

“Plotting the Paths of Justice:

Urban Growth, Security Governance and Evangelical Revivalism in Mexico”

by Ethan P. Sharp (Assistant Professor, University of Texas – Pan American)

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My essay aims to provide a sense of the theoretical concerns and lived experiences that make up my current research, which is centered on ethnographic engagements with young men from the burgeoning marginalized settlements of Monterrey, Mexico. Many of these men have been drawn into the drug trade and are currently the focus of major innovations in governance, including more aggressive policing and imprisonment, as part of the state’s very violent war on drugs. In prisons, they often encounter faith-based rehabilitation programs implemented by evangelical activists and endorsed by the state. I contend that my research, by following young men through their dangerous neighborhoods, addiction treatment programs, prisons and churches, can begin to illuminate the ways in which urban expansion in northern Mexico, security governance in the context of the war on drugs, and the growth of evangelical religions are deeply interconnected.

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Since completing and defending my doctoral dissertation in 2004, I have pursued an ethnographic expertise in the relationships between religious practice and political formations in urban centers that are structured upon a complex set of transnational relationships linking the US and Mexico. I have recently completed a book manuscript, to be published with Indiana University Press, that describes a general Catholic renewal among Mexican immigrants in cities of the Midwestern US and the role of this renewal in sustaining forms of political engagement by and on behalf of immigrants. At the same time, I have continued with research on the development of evangelical organizations that have

begun to assume increasingly prominent roles in the war on drugs in Mexico. I believe that ethnographic investigation of organizations that many people have come to recognize as “faith-based” is a promising enterprise.<sup>1</sup> Research into these organizations can yield insight into the ways in which faith is experienced and practiced, the particular social problems that these organizations endeavor to address, and the contemporary social and political configurations that have given rise to these organizations, drawing us into the kinds of reflexive exercises that are arguably the greatest contributions that ethnographic research currently can offer to the larger academic enterprise. In my research, I have sought to illuminate and to explore three kinds of interstitial action:

- 1) how the state implements strategic minimalist projects in order to address the insecurity that its policy orientations have generated, between the promise of economic growth and the continuing impoverishment of marginalized settlements;
- 2) how the state in collaboration with other organizations makes use of carceral institutions, a question that is especially difficult when dealing with juvenile delinquents, one that emerges between the promise of rehabilitation and the imperative of containment;
- 3) and how evangelicals fashion their faith through their social circumstances and interactions with the state, a process that emerges between the hope of a transformative religious practice and the power of neoliberal hegemonies.

The formulation of my research agenda began during the course of my research excursions in Mexico in 2006. During a period of fierce presidential campaigns, the state government of Nuevo León provided materials and organized a group of workers in order to install stairs and sidewalks amid a set of houses, originally squatter settlements, that had been precariously constructed on one of the steep foothills of the Sierra Madre Oriental in the southern half of Monterrey, Mexico’s third most populous urban center. Since the only means of reaching most of the houses in this colonia was by foot, the stairs

and paved alleyways were welcomed improvements, making movement to and from the houses much easier, especially during heavy rains. An employee of the state government who had overseen the project brought me to the colonia to conduct a series of conversations with residents about the improvements, as part of my ethnographic research on governance and insecurity in Mexico. We began with José, who was nineteen years old and had taken to spending most of his days lounging on one of the new sidewalks. The conversation, however, was complicated by the fact that José was an addict to crack cocaine. He did not have much to say in response to my questions, and repeatedly asked me if I could give him some cash for his next fix, which could be purchased in a house a few steps away. Our exchanges were interrupted, when from afar, down the hill, a child crossed the street and yelled, “Hola, papí,” to José. We then followed the main sidewalk to the house on the peak of the hill, with impressive vistas of middle-class neighborhoods to the east and west, and I talked at length with a middle-aged couple who lived there. This conversation dwelled on their eighteen year old son, Alex, who had a less expensive but perhaps more harmful addiction to inhalants, including paint thinner. His parents were nonetheless proud that Alex had been holding down a job at a large, American-owned department store that was a short distance from the hill and easily visible from our vantage point.

