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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Armed Movements and Counterinsurgency in Contemporary Mexico

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ABSTRACT:

Based on a case study, this article seeks to analyze the contemporary evolution of the armed movements in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero and the counterinsurgency operations they have faced. To reach this goal, the object of the qualitative methodology is the local history of a municipality, Ayutla de los Libres, from 1998 to 2013, describing the socio-political processes that were developed there and that separate both dates, each marked by a critical episode of repression. The main result is that, although the field of armed movements underwent great changes, moving from offensive to defensive forms, the counterinsurgency used against them shows strong continuities focused on repression.

KEYWORDS: armed movements, Community Police, counterinsurgency, Guerrero, guerrilla

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1. Introduction

According to Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman (2015: 29), "the decantation of historical judgment has highlighted Ayutla as a luminous sign in the landscape of our past. It is a rebellion, yes; but it is the eponymous rebellion, it is said, that marks the border between the shadows and the historical days of Mexico." These words about the Ayutla Revolution of the mid-nineteenth century also serve to introduce the subject of this text, despite its contemporary nature. Indeed, although Ayutla has gone down in history for the eponymous plan that ended the dictatorship of Santa Anna, in recent years the inhabitants of this little municipality, in the southern state of Guerrero, have made the country remember its name, showing that the light of their rebellion lives on. In 1998, a new guerrilla was born there. In 2013, the armed uprising of self-defense groups took place there. In 2018, for the first time in local legal history, an assembly was elected as the new municipal government, without party or president.

It is a part of these recent processes that I seek to study in this article, taking as a matter of analysis the period of the political history of the Ayutla municipality that runs from 1998 to 2013. The construction of the object of study responds to several selection criteria that help delimitate it and give it relevance. First, the municipality has suffered critical episodes of repression on these two dates, 1998 and 2013, through military interventions motivated by counterinsurgency purposes, in response to the presence of armed groups. Second, the two localities where these events occurred—El Charco and El Paraíso—are Mixtec indigenous communities; they belong to the same cultural zone, which makes them two comparable entities that share a political culture, since they have a common history in their development as neighboring rural communities. Third, the 15-year distance that separates both episodes is ideal to observe as variables of analysis the variations of qualitative order that political processes show at the municipal level. Finally, beyond its singularity as an empirical case, as in the era studied by O'Gorman, I think that the history of Ayutla is still representative of its time and its regional context, the state of Guerrero. Therefore, analyzing it can lead to a better understanding of the contemporary evolution of the armed movements in southern Mexico in relation to the counterinsurgency strategies they face.

To achieve this objective, the article takes the perspective of social movement theory on political violence (Bosi, Della Porta and Malthaner 2019), based on a relational approach that understands this type of violence not in isolation, focusing only on armed groups, but in relation to the broader field of social movements to which they are connected, as well as to their political opponents, the State institutions, and the dynamics of contention between them (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). From this theoretical perspective, I want to observe in particular the relationship between political violence and repression (Della Porta 2014), as applied to the case study, between the armed movements present in Guerrero and the counterinsurgency they face.[1] At this point, there is a consensus in the specialized literature to point out that the effects of repression on social mobilization are varied and may be positive or negative depending on how the relations between State institutions and mobilized groups are configured.

However, most studies have focused on the positive effects that persistent repression can have, by producing processes of escalation and radicalization (Alimi, Bosi and Demetriou 2015). This paper seeks to contribute to the study of the opposite effect, when political violence decreases despite sustained levels of repression, with the emergence of new forms of conflict, collective identity or social organization, due to adaptation in its dynamic relationship with the State. In this sense, the idea that I defend here is that the permanence of repressive patterns over time, in a negative way, forces the mobilization to transform itself in order to adapt, by taking forms that give it a greater capacity to resist in the face of repression. I will try to illustrate this idea through the case of the field of armed movements in Guerrero and its transition from offensive to defensive forms, that is, from the guerrilla to community defense.

