

Economy of Death: The Grey Zone, Cannibal War Machine and Capitalist Accumulation in Latin America

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Abstract. This article argues, based on the analysis of extortion and criminal governance in México, that criminal activities should be understood as a key component of contemporary capital accumulation. This criminal accumulation of capital requires the suspension of restrictions on illegal activities, generating zones of legal-illegal indistinction that allow profitability, shared sovereignties and cannibal war machines that, through violence, generate the extraction of goods, income and bodies in line with the neoliberal enterprise. This means that criminal capital carries out, in an extreme and nihilistic way, the logic of value.

Key Words: extortion, criminal governance, criminal capitalism, war machine, economy of death, neoliberalism, Latin America

Ekonomija smrti: siva cona, kanibalski vojni stroj in kapitalistično kopičenje v Latinski Ameriki

Povzetek. Na podlagi analize izsiljevanja in kriminalnega upravljanja v Mehiki članek zagovarja tezo, da kriminalne dejavnosti predstavljajo ključno sestavino sodobnega kapitalističnega kopičenja. Takšno kopičenje kapitala v kriminalnih okvirih zahteva odpravo omejitev za nezakonite dejavnosti, kar ustvarja območja, kjer se meja med zakonitim in nezakonitim zabiše. To omogoča profitabilnost, deljene suverenosti in kanibalske vojne stroje, ki preko nasilja omogočajo ekstrakcijo dobrin, dohodkov in teles v skladu z neoliberalno logiko podjetništva. Članek ugotavlja, da kriminalni kapital na skrajni in nihilističen način udejanja logiko vrednosti.

Ključne besede: izsiljevanje, kriminalno upravljanje, kriminalni kapitalizem, vojni stroj, ekonomija smrti, neoliberalizem, Latinska Amerika

Introduction: From Drug Trafficking to Organized Crime

The phenomenon of drug trafficking in México and other Latin American regions is complex, given the territorial particularities of the different contexts in which it occurs. In México, it was consolidated between 1940 and 1980, creating a corridor of psychotropic substances from the Pacific to the United States. In the 1990s, its form of operation changed, mainly due to three factors: (1) free market policies following the signing of trade agreements – the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in 1982 (GATT) and North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 – which favoured the trafficking of illegal substances and the transnationalization of drug trafficking; (2) the state's shift towards deregulation of previously coordinated activities, which suspended its central intervention in the management of legalism, leaving it to self-regulation; and (3) the modification of Article 115 of México's Political Constitution, which gave local state governments and municipalities greater control over the administration of federal resources, allowing the rise of local crime-linked groups into governmental structures. These changes allow us to understand the transition from the traditional profile of drug trafficking to global and diversified corporations competing for specific niches. This is the phase towards which the war against drug trafficking was directed.

At least two phenomena have been observed in recent decades regarding this illicit enterprise. The first would be the diversification of activities beyond the cultivation and trafficking of illegal substances, to which its commercial operations have been extended. The second is the predatory way in which the implementation of this diversification has been carried out, which explains, to some extent, the extreme violence in the struggle for markets, territorial control, and its resulting high lethality (Fuentes Díaz 2022, 38–58).

In the case of México, the transformation of drug trafficking groups – from engaging primarily in the production and distribution of illicit substances to functioning as transnational corporations – occurred in parallel with the shift of the post-revolutionary welfare state, which had emerged from the 1910 social revolt, toward neoliberal economic deregulation during the 1980s. This is important because it allows us to understand the emergence of new regulatory actors beyond the state who began to establish territorial controls based on their criminal entrepreneurship.

These transformations enabled the consolidation of groups that generated profits in the form of rents beyond drug trafficking, thereby creating environments conducive to the extraction of resources from a multitude of criminal activities, including kidnappings, illegal logging, mineral extraction, illicit gasoline and gas extraction, human trafficking for sexual exploitation and slave labour, and migrant smuggling, among others. This led to the control of territories for the commercialization and circulation of illicit commodities in dispute or negotiation with the state (hybrid governance), as well as the generalized use of predatory behaviour marked by extorsive practices. These two phenomena, governance and extortion, will be the focus of our examination of criminality and its relationship with capital accumulation.

