

Irregular armed forces, shifting patterns of commitment, and fragmented sovereignty in the developing world

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Abstract Historically, the study of state formation has involved a focus on the urban and national conditions under which states monopolize the means of coercion, generate legitimacy, and marshal sufficient economic resources to wage war against enemies while sustaining citizen allegiance through the extension of social programs, new forms of national solidarity, and citizenship. In Charles Tilly’s large body of work, these themes loomed large, and they have re-emerged in slightly reformulated ways in an unfinished manuscript that reflected on the relationship between capital and coercion in which he also integrated the element of commitment—or networks of trust—into the study of state formation. This article develops these same ideas but in new directions, casting them in light of contemporary rather than historical developments. Taking as its point of departure the accelerating rates of criminal violence and citizen insecurity in cities of the developing world, this essay suggests that random and targeted violence increasingly perpetrated by “irregular” armed forces pose a direct challenge to state legitimacy and national sovereignty. Through examination of urban and transnational non-state armed actors who use violence to accumulate capital and secure economic dominion, and whose activities reveal alternative networks of commitment, power, authority, and even self-governance, this essay identifies contemporary parallels with the pre-modern period studied by Charles Tilly, arguing that current patterns challenge prevailing national-state forms of sovereignty. Drawing evidence primarily from Mexico and other middle income developing countries that face growing insecurity and armed violence, the article examines the new “spatialities” of irregular armed force, how they form the basis for alternative networks of coercion, allegiance, and reciprocity

This essay is dedicated to the memory of Charles Tilly, a valued former colleague at the New School for Social Research and a great source of inspiration during my 14 years of teaching there. His writings and insights have stimulated much of my own work on the relations between cities and state formation.

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that challenge old forms and scales of sovereignty, and what this means for the power and legitimacy of the traditional nation-state.

Urban violence as challenge to the state's monopoly of coercive power

Anyone who knows cities of the developing world in recent years is aware that a major concern of both elected officials and citizens is the explosion of everyday violence, both random and targeted (Moser 2004; Koonings and Kruijt 1999). This is especially so in Latin America, a region that hosts three times the world average in death by firearms as well as among the highest homicide rates in the world (Cohen and Rubio 2007; Koonings and Kruijt 2007; Rotker et al. 2003).¹ In some of the most violence-prone cities, unprecedented levels of police corruption and impunity have contributed to rising public insecurity (Hinton and Newburn 2009; Davis 2007), thus producing outposts of urban violence marked by accelerating levels of robbery, assault, and kidnapping (McIlwaine and Moser 2001). In certain locales, of which several cities in Mexico are among the most notorious, organized gangs equipped with a sophisticated cache of arms and advanced technologies for protection and detection against law enforcement raids have blatantly attacked police and military as well as the citizens who report them to the authorities (Astorga 2007).

As larger numbers of armed actors in cities of Latin America show capacities to marshal weapons and other coercive means that can parallel if not exceed or undermine those available to the nation-state, governments find their legitimacy steadily eroding away (Arias and Goldstein 2010). With trust in the coercive apparatus of the state and its administration of justice system declining, citizens have been known to take matters into their own hands—either through vigilante acts or, more commonly, through the standard route of hiring private security guards who act on behalf of individuals and communities but not the larger public (Goldstein 2003). The state's declining capacity to monopolize the means of coercion in the face of both everyday violence and the privatization of security is the subject of this essay.

Conceptually central to this discussion are “irregular armed forces”—or non-state armed actors who wield coercive capacity that either parallels or challenges that held by the state, and whose deployment of violence undermines the state's monopolization of the means of coercion. Studies of these forces and their impact on politics and state formation are few. My own prior work emphasized this lacuna and sought to fill the void by examining police, paramilitaries, and veterans (Davis and Pereira 2004). But those particular actors had a direct connection to the state in ways that urban-based organized gangs, citizen militias, vigilante groups, criminal mafias, and private security guards in cities of the developing world do not. Thus the question is whether these particular non-state armed actors also are significant for national politics and state formation.

We consider this possibility not just because these particular actors and their contributions to violence and insecurity constitute a serious challenge to governance and livability, but also because they have remained off the intellectual drawing board of most work on national politics and state formation, despite their potential to

¹ Colombia, El Salvador, Venezuela, and Brazil hold the highest homicide rates in the world (Cohen and Rubio 2007).

impact the state's monopoly of the means of coercion. Developed primarily by political scientists with an interest in national security, the existent literature on non-state armed actors almost completely ignores urban-based forces, and tends to focus on rural rebel movements, terrorists, and guerillas (Huber and Reimann 2006; Reno 2004). In addition to its anti-urban bias, this literature builds around two basic assumptions: that non-state armed actors are most likely to emerge in poor and authoritarian countries where institutions of governance are illegitimate or under siege (Collier et al. 2003; Fearon and Laitin 2003); and that the target of their activities is the state, state power, or regime-change (Coletta and Cullen 2000; Jackson 1990).

