely go down to the town and when

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ical center remember how the ranches were connected to the main town by blasting and digging breaches through the mountainous terrain and constructing gravel roads.[49] They recall the people from the countryside coming to town with their families, and that it was the mothers of the rancher families who wanted to enjoy the benefits of living in town. The town was growing in all directions, with new streets and neighborhoods being built.[50]

Along with that, the townspeople say that real estate prices increased[51] as the drug economy was buying land and houses in town to launder money. Many people who had migrated to the USA were also investing. There were many pickup trucks in the mountains outside the town. The number of jobs in the town remained the same, as there was still only the timber industry.[52] Retrospectively, life back then is perceived as more anonymous, unlike a time when everyone greeted each other because they knew everyone, including the parents of friends.[53] The townspeople saw the people from the ranches becoming the majority. They attribute this to the fact that the young adults from the town aspired to study in the state capital and then stayed there. In contrast, the young people from the ranches did not leave the municipality after school, unless they followed a family member to the USA.[54] In the meantime, people who originally had come from the municipality were returning from the USA. A town resident who had never migrated to the north describes these returnees as vicious and responsible for the onset of drug use in town.[55]

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they do it, they do it well equipped, they are people, so to speak, almost impossible to deal with [...]." (own translation from Spanish).

49 See interview with Darío, February 2024.

50 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.

51 See interview with Emilio, February 2024.

52 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.

53 See interview with Benjamín, March 2024.

54 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.

55 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.

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The 2000s to Present Day – Homogenization in Different Terms

A contemporary witness from the ranches outside town remembers conflicts among the transporters, who were moving the drugs. Furthermore, people from the region had become part of these groups, and the business was transforming from marijuana production to cocaine transportation, and finally to the production of synthetic drugs. The same person describes that the amounts of money made from the drug economy had been historically large for the people in the area and that adults were observing the loss of values in their children's generation.[56] Apart from that, people like living in town because of the many services, but also because of the many ranchers who are now living there.[57] These days, people greet each other because most know each other and which family each person is from. Many came from ranches, got to know each other in town, and shared the same culture.[58] Despite these positive aspects, some families have decided to stay on the ranches.[59] Some grown children of the ranchers, who now live in town, maintain the ranches without economic aspirations, but as a diversion and for reasons of identity. They go there on the weekends to plant pine and avocado trees and keep a few cows.[60] A town-born ranch-family-descendant with a university degree reports that everyone in his generation felt that they had to leave the town for the state capital to develop further, but that no one had said to them, "Come here."[61]

Older townspeople, who see themselves as "the originals" because they belong to the "older families", report that the town's atmosphere has changed since people from the ranches and other municipalities arrived, and it is no longer the same.[62] Many ranches are deserted

56 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.
57 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.
58 See interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
59 Interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
60 See interviews with Gustavo, March 2024; and with Guillermo, March 2024.
61 Interview with Guillermo, March 2024.
62 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.

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because of violence.[63] They describe that many people, especially long-standing families, have sold their houses, left the town[64], and moved to Guadalajara and Mexico City.[65] The older townspeople feel less confident and more isolated, as people from the outside dominate in terms of numbers and behavior.[66] To some, the coexistence in town remains friendly,[67] while others find the tone rougher, the music louder, and more *ranchera*.[68] At the same time, younger townspeople attribute this to a contemporary trend of showing off by equipping cars with powerful music systems.[69] The older townspeople remember that in the past, getting drunk was normal, but with the arrival of drugs, the peaceful feeling in town had come to an end. They say that now you have to be as quiet as a mouse because the *narco*[70] is everywhere[71], and you must be careful with whom you talk.[72] Referring to the children of people from the ranches, the older townspeople say that they are growing up with a lot of money, that their parents pay for everything, and that the mentality of materialism and showing off has prevailed. Children born since the year 2000 imitate *narcos* with pick-up trucks, gold rings, and attention-grabbing behaviors.[73] On the one hand, the long-established residents report that many grow up with single mothers because their fathers are in the USA or in prison[74], and leave school during or after

63 See interview with Daniel, February 2024.
64 See interview with Emilio, February 2024.
65 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.
66 See interviews with Emilio, February 2024; and with Alfonso, March 2024.
67 See interview with Emilio, February 2024.
68 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.
69 See interview with Benjamín, April 2024.
70 Applied by the interviewees, the term "narco" is an abbreviated colloquial form of the Spanish term "narcotráfico", which refers to the trade of illegal drugs, the related enabling structures, and the individuals who participate in this economic sector, but often is used indistinctively in public discussion.
71 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.
72 See interview with Emilio, February 2024.
73 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.
74 Interview with Alfonso, March 2024.