Therefore, this work is based on a qualitative methodology. The secondary source for the results is substantial bibliographic research and a review of the local press. The primary source are the notes of a field diary written over several years—between 2012 and 2018—while participating in social work activities in various municipalities of Guerrero, from a privileged position as a university professor, which has allowed for numerous observation practices—often with participation—using ethnographic tools. In the municipality of Ayutla in particular, this work was carried out in two periods: between 2012 and 2013 as a local professor, and between 2017 and 2018 making a documentary on the municipal electoral process.

[1] Following Kilcullen (2010), counterinsurgency is an umbrella term that includes the set of measures that governments take to defeat an insurgency, that is, any political-military movement that struggles to conquer State power against the established government. For further developments on counterinsurgency in Mexico, see the work of Sierra Guzmán (2007).

It is important to note, however, that the most difficult issue to be investigated in Guerrero is precisely the question of the guerrillas—more than crime—, which is a real taboo due to its danger. Doing ethnography on the subject is extremely difficult because it requires very high levels of trust. As a local researcher acknowledges, the existence of guerrillas "has a veil of taboo and secrecy. The subject is not discussed openly except in private with trusted family and friends" (Berber, 2017: 123). Therefore, on several occasions my interlocutors refused to speak about it or declared not knowing anything. Of all the interviews that I have conducted with key actors in municipal politics and local history, over several years of fieldwork, only in five of them has the issue been addressed, and in three substantively. Of these last three, one was with a former guerrilla fighter, another with a sympathizer, and the last with a survivor of the Charco massacre. Meanwhile, the rest of the primary information on the guerrillas has been obtained outside of interviews, in informal conversations and in different places, often late at night.

Finally, this article is part of a broader research project on the historical genesis of the self-defense armed groups that emerged in early 2013 in the Costa Chica region. It represents a systematization effort that seeks to add to the general study of the armed forces in Mexico through a contribution—certainly modest—related to the contemporary evolution of the armed movements in Guerrero, and understood as an invitation for future and substantive investigations in the matter. To reach its conclusions—which will take stock of the changes and continuities of these movements—the article is divided into seven sections: 1) a succinct presentation of the municipality of Ayutla; 2) the resurgence of the guerrillas in the 1990s; 3) the Charco massacre; 4) the change from guerrillas to the Community Police; 5) the creation of a House of Justice in El Paraíso; 6) the subsequent assault it suffered to be dismantled; and, 7) conclusions on the results obtained from the analysis.

1. The Municipality of Ayutla de los Libres

Ayutla is one of the municipalities that make up the Costa Chica region in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero. Despite being considered a coastal municipality, it does not have an exit to the sea, but to the north it borders the mountain region. Due to this position, Ayutla shares with other neighboring municipalities a condition that places it in a subregion known as Costa-Montaña, as a natural and cultural border between both regions. It is the most populated municipality in the Costa Chica region, as well as the ninth municipality with the largest population in Guerrero with a total of almost 70,000 inhabitants as of 2015, divided between the main city of Ayutla and some one hundred rural localities, most with fewer than 500 inhabitants. Like the rest of the region, Ayutla is an eminently rural municipality. In 2014, 70% of its population was dedicated to the agricultural sector.

The biodiversity and natural wealth of the area, which make a variety of production systems possible, contrasts with the high levels of marginalization: 88% of the population lives in poverty and 56% in extreme poverty. Likewise, during the study period, half of the municipal population lacked access to food, 60% to living spaces and quality, and 80% to basic services (CONEVAL 2010). In education, 25% of the adult population was illiterate and 40% had not completed primary school (CONAPO 2010). In general, with the exception of access to health services—due to the existence of a hospital in the main city—indicators of social deprivation are systematically above national and state averages, illustrating the severity of the poverty that affects the majority of the municipality's population.

