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Sección 4 – Derechas, violencia y fuerzas armadas

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From Spent Cartridges to Militarization: The Military and the Political Right in Modern Mexico

Résumé

This papers examines the relationship between the armed forces and the political Right in Mexico since 1920. It identifies two main phases. From 1920 to the 1950s, right-wing officers sought direct political power, but factionalism, anticlericalism, and civil-military tensions hindered their efforts. From the 1960s to the present, the military played an important role in domestic policing and counterinsurgency, culminating in Enrique Calderón's Drug War. Despite controversial incidents of repression, military policing has often enjoyed broad public and bipartisan support. The paper concludes that increasing militarization and the Drug War have offered a useful stimulus to the historiography.

Entrées d'index

Keywords : Mexico, militarization, Right, armed forces
Palabras claves : México, militarización, Derecha, fuerzas armadas

Texte intégral

1 In December 2006, Mexico's newly elected president, Enrique Calderón, sent 6,700 Mexican troops into the state of Michoacán to combat organized crime. The following month, television pictures showed Calderón reviewing these forces dressed in olive

green military fatigues and surrounded by a cohort of officers. Soon after, Calderón began to talk of waging a "frontal war" against organized crime.[1] Although some left-wing journalists worried about military's involvement in policing and mocked Calderon's ill-fitting uniform, the President's approval rating improved. It was impossible not to be stuck by a certain historical irony. Calderón was the leader of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), Mexico's Catholic center-right party. Since 1939, the PAN had spent most of its existence contesting the regime of the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI), of which the military was an integral part. The military traced its origins to the Revolution, supplied the dominant party with political leaders for decades, policed much of the countryside, and from time to time carried out the regime's dirty work of political repression. And yet, here was Calderón, embracing the military as few PRI presidents had done and starting a deployment of troops on a scale unseen in Mexico since the 1920s.

2 This paper skirts the recent, complicated, and bloody history of Calderón's drug war, the first drafts of which journalists and ethnographers are beginning to write. Instead, it traces in broad strokes the relationship between the political Right and the Mexican military from the end of the Revolution to the early twenty-first century. By doing so, it aims to provide some historical perspective for Calderón's actions, illuminate and connect two themes which for a long time have been studied little and separately, and draw attention to some historiographical innovations and opportunities.

3 The Mexican military has long discouraged scholarly attention. In any case, from the 1950s, by regional standards the military appeared quiescent and marginal to the civilian corporate monolith which, most analysts assumed, held the key to dominant-party rule. (In the 1990s, the new cultural history was no more attentive to the military, for different reasons.) The history of the postrevolutionary Right has also been relatively understudied, although perhaps not to the same degree. If we define the Right as a politics in defense of political hierarchy and social inequality, it is obvious that it can take varied forms: traditional or modernizing; religious or secular; ideologically overt or secretive and dissembling. Historians have focused either on highly visible groups in society hostile the new regime – usually what Knight terms "political Catholics" – or, to a lesser degree, on right-wing forces within the very broad coalition identified with the Revolution – the so-called revolutionary family –, although most studies have halted around 1940 with the supposed stabilization of dominant-party rule.[2] In the last decade or so, important new work on the military and Right has begun to emerge, part of a larger effort to move historical analysis beyond the traditional boundary of 1940, question the image of a strong, stable, President-dominated, and hegemonic PRI regime, and search for new connections between that past and an increasingly violent and traumatic present.

4 This essay argues that the military's relationship to the Right falls roughly into two phases, corresponding to larger shifts in the political system. From 1920 until the early 1950s, military officers' involvement in national politics was direct and obvious: they rebelled against the government, formed dissident parties, and held the presidency until 1946. From the early 1950s, officers' overt political role (very gradually) declined, and the military became less a political agent and more an instrument (although, as we will see, this shift was never entirely complete). Thus, the political question for Mexican society became less about whether the military (or factions of officers within it) would rule, but how the PRI would use the military to maintain domestic order. In the first phase, many officers were powerful and vocal members of the revolutionary right, but it was very difficult for them to either dominate the state or build alliances with the non-revolutionary, Catholic right. In the second phase, while episodes of the military repression were certainly controversial and generated criticism, the idea that the military should intervene in domestic security and policing also enjoyed wide-ranging support across the political spectrum, for a range of probable reasons. However, beginning in the early 1990s, it has been easier to find partisan criticisms of military policing on the Left than on the Right.