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middle school.[75] Children's education is highlighted as an important issue, while future parents are perceived as uneducated.[76] On the other hand, a ranch-born town-inhabitant explains that students who aspire to further studies no longer need to leave for the state capital anymore, as the institutional offering for superior education in town has improved.[77] However, the security situation for students of non-local origin is considered volatile[78], and the available careers are said to have little demand in the local labor market.[79] A townsperson says the ranchers have ceased to be farmers, that they are living in town and leave at 4 a.m. by car to go to the ranch to tell their ranch keepers what to do.[80]

A Look Back at Five Decades – Aspects and Limits of Distinction

The descriptions of the societal realities of 'ranch' and 'town' show how the drug economy is evolving and transforming throughout the decades: while in the 1970s, the production of drugs had turned into an option for many farmers, during the 1980s and 1990s drugs had become a profitable business, including a wider range of processes (production, transportation) and products (marijuana, cocaine, synthetic drugs), which have been subject to continuous conflicts between the involved organizations from the late 1990s and early 2000s up until the present day. By focusing on the aspects of means of earning a living, behavior, and education, from the different perspectives of the ranchers and the townspeople on themselves and on each other, we can see how, from the local residents' point of view, the drug economy has shaped local society in the short, medium, and long-term.

75 See interviews with Emilio, February 2024; and with Alfonso, March 2024.
76 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.
77 See interview with Gustavo, March 2024.
78 Interview with Gustavo, March 2024.
79 See interview with Emilio, February 2024.
80 See interview with Alfonso, March 2024.

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In the short term, some economic and educational leveling aspects of society have become visible. Until the late 1980s, the ranchers could meet their aspirational model by sending all their children to school after moving to town and by becoming neighbors of the people perceived as well educated, since the town by then was known as the "Athens of the region".

In the mid-term, societal distinction prevailed. In the 1970s, the ranchers were perceived as welfare beneficiaries, but by the following decade, they had become neighbors of the townspeople, who attributed this development to the illicit funding of property acquisitions. In later decades, the townspeople underline differences in educational aspirations (university studies in the state capital) and behavior (manners, e.g., loud music etiquette) compared to the ranchers and their descendants; meanwhile, the former point out similarities (religion, dialect, ethnicity). In conclusion, it can be seen how the townspeople, during the period of arrival of rancher families in the town's neighborhoods, have used the rancher families' means of earning a living (illicit source of income) as a horizontal distinguishing aspect. After the establishment of rancher families in town, the townspeople began highlighting higher education and behavioral conventions as a means of vertical distinction.

In the long term, from the local residents' point of view, their local society became homogenized. The contemporary interviewees describe how the older townspeople have been leaving the town amid feelings of increased societal anonymity, while the ranchers and their descendants are seen as becoming larger in number and perceiving life in town as more familiar. Higher education, once used by the older townspeople as a means of maintaining distinction, is now available in town, since the institutional offerings of continuing education *in situ* have improved. Residents' accounts indicate the challenging situation of insufficient job opportunities related to the studies offered at the local level. The interviewees additionally reveal that, regardless of the local educational opportunities, younger people who want to develop themselves further are still leaving the town (e.g., to the state capital or the USA). In contrast, some others either do not come to study in town due to the security situation or never qualify to participate in higher education in the first place.

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(2) The Intertwining of Society and the Drug Economy

According to the primary sources (interviews, archival material), the local society and the drug economy became progressively more intertwined alongside the following emblematic developments: (1) In the 1970s and 1980s, disagreements between different state levels about the means of law enforcement within the municipal territory lead to a benefit for the drug economy; (2) at the turn of the new Millennium, the drug economy is described for the first time in relation to political power in the municipality; (3) at least since the 2020s, social activities sponsored by an organization associated with the drug economy are continuously visible in public.