But the focus on Latin America shows that non-state armed actors also exist in relatively stable middle income democracies of the developing world, their activities are not always motivated by anti-government ideals or regime change, their targets of action are not primarily the state and state power, and in the contemporary period they are as likely to be urban-based as rural. At least that is so with respect to armed private guards and security personnel who protect civilians, firms, and communities from violence, with citizen militias, and with mafia organizations or pirating forces that operate in both urban economies and through transnational networks of trade structured around clandestine networks of capital accumulation. As civil-society based actors involved in both licit and illicit activities, these particular non-state armed actors use coercive force to protect themselves, monitor or restrain movement in space, or secure access to capital by controlling commodity chains, networks, or the supply of goods, spaces, and activities for economic survival. Unlike the rebel groups and guerrilla forces whose object of violence is the state and who have historically predominated in rural areas, their reference points are civil society and the market, and they operate in delimited urban spaces as much as the countryside.

To the extent that a growing number of these forces take on security and policing functions, even if only for their circumscribed communities or clients, they hold the potential to erode the state's monopoly over the means of coercion. When such trends occur in a context of growing urban violence associated with uncontrolled criminal activity, as in much of Latin America, citizen dissatisfaction with the state plummets and the state's monopoly over coercive force is further undermined, fueling the vicious cycle of security privatization and government de-legitimization. The result is an urban terrain filled with competing and at times overlapping state and non-state armed actors, some acting defensively and some offensively, whose combined activities generate insecurity and the routine deployment of violence.

Such developments not only lay the groundwork for challenging the traditional functions, legitimacy, coercive capacities, and territorial logic of the nation-state. They also may signal the rise of new networks of loyalties that link urban-based, non-state armed actors to a variety of communities or constituencies with varying economic and social agendas that direct their attention locally and trans-nationally more than nationally. At times, their sub-national and transnational activities form the basis for new imagined communities of allegiance and alternative networks of commitment or coercion that territorially cross-cut or undermine old allegiances to a sovereign national state.

In the remainder of this essay, I argue that the proliferation of a wide range of non-state armed actors organized around overlapping and territorially diverse networks of commitment and coercion can be considered both product and producer

of the changing nature of states and sovereignty in the developing world. Using a closer examination of middle income late developers in Latin America, primarily Mexico but also Brazil and with occasional reference to other countries of the global south, I trace the source and nature of these developments to urban and global dynamics, both historical and contemporary, as well as to political legacies of late development. I argue that these factors laid the foundation for both accelerating violence and new “spatialities” of non-armed state action, which in turn reinforces alternative networks of allegiance and coercion that challenge the power and legitimacy of the traditional nation-state. Over time, these dynamics lead to a situation of *fragmented sovereignty* that holds the potential to undermine national state-based sovereignties in the developing world.²

Armed force, state formation, and sovereignty in theory and practice

Fragmented sovereignty finds its origins in patterns of coercion, capital accumulation, and their distribution across cities and states. Much of our knowledge of these relationships comes from Charles Tilly, who argued that to defend or to establish national sovereignty states engaged in armed warfare, with inter-state violence fueling both the domestic monopolization of the means of coercion and modern state-formation. To wage and win wars successfully the state created new institutions (government bureaucracies), new revenue sources (taxes), and new avenues for securing legitimacy (citizenship rights), which then allowed it to extract funds and moral support from the citizenry to employ armed actors, in the process building stronger state-society connections.

These institutions, revenues, and legitimacy claims formed the basic building blocks of the modern nation-state, whose capacity to endure and strengthen its sovereignty rested on its capacity to monopolize the means of violence. Cities in particular played a key role in generating both allies and revenues for mounting and monopolizing armed force on the state’s behalf, making city-based commerce and other related urban economic dynamics key to successful war-making and to the establishment of the nation-state as the modal form of sovereignty in the modern era (Tilly 1990). And in a recent updating of these ideas, Tilly (2008) underscored the importance of trust relations in cementing the dynamics of cooperation or conflict between cities and states.

In cities of the developing world today a parallel drama appears to be unfolding, albeit in non-state domains and with different sovereignty outcomes, in which urban armed actors—ranging from private security guards and citizen militias to mafias—also engage in struggles to wield coercive capacity and accumulate capital. This partly owes to the fact that in recent years, democratization and decentralization have shifted the locus of citizen claim-making from the modern national state to the city or other sub-national scales of determination. As a result, many urban residents become less connected to national states as a source of political allegiance or social

² Drawing on a definition offered by Nir Gazit (2009, p. 1), I conceive of fragmented sovereignty as the existence of “multiple, localized, and relatively autonomous cores of power,” rather than an “all-compassing structural and centralized modality of control,” a more standard form of sovereignty associated with the modern nation-state.

and economic claim-making (Sassen 2007; Devetak and Higgott 1999; Linklater 1993), and more prone to identify with alternative “imagined communities” or networks of loyalties built on locally-based but spatially-circumscribed allegiances and networks of social and economic production and reproduction as well as new transnational activities (Sparke 2005; Keck and Sikkink 1997).