Hybrid Governance/Criminal Governance

A variety of non-state actors, including criminal groups, have produced new forms of social control by establishing a mix of coercion and consensus (Sampó, Jenne and Ferreira 2023) – coercion against rival groups, consensus on the communities where they deploy their operations – which allows advantages in the profitability of their criminal ventures. This behaviour has been documented in other regions of Latin America, and can be thought of as transformations that shape criminal activities as a functional form of the political economy of capitalism.

The term ‘criminal governance’ (Arias 2017) has been used to refer to the involvement of criminal groups in the coercive capacity to exercise authority and impose rules and standards of conduct in a given environment, offering public services and goods to build their legitimacy, as well as sanctioning challenges or competition to their authority.

This form of government has made it possible to complexify the understanding of the production of political order through the coercion exerted by these non-state actors, which challenge, replace or complement the state, producing shared sovereignties (Mbembe 2003) and hybrid governances (Villa, de Macedo Braga, and Ferreira, 2021). These relationships allow us to observe that, in some geographies, the state has abandoned its locus as the exclusive centre of the legitimate monopoly of coercion and sovereignty – perhaps this locus was never such – as the emergence of multiple regulatory authorities, disputes over sovereignty and, above all, the distancing from the public good has been documented, configuring new statehoods.

The logic of accumulation requires the use of illegal practices as prof-

itable resources, being used by various actors – not only criminals – which forms networks of complicity under illegality between the state, business and criminal groups, operating in different territorial extensions and with different degrees of influence in the formal government structures (Vázquez Valencia 2019), linking state institutions, parties, political leaders, de facto powers and economic elites (Terán Mantovani 2021), which creates indistinguishable zones between the state and crime, networks of hegemonic power that merge legal and illegal activities.

These links have historical particularity and have accompanied the construction of the state (Pansters 2012). One hypothesis we are working with today is that these indistinctions between legal and illegal activities, state-crime, have found favourable conditions since neoliberal deregulation as a new form of the global state, with greater accentuations according to its own particularities, generating a multiplication of ‘grey zones’ (Fuentes Díaz and Fini 2021) that amalgamate criminal and state actors in the imposition of orders that simultaneously allow social regulation, but above all the extraction of resources under illegal practices.¹ In this sense, this criminal governance is fundamentally necessary for profitability (Lerch Huacuja 2024, 33). The expansion of these criminal networks in the region must be understood within the framework of a broader global process. We note here a first outline of a political economy of crime.

Extortion

The majority of the population in the region experiences organized crime not only through lethal and spectacular actions, but above all through daily victimization associated with extortion (Moncada 2021). Extortion is one of those illicit markets in which criminal actors obtain profits through the threat and/or use of coercion, in some contexts, in exchange for the promise of protection or preservation of the life or physical integrity of the victims. The forms it takes include security fees, percentage payments for products from export companies, ransom payments for kidnappings, parafiscal taxes for commercial activities, appropriation of municipal resources, and even payment in kind. An overview of extortion in some Latin American countries shows that it is an increasing ac-

¹ We have referred to this elsewhere as the articulation of a ‘dispositif of the extraction and regulation of redundancy’ (see Fuentes Díaz 2022, 51). On the other hand, it is no coincidence that these phenomena approach what Agamben (1998) considered the zone of indistinction between law and exception.

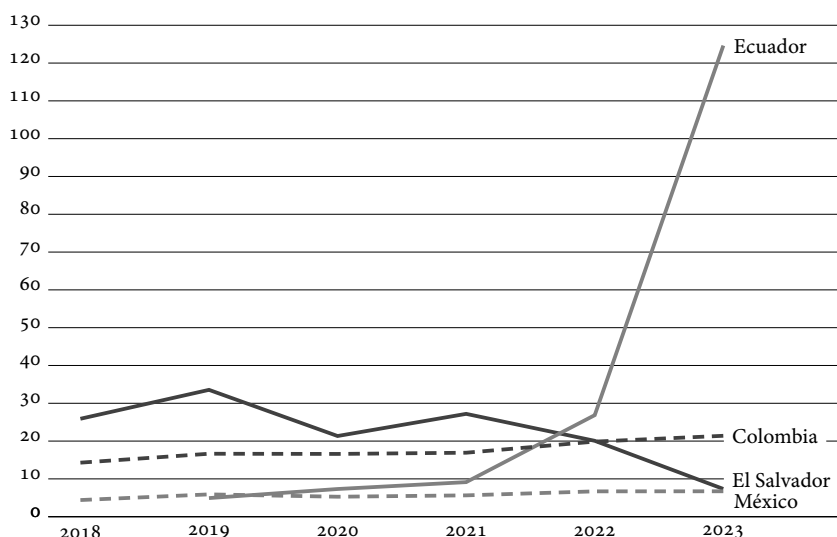


Figure 1 Extortion Rates per 100,000 Inhabitants, 2018–2023

NOTES Based on data from Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Crimen Organizado (2023) and Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (2024).