Disagreements Regarding Law Enforcement: 1970/1980s

In Mexico, in addition to the three levels of government (federal, state, and municipal), there is a fourth level, the so-called *tenencias*. The *tenencias* themselves are further divided into three different territorial regimes: Private land (ranches, small and large properties), agrarian communities (*ejidos*), and indigenous communities.

In this case study, at the end of the 1970s, there is evidence that law enforcement at the municipal level lacked police officers, as the local mayor sent his chief of police to recruit officers in neighboring municipalities.[81] At the level of the *tenencias*, outside the main town, around 86 so-called *encargados del orden* (persons in charge of order) supported the existing police officers.[82] The respective ranch-communities elected these people[83], who were then officially appointed for a period of three years and expected to maintain order in a settlement, an *eijdo*, or an

81 See AGHPEM: The document referred to includes an instruction from the local mayor on Juli 13, 1978, to the commander of the municipal police.

82 See AGHPEM: The amount includes 56 *encargados del orden* and 30 substitutes mentioned in a list sent by the local mayor on March 29, 1978, to the Department of Government of the State of Michoacán in order to obtain certificates to appoint them officially.

83 See Interviews with Prudencia and Plácido, in March 2024.

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accumulation of ranches. This included the unpaid enforcement of the law (schooling, vaccinations for children, or preventing unauthorized alcohol sales) as well as control and mediation functions.[84] In 1978, against the backdrop of the growing drug economy, their regular range of responsibilities expanded. The local mayor instructed them to report any persons, activities, and locations associated with the cultivation and trafficking of drugs to the regional military command or the local administration.[85] This extension of duties aimed to enhance the possibility of "combating and eradicating this evil among the population in the countryside"[86].

To foster the fulfilment of these responsibilities, a subsequent local mayor strived to allow the *encargados del orden* the possession of arms at the beginning of the 1980s. The rationale was that the existing operational unit of 11 armed municipal police officers and a tactical group of 13 soldiers were not enough to carry out law enforcement activities in the remote areas of the municipality, whose territory is larger than the Mexican State of Colima.[87]

Two inhabitants of the Sierra Madre del Sur region during the 1980s remember the mayor's order as undermining the traditional way people became *encargados del orden*. Previously, they had to be elected by their neighbors on the ranches prior to their official appointment. But after the mayor's order, both recall that gun owners often designated themselves as *encargados del orden* to obtain the official permit to possess

84 See AGHPEM: The document referred to is a personal certificate of appointment for an *encargado del orden*, which besides personal details includes a list of the responsibilities of these voluntary forces.

85 See AGHPEM: The document referred to is an order given to an *encargado del orden*, that is signed by the local mayor in 1978, which mentions the expansion of the voluntaries' responsibilities regarding the growing drug economy [Although there is no indication of its date of creation within the document, it can be assumed that the document dates from August 1978, because of the position within the chronological order of the archival folder in which it was found].

86 Ibid. (own translation from Spanish).

87 See AGHPEM: Letter from the local mayor on May 21, 1981, to the Federal Arms Register at the National Secretary of Defence.

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weapons.[88] Regarding the intrinsic motivation behind this behavior, one interviewee points out: "[…] and since weapons were somehow important for protecting your marijuana […], so, there was this entanglement, this understanding between the government and producers."[89] Another interviewee and former resident of the municipality argues along the same lines that producers had to be able to defend themselves, since it was not possible to go to the police because of a stolen marijuana harvest.[90]

The National Secretary of Defense in Mexico City opposed granting a collective permission for weapons' possession to *encargados del orden*, as they were not employees of the local administration and worked voluntarily, unlike municipal police officers.[91] The local administration tried to overcome this objection by certifying in the municipal law *encargados del orden* as "representatives of the law"[92] and also declaring that they did not have the budgetary resources to employ them officially as police officers. However, the regional military command perceived this approach as a violation of federal law regarding certain weapons[93] for the exclusive use of the armed forces.[94] According to one of the local mayors at the time, the Mexican military repeatedly disarmed the *encargados del orden* on the ranches. The military's way of operating caused fear and terror among the ranch families, as, according to contemporaries, the disar-