To the extent that sub-national and transnational communities of allegiance also provide new forms of welfare, employment, security, and meaning, they often operate as the functional equivalents of states, thus encouraging new forms of “non-state” sovereignty that contrast to the real or imagined communities that sustained modern nationalism and traditional patterns of national-state sovereignty along the lines articulated by Benedict Anderson (1983). For example, private police working for community clients often build a general sense of civic solidarity, especially if they self-define their aims as protecting larger values in society, as occurred in South Africa after the end of apartheid rule,³ or as is now current among private police and citizen security patrols in Mexico City who see themselves on the fault lines of “war” against criminal forces who threaten to destroy the nation (Davis et al. 2003).

Mafia and forces involved in transnational struggling and drug trade do not so easily capture the hearts and minds of citizens, but they often count on strong community loyalties in both local and global arenas. Evidence from the Mexican industrial city of Laredo, in the Northern state of Nuevo Laredo not far from the US-Mexican border, shows the strength of such community-transnational mafia ties. A renowned global drug cartel called the *Zetas* hung a banner on a downtown pedestrian bridge calling for “military recruits and ex-military men ... seeking a good salary, food, and help for their families” to join them and support their activities. The banner promised no more “suffering maltreatment or hunger,” while a local phone number was posted for contact. The hubris of a drug mafia publicly announcing efforts to recruit new loyalists (ex-military personnel to boot) to a countervailing social and political project defined in direct opposition to a sovereign state and its rule of law, but using the same enlightenment principles of welfare reciprocity, would have been almost unimaginable a decade ago. But in the cities of Latin America transnational crime networks are often as visible as national states, producing a sense of community among citizen supporters whose lives become spatially or socially embedded in these powerful criminal orbits (Arias 2004).

Charles Tilly’s recent writings on commitment and networks of trust may help us understand these developments, especially to the extent they shed light on the “struggle between existing [citizen] trust networks, on one side, and cities or states, on the other” (Tilly 2008). In the region of Mexico where the *Zetas* waged a battle for the hearts and minds of citizens, longstanding patterns of police corruption and military abuse formed a backdrop for local willingness to side with the non-state armed forces like the *Zetas*. After decades in which the state’s military and police personnel destroyed networks of trust between citizens and the state, residents had little commitment to the state or those coercive forces acting on its behalf. When the *Zetas* offered new and alternative bonds of community solidarity by offering employment, building parks and

³ Much of this owed to the fact that private police were seen as a mainstay of white protection, harkening to the values of Afrikaaner dominance of the past, in the era of political transition in which the new South African Police (SAP) were empowered and legitimized to represent the new South Africa.

playgrounds, or providing goods that the local residents needed, advertising these services at the level of the city, many citizens responded positively.

To be sure, some of these responses may have owed to direct coercion from the *Zetas*, and to the fact that some citizens may have had little choice but to accommodate mafia desires. The *Zetas* also were known to pay citizens to protest on their behalf; but so too did Mexico's ruling party employ similar tactics on behalf of the national state. Further parallels are demonstrated by the fact that the *Zetas* offered armed protection to those citizens who pledged loyalty—the same type of bargain national states offer their citizens, a fact that led Tilly (1985) to term state formation as another form of protection racket. And in the Mexican case, these developments were unfolding in a regionalized context where citizens in northern Mexico had already seen themselves as distant from the political objectives of a national state whose leaders had long crafted their strongest relationships with forces in the center of the country.

To a certain extent, elements of this situation hark back to medieval, absolutist, and pre-modern periods before national state formation, described by Perry Anderson and others, when princely elites, regional warlords, or other territorially circumscribed power brokers wielded control of territories, markets, and subjects. Both then and now, non-state armed actors in imagined communities pose a challenge to national-state sovereignty and to the state's capacity to monopolize the means of coercion. Scholars like Arjun Appadurai (2003; see also Agnew 2007) have already argued that we are living in a world of new sovereignties, and Dennis Rodgers's recent work (2006) on "social sovereignty" further attests to the fact that the formal national state may not necessarily lay at the center of these new arrangements of power and authority. But what most distinguishes the contemporary situation in Latin America from the pre-modern, before the rise of the modern state, is that a multiplicity of non-state armed actors are struggling for new forms of sovereignty—defined in terms of varying territorial scales of power, authority, governance, and citizen reciprocity—in an environment where traditional institutions of national sovereignty and the power of the nation-state exist and must also be reckoned with.