Generals in (and around) *Los Pinos*: 1920s-1950s

5 By 1920, Mexico's army contained men from a huge variety of social backgrounds and ideological positions, reflecting the heterogeneous nature of the revolution itself. Initially ideological differences were not very prominent. Disgruntled military factions rebelled against the Sonoran regime in 1923-4, 1927, and 1929. Both rebels and government laid claim to the Constitution of 1917; military rebels simply denounced the Sonorans for betraying its democratic principles by corruptly clinging to power. Under the surface of national politics, it is not hard to find examples of radical agraristas and sindicatos condemning particular military commanders as reactionaries for allying with established interests and impeding land and labor reform.[3] In the 1930s, the existence of officers hostile to more socially radical interpretations of the revolution became more obvious. Confronted with Cardenismo, many began to complain that the Revolution they had fought for had been hi-jacked by effete, civilian demagogues, and taken in an exotic socialistic direction. Most officers did not take the route of quixotic rebellion chosen by General Saturnino Cedillo. Right-wing veterans groups proliferated in the mid-1930s, often tied to serving officers; by 1939, no less than three dissident officer-led political groups promised to correct Cardenista radicalism, including former Secretary of Defense Joaquín Amaro's Partido de la Revolución Anticommunista (PRAC); eventually most of this open military opposition coalesced behind General Juan Andreu Almazán's 1940 presidential campaign. These were the men labor leader Vicente Lombardo Toledano liked to call- with obvious sexual innuendo- the *cartuchos quemados*: reactionary, spent forces in the new, progressive regime Lombardo imagined he was creating.[4]

6 Such officers certainly faced political obstacles. It was impossible for right-wing officers to dominate the military or the revolutionary party as whole. Despite the incipient professional reforms of the 1920s, the military was simply too politically diverse and divided.[5] Unlike in postwar Europe, right-wing military veterans groups had to coexist with more radical veterans demanding land reform.[6] President Cárdenas enjoyed some left-leaning allies among the officer corps. In the early 1930s, the Secretary of Defense worried about radical ideas circulating among some junior officer – a few even attempted a Batista-inspired coup. Even more important, the army was riven by personal factions, and Cárdenas proved adept at managing them. On taking office, Cárdenas instructed his private secretary to "take care of the civilians...I will take care of ...the Army."[7] Cárdenas invited back many old Carrancista generals marginalized since 1920 – no radicals but useful political allies. Indeed, the last major foray of officers into presidential politics had a distinctly leftist tinge. General Miguel Henríquez Guzmán launched his 1952 presidential campaign standing under a huge portrait of Cárdenas, and intimated a return to the pro-labor, redistributionist policies of the 1930s, although he never succeeded in winning Cárdenas's backing.[8]

7 Factionalism and institutional interests also impeded efforts by right-wing officers to ally with civilians in the revolutionary family. The best example of this is the tension between President Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) – the first civilian president since 1920 – and many right-wing officers, which culminated in widespread rumors of a coup in the summer of 1948.[9] Despite Miguel Alemán's avowedly pro-business policies, his status as a civilian (and as a Veracruzano) made him the enemy of many officers. General Alejandro Mange, longtime commander of Veracruz, and second to none in his enthusiasm for (self-serving) agrarian counter-revolution, nevertheless considered Alemán a civilian "*hijo de la chingada pelele*".[10] Some right-wing officers were so intent on preventing another civilian president that they preferred to ally with Henríquez. After defeat in 1952, the frustrated remnants of Henriquismo shifted rightwards; in 1955, Henríquez briefly tried to restore his fortunes by embracing anticommunism and courting US support; in 1961, General Celestino Gasco gathered fragmented groups of Henriquista veterans, allied with Jorge Siegrist's rightwing Catholic militants, and launched a short-lived rebellion, crushed in a few days by the army.[11]