tivity with different degrees of regional intensity (figure 1). Profits from extortion crimes in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have reached around US\$1.1 billion annually, with at least 330,000 people being victims of extortion each year (Yansura et al. 2021). In México, reports from the Bank of México (Banco de México 2019) claim that extortion of businesses and services has been increasing since 2015, with a high number of unreported crimes.

We believe that the important role that extortion took on in criminal activities was made possible by at least two moments: the international policies to combat criminal organizations and the fall in international prices for illicit crops, which reduced the high profits obtained by them in the international illegal market. These facts, among others, favoured the shift towards a broad diversification of highly profitable criminal activities, which was accompanied by the emergence of predatory behaviour.

This shift also involved specific forms of governance where extortion finds a place. Criminal organizations involved on illicit crops (marijuana, opium, coca leaves) implemented a model of regulation of social life based on the distribution of economic benefits and public services (such as schools, roads, administration of justice) to the social base used in such activities. In doing so, they established protective relationships with the

labour force employed in these illegal Ventures – following a redistributive logic that, in some ways, resembled the principles of a welfare state (Azula Díaz del Castillo 2017).

The shift towards the diversification of profitable illicit activities, as well as the growing importance of the marketing of synthetic drugs (methamphetamine, fentanyl) has made it unnecessary to take care of the workforce for such criminal ventures, becoming predatory on a social basis based on the search for profitability that has established extortion as a way to achieve it.

In this way, extortion – at least in some Latin American geographies – was accompanied by a breakdown in reciprocity between criminals, the state and communities, which enabled an increase in predatory behaviour necessary to obtain it through the use or threat of coercion. It is no coincidence that a series of movements – including armed ones – have emerged against extortion and other crimes in various Latin American contexts to confront the criminal groups that practice it (Fuentes Díaz and Fini 2021; Moncada 2021, 23).

Extortion, Rent Income and Violence

Extortion is a practice of appropriation of resources that takes the form of rent. According to Marx (1993), rent income is produced when revenue is generated from environments that have not been directly involved in the production cycle of goods – as in the case of ownership of land or scarce natural resources such as water, oil, metals, and minerals.

Thus, some resources, without being part of the direct process of production of goods, generate wealth by being appropriated and incorporated into the flow of social surplus value produced in other spheres. This appropriation of environments external to the production cycle ends up generating profit by being inserted into the cycle of valorization of the commodity form.

Marx's analysis is focused on the land, but it is possible to conclude that there are other areas related to the control of territory that generate rents. What is common to all of them is the extraction of resources, which occurs without interference in their productive cycle. The concept of rent can be defined as the appropriation of profits without the appropriator intervening in the organization of production. This is to say that rent is the extraction of profits from a social cooperation to which the appropriator does not contribute.

We will see later that this form of appropriation is not an anomaly or

externality in the production of profits, but rather an operational form of predatory accumulation of capital, which is reinvested in the circuits of the legal and financial economy and in the maintenance of the armed groups themselves. In this sense, extortionate rent is similar to state taxes, which take the form of rent, appropriating social surplus value for the construction of political order. In this sense, extortionate rent is linked to the production of order and criminal governance.

As rent and extortion are two phenomena that share a similar constitution, they can be considered to be part of the same category of extractive activities. It is for this reason that the process of extraction should be considered a significant aspect of global capital accumulation, which encompasses a diverse range of activities including commodity-based extractive industries, those reliant on the use of data and information (platform capitalism), the global financial system, and even the extraction of rent from criminal operations, among others (Gago and Mezzadra 2017).

In this way, criminal forms of extraction – including the appropriation and commercialization of so-called natural resources – are fundamental manifestations of the political economy of capital (Terán 2021). A significant fraction of its overall composition is involved in illicit and clandestine activities that allow for extraordinary profits from this condition (Covarrubias 2020).

