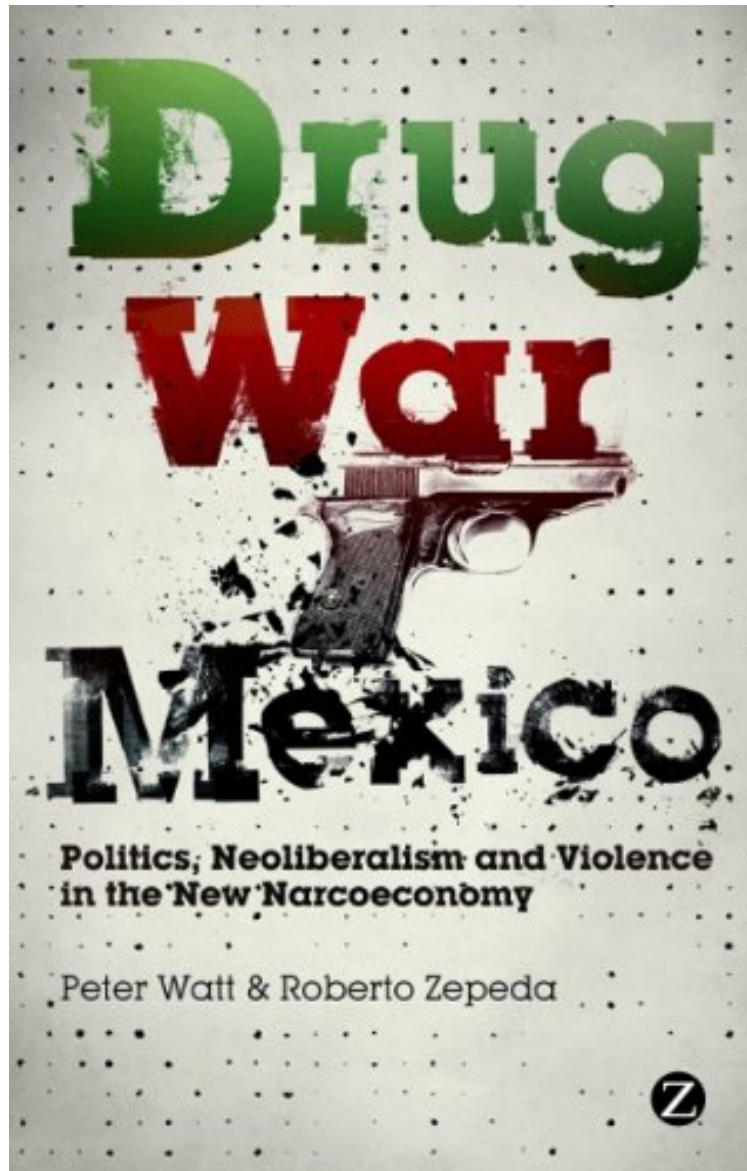


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# Drug War Mexico: Politics, Neoliberalism and Violence in the New Narcoeconomy

*Peter Watt, Roberto Zepeda*

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By dawn[...]If you look for it, you might find a buried headline about how a Caravan organized by Mexicans impacted by drug violence is making its way from the U.S. Mexico border to Washington DC, calling for justice and peace in Mexico. Hundreds of people are gathering at each of the stops along the way to remember the dead and disappeared, and to denounce the ongoing atrocities being committed in the name of the War on Drugs. It goes without saying that coverage of the Caravan pales in comparison to reports of new atrocities in Mexico, which, stripped of any context, make headlines around the world. Even so, coverage of the violence can hide more than it reveals. By way of example, there is no reliable number of the total number of dead in the war. Most media figures tend closer to the lower estimate of 60,000, while some peg it at over 200,000. For people looking for a more careful analysis on what is taking place in Mexico, Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda's new book, *Drug War Mexico*, is a good place to start. The authors begin by acknowledging the problematic role the mainstream media play in the conflict in Mexico. "Reports from media organizations like Televisa in Mexico, CNN in the US, and the BBC in the UK tend to present the 'drug war' in Mexico as a mysterious and inexplicable conflict in which the government (with the help of its ally, the United States) and the army attempt to defeat the evil tactics and poisonous influence of organized crime," write Watt and Zepeda in the introduction. "Within this narrow and misleading representation of the drug war, state actors who perpetrate violence and abuse human rights are rarely ascribed agency, and thus are afforded complete immunity by influential mainstream media organizations. Consequently, the drug war is seldom given the historico-political context and analysis it surely merits." What follows in *Drug War Mexico* is Watt and Zepeda's attempt to map how the intensification of violence in Mexico "did not arrive out of the blue." A brief history of drug cultivation, use, and state power in Mexico opens the book, which then delves into anti-drugs initiatives in Mexico from the 1970s onwards. By the time of the presidency of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976), write Watt and Zepeda, the government of Mexico was already associating "all types of political activism with criminality and frequently with drug trafficking." Watt and Zepeda set up the national and international context at the time, painting in broad strokes the Mexico where the CIA and the DEA began to set up a "permanent drug war." The book describes in some detail Operation Condor, a US backed anti-drug plan that involved the militarization of Sinaloa, Durango and Chihuahua, as well as aerial spraying of crops with Agent Orange. *Drug War Mexico* argues these processes made heroin and marijuana prices spike and encouraged the "cartelisation" of the drug trade. "For the producers and traffickers with the best political contacts, the largest networks, and sufficient resources, and for those who had adapted to survive the initial years of this new phase of anti-drug policy, this sharp and sudden rise in the price of their exports was both rewarding and tantalising," write Watt and Zepeda. The false notion that the state and drug traffickers are oppositional forces is firmly dispelled in *Drug War Mexico*, which draws on numerous examples to prove cooperation and at the very least complicity between the political and business class and the so-called underworld. The authors argue that the 1982 election of Miguel de Madrid and the changes heralded in during his term were more significant than the break from the PRI in 2000. They go on to document how narcotics trafficking must be understood as an "integral component" in Mexico's economic transformation towards neoliberalism. This economic restructuring took place just as the US led war on drugs was at its most active in the Caribbean, pushing cocaine smugglers into Mexico. Watt and Zepeda carefully document the connections between CIA-linked secret police in Mexico and high level traffickers, relationships which unfolded at the same time as the Iran-Contra debacle came to light in the US. Later, the book discusses how the North America Free Trade Agreement "provided both the infrastructure and the labour pool to facilitate smuggling..." further developing the idea of a narcotics industry intertwined with neoliberal transformation. "Proponents of NAFTA thus bear no small responsibility for the growth of drug production in Mexico and, ironically, are often the same individuals behind the 'war on drugs,'" they write. *Drug War Mexico* goes a long way towards explaining the notion that the militarization of Mexico through the drug war is a form of "armouring NAFTA." Even so, the "new narcoeconomy" referenced in the title is outlined but not described with as much detail as it merits. Woven together from journalist sources, analysts and academics, the book may leave readers wishing for more on the ground context and first person perspectives on the violence and terror wreaking Mexico. In their treatment of the years 2000-2012, Mexico's two term break with PRI governance, Watt and Zepeda outline much of the more recent context around the drug war. Much of this section will be familiar to more casual observers of the drug war in Mexico, as it includes background on some of the direct groups and characters whose prowess and financial power are bandied around by the mainstream media today. Here there are a few areas where *Drug War Mexico* could have gone into more detail so as to debunk baseless information repeated in the mainstream press. For example, the authors use information touted by Forbes magazine regarding the wealth of Joaquín Guzmán Loera, aka "El Chapo," even though there is little proof that Forbes has an accurate methodology for determining the fortune of a so-called drug lord. Watt and Zepeda also claim that "Latin America has remained 'democratic' so far, but there is more poverty in the region today than there was 20 years ago," ignoring the 2009 coup d'état in Honduras, an event of key importance which is inextricably linked with US anti-drug policy in the region. The authors write "As the USA's closest ally, Mexico has become the latest battleground in assuring US