8 It was challenging for officers to build any kind of alliance with conservative, political Catholics. The Cristero War (1926-9) left a bitter legacy, and recent research has emphasized just how long and bitter it was in many places.[12] While some officers mellowed with age, in general a moderate anticlericalism remained one of the strands of revolutionary ideology on which officers could agree, shared by men with widely differing visions of social reform. In the 1930s, General Cedillo courted Catholic support but "he knew that Catholics regarded him with insecure gratitude".[13] The Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS), a Catholic integralist group founded in 1937, displayed a certain ambivalence towards the military. They usually condemned the federal army, although *Sinarquista* gatherings were themselves replete with military rhetoric, drills, and uniforms; in 1944, the UNS even called on the military to ally with them in a patriotic, anticommunist revolt, a move which only resulted in a government crack-down.[14] By the late 1940s, the UNS had entered terminal decline, the victim of considerable military repression, and the PAN became the long-term focus of Catholic opposition from the Right. Although initially skeptical of liberalism in many respects, it defended the idea of military political neutrality "to serve and protect the whole nation" during elections. (How the party reconciled this with its lingering defense of Franco's coup in Spain was never clear.)[15] As such, the PAN ostensibly shared the same civilianizing official goals of the PRI, something PRIistas reminded them about in order to counter PAN criticisms of electoral fraud. Social barriers reinforced ideology and historic mistrust. Conservative Catholic elites rarely viewed the military as a respectable profession. Soldiers were aware of this disdain, and sometimes grumbled about it in the few candid memoirs they wrote.[16]

9 Despite these problems, right-wingers in the army were not politically impotent, and the boundaries between them and conservative sectors of Mexican society were sometimes permeable. In the late 1930s, a group of officers determined to moderate the excesses of Cardenismo from within the official party supported General Manuel Avila Camacho's candidature for the 1940 election, and helped propel him to the presidency. Avilacamachismo was a diverse and loose alliance of officers and civilian políticos; as president, Manuel Avila Camacho invited many rightwing officers who had opposed Cárdenas back into the political fold. Just as Cárdenas used his governorship in Michoacán to experiment with new kinds of mass politics, the state of Puebla – ruthlessly dominated by Manuel's elder brother Maximino – served as a microcosm of the Avilacamachista project to tame labor and obtain a rapprochement with business and Catholic elites. In Nuevo León, General Bonifacio Salinas Leal – another Avilacamachista and durable political heavyweight in the army – appears to have followed suit, setting himself up as a mediator between the Monterey's conservative industrial and financial elites and the center.

10 The Pentathlón Deportivo Militar Universitario provides a vivid example of how Avilacamachismo defused and absorbed the rightwing impulses of the 1930s. In 1937, well-to-do students at the National University founded this group and aimed to inculcate discipline through sport, train reserve officers for the army, and fight the advance of atheistic socialism. By the early 1940s, the Pentathlón had jettisoned more radical members – including an alleged Nazi sympathizer –and morphed into an officially –sponsored organization whose messages of discipline and anticommunism echoed those of the official party.[17]

11 The PRI never returned to the radicalism of the 1930s, although different presidents oscillated between somewhat more leftist or rightist personas, alternatively pushing or impeding limited social reforms, according to a complex mix of political forces. Still, Avilacamachismo left a clear legacy. Gustavo Díaz Ordaz cut his political teeth as a civilian member of the group, acting as federal deputy for Puebla in the 1940s; as Secretary of the Interior (1958-64) he helped prepare his path to the presidency by carefully fostering support among rightwing groups, including the many vociferous, more or less paranoid, anticommunist movements that flourished in Mexico after the Cuban Revolution.[18] The PRI fostered a monolithic image of unity and deference to the President, located itself discursively somewhere on the nationalist Left, and generally reserved *la derecha* as an insult for its opponents. Here, newly available spy reports prove particularly useful; spies themselves identified and labeled more or less

progressive currents within the PRI; they also recorded revealing gossip and off-stage outbursts.