88 See interviews with Prudencia and Plácido, March 2024.

89 Interview with Plácido, March 2024 (own translation from Spanish).

90 See interview with Tito, March 2024.

91 See AGHPEM: Notification from the National Secretary of Defence on May 20, 1981, to the local mayor.

92 See AGHPEM: Letter from the local mayor on July 6, 1981, to the National Secretary of Defence.

93 See Ley Federal de Armas de Fuego y Explosivos, Artículos 8, 11, 24.

94 See AGHPEM: Letter from the local mayor on August 27, 1981, to the Governor of the State of Michoacán.

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mament was often accompanied by the raiding[95] of the farmhouses. An interviewee remembers that people were digging holes to hide not only weapons, but their valuables in general.[96] Therefore, in the mid-1980s, it became more difficult to find people who would voluntarily assume the responsibilities of the *encargados del orden*.[97]

These developments show two perspectives: on the one hand, the state's contradictory approach to law and drug enforcement within the municipal territory, and on the other, the emerging need for protection in the unregulated drug economy. The lasting disagreements between different levels of government on the means to ensure law enforcement created competitive conditions for marijuana producers and led to the generalized criminalization of ranch populations.

Obtaining Governmental Power: 1990/2000s

At the third level of government in Mexico, the municipalities, mayoral elections are held every three years. In this case study, one election at the end of the 1990s is of particular interest. Retrospectively, it is said to have been the first election of a "narco-mayor"[98]. Contemporaries describe this mayor's election and his period of rule[99] as well as the end of his term, as ambiguous.

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95 See AGN: A further impression of the military's way of operating can be found in the archives of the Secretary of Defence. In a "report to the superiority" on November 28, 1985, two residents of a ranch within the municipality ask for the return of their belongings taken by a military patrol.

96 See interview with Prudencia, March 2024.

97 See AGHPEM: In a letter from the local mayor on June 30, 1984, to the Secretary of the State Governor, the mayor explains that the military's way of operating makes it difficult to find people who would assume the law enforcement responsibilities on the ranches.

98 Interview with Ignacio, June 2023. According to several interviewees, it was the first time that the elected political head of the municipal administration was apparently linked to the drug economy.

99 According to the Encyclopaedia of Mexican Municipalities (INAFED, 2005), the term of the referred mayor started in 1999 and ended in 2001.

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Compared to other candidates for mayor, local residents remember him as a relatively young candidate who came from a ranch and was suspected of having connections to the drug economy.[100] He had won the internal party pre-election by a very high margin against the candidate nominated by the established party members. Some say this victory was made possible by a "sudden" numerical superiority of eligible voters who came by bus from the ranches and may have been paid to do so.[101] Others say his successful election was due to his political involvement in previous years: he had led a citizens' coalition that advocated for necessary infrastructure projects (bridges, roads) that would primarily benefit the cut-off settlements and isolated ranches within the area of the municipality and not just the interests of loggers and the sawmills. There had been strikes and roadblocks against the timber industry to put pressure on the municipal and state governments.[102]

During his time as mayor, on the one hand, some municipal residents recall him as an "uneducated and ignorant"[103] person who was rude in his everyday treatment (shouting, boots, and a gun on the desk) of administrative staff and who allegedly carried out activities related to the drug economy from the town hall.[104] On the other hand, another local describes him as a kind and charismatic person, hugging and making friends with everyone, and who, as mayor, had realized all promised infrastructure projects.[105] Some say that the projects and subsidies during his term benefited the municipality's people regardless of their party affiliation.[106] Others report that people who were not in his party had a difficult time.[107] However, the contemporaries are unsure whether construction activity during his term was indeed higher than during previ-

100 See interviews with Emilio, February 2024; and Darío, February 2024.

101 See interview with Ignacio, June 2023.

102 See interview with Darío, February 2024.

103 Interview with Emilio, February 2024.

104 See interviews with Anita, March 2024; Emilio, February 2024; and Dario, February 2024.

105 See interview with Darío, February 2024.

106 Interview with Darío, February 2024.

107 See interview with Anita, March 2024.

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ous or subsequent local governments.[108] After the end of his term, he lost the internal party pre-election for the Senate. Regarding this episode, one inhabitant of the municipality remembers that he accepted his defeat and withdrew from daily political business[109], something that was seen as somewhat odd. The reason given for this behavior was that he had been an "old-school-narco",[110] a category which, according to contemporaries, signifies a person associated with the drug economy who formerly used to negotiate its interests with politicians without notably interfering in politics. Years later, he was allegedly forced to leave the town.[111]

This historical example highlights how the drug economy reached the administrative and political center of the municipality and used its influence to benefit the ranches. The way contemporaries describe this period shows how the relationship between the drug economy and politics became normalized. The residents' accounts also make clear that until this point, there was hardly any political representation for the concerns of the ranches in the political center of the municipality.