Part of this general condition of poverty is due to the geographical isolation that the municipality has historically suffered, since it occupies a border position in the regional geography in which the physical borders are reinforced by cultural, ethnic and linguistic borders. Indeed, more than half of the municipal

population recognizes itself as indigenous (INEGI 2015), either Mixtec (na savi) or Tlapanec (me'phaa), who live in the numerous localities of the mountainous parts of the municipality, isolated by the topography and connected to each other by paths and gaps. Proof of this isolation is the 55% rate of monolingualism of the inhabitants of the municipality's indigenous communities as of the year 2000 (Del Val and Cruz 2009: 549). In turn, these same localities are the most affected by conditions of marginalization, including El Charco and El Paraíso, both communities with very high rates of poverty.

On top of these differences between segregated, overlapping and interrelated social spaces, there is another conflict, economic in nature, resulting from historical processes of polarization between the group of peasant families on the one hand, and the factions of the local ruling class on the other. The latter's power is concentrated in the main city around the town hall, which separates the city of Ayutla from its annexed localities. In short, like most rural municipalities in the region, the structure of Ayutla's local society is characterized by a general condition of poverty exacerbated by a set of antagonisms whose main axis opposes poor peasant communities, mostly indigenous, with traditional systems of government, and a main city that serves as a symbol of modernity and where the power of the State and money are concentrated.

2. From One Guerrilla to Another

When we talk about insurgency in Mexico, the state of Guerrero is commonplace. In national history, from independence onwards, Guerrero has been a permanent stage for war. As the origin of numerous social upheavals, it has become the epicenter of the armed struggle, as if the guerrillas were part of the state's geography and the name of Guerrero—which means warrior—a predestination. However, the recurrence of the armed movements there is explained by two historical factors: first, by persistent conditions of poverty that affect the majority of the population; and second, by a deeply unequal social order that begets and is nurtured by these same conditions. To reproduce, this social order has had to adopt forms of government whose power bears the stamp of authoritarianism. In this sense, rebellions have often been violent because the rule they face is itself violent. In the deep south of Mexico that Armando Bartra describes (2000: 16-17), "the one who hits, commands, and the one who commands must hit [...] Those who rule by force, by force fight for power, and when the subordinates decide to shake off this clumsy mandate, they almost always end up appealing themselves to force: the social key par excellence in an order based on fear and violence."

Both due to the conditions of misery that prevail and the violence with which political power is exercised, there are plenty of reasons for the people of Guerrero to challenge the Mexican State. "Many have invited them to organize and rise up in arms against the system and, in most cases, they have listened to them attentively because they live in their own flesh the misery spoken of by those who suggest the armed path" (Barrera and Sarmiento 2006: 705). However, in the social history of Guerrero, taking up arms has rarely been the first option, but rather a last resort. Thus, the uprising of armed movements has always been preceded by civic and peaceful mobilizations whose social demands have failed to be met due to the closure of institutional channels and the neglect of governments.

This is the paradigmatic case of the guerrillas of the 1970s, which arose as a result of a civic movement that sought the democratization of the political system, but instead suffered electoral fraud—in the 1962 elections—and ended up becoming more radical in the face of increasing repression after several massacres: in Chilpancingo in 1960, Iguala in 1962, Acapulco and Atoyac in 1967. It is in reaction to these that two guerrilla organizations were created by Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez, two teachers made guerrilleros by the facts of reality (Aviña 2014). In the words of Bartra (2000: 139), "the brutal annihilation of the social

organization's peaceful civility in the early 1970s stifles the opposition's electoral belligerence [...] and angers the democratic rebellion, which will soon become armed." It is against both guerrillas that the so-called Dirty War was developed (Herrera and Cedillo 2012), through a massive military deployment, a scorched earth policy and a systematic use of torture and enforced disappearance. If this war achieved its main objective, the physical destruction of both guerrillas, in no way did it mean the elimination of the structural causes that had given rise to the rebellion.