Soldiers in the Street: The Military and Domestic Order

12 It is traditional to see Henríquez's failed 1952 presidential campaign as a watershed in military politics, after which officers stopped challenging for national power and their representation in the cabinet dwindled. Recent research (including my own) has emphasized just how gradual and incomplete officers' retreat from politics was, as they clung to influence as governors, party-bosses, and as commanders able to deflect the central government's efforts to make them circulate commands or retire. Many of these officers had allied with the Avilacamachistas, created political bases in the 1940s, and were loath to abandon them.

13 The key to this endurance lies in the nature of political demilitarization itself, which involved a tense series of political bargains and pacts. As Roderic Camp has suggested, it might be helpful to posit another intermediate stage in civil-military relations from the 1950s to the 1970s in which revolutionary-era officers deferred to civilian presidents but still lobbied, politicked, grafted, and moved in between civilian and military posts, until they finally retired or died. We still know very little about the kind of power these "political-military" officers wielded.[19] As historians dig into this period, we will hopefully learn how seriously to take the rumors of shady alliances between rightwing officers and conservative business and Catholic groups that proliferated during the Echeverría administration (1970-76). Mexico City's gossiping conservative middle classes even sang songs warning Echeverría that he might go the way of Salvador Allende, although they were notably vague on exactly who would carry out any coup.[20] The redoubtable General Salinas Leal was perhaps one candidate. Spies reported that he planned to destabilize Echeverría by organizing another attack on students in Mexico City.[21]

14 Despite the durability of these political-military officers, from the 1950s, and particularly from the 1970s, political debates on the military have focused on its role securing domestic order. This was certainly not a new topic. Since the 1920s, the infantry battalions and cavalry units were stationed around the country, garrisoned in major provincial cities and towns, with smaller squads placed in conflictive villages and on key roads, railways, oil wells, and damns. The PRI generally used the army with a certain pragmatism. Sometimes they acted rather consensually, mediating conflicts, and carrying out police work that communities themselves requested and supported. On the other hand, soldiers organized political repression and conducted counterinsurgency more frequently than once thought which could be needlessly brutal and terrifying. Often the government deployed a one-two punch of military force followed quickly by offers of conciliation and patronage.

15 New sources have made clear that divisions existed within the military about how it should confront growing leftist student and guerilla protests in the 1960s. Documents from the Secretariat of Defense suggest that the government did not trust the regular army to suppress students in 1968 at Tlatelolco, and ordered officers from the (reliably anticommunist) Presidential General Staff to act as agents provocateurs by firing on the crowd and soldiers alike. In any case, many officers resented being tainted by Tlatelolco for decades, and the government made an effort to keep them away from campuses.[22] Thanks to General Salvador Rangel Medina's one-of-a-kind memoir, we also know that commanders disagreed about how to conduct the anti-guerrilla campaign in Guerrero; some (like Rangel) favored an emphasis on conciliation and targeted violence (which they argued was part of their own authentic national tradition); others successfully adopted more hardline repressive tactics (which they associated with US influence). Tactical tastes seem to have corresponded to generational differences rather the political factions one might expect; Rangel was no Cardenista, and had been mentored by various Callista officers. [23]