Promoting Social Activities: 2020s

Religious and state holidays, commemorative days in honor of children, mothers, fathers, or teachers, as well as *las posadas* (pre-Christmas tradition), are societal events of interest all over Mexico. Additionally, *los jaripeos* (competition in bull-riding) and cockfights are of further importance in the countryside, also in Michoacán. In this case study, I focus on events such as Children's Day, Mother's Day, and cockfights.

Within the municipality under study, Children's Days were regularly celebrated in elementary schools or hosted by the municipal administration or by civil society organizations. Teachers used to dress up as clowns

108 See interview with Darío, February 2024.

109 See interview with Ignacio, June 2023.

110 Interview with Dario, February 2024 (own translation from Spanish).

111 See interviews with Ignacio, June 2023; and with Darío, February 2024.

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or other characters, and schoolchildren did not have to wear their uniforms and received small gifts.[112] According to eyewitnesses, the celebrations in 2023 and 2024 took place on the central square of the town, where fast food was offered for free and the gifts (footballs, bags of sweets) for the attending children were labelled with stickers depicting a rooster and the message which said in Spanish: "Happy Children's Day from your friend the Lord of the Roosters".[113]

In this context, "Lord of the Roosters" is the self-designated alias of the leader of a nationwide criminal organization, who is originally from the Sierra Madre del Sur region and associated with the drug economy. Referring to these gatherings, a town's resident points out:

> I mean, these are gifts [that] […] make people happy, but unfortunately, […] [that's] the situation in [the municipality] and many other places where people don't have the money to afford the luxury of buying a hamburger or a hot dog and going out to dinner. Because there, you're going to spend 200 pesos, and those 200 pesos are what a person earns in a day for working. So, it's like a luxury, and people are grateful for it.[114]

Concerning a similar proceeding of the same organization during the Mother's Day celebrations, another local interviewee focuses on the implicit message sent to the population of the municipality: "Everything will be fine […]. Don't worry […]."[115]

These developments show how the drug economy and local society are intertwining. By sponsoring the annual Children's and Mother's Day events, formerly organized by the municipal administration, an organization associated with the drug economy adopts a state's offering of social activities and thus continues an established practice for its own legitimization.

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112 See interviews with Benjamín, April 2024; and with Anita, March 2024.

113 See interviews with Alfonso, March 2024; and with Benjamín, April 2024.

114 Interview with Benjamín, April 2024 (own translation from Spanish).

115 Interview with Alfonso, March 2024 (own translation from Spanish).

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A similar adoption and reproduction of structures relevant to the local society comes along with the hosting of cockfights. The correspondences of the municipality's mayors between the late 1970s and early 1980s reveal that cockfights had usually been celebrated during the days after Christmas. The provision of these events always required a special permit[116] from the superior authorities, as in Mexico, the hosting of cockfights is restricted by federal[117] and state law[118] (betting and gambling, animal protection). In this light, the self-designation as "Lord of the Roosters" by the organization's leader, as depicted on the abovementioned stickers, not only implies a claim (1) of belonging to traditional rural life on the ranches, where roosters set the daily rhythm. It also (2) insinuates the dominion over these animals, which are especially trained for cockfights and may represent the forces of nature, where only the fittest or strongest rooster survives. In addition, it indicates (3) a claim of authority beyond state regulations, which is supported by the image given to the organization's leader in ballads, where he appears as "El Dueño del Palenque"[119], a designation which in Mexican Spanish implies the ownership of the place where cockfights are held.