In documented cases across Latin America, criminal organizations have been directly involved in participating in different forms of extraction and commercialization of commodities. These activities pose fewer risks compared to drug trafficking and offer a wide range of opportunities for money laundering – such as gold mining, trafficking in timber, wildlife, and aquatic species, as well as the extraction of iron, coal, diamonds, oil, and land grabbing. In México, some criminal groups have acted as the armed wing of mining companies in order to weaken community resistance to their extractive projects; in other cases, they extort both companies and the populations that eventually benefit from such situations, generating a double rent: extortive and extractive. In Brazil, the so-called militias have been involved in a series of extortive rents, but also in the illegal appropriation of sandscapes that they sell to construction companies associated with them, controlling the entire chain of illegal real estate development (Müller 2024).

All these extraction events generate homicides, rapes, forced displacements, injuries, disappearances and racial and gender discrimination. In this sense we can argue that the tendency towards rent, as a central com-

ponent of capital accumulation, requires violence. Rent denotes a ‘predatory accumulation’ of capital (Bourgois 2018) – a contemporary expression of primitive accumulation (Marx 1982) – which has been able to capitalize on the labour of lumpenized populations expelled from the legitimate economy, even profiting from their death, assuming the extreme realization of the logic of value. Gareth Williams (2021) has identified two tendencies of this accumulation: one that projects itself towards the absolutization of the commodity form and surplus value, and one that simultaneously aims at the minimization of the value of labour, in a way close to what Achille Mbembe (2003) places as necropolitics. In this, the tendency towards rent plays a central role.

For criminal capitalism to take place, it needs to be intertwined with legal capital, for example, in the international financial system through money laundering, and requires a relationship with the state to maintain the definition of illegality. This relationship, which we have called the ‘grey zone,’ de facto blurs the artificial distinction between legal and illegal activities as patterns of predatory accumulation, widening the grey zones and generating macro-criminality networks based on profitability. Illicit merchandise thus requires dispensing with the legal restrictions produced by the modern state form, centred on legality, sovereignty and the monopoly of legitimate coercion in the state. This lack of restriction breaks the metaphysical structures of political theology under which the modern state would have been built, imploding the distinction between *nomos* and *anomie* (Williams 2021, 121).

This interregnum requires hybrid governance – criminal governance – states of exception, security policies, and deterritorialization. Hybrid forms of governance would be a moment of capital that needs to suspend legality to complete its circuit of predatory accumulation. In this sense, the legal-illegal dichotomy as a framework for the legitimacy of the modern state, as well as the notion of the rule of law, cease to be fundamental discursive forms of social coordination – if they ever were.

On the other hand, the coexistence of multiple sovereign entities is contingent upon the absence of assurances regarding economic and social rights for a significant proportion of the population, which the state is unable to provide in light of its embrace of neoliberal deregulation, where flexible labour and the predatory form of accumulation increase situations of uncertainty for social reproduction – as in periods of economic crisis – and the production of superfluous population. The conditions that mediated conflict and social mobility based on wages have vanished,

and governability has been deferred to other instances – NGOs, civil associations, and supranational institutions.

In this sense, the narrative framework from which the sovereign discourse and social defence were built tends to dilute its central axis in the state. This dilution becomes greater when the state itself generates and collaborates with the production of insecurity and grey zones. Therefore, the new form of the state is incapable of upholding its own sovereign theoretical core, namely, the provision of public welfare and the externalization of danger in the designated spheres, as envisioned in *the state of nature* of the Hobbesian model of sovereignty. It is no coincidence that nativist, essentialist or localist discourses are the ones that gain legitimacy for the production of an order that contains the predatory flow. Vignettes on the construction of ‘walls’ are eloquent.

In this framework of accumulation and new regulation, these new forms of violence and responses to it appear in defensive terms, favouring the emergence of defensive or contentious community orders (Fuentes Díaz, Gamallo, and Quiroz Rojas 2022). Here is a second outline for understanding the political economy of crime.

Criminal Capital and the Economy of Death

Criminal capital is not an anomaly, but is part of global value flows (Covarrubias 2020). It should be added that, from the perspective of a critique of political economy, the boundaries between what is lawful and what is unlawful are blurred. This is more of a *formal* distinction than a *real* one. For example, in 2015, global illegal business was estimated to account for between 8 and 15% of global GDP, not including legalized activities arising from criminal capital, while in 2019, money laundering was estimated to account for between 2 and 5% of global GDP (Covarrubias 2020, 32–3).