hegemony throughout the hemisphere." This is, again, worthy of further thought and elaboration in a regional context. Though Mexico's economy is much larger, it is not immediately clear that Calderoacute;n's Mexico is necessarily a closer ally the US than Colombia under Juan Manuel Santos, Panama under Ricardo Martinelli, Honduras under the post- coup presidency of Porfirio Lobo, or even Guatemala under ex-general Otto Peacute;rez Molina. All said, Drug War Mexico is a carefully constructed and well referenced book that provides valuable insight into the violence throughout Mexico. Dispelling the artificial binary between state forces and so-called drug cartels is perhaps the book's strongest suit, and is done here in an accessible manner. Excavating histories little known and seldom referenced in the English language press, Drug War Mexico is an important addition to a growing body of work suggesting a new frame through which to understand what is taking place in Mexico today.

Mexico is a country in crisis. Capitalizing on weakened public institutions, widespread unemployment, a state of lawlessness and the strengthening of links between Mexican and Colombian drug cartels, narcotrafficking in the country has flourished during the post-1982 neoliberal era. In fact, it has become one of Mexico's biggest source of revenue, as well as its most violent, with over 12,000 drug-related executions in 2011 alone. In response, Mexican president Felipe Calderoacute;n, armed with millions of dollars in US military aid, has launched a crackdown, ostensibly to combat organised crime. Despite this, human rights violations have increased, as has the murder rate, making Ciudad Juacute;rez on the northern border the most dangerous city on the planet. Meanwhile, the supply of cocaine, heroin, marijuana and methamphetamine has continued to grow. In this insightful and controversial book, Watt and Zepeda throw new light on the situation, contending that the 'war on drugs' in Mexico is in fact the pretext for a US-backed strategy to bolster unpopular neoliberal policies, a weak yet authoritarian government and a radically unfair status quo.

'This is a superb, carefully documented analysis of how American drug and neoliberal policies have helped open up Mexico to crony capitalism, crony drug trafficking, increasing wealth disparity, impoverishment of the lower 50 percent, police and army corruption and domination, and now a murderous, fruitless, US-driven drug war. Concerned Americans should read this book, and get others to read it, as a step towards decriminalizing marijuana - the chief commodity of the Mexican cartels - to help end the nightmare.' Peter Dale Scott, author of American War Machine  
'Peter Watt and Roberto Zepeda shed light on this dark moment in Mexican history, a drug war that has become one of the most brutal and misunderstood conflicts of the twenty first century.' Ioan Grillo, author of El Narco: The Bloody Rise of Mexican Drug Cartels  
'By carefully linking together the economic, political and criminal histories of Mexico over the past decades, Watt and Zepeda roll back the curtain on the "war on drugs". Their book offers a comprehensive analysis, examining overlapping facts that others have assumed unrelated and documenting step by step the hypocrisy and corruption rampant in this war of contradictions. With its cast of shady characters and stranger-than-fiction events, the book leads logically to the conclusion that there is much more than meets the eye to the US and Mexican governments' efforts to "defeat organized crime". The information presented here will be an important tool in understanding the real interests behind the drug war-it will be up to a new generation to use that tool to end this deadly and unjust war before the death toll climbs even higher.' Laura Carlsen, Director, Americas Program  
About the Author