Stated simply, such alternative imagined communities do not exist in an historical vacuum. They co-exist and overlap with the modern state without trying to replace it, and by so doing have a feedback effect on "old" imagined communities (e.g., the national state) and their relationship to society, by virtue of their capacity to delegitimize, weaken, or challenge political allegiance to the nation-state, if not infiltrate it directly. And it is the proliferation of a wide range of competing and overlapping communities, with their own armed forces of protection and own allegiances, that leads to contested geographies of citizenship—and thus *fragmented sovereignty*—in much of the developing world (see Litzinger 2006; Kraxberger 2005). In this environment the dominion of a single nation-state is challenged but not defeated, while coercive capacity, rule of law, and citizen loyalties are divided, not shared, albeit within and across the formal territorial bounds of the nation-state.

Transnational dimensions of fragmented sovereignty

In prior epochs, when state armed actors monopolized the means of violence, sovereignty used to be about asserting and legitimizing political power over a unified

and fixed territorial domain that established the same national boundaries of allegiance for citizens and state alike. Capital, whether global or local, was relevant mainly as a source of funds for arming state actors who engaged in war to protect those national boundaries and the citizens within them. States frequently made alliances with local capitalists to support the state's territorial sovereignty and war-making aims; in return they protected markets, or local capitalists, so that flows of resources could be guaranteed for state activities, war-related or not. In today's world, non-state armed actors are as likely as states to rely on global and local capital for their activities, and by so doing they diminish the legitimacy and resource-extraction capacities of states even as they relocate the territorial domain and reach of protection rackets to other scales, both sub-national and international.

Such trends and their implications for fragmented sovereignty are evident by focusing on the main purveyors of violence in cities of the contemporary developing world and by highlighting the spatiality of their activities. Two or more decades ago, the military, paramilitary, police, and others acting on behalf of national states tended to monopolize the means of violence in Latin America and other middle-income late developers, using repressive actions against rebellious citizens identified with warlike terminology as "enemies of the state" (Huggins 1998). Much of this conflict centered in rural areas or in regions excluded from the urban-based or elite dominated developmental gains that accompanied late development. Today, although civil wars and agrarian or rural-based rebel movements still persist in a select subset of countries in Latin America and elsewhere, violence and "warfare" are more likely to unfold in large cities, including those that are not capitals (Landau-Wells 2008). They also are just as likely to be associated with the activities of drug cartels, mafias, non-state militias, citizens acting as vigilantes, and private police (providing protection for "firms" in both the liberal and illiberal economy), as with political insurgency.

Moreover, whereas in the past rural settings hosted much of the armed violence associated with roaming rebel or guerrilla opposition, in today's world non-state armed actors often site their command and control functions in urban locales, whether in squatter settlements or bustling commercial neighborhoods where the prevalence of informality can hide clandestine activity. This means that many political communities of reciprocity are fixed in urban space and structured around quotidian solidarities that are no longer bounded by the nation in the same way as before. These urban spaces are also likely to generate forms of mobility and connection that exist in transnational space, as new technologies and trade connections tie citizens and their activities to each other, despite the distances covered. Whether through boundary-crossing migrant networks or international smuggling rings, these activities lay the basis for new networks of citizen allegiance that extend in space from the local to the global (Maimbo 2006; Simone 2006).

Several of these dynamics are embodied in the activities and identities of a transnational gang called the Mara Salvatrucha, known widely as "los Maras," a trans-nationally organized network of Spanish-speaking youth who are linked via their origins in Los Angeles, through Mexico, down into the major cities of Guatemala and El Salvador in a self-identified community of loyalties and commitments. What is most significant about the Maras is not so much their self-identified gang status but their origins as a self-identified group of city-based youth

who turned to criminal activity because of the lack of employment alternatives in the large metropolitan areas of California, Mexico, and Central America. Both the urban and employment aspects of their formation as a transnational network speak loudly to the prevalence of city-based, non-state armed actors all over the burgeoning metropolises of the global south (Rodgers 2007).

The violence generated by these transnational non-state armed actors may be as debilitating and threatening to the institutional capacities and democratic character of the state as were the more conventional non-state armed actors (guerrillas, rebels, etc.). This has been clearly shown in Mexico, in the actions of globally-operating drug mafias and other armed actors who have waged war against local police and military, in an ongoing battle that has pushed the state to introduce authoritarian measures and legislation that limit general civil liberties and concentrate power in a small circle of high-level officials (Davis 2006a, b; Bailey and Godson 2000). Such patterns are also clear in other countries or regions of the world, with Brazil, Argentina, Russia, and South Africa only a few of the many nations where global smuggling rings that rely on armed protection have come into violent conflict with the state or citizens. Additionally, in most of these settings the power and influence of mafias has at times been so great, owing to the huge sums of money involved, that mafia elements directly infiltrate those state's agencies charged with coercion (Lacy 2008). Infiltration or rampant rent-seeking—built on clandestine forms of reciprocities—further limit the state's capacity to reduce overall violence and insecurity. With inside knowledge of the state's strategies and intelligence gathering breached, and old networks of trust no longer viable, the state cannot function as a single sovereign entity, nor is it capable of upholding a rule of law, despite its democratic status and electorally legitimate hold on power. Fragmentation of the state's power, generated from within by its own ranks, is one result.