On the one hand, the state incorporates these value flows in various ways and they appear as part of the GDP, and, on the other hand, through practices such as money laundering, part of these value flows are incorporated into the financial markets. It is no coincidence that the head of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime admitted that drug trafficking had helped rescue several banks from collapse during the 2008 financial crisis (EFE 2009). In this sense, it would not be an exaggeration to suppose that the flows of value generated by illicit enterprises played a crucial role in the management of the crisis by various states.

Thus, the particularity of criminal capital is not that it is just another branch of capital, but rather that it embodies the logic of value more

crudely and thus generates extraordinary profits. The peculiarity of the capitalist machine is that, under the dynamics of value expansion, it converts all social flows into abstract quantities (Deleuze and Guattari 2000, 372–4). The content of social practice becomes an empty signifier because the conceptual realization of the commodity-form is *nothingness* (Jappe 2014, 216–7).

To the extent that subjects become the personifications of ‘nothingness,’ they are driven by the *death drive* that not only destroys the other but also destroys themselves (Jappe 2023). In this sense, *thanatopolitics* materializes the nihilistic spirit that lies at the core of the capitalist mode of production and unfolds as an economy of death.

As Marx (1982, 342) argued, capital ‘has one sole driving force, the drive to valorise itself, to create surplus-value, to make its constant part, the means of production, absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus labour. Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.’ At the time Marx wrote these lines he also identified certain ‘physical’ and ‘moral’ barriers that curbed the expansion of value and that were related to the self-reproduction of the labour force (p. 341). Criminal capital, for its part, finds the conditions that allow it to comply with capitalist rationality in an absolute manner, as well as to break down all the barriers that are imposed in its way for the generation of surplus value.

Taking advantage of the existence of a postmodern lumpenproletariat, made up of disposable bodies and without any legal protection, the driving force of criminal capital finds in it available lives to suck to death. Part of this surplus lumpenproletariat, the product of a machinery of terror and processes of territorial dispossession deployed under the pattern of neoliberal domination, is recruited into the ranks of the criminal labour market either ‘freely’ or by force (Álvarez Martínez 2023, 378–9).

By 2022, the population considered to be in multidimensional poverty in México reached 36.3%; within this percentage, 29.3% was considered to be in moderate poverty and 7.1% in extreme poverty (Villalobos López 2023, 13). In addition to the above, Rafael Prieto-Curiel, Gian Campedelli, and Alejandro Hope (2023) estimated that, in 2022, the cartel population ranged between 160,000 and 185,000 ‘units,’ and calculated that the death toll corresponded to 120 ‘units’ per week.

These figures indicate that criminal capital is the fifth largest employer in México and that, in addition, its own dynamics require the recruitment of at least between 350 and 370 people per week in order not to collapse

due to the ‘losses’ of labour force that it suffers, whether due to conflicts between cartels or for reasons of judicial ‘incapacity,’ that is, due to death or imprisonment (Prieto-Curiel, Campedelli, and Hope 2023, 1313–4).

The generation of the ‘superfluous population’ in México that feeds the gears of illicit enterprises is not an anomaly, but rather part of the violence that constitutes the capitalist machine as a permanent process of primitive accumulation (Marx 1982; Bonefeld 2011, 381–5). The fact that criminal capital far exceeds physical and moral barriers to generate extraordinary profits indicates the absolute realization of the dynamics of value as an economy of death. If capitalism is defined by cruelty and terror, then criminal capital expresses the capitalist axiomatic, but without the moralistic masks that liberalism displays. So far we have argued that criminal capital is the crudest expression of the logic of value; we will now see how this same logic is configured as a ‘cannibal war machine’ (Whitehead 2011).