In consequence, the guerrillas returned to public light in the mid-1990s, after the Aguas Blancas massacre, with the uprising of the People's Revolutionary Army—Ejército del Pueblo Revolucionario (EPR). While it is true that this army is not the direct continuation of the guerrillas of the 1970s, it is also true that the EPR is nourished by this historical experience, works according to inherited schemes and, therefore, "represents a type of guerrilla that does not succeed in overcoming the limitations of their previous expressions" (Barrera and Sarmiento 2006: 693). The history of the EPR is that of a common front made up of diverse small armed groups which momentarily converged in the only major military campaign that the guerrilla managed to carry out, between late 1996 and mid-1997—in various Mexican states. Despite this initial projection, it soon became clear that Guerrero continued to occupy a central position, since it was there that the EPR was first made known and where it was estimated that more than half of its columns were concentrated (Gutiérrez 1998: 305).

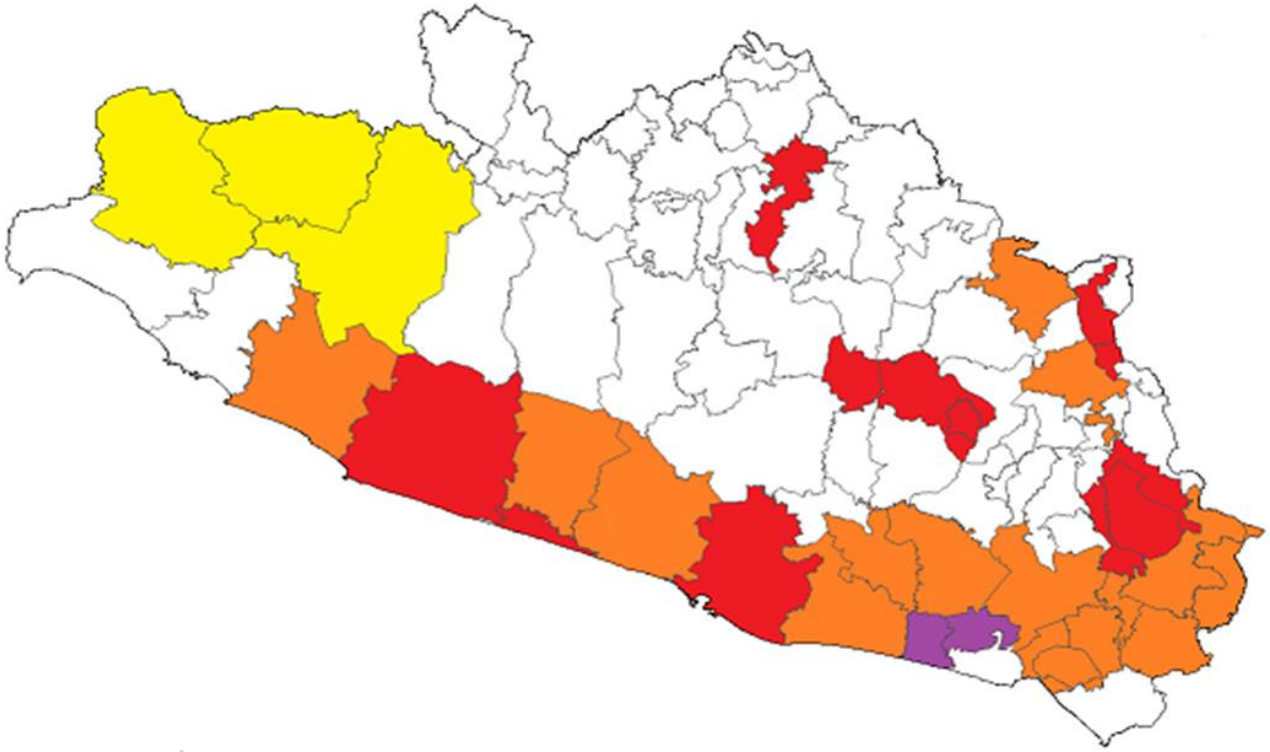
After the offensive, the diaspora began. Dogmatism, strategic divergence, and internal struggles fragmented the EPR into numerous divisions. "New identities and denominations have been progressively formed, acknowledging the EPR movement as the original, common core" (Lofredo 2007b: 51). The first great schism occurred in 1998 with the detachment of the Revolutionary Army of the Insurgent People—Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo Insurgente (ERPI). After this, the acronyms multiplied at the rhythm of the press releases. Between 1996 and 2013, the guerrilla groups announced in Guerrero added a total of approximately 26 different acronyms, coined especially in the years immediately following the public emergence of the EPR. However, only a minority of these names have taken military actions that have a press record, while most of the initials have left nothing more than a written proclamation or a fleeting appearance. Of these, little or nothing has been known again, giving rise to a "nebula"—to borrow the expression used by Jorge Lofredo.