Another is growing cynicism and a renewed sense of hopelessness in civil society about both the future and the potential of a democratic political system to deal with extra-legal violence and impunity. Instead of letting elected officials and their regulatory agents fight the problems of crime, growing numbers of citizens reject formal political channels and look for their own answers to the problems of insecurity in everyday life, relying on themselves or privately contracted armed guards rather than the state. The upside of this trend may be that by citizens mobilize among themselves or become directly involved in civil society efforts to monitor crime and reduce insecurity. In one community in northern Mexico called LeBarón, citizens fed up with police corruption and mafia violence organized collectively to provide their own police services, asking the state governor for resources to fund their own security services in replacement of the local police (La Jornada 2009a, b).

But there also are downsides. In the LeBarón case, two of the local leaders of the community responsible for organizing a citizen police force were assassinated by drug lords. Such events underscore why anxiety about the urban security situation and the state's inability to guarantee order has become so extreme that some communities have turned to violence themselves—whether in the form of lynching and other acts of vigilantism, seen as a last-gasp measure for achieving some sense of citizen justice, or whether by self-arming or other forms of protection to establish some control over their daily existence (Goldstein 2003; Huggins 1991). The state's legitimacy declines as citizens themselves take on policing functions; and even if

most citizens do not arm themselves, they are quite likely to hire private security guards.

Either way, citizens act defensively, sometimes using violence in the process, with many guaranteeing security by barricading themselves in gated private communities, in isolation from the public. Thus we see why some of the most violent cities of the developing world have become a mosaic of fortresses, creating a fragmented civil society in which families or streets or neighborhoods create their own forms of protection, often relying on armed force (Murray 2008; Caldeira 2001). Both activities diminish reliance on the state's coercive apparatus to provide security, and may even reduce citizen willingness to support a single, unifying state-society contract. Over time, de facto bonds of commitment develop among families and nearby neighbors, who operate as a fragmented set of constituencies each with their own coercive forces and each concerned with only their particular locality or smuggling activity. Connections and loyalties to state—or at least to the police and legal institutions charged with the de jure capacity for protection and justice—diminish. Such developments not only undermine the state's effective sovereignty and its legitimate capacity to dispense justice and guarantee a rule of law; they also make it more difficult for the state to solve problems of violence, in no small part because it is increasingly less clear who has the legitimate right to provide security.

In the shifting terrain, organized criminal elements take advantage of the breakdown in state coercive capacity, some of it fueled by intra-state tension between local and national police and military, as well as by the devolution of security services to local communities and individuals. More violence is often the result. In Mexico, for example, the number of deaths attributed to police-military-mafia violence in Mexico has reached more than 3500 in the last six months alone, even as weekly executions (i.e., cartel-related killings) reached a nationwide average of 126.5, up 13% from a prior weekly average of 112—numbers that resemble body counts from civil war battles.⁴ Granted, this dire state of affair is partly explained by the unique history of police and military corruption in Mexico, which has generated bonds of reciprocity between criminals and elements of the state, and which now leads to an all-out battle for coercive supremacy.⁵ But it is precisely this history that weakened the state, allowing mafias and other criminal forces to emerge on the scene in the first place.

Cities and fragmented sovereignty

Among the historical factors responsible for fragmented sovereignty in Mexico and other middle income countries of Latin America and the developing world, rapid urbanization stands out as a significant driving force. The unchecked growth of

⁴ Recent evidence included a series of shoot-outs between military and mafia on one hand, and military and police on the other that led to a total of 40 deaths across various cities in Mexico in a single day this past July, ratcheting up the yearly rate of deaths stemming from battles over drugs to 3553. For newspaper accounts of this recent explosion of deadly violence, see, e.g., *La Jornada*, July 11, 2009, p. 7.

⁵ For more on this history, see Davis (forthcoming). A quarterly compilation of statistics and reporting on the levels of impunity and corruption in police and military are available from the Justice in Mexico Project, www.justiceinmexico.org.

cities, which came hand-in-hand with import-substitution industrialization, has produced a huge set of problems. Primary among them are migration and unemployment, as well as housing scarcities, squatting, and evictions produced by government efforts to displace illegal settlers or turn old slums into high-end property development. Over time, all these changes have played a role in destroying old bonds of community and solidarity among citizens while also fueling job and housing insecurity and, at times, the resort to violence or armed force to protect livelihoods. To the extent that cities also concentrate resources and populations that can counterbalance or challenge the aims and power of national actors and institutions, owing to the history of urban primacy in the developing world, rapid and uncontrolled urbanization recasts the city-nation nexus so that the emergence of urban-based armed actors can affect the power and legitimacy of the nation-state.