The Emergency of Cannibal War Machines and the Reconfiguration of Neoliberalism

To recap, Neil Whitehead developed the concept of the ‘cannibal war machine’ to allude to the reconfiguration of the enterprise and modern military-industrial complexes during neoliberal capitalism. What is characteristic of these cannibal war machines is that they blur the boundaries between war, competition and the economy of death because they operate under the same principle: the accumulation of power and wealth through the systematic use of violence (Whitehead 2011). In this sense, criminal capital is not simply the ‘bad’ or ‘illicit’ counterpart to legitimate economic accumulation; rather, it functions as an integral component of a broader, systemic apparatus – a ‘cannibal war machine.’ This machine synthesizes elements of neoliberal enterprise and the military-industrial complex to perpetuate and expand capitalist accumulation, often aligning seamlessly with legal markets.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari characterized the nomadic groups of the pre-capitalist era as ‘war machines,’ or, more specifically, rhizomatic machines. These operated in a ‘smooth,’ deterritorialized space, such as deserts, and were situated exterior to the state. In modernity, they argued, struggles generate their own war machines against the capitalist ‘model of the True’; that is, they generate mutant, minority and revolutionary machines, such as those we can find in guerrillas and rebellions; but they also argued that war machines were operating under the capitalist ax-

iomatic, such as the financial, technological and military-industrial complexes (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 422).

Since the 1990s, illegal enterprises have been forming their own private armies as a necessary condition to control territories and reconfigure the grey zones that previously existed. Thus, the survival of these enterprises in the competition that occurs in the criminal market depends on the use of extreme violence (Trejo and Ley 2020).

Guillermo Trejo and Sandra Ley argue that the formation of private armies was the result of the destabilization of the grey zones created during the Mexican authoritarian period, when the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI by its acronym in Spanish) governed. In the 1990s, electoral alternation in municipalities and states undermined the PRI's hegemony, destabilizing previous pacts established between criminal enterprises and authorities. Faced with this situation, in which the cartels were losing the state protection necessary for their businesses, the formation of private armies began, employing, among others, military personnel previously dedicated to counterinsurgency activities (Trejo and Ley 2020).

Under this dynamic, the armed war between cartels for territorial control was going to intensify during the so-called war against drug trafficking. The result of this war was that the number of deaths and disappearances exceeded the average figures of a civil war. Trejo and Ley's (2020) diagnosis is that this exacerbation of violence is due to the fact that transitional justice processes were not carried out in México during the post-authoritarian period, remaining an *illiberal democracy* characterized by a *weak rule of law*.

This type of theoretical position, which presupposes the separation between the economic and political spheres, does not make visible, on the one hand, that the fact that illicit enterprises are transformed into 'cannibal war machines' is not due to the weakness of the states to maintain *the monopoly of legitimate coercion* – in Weberian terms – but to the restructuring of social relations carried out in Latin America under the pattern of neoliberal domination (Álvarez Martínez 2023). On the other hand, if criminal capital took the form of a cannibal war machine, it is because it operates with the same logic as a neoliberal enterprise (Fuentes Díaz 2014, 306).

In the wake of the crisis of the Fordist model of production, precipitated by the decline in the world profit rate in the 1970s, Latin America became the inaugural testing ground for the implementation of a novel pattern of domination. In the quest to recover the global profit rate and manage the

capitalist crisis, the neoliberal project in Latin America was established through a direct attack on the workforce, an increase in the rate of exploitation, both at a relative and absolute level, and the imposition of a 'model of flexible accumulation' (Harvey 1992, 189) which generated precarious working conditions, accompanied by the annihilation of welfare policies that served as a safety net for the lower classes. In addition, the privatization of common goods and state-owned corporations, the processes of dispossession (Álvarez Martínez 2023, 379) and the deregulation of capital flows were promoted which, as a whole, functioned as a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of social relations.

In México, the reconfiguration of social relations under the new pattern of domination dramatically increased inequality (Bayón 2019), exclusion (Patiño 2004, 138) and the updating of state violence, such as the militarization of repressive mechanisms (Barrios Rodríguez 2021, 199). A key factor in these transformations was the fall of the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001, which redefined security at a global level. In this scenario, the rhetoric of the communist threat typical of the Cold War was abandoned, requiring the production of an external enemy through the imprecise location of terrorism and an internal enemy under the threat of organized crime. The global war on drugs was a turning point in this shift, militarizing large areas of territory under new war logics, increasing mass violence in many strategic areas of Latin America.