The organizational fragmentation of the EPR movement is also clear in its geographical dispersion. Between 1996 and 2013, press monitoring efforts—including mine—indicated the presence of guerrilla groups in at least 32 municipalities of Guerrero, more due to armed propaganda activities than to military actions (Map 1). This presence was concentrated on both coasts of the state—Costa Grande and Costa Chica, separated by the Acapulco bay—but it was also found in some points of other regions, between areas of influence of the EPR [red], the ERPI [yellow], both [orange] and a third group (FARP) [violet].

Guerrero is a scene overcrowded with armed movements, so the degree of fragmentation of the EPR movement is so high that it is extremely difficult to distinguish between genuine guerrillas and other groups, which instead respond to power interests, be they paramilitary or criminal. Now, the gray area in which the guerrillas move, "despite the doubts and suspicions that the armed groups and their real intentions arouse, the issue is no less important; rather, there should be further analysis and understanding of both the Mexican State's strategy of creating fictitious groups […] and the political culture of peasants and indigenous people" (Lofredo, 2007a: 235).[2]

[2] I recognize that the EPR movement represents a big research challenge. First, because studies on contemporary forms of guerrilla in Guerrero are scarce, unlike their predecessors from the 1960s and 1970s, much more studied because of the Dirty War; and second, because the taboo subject par excellence in Guerrero is precisely the guerrilla, which greatly hinders any

Map 1. Guerrilla presence in municipalities of Guerrero with a press record (1996-2013)



Sources: *Gutiérrez 1998, Sánchez Valdés 2015*

With the guerrilla revival, the militarization policies have been reactivated for implementing a counterinsurgency that had been tried in the Dirty War and that is now reinventing itself in Chiapas in the face of the Zapatista uprising. Among others, a good example of this is the arrival of Luis Humberto López Portillo Leal to the command of the IX Military Region—corresponding to the state of Guerrero. He is the same military chief accused of ordering executions during the battle of Ocosingo—in Chiapas—against the Zapatist Army. He was trained in the fight against Lucio Cabañas in the 1970s (Gutiérrez 1998: 281). By the end of 1999, the Pie de la Cuesta Air Base, the Icacos Naval Base—both in Acapulco—and the seven pre-existing infantry battalions based in Guerrero had been joined by three more battalions and a headquarters of special forces. Likewise, "in 1997 the federal deputies of the Defense Commission estimated the number of soldiers in Guerrero at 23,000, while the EPR stated that there were 45,000" (Gutiérrez 2000: 93).

The massive deployment of troops, which seeks the physical occupation of the field, repeats the basic schemes of the Dirty War, because, as Carlos Montemayor (2007: 34) explains, “the peasant and indigenous guerrilla grows under the complicit silence of an entire region […] The armed or military-prepared groups are but the tip of the iceberg. The extensive and complex family ties penetrate villages and ranches with a communication system that the Army is unable to decipher or anticipate without resorting to indiscriminate devastation. This indigenous and peasant support for the guerrilla is the circuit that the armies intend to deactivate.” To do this, roads, hills and parcels are turned into small battlefields where the peasants constantly find themselves facing military checkpoints, soldiers' pickets or improvised camps. In these places, abuses of power and human rights violations are committed. Security forces become risk factors.

ethnography on the subject. Consequently, the few results that I present are still partial and can only be an invitation for future research, as indicated in the introduction.