Key to both sets of transformations is the proliferation of informality and the reliance on illicit trade and services, both of which predominate in cities of the global south. In rapidly transforming urban environments of the global south, informal employment (in commerce and trade primarily) is a common source of livelihood, owing in part to the scarcity of formal sector jobs, low rates of education and literacy, and high rates of migration (Castells and Portes 1989). In Mexico City, for example, official estimates identify close to 70% of the urban labor force as employed in the informal sector, and within this category, petty commerce and street vending often predominate. Such employment, which barely meets subsistence needs for many stuck within it, has become ever more “illicit” as protectionist barriers drop and fewer domestic goods for re-sale are produced, and as the globalization of trade in contraband and illegal goods picks up the slack. As a result, much informal employment is physically and socially situated within an illicit commercial world of violence and impunity, if only for historical reasons.

Those directly involved in the illicit activities—whether contraband products like pirated CDs, knock-off designer goods, or valuable gems (in the case of natural resource rich African cities), or high-violence activities like drugs and guns—frequently deploy their own “armed forces” for protection against the long arm of the state, whether the police or customs inspectors. These forces, in turn, fight amongst themselves for control of illicit supply chains, further creating an environment of violence (Volkov 2002; Lupsha 1996). In urban Latin America, criminal and mafia organizations offer coercive and material support in the face of other illicit competitors and the state. Much like national states, mafias often provide citizen protection in exchange for territorial dominion as well, thereby cementing relations with local communities (Leeds 2006).

Like states, most mafia or gang organizations count on strong loyalties and commitments among member elements, although much of it coerced rather than freely given, partly because of the illegal nature of their activities. Thus commitments are often “guaranteed” through deployment of violence within the group, to keep loyalties strong and the likelihood of infiltration weak. These same organized gangs and criminal mafias may even participate in their own form of “foreign policy” by negotiating, threatening, or cooperating with the sovereign states in whose territory they operate. The result is often the development of clandestine connections among local police, mafias, and the informal sector, as well, which further reinforces the isolation of certain neighborhoods or territories as locations for illicit activities (Guaracy 2007).

Border areas between nation-states used to serve this function, making them outposts of illegality and violence. But as urbanization changes cities into dense conglomerations of peoples and activities, and as illicit trade becomes a principal source of livelihood, we see the same patterns within cities, with certain neighborhoods hosting illegal activities. In many cities, including Mexico City, these dangerous areas sit nestled against old central business districts (CBD), where local chambers of commerce face a declining manufacturing base and are eager to attract high-end corporate investors and financial services. These land use patterns lead to conflict as formal and informal commerce compete to control the same space, with the latter relying on longstanding loyalties among seller families and ever more illicit commodity chains to fuel their activities. Globalization has added even more urgency to this dynamic as real estate development and the physical creation of upscale “global cities” has brought pressures to transform downtown land use (Davis 2006a, b; Sassen 1991) and displace informal sellers (Hasan 2002). The upshot is frequently a clash of urban priorities, with armed mafia forces stepping in to protect illegal and informal activities in exchange for loyalty and territorial dominion.

The violence that ensues is not conventional war-making, or at least that which led to modern state-making, because armed mafia forces are not struggling for political dominion, control of the state, or political inclusion so much as economic and sub-territorial dominion as well as the coercive capacity to control key local nodes and transnational networks that make their economic activities possible (see Campbell 2006). Yet mafia desire to control territory and space so that illicit activities can flourish leads to the physical concentration of violence in locations with histories of informality, turning these neighborhoods into “no man’s lands” outside state control (Davis 2007). Their existence leads to the overall recognition that the state has lost control of parts of its territory to “competing sovereigns,” as mafias and local citizens monopolize control over movement in and through physical spaces (Rodgers 2004).

The physical isolation of certain urban spaces under mafia control also draws local citizens into criminal orbits, even if they are not directly involved in illegal activities, precisely because they find it more expedient to cast their loyalties with the criminals who serve as their community “protectors” (Arias 2004) as with the state. This means that even when citizens are not directly involved in illegal or illicit work activities requiring violence, much of the urban poor find themselves co-existing in a delimited territorial context where network of obligations and reciprocities are not necessarily coincident with or loyal to the institutions of the nation-state, and where sub-local or transnational networks of reciprocity are more significant for their daily lives (McIlwaine and Moser 2001).