116 See AGHPEM: A large amount of correspondence between local and state authorities on the permit to hold cockfights can be traced back from the late 1970s up until the early 1980s. I.e. a request from the local mayor on October 15, 1978, to the state governor to obtain the permit to hold cockfights during the days after Christmas.

117 See Ley Federal de Juegos y Sorteos, Artículo 1.

118 See Ley De Protección A Los Animales Para El Estado De Michoacán De Ocampo, Artículo 11.

119 See Los Alegres del Barranco (2025), minutes 00:24-00:51, lyrics in Spanish: "Soy el dueño del palenque […], soy del mero Michoacán, donde es la Tierra Caliente. Soy el Señor de los gallos […], tengo gallos de pelea, que pelean por mi partido […]".

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(3) Assessing the Given Explanations

Preliminary Takeaways

This case study aims to show how the society at a rural drug production site evolves over a period of almost five decades, beginning with its insertion into the global drug supply chain. The local community members describe the drug economy *in situ* as diversifying in terms of activities and products, while the municipal society becomes more homogeneous as the societal frame attributed to the ranchers and their descendants begins to dominate local life.

Regarding the societal realities ('ranch', 'town') taken into consideration in the first part of this study, the drug economy's establishment results in short-term levelling aspects to society (access to properties in the town's neighborhoods for ranchers and to basic education for their children), while mechanisms of societal distinction remain in the mid-term. Townspeople use moral, legal, and structural conventions (means of earning a living, higher education, and behavioral conventions) to keep the drug economy's alleged beneficiaries and their descendants at a distance, both horizontally and vertically. In the long term, the town's society becomes ever more like the ranch. The representatives of the "traditional local hierarchy" become the minority (leaving of "older families"), and the limits of social mobility *in situ* due to higher education become visible.

In the second part of this study, I introduce three emblematic developments that exemplify the intertwining of the drug economy with local society: (1) the state levels' contradictions regarding law and drug enforcement on the ranches, (2) the drug economy's emergence as a factor in the political sphere at the local level, (3) as well as the public displays of social activities by an organization associated with this economic sector. It shows how the drug economy took advantage of conflicting approaches to law and drug enforcement, provided solutions to unattended societal inequalities (infrastructure), and adopted existing state activities relevant to the local society, and thus reproduced functional dependencies (donor, beneficiary).

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Methodological Constraints of the Study

The approach of this study is designed to retrace the development of the relationship between the drug economy and local society at one of the production sites of the global drug supply chain. Therefore, the study takes as an example the societal developments within a Mexican municipality over a period of approximately five decades. Its most important constraints are related to the speaker position of the eyewitnesses, the twofold analytical-descriptive reconstruction method, and the inherent biases of the thematic focus, the underlying analytical lenses, as well as the non-Mexican academic view.

Besides archival material and guidance by encyclopedic knowledge, the study is primarily based on narrative accounts of the interviewed contemporaries. By looking at their individual attributes, a bias of the respective speaker position can be derived. The 14 contemporary accounts considered in this study are mainly of 'townspeople' without direct connection to the drug economy. By combining the interviewees' perspectives with the archival material, a construction of the 'ranch' and its inhabitants as the "deviant other" is recognizable; meanwhile, the 'town' entity and the perspective of the 'townspeople' appear as the norm. In the first part of the study, this bias appears to inform the analytical-descriptive reconstruction of the societal realities of 'ranch' and 'town' and is particularly observable regarding the decades-long contrast between the two. Furthermore, in the second part of the reconstruction (emblematic developments), the thematic focus on the drug economy leads to a predetermined explanation for societal developments in general. This perspective is also sustained by a dominant discursive pattern seen within the interview and archival accounts (*discurso aprendido*: disagreements regarding law enforcement, increased political influence, promotion of social activities). Finally, the underlying Bourdieuan thought may have overly narrowed the analytical focus on the matter of distinction, and thus on educational, behavioral, and economic aspects. This, in combination with the contrastive approach of 'ranch' and 'town', could have contributed to an oversimplification of rural society, particularly of the ranch societal frame. The "high differentiation" of this frame and its im-

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portance for Mexican modernity were not given enough space within this study (cf. Barragán 1997: 30, 47–48).