The more the enemy is presented as an omnipresent threat, the more the demand for the state to strengthen itself increases. This, in turn, leads to the legitimization of exceptional uses of violence for political and military control of the territory. Liberal democracies cannot exist without constantly inventing new enemy figures to legitimize the existence of nation-states (Mbembe 2018). Although the figure of the enemy is abstract in legal frameworks, it materializes in a concrete way against the poor, ethnic minorities and social struggles. For this reason, the war on drugs in México was a *selective security* policy that frequently identified social struggles, the poor, and the racially 'inferior' as criminals, which perpetuates power relations based on class, race and gender within the framework of authoritarian neoliberalism (Jenss 2023, 5). In this sense, diagnosing the problem of exacerbated violence as the formation of an *illiberal democracy* shaped by a *weak rule of law* is reductive.

Sustained in a context of pervasive inequality and social marginalization, contemporary forms of violence manifest in different patterns and activate other repertoires. These are characterized by the existence of a

plurality of violent actors who operate according to a logic of profitability based on the extraction of resources within the framework of the globalized transformations of capitalism's expanded reproduction.

These new forms of violence in unconventional settings and with unconventional actors occurred alongside a regional economic reorganization that, in the Mexican case, began with the entry into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. This process marked a new era in which devastating economic conditions were intertwined with new forms of criminal expression in sectors of society devastated by poverty and structural violence. In this new pattern of violence, new repertoires and actors can be found who use it for different objectives. Some distinctive features would be: (1) that a plurality of actors generate it, including the state, but also organized segments of civil society; (2) it is a horizontal violence, exercised to a greater extent by civil groups; (3) it is useful for a variety of objectives with coercive methods and strategies; (4) it is expressed in areas of indistinction between the legal and illegal, the private and the public; (5) it is a spectacular violence; and (6) it functions as a *dispositive for extracting and regulating surplus* that combines the previous characteristics (Fuentes Díaz 2022, 38–58).

In these violent conditions of restructuring of social relations, criminal capital was reconfigured under the figure of the neoliberal enterprise, operating through the adoption of the model of flexible accumulation linked to global competition, the decentralization of production, the expansion of fictitious capital, the acceleration of capital turnover, the processes of primitive accumulation, the deterritorialization-reterritorialization of the body and the *annulment of the subjective experience of time* through the generation of an *industrial reserve army* as a *killable body*. Furthermore, the entire machinery of terror mobilized by illicit enterprises in the neoliberal era has served to devalue land and labour, generating optimal conditions for the expansion of value. In this context, violence is a constituent of capitalist accumulation and competition is a metonym of war (Whitehead 2011), the notion that illicit enterprises operate as 'cannibal war machines' par excellence, holds true.

Final Thoughts: Grey Zones, Cannibal War Machines and the Paradigm of the Political in Neoliberal Postmodernity

Apparently, we find ourselves in an antinomy. At the moment when sovereign power seems to dissolve, at the same time, it is reinforced. On the one hand, the formation of grey zones that dissolve the bound-

aries between *nomos* and *anomie* in neoliberal postmodernity break the Hobbesian/Weberian paradigms of sovereignty. On the other hand, the pattern of neoliberal domination would not be possible in Latin America without the imposition of a permanent state of exception justified by the existence of an unspecified enemy such as the figure of the criminal and the terrorist.

Giorgio Agamben (1998) argues that what constitutes sovereign power is the exception, the threshold between *nomos* and *anomie* that defines which bodies deserve to live. However, what Agamben does not make visible is that thanatopolitics is the expression of the nihilistic spirit of the *value-form*.² The systematic use of militarized violence to control territories necessary to produce and circulate commodities, the practices of extortive rent to appropriate surplus value, and the exploitation to death of the lumpenized labour force, indicates to us that criminal capital is the crudest expression of the law of value, and is a cannibal war machine par excellence, synthesizing the qualities of neoliberal enterprise and military complexes.

To the extent that violence is a constituent of capitalist accumulation, the state and cannibal war machines operate under the same principle: the necrotic expansion of value, articulating a *dispositive for extraction and regulation of redundancy*. From there, not only does the antinomy dissolve, but it leaves open the question of whether the grey zones that blur the boundaries between war and competition, *nomos* and *anomie*, are not an anomaly but the biopolitical paradigm of neoliberal postmodernity.

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² Agamben (1998) saw the paradigm of modernity in the Nazi concentration camps, but he does not link how this whole economy of death crystallizes in the epigraph *Arbeit macht frei* (Work makes one free).

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