The metropolitan area of Monterrey boasts one of the highest concentrations of wealth in Latin America, benefitting from easy access to the US border, a little more than 200 kilometers to the north. The city has sustained relatively consistent economic growth for decades and holds out educational and employment possibilities for migrants who continue to arrive in great numbers from other parts of Mexico, but the young men from the colonias, especially the original squatter settlements, have not benefited from these developments and have become increasingly involved in risky activities. Indeed, involvement in the intercontinental drug trade, if not migration to the US, has become one of their better options, since their mobility within Monterrey is severely limited. With no prospects of moving into one of the less notorious neighborhoods, these young men are left to circulate through the

cramped environs of the colonias, poor schools, prisons, low-paying service jobs, addiction treatment programs, and prisons. Despite their problems, José and Alex compare favorably with their brothers and other peers. Although José's addiction had apparently kept him distant from his two young sons, he had managed to steer clear of involvement in the local gang, which had marked its territories on the walls around the colonia, and had not spent time in what is popularly known as the tutelar, the juvenile detention facilities where his younger brother had been for several months. Alex, who also had a younger brother in the tutelar, had maintained a reputation as a quiet person and voluntarily moved into residential addiction treatment centers on two occasions, although he escaped both centers several weeks short of completing the plan of treatment.

Since 2006, I have continued to conduct research in Mexico and the US that retraces the web of spaces in which men like José and Alex move and that reveals the paradoxes of "capitalocentric" development.<sup>2</sup> José and Alex's colonia had been cobbled into being more than fifty years ago, when state-protected industrial development helped birth a larger urban middle-class and attracted tremendous numbers of migrants. The migrants who claimed land on the hills in and around Monterrey built a mix of houses, which slowly proceeded through various stages of completion, were invariably left unpainted, and cast discomfiting shadows upon the sprawling neighborhoods around them. Now in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as the state has continued to favor neoliberal models of development and now contends with fierce competition among national political parties, the paths into and through the colonia have been renewed as sources of public concern. Now the colonia's maze of homes conceals sites for drug sales and consumption, especially by young men, which have coincided with and fueled an increase in gang organizing and delinquent actions. The response of the state has been to render these spaces more accessible and less threatening through minimal yet strategic investments, which can foster greater civic participation and integration.

At the same time, the state has pursued a reestablishment of the rule of law through the re-legitimization of carceral institutions. It has not simply involved an insistence on imprisonment as a response to social problems, but has included efforts to make carceral experiences more effective, especially by linking them to a process of spiritual transformation.<sup>3</sup> As part of the war on drugs, the state has increased its reliance on already overcrowded prisons, opened new residential substance abuse treatment centers, and begun to collaborate more closely and purposefully with evangelical and other religious organizations in the rehabilitation of prisoners and drug addicts.<sup>4</sup> In the course of my research, I have focused primarily on the strengthening alliance between evangelical organizations and the state, and the emergence of faith-based initiatives. I have documented in detail the contributions of two evangelical organizations to the detention and rehabilitation of young men and boys charged with delinquency by the state of Nuevo León. The experiences of the colonia provide a critical background to these processes, because most of the individuals who pass through juvenile detention facilities reside in colonias, and because it links the work of prison officials and evangelical activists to a larger set of complicated development efforts that have reshaped the landscape of northeastern Mexico, culminating in the kind of neoliberal governance that engages communities in both structural and cosmetic improvements. Ultimately, one can begin to appreciate that the histories of poor neighborhoods like the colonias are deeply implicated in new configurations and applications of faith and spirituality, and to address questions such as, to what degree is ongoing religious change throughout urban Mexico complicit with neoliberal security governance, or will this religious change yield new forms of democratic practice that will chart newer and more equitable patterns of development? I am eager to participate in the Berlin roundtables in order to pursue questions like these in concert with other scholars, and to build on the insights that I have gained through my ethnographic experiences in urban Mexico.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion that something is "faith-based" is unique to the current moment in which advanced secularization in the public square is matched by a fervent evangelical revival that seeks engagement with the public square.

<sup>2</sup> According to Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, capitalocentrism "involves situating capitalism at the center of development narratives" and "tending to devalue or marginalize possibilities of noncapitalist development" (Gibson-Graham 1996: 41). Arturo Escobar (2001) uses the term "capitalocentric" to refer to discourses and practices that are consistent with this definition.

<sup>3</sup> John Pratt (1999) describes the "religitimation" of prison as a standard and consistent response to cases of ungovernability that result in neoliberal regimes. As part of this process, prisons often give new emphases to "self-determination," as the only means of producing change in a prisoner's conduct. Pratt does not address the element of spirituality in self-determination.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Ungar (2001) reports a 50% increase in Mexico's prison population through the 1990s. This increase has continued in recent years. The current president, Felipe Calderón, has more aggressively pursued policies that will alleviate further overcrowding in the prisons, such as supporting and speeding up extraditions of drug traffickers charged with crimes in the US. Also, the opening of hundreds of new residential substance abuse treatment centers has become a centerpiece of Calderón's campaign in the war on drugs.