Developments not Related to the Drug Economy

Considering these constraints, it is evident that many of the observations mentioned above are developments not only attributable to the incipient drug economy but also general indicators of a structurally weak region and expressions of societal negotiations in the face of changing economic conditions.

First, the perceived homogenization of the local population may be a result of the limited employment opportunities due to a barely diversified local economy (agriculture, timber industry, and iron ore mining). Second, and against this backdrop, the influence of local entrepreneurs on political structures and procedures, as well as their appearance as benefactors and sponsors of social events, does not appear to be a sector-specific peculiarity of the drug economy. Especially, since the mayor's office after the election of the first "narco-mayor" at the end of the 1990s has been held for at least three terms by people who are recognizable as entrepreneurs in the local timber industry (owners of sawmills) (INAFED, 2005). Moreover, addressing certain populations with social activities follows a general hearts and minds approach (cf. Schoon 2018: 67), and thus does not represent a standalone strategy of an organization related to this economic sector.

Third, the efforts of societal distinction, recognizable as pejorative forms of stratification criteria during the marijuana boom, which describe people associated with the drug economy as "uneducated", "loud", and "hard to deal with", are not a phenomenon specifically related to this economic sector. These criteria can be understood rather as general mechanisms for the vertical distinction of economically emerging parts of the local population ("the new rich"). E.g., a contemporary of Michoacán's cotton boom in the Tierra Caliente region during the 1950s and 1960s applies the same criteria by describing the farmers who came

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into money during this period as "ignorant, drunken, uneducated"[120] and as "people without culture"[121]. Fourth, the observable divergence about behavioral conventions (volume of music) represents an intergenerational negotiation process about the rules of social coexistence rather than a specific societal development caused by the drug economy.

Fifth and finally, the reported decline of the importance of certified educational degrees (secondary and higher education) cannot be categorized as a specific impact of an incipient drug economy. On the one hand, effects of the non-Mexico-specific "Ni-Ni" phenomenon are observable here, which pejoratively labels adolescents and young adults as "neither study nor work (*ni estudian, ni trabajan*)" (Rogers, 2016). According to a World Bank study of 2016 (de Hoyos et al., 2016), this phenomenon affected 20% of 15 to 24-year-olds in Latin America, two-thirds of them women. Their early marriages, teen pregnancies, and, as for most young men, the need to start work without being able to return to school are mentioned here as the main reasons for this development (Rogers, 2016). Moreover, for young people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, the structural unawareness about further educational pathways (e.g., nobody tells them/supports them to go to university), as well as the implicit requirements of a habitus transformation, may represent additional challenges. Referring to the latter, existential conditions that are associated with permanent needs and shortages could result in the persistence of a mindset that emphasizes "functions and urgencies" (El-Mafaalani, 2012, p. 314), which, in relation to higher education, demands that knowledge be applicable to daily life (ibid.).

On the other hand, the decreasing importance of certified educational degrees can be explained by the fact that the ability to work in many of the economic sectors *in situ* (e.g., agriculture, timber industry, drug economy) is probably not subject to educational degrees, but to proving oneself on the job and by upskilling in practice. Furthermore,

120 Interview with Victor, June 2023.

121 Interview with Victor, June 2023.

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the societal context of the case study reveals a "transnational labor routine" that has been developed over several generations. For the majority of the interviewed eyewitnesses, temporary labor migration to the USA is a common experience in their family biographies. At the time of the interviews, for many residents of the Sierra Madre del Sur region, a working stay in California or Oregon represented a fixed part of their annual income: going by plane to Portland on a harvest visa, and earning enough in three to four months as a picker or truck driver, to pay the annual salaries of two employees in one's own business at home.

Developments Related to the Drug Economy

The previously noted preliminary observations also reveal some developments that are particular to the drug economy as a demand-driven industry and have a direct impact on local society. In the undiversified local economy, which is characterized by sources of income in the public sector and in extractive, inflexible, and non-scalable industries (timber industry, iron ore mining), the drug economy positioned itself as a scalable, market-responsive economic sector and thus as a profitable and crisis-proven alternative source of income. From the beginning of the almost five-decade period under consideration, when the area is inserted as a production site into the global drug supply chains of marijuana and poppy, the local drug economy diversifies into additional products and their respective supply chains. This means it expands in terms of products (marijuana, poppy, cocaine, methamphetamine, fentanyl) and processes (cultivation, processing of chemical precursors), as well as by increasing the variety of activities within specific supply chains (e.g. production, transport and consumption of marijuana) and by applying the acquired functional competences to other supply chains (Gereffi & Kaplinsky, 2001, p. 4.). For example, people transferred their marijuana transportation expertise acquired in the 1970s to cocaine in the 1980s.