16 From the 1980s, the military's role in domestic security has gradually increased, accelerating after the Chiapas rebellion in 1994. Calderón's drug war thus represents the dramatic acceleration of an older process. In the late-1960s and 1970s, government repression of students and guerrillas may have been more visible than previously, but the military remained small by regional standards. From 1973 to 1999 the army more than tripled in size, from 60,000 to 192,770 men. From 1985 to 1995, according to the World Bank, the military's share of the federal budget rose from 2.6% to 5.1%, and has continued an upward trend since then. At the same time, the army increased its missions against narcotic trafficking, and its influence in security and judicial institutions, notably the office of attorney general. This is the process loosely referred to as militarization, a concept that has recently migrated from political science and NGO reports into the public lexicon.[24] Political scientists have offered possible explanations of this process- the growth of transnational organized crime, the influence of US security models and drug prohibition, the restructuring of state and economy by a new technocratic neoliberal PRI- but its history largely remains to be written. Other disciplines are yet to bring their tools and perspectives to bear on this crucial subplot in Mexico's democratization.

17 We do know that post-1980 militarization has enjoyed a good deal of support from the public and across the political spectrum. Since political scientists started conducting surveys and polls in the 1960s, the military has emerged as one of the most trusted public institutions, and polls have consistently confirmed public support for the military role in policing. While valuable, even the most finely grained polls represent static snap-shots of historical process and experiences, and contain a range of possible attitudes. Given the notoriously unpopular police, many doubtless support military policing *faute de mieux*. Support may also reflect the experience of the softer side of military intervention, which the army deliberately bolstered after 1968. (This is the past in which the novelist Álvaro Enrigue recently remembered he and his "parents and grandparents" grew up: "a country where the army carried out rescue work after a natural disaster and showed their weapons only during a parade".)[25] Some polls suggest disproportionate support for military policing among supporters of the left-wing Partido de la Revolución Democratica. Roderic Camp argues that this suggests the army's success in portraying itself as a constructive institution rooted in the masses.[26]

18 Still, support for militarization probably also reflected a faith in hardline military solutions to disorder, including political agitation. One dominant narrative of Mexico's recent past portrays the 1968 student massacre as a seismic event that unmasked the regime's latent authoritarianism, jolted a slumbering civil society into action, and began a long process of democratization. Historians are now challenging this narrow perspective – one constructed in no small measure by liberal and left participants in the movement- which tends to emphasize the exceptional nature of repression in 1968, and exaggerate public support for students. Ariel Rodríguez has analyzed the hundreds of people – Catholic conservatives, workers, union leaders, confessed "average citizens", middle-class professionals – who wrote to the president in 1968 alternatively condemning students for their radicalism, their lack of patriotism, or their promiscuity and vice. They all agreed that the military was the correct instrument to restore order. Rodríguez argues that 1968 comprised a fleeting moment of conservative consensus, but it seems unlikely that such attitudes were entirely isolated and ephemeral.[27] Polling data and national political speeches may not be the best places to uncover this kind of discourse. New work on the twentieth-century press has shown that the tabloid crime news contained criticism of government corruption and injustice, but also expressed selective support for extrajudicial state violence, including the notorious *ley fuga*.[28]

19 Since the early 1990s, and the legislative alliance formed by the PRI and the PAN, political debates about militarization have gradually adopted a clearer partisan complexion. A spate of murders of PRD activists, the Chiapas revolt, and the growing documentation of military human rights abuses by international agencies, encouraged the PRD to adopt a more critical perspective on militarization. It promoted stronger legislative oversight of military budgets and justice; some party members even argued that military policing contravened Article 129 of the constitution – a legal argument

rarely heard before outside of isolated student protests – and induced the Supreme Court to uphold the legality of military police work. The PRD leadership did not fully embrace military reform – any criticism is tempered by the party's need to retain political support among soldiers and recruit sympathetic officers– but it played a role in opening up partisan discussion.