One explanation for this involves the police, whose actions help explain why the urban poor so frequently resort to their own armed force or continue to engage in illegality. In most cities of the developing world, the police are highly corrupt—a problem that traces to historical legacies of urbanization as well as prior patterns of state formation. The political history of late industrialization generally includes contested struggles over state power and macro-economic development models. In the face of these conflicts, most governments in the developing world exercised considerable coercive power against real and potential enemies, using the police as a

main force for disciplining regime opponents and internal enemies. These practices ultimately helped institutionalize police corruption and the coercive power of an authoritarian state whose pervasive use of violence and disregard for the rule of law ultimately permeated civil society as well (Davis 2010).

The abusive power of the police was further extended in the age of rapid urbanization. With cities expanding ever more rapidly and hosting more informality, police found that rent-seeking with respect to this growing and vulnerable sector of society was an activity that served both the regulators and the regulated. Informal sellers would bribe officials if it meant avoiding court-based prosecution for urban violations; while the police also gained from diverting “justice” away from the higher courts, where they similarly had little influence, to the streets where face-to-face negotiation with citizens usually produced some sort of agreed upon bargain (Picatto 2003).

Over time, these reciprocities and networks of impunity reinforced even greater corruption in the police, delegitimized the state that deployed them, and undermined the rule of law, thus leading citizens to reduce trust in the state’s coercive forces and to find their own agents of security and protection. They also made it possible for illicit activities and organized criminality to flourish without rebuke, in no small part because corrupt police frequently either participated in these activities or cast a blind eye when the payoff was sufficient. It is no surprise, then, that citizens turned to their own armed forces for protection when violence and criminality skyrocketed out of control, thus undermining the state’s monopoly on the means of coercion.

Even so, the privatization of security has not necessarily reduced violence or public police corruption, and thus the conditions for fragmented sovereignty still remain. In both Mexico City and Johannesburg, two highly violent cities, both public and private police forces—not to mention communities themselves—have been known to engage in conflict over who has the right to protect and arrest citizens. Private police often withhold evidence from public police so as to maintain the capacity to serve their clients without state oversight, and public police are more interested in protecting their own institutional authority and power than cooperating with “non-state” actors to solve crimes. Moreover, private police will work for whomever pays them, not just for citizens who need them, thus raising questions about their longer-term impact on the security situation. In certain *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo citizens, still prefer to support local drug lords and their private security guards because they guarantee protection better than do police or the state (Leeds 2007). Such conditions clearly do not reduce violence, but more significantly, they hold the potential to bring a collision of commitments and a confusion of allegiances that further fragment loyalty within and between the state and citizens.

The problem is not just competition between or confusion about which armed actors can be counted upon for protection or justice. In some countries the problem is the overlap, or a blurring of lines, between state and non-state armed actors. Recent research by Desmond Arias (2006) shows, for example, that armed civilian groups in Brazil interact directly with the state in identifiable social networks, providing financial or narcotic kick-backs to security forces, which in turn provide armed groups with weaponry and a modicum of unconstrained maneuverability in their respective communities. Ralph Rozema (2008) has identified a similar type of collaboration in his study of the relations between criminal networks and

paramilitaries in Colombia. When the same individuals or networks of armed professionals move back and forth between the state and civil society, sharing knowledge and personal relations, it is harder for citizens to leverage institutional accountability vis-à-vis the police, and the state's abuse of coercive power is more likely to continue. Not only does this drive the vicious cycle of state delegitimization, and erode the state's capacity to control or eliminate violence, it undermines the institutions, loyalties, and practice of sovereignty (Koonings and Kruijt 2007). These trends help fragment the public into distinct clients and interest groups—or distinct imagined communities, if you will—who neither rely on a single force to monopolize the means of coercion over the larger national territory, nor are willing to give up their rights to self-protective force by ceding security matters only to the national state.

Non-state armed actors, urban violence, and fragmented sovereignty: some concluding remarks

This essay began and concludes with the suggestion that we can both understand and theorize the roots of fragmented sovereignty by adopting Charles Tilly's groundbreaking work on the relations among capital, coercion, cities, and state formation, albeit by updating it to take into account conditions in the contemporary developing world. In many cities of the developing world, citizens suffering from extreme levels of violence and insecurity find it difficult to know whether public police, private police, the military, local vigilante groups, community members, or even criminal mafias will be most likely to offer protection from harm. In the absence of any certainty about which armed actors or state/non-state institutions are most likely to guarantee security or inflict harm, and in the face of growing violence, a multiplicity of armed actors offer their own services to ever larger but disaggregated numbers of clients, with the most complex array of coercive forces particularly visible in cities. The existence of a wide range of individuals and groups using coercive force either defensively or offensively helps to undermine the state's longstanding monopoly over the means of coercion, even as it allows varying disaggregated networks of individuals and communities to look inward for identifying and guaranteeing their own quotidian needs. The sub-national and transnational scope of these practices further challenges the legitimacy and sovereign authority of the nation-state, leading to a situation in which the state takes seriously its mandate to monopolize the means of coercion, but runs up against alternative collectivities with different commitments and loyalties who mount their own coercive force and elude state constraint.