Based on this, and in conjunction with the described state approaches of law and drug enforcement during the 1980s, a further development specific to the drug economy with effects on local society

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can be identified. The international prohibition approach[122] embodied in various UN conventions (Wieczoreck, 2020, pp. 31–32; Buxton & Burger, 2020, pp. 17–19) falls short due to the innovative capability of the global drug economy (expansion of capabilities, application of competencies to different supply chains) and, furthermore, it reduces the active regulatory capacity of the ratifying states. The latter commonly address isolated activities of a transnational drug supply chain within their territory with reactive policies of domestic reach, which are often term-dependent and may even be of an aggravating nature (Atuesta & Ponce, 2017, p. 389.) (interventions by the security forces), such as the "[…] 'beheading' strategy […] [triggering] violence through an increase in the fragmentation of criminal groups" (Ibid.).

On the contrary, active participation of the state in the rule-setting process regarding the supply chains is left to organizations (Gereffi et al., 2005, p. 97) of the drug economy with transnational reach. The resulting unregulated organizational competition over processes and activities within the individual segments of the supply chains (Ríos, 2013, p. 142) consolidates the informal character of this economic sector and has also been accompanied by recurring excessive violence (Shirk & Wallman, 2015, p. 1354; Davies et al., 2024, pp. 677, 681) in Mexico at least since the declaration of the "war on drugs" in 2006 up to present day. The interview accounts in this case study show how this influences the local society, regarding the infringement of the exercise of civil rights, e.g. freedom of movement ("abandoned ranches because of violence"), personal integrity ("volatile security situation for students of non-local origin") or freedom of expression ("you have to be quiet as a mouse").

122 M. Wieczoreck describes (Wieczoreck, 2020, pp. 31–32) an increase of drug enforcement embodied in three UN-Conventions between 1961 and 1988. Meanwhile the 1961 and 1971 conventions (1961 United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1971 United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances) pointed on offer-control, the 1988 United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances concentrated on law enforcement regarding production, purchase and possession of drugs.

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Another development specific to the drug economy that affects local society directly is the "means of earning a living" aspect. On the one hand, it is applied by representatives of the "traditional local hierarchy" ("old money") in conjunction with the illegal nature of the drug economy to distinguish themselves horizontally from the drug economy's alleged participants ("new money"). Thus, due to moral considerations based on the legal framework, people who offer services in the various segments of a drug supply chain get deprived of the societal reputation of a successful entrepreneur that they would hypothetically have received, e.g., as producers or transporters of an internationally decriminalized supply chain of marijuana. On the other hand, this "illicit source of income" does not appear to be a criterion of distinction to parts of the local population, as long as it leads to the achievement of aspirations (house in town, schooling of children) or to the reproduction of structures relevant to the local society (sponsoring of Children's and Mother's Day events).

Conclusion

In this case study, it has been shown how the unregulated character of the drug economy results in a hostile living environment for the local society, akin to the previous situation of the ranch-economy before the 1980s, which is described as isolated and exposed to the forces of nature. Both surroundings favor those local residents who are more capable of persisting amidst ever-changing conditions with narrow cycles of revenue and production. Therefore, the remaining local society draws actively on an intergenerationally acquired life-knowledge, or "ranch-smarts", and less on a resilience-seeking approach. The latter implies the passive adaptation to exploitative environmental conditions without intention to overcome them, while the former refers to the transfer and adaptation of capabilities to encounter and overcome the challenges of a hostile environment.

Summarizing these developments, this case study shows how the establishment of a rural production site in the global drug economy, under conditions of (1) a barely diversified local economy, and (2) in light of an

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economic crisis, as well as (3) framed by an international policy approach that evades the logic of global supply chains, leads within the local society to the prevalence of a pragmatic, and economically driven habitus, relatable to the societal frame of the 'ranch'.

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