20 Over the same period, whatever hesitations the PAN may have entertained about militarization have faded from public view. A wariness of military intervention in society was foundational for the party: Panistas professed admiration for the Cristeros, defended the principles of civilian electoral democracy, and condemned their own occasional experience of heavy-handed military force – of "democracy directed by machine guns".[29] However, the military never provided a terrain for ideological struggle and definition in the way, say, public education certainly did. In recent decades, the victims of military repression are far more likely to have belonged to the Left than the Right, and unsurprisingly PAN criticism of military policing was selective. The PAN voiced few concerns over the murders of PRD activists in the early 1990s, in which military complicity was often alleged. As crime spiked during the 1995 economic crisis, the PAN enthusiastically supported the PRI's militarization of DF police forces. (An initiative later reversed when the PRD took over the city government.)[30] By the end of the 1990s, echoing initiatives within the PRD, the PAN began to promote greater legislative control over the military; during his 2000 presidential campaign, Vicente Fox even promised to reform the military's command structure and remove it from the war on drugs. In power, Fox largely abandoned these plans. He also effectively undermined the commission created to investigate military and police abuses of the past, removing a final major source of conflict between the PAN and the military.[31]

21 Of course, many analysts have worried that creeping militarization has empowered the military, inviting officers to return to a more direct political role. The PAN has dismissed such worries, arguing that the consolidation of democracy and the army's tradition of loyalty prevents this. Although there are some signs that individual officers and factions may be becoming more assertive and politically restive, the evidence is patchy. However, it is clear that militarization has increased the military's leverage as an institution. Officers always expected certain institutional rewards – promotions, pensions, guns, impunity – for propping up the PRI. These were the bedrock conditions on which civilian dominance of national politics rested, and militarization has boosted the military's bargaining power. Despite some gains in legislative oversight and human rights obtained since the mid-1990s, the military has tenaciously defended its considerable remaining autonomy and prerogatives, and PAN administrations have been forced to guarantee and publicly support them. Most controversially, the military clung to its legal *fuero* despite a crescendo of complaints of military abuse, torture, and murder.

Conclusion

22 Decades ago, Alain Rouquié pointed out the variability of military politics in Latin America, and criticized stereotypes portraying the military as either unchanging expressions of Hispanic *caudillismo*, or simple agents of bourgeois, Pentagon-inspired reaction. Such arguments certainly hold in modern Mexico, whose military has been more ideologically and politically ambiguous than most.[32] On the face of it the military- with its rigid internal hierarchies- and the Right seem natural allies. For most of the twentieth century, despite points of overlap and mutual influence, like in some frustrated romance, it was hard for the military and the political Right to form a powerful, durable, and exclusive partnership. From the 1920s to the mid-1950s, rightwing officers jostled for power, most visibly in the 1930s, and pushed against more socially radical interpretations of the revolution. Most successful were the Avilacamachistas, who helped shift the official party rightwards after 1940 and reconcile it to rightwing, Catholic forces. However, rightist officers were limited by the diverse, factionalized nature of the army, the legacy of anticlericalism, and tensions

between civilians and the military. From the mid-1950s onwards, political debates gradually came to focus on the military's indirect role in maintaining domestic order. The Right condemned episodes of military policing it considered political and illegitimate – certainly when it was used against themselves – but it offered no principled objections to this institutional role, a position supported by a broad, bipartisan current of public opinion. Since the 1990s, the PAN gradually entered into a firmer political and discursive embrace of the military, albeit at the cost of abandoning efforts to reduce military autonomy and impunity.

23 One consequence of militarization is that Mexico now looks a lot less exceptional in Latin America than it once did; perhaps it was never so exceptional. A final, more historiographical conclusion can be drawn. The administrations of the PAN, whatever their failings – and there have surely been many – have provided a salutary, perhaps unintended, stimulus to the historiography of Mexico's recent past. Access to political, intelligence, and military archives improved; at the same time, militarization, insecurity, and rise of the PAN itself encouraged scholars to question elements of the old story of PRI rule, attend to previously neglected themes- not least violence, the military, and the Right- and start to write a more detailed, conflictive, multi-layered account of politics during PRIísmo. This effort remains a work in progress. In particular, the creeping militarization of domestic security – a process so far sketched in its outlines by political scientists – represents a promising and indeed urgent field for interdisciplinary enquiry.

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