In Mexico, these conditions have reached such dangerous heights that some foreign observers fear a “failed state” (Kurtzman 2009). Mexican governing officials have responded angrily that it was irresponsible to compare Mexico to more conventionally understood failed states like Sudan or even Iraq, because of its consolidated democracy, the strong financial system, and the strong welfare state. And on these measures of state strength, there is no doubt that Mexico surely qualifies as stable and sovereign. But if we apply a Weberian litmus test, combining

legitimacy and the monopolization of the means of coercion across a given and continuous territorial space, the comparison with Sudan, Afghanistan, and Iraq—where non-state armed actors also generate violence and fight against weak and fragile states that have not yet consolidated themselves as institutionally legitimate for all its peoples—it is clear that there are parallels. But they can only go so far. Thus we would be better served by finding a new categorical description of states like Mexico's: characterized by fragmented rather than failed sovereignty, in which a single national-state has been unable to monopolize the means of coercion.

The evidence presented in this essay suggests that this state of affairs is determined by path-dependent historical trajectories, more recent patterns of urban and economic development, and the transnational flows of people and goods facilitated by globalization. Middle income countries of the developing world with a history of urbanization-led industrialization and authoritarian rule are surprisingly vulnerable, perhaps because they may be even more susceptible than poorer developing countries to the mafia forces who traffic in goods and activities geared towards groups with moderately expendable income—whether in the form of drug use, commodities “fencing,” or even kidnapping. Still, because these problems do not stay confined to the countries from which they emanate, the problem of fragmented sovereignty is a concern for all, even those with stable, legitimate, and sovereign national-states.

This is clear in the ways that US officials have expressed a concern about the overflow of Mexico's problems into its own sovereign territory, as seen in the penetration of criminal gangs from Mexico across the border into Arizona, Texas, and California. To the extent that these non-state armed actors are causing a problem for countries beyond their host borders, then no nation-state is immune to the changes that emanate from the developing world. As such, it is worth considering that we are at risk of exiting a Westphalian world where most coercive force has been monopolized in the hands of nation-states, and entering a new epoch where local and transnational non-state actors take on those roles (Keck and Linklater 1993), be they terrorists or armed smugglers, either because the nation-state is weak or non-state actors are overly strong, or because the strength of the latter fuels the weakness of the former, and vice-versa.

This pattern, which dominated in the pre-modern era before the rise of nation-states, was in later periods confined primarily to the poor and non-democratic countries and regions of the world that never fully consolidated state power. But now it is expanding in geographic scope all over the global south, in poor and middle income countries alike, some democratic and others not. To the extent that the wealthier and politically stable nations of the world, like the United States, can be pulled into this global orbit through transnational activities that cross developmental boundaries, ranging from the attacks by Al Qaeda to presence of Mexican drug smuggling gangs within US territory, then this indeed may be a global and temporal transition that affects all states, not just the developing world. In the face of these changes, new questions arise: How will security and state control over the means of coercion be guaranteed on local, national, or global domains if these scales are connected not only through transnational networks but also through new imagined communities or networks of commitment that reject standard allegiances to a single nation-state? What happens when everyday smugglers join political rebels or

terrorist groups to combine loyalties against sovereign national states?⁶ What state forms and governance structures, acting at what scale(s) of action are best suited to meet the challenges of fragmented sovereignty?

While answers to these questions may remain elusive, the methodology needed to answer them is already in place, in large part because of prior work by Charles Tilly. To study these developments scholars must be able to identify and analyze new networks of trust or loyalties and how they unfold territorially, whether in cities, states, or beyond. They must also be prepared to accommodate a more nuanced understanding of the territorial underpinnings of sovereignty, precisely because the new imagined communities that non-state armed actors defend, and the battles that states in turn are forced to engage in, are likely to exist in spatial orbits that are both smaller and larger than the nation-state, at times cross-cutting cities, countries, and regions to create new networks of obligation and reciprocity that can only be understood when the spatial correlates of their action and allegiance are spelled out. This, finally, may be the greatest challenge for scholars of sovereignty and state formation: learning how to analyze the ways in which new sub- and trans-national communities and networks create new practices and allegiances that challenge the institutions, political authority, and social legitimacy of the nation-state—and with what impacts for states, cities, and citizens in the modern world.

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⁶ Some examples include Hezbollah's reliance on Colombia drug traffickers for funds, the Taliban's use of the opium trade for financial resources, and Somali rebels' engagement with pirates and other criminal groups who control trade running through waters off the African coast. See Jojarth (2009).

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