Additionally, in indigenous municipalities such as Ayutla, the effects of loss of legitimacy are exacerbated by the cultural and social distance that separates the soldiers from the indigenous peasants, who carry the stigmas built against them. Conversely, for the latter, the troops generate mistrust as they embody the mestizo power of an urban world that rejects them and a State that oppresses them. It is for these reasons that the guerrillas have found roots in a municipality like Ayutla. Their area of influence is particularly strong among the municipality's indigenous communities—as confirmed by all the interviews in which the subject was discussed. The main reasons for this presence, according to my informants, are the conditions of extreme poverty and the multiple injustices of which indigenous people are victims. In the face of governmental omission and political violence, some people see "no other way" (Goodwin, 2001) to improve these conditions than to resort to armed struggle. Despite the cost that their participation in the guerrilla can represent, it is a way that communities have found to defend themselves against abuses and, at the same time, to try to provoke some kind of political change.

3. June 7, 1998: The Charco Massacre

In the contemporary history of Guerrero, each guerrilla cycle, both in the 60s and the 90s, is associated with various massacres.[3] In the mid-1990s, the guerrilla rebirth coincided with the Aguas Blancas massacre and culminated with the Charco massacre. The first allowed the convergence of the EPR, while the second showed its fragmentation. Completed in late 1997, the split of the ERPI is seen as the great schism of the EPR movement, since it undoubtedly represented the most important part of the Guerrero cadres, particularly on the coast, and corresponded more or less with the state committee of the EPR (Lofredo 2007b: 51). The ERPI stands out for its insurgency strategies. It promotes the role of the support bases in decision-making processes, which has led it to establish stable relations with unarmed social sectors and non-clandestine organizations. In this sense, the ERPI shows a certain closeness to the Zapatist movement.

This new guerrilla came to light due to the massacre that occurred in the Mixtec village of El Charco, in Ayutla, on June 7, 1998. On the previous day, a meeting was called by traditional authorities for the management of productive projects. It was attended by inhabitants of the village, as well as by visitors from localities of the area, mostly Mixtec men. Towards the end of the afternoon, a column of the ERPI joined the meeting to proselytize the attendees. "Then they spent time with the peasants. Some of them spoke in Mixtec language […] At around 10 p.m., the community's inhabitants retired to sleep at their homes, and the guerrilleros and visiting peasants stayed inside the village primary school" (Gutiérrez 1998: 296). In some way or another, information about the meeting reached the Mexican Army, whose 78th Infantry Battalion deployed a spectacular operation, along with local police, to reach the village the next morning, and surprise those who were spending the night in the two classrooms of the primary school (CNDH 2000). The assault occurred at dawn. 11 people were killed, five others were injured and 22 were detained and taken to the IX Military Region Headquarters in Acapulco, where they were systematically tortured. Of the 11 dead, 10 were

[3] These massacres, although they undoubtedly contribute to the radicalization of the political struggle and the possibility of taking up arms, do not in themselves explain the existence of armed movements, or the emergence of guerrillas. In this sense, in the same way that there can be conflict without mobilization, critical episodes of repression can occur without necessarily triggering a social response, because the threat they produce manages to inhibit it. In Guerrero, while every guerrilla uprising has been preceded by a massacre, not all massacres have provoked this type of reaction. They have only done so under certain circumstances.

from the Mixtec zone of the municipality. Among them, the ERPI recognized four of its members. The only statement of the guerrilla about what happened says the following:

> At the village school, seven unarmed civilians and four revolutionary fighters were murdered […] The official version that states it was a casual meeting during a routine tour is absurd […] The federal army put a tactical fence around the village […] Our unit chose to leave the classrooms to take the combat away from the school and avoid a larger massacre […] The two fighters who resisted until the end, Oscar and Elías, and two more civilians, were executed at great speed and at short range on the school court. They had surrendered and were unarmed. The 11 bodies that the Army presented as a result of a confrontation actually correspond to one combatant killed in combat, a volunteer visitor killed in combat, two temporary or dispersed combatants executed when surrendered and unarmed, and seven peasants killed when they were totally defenseless (five in the classrooms and two more on the court). The wounded are all civilians [who] were also unarmed. (ERPI 1998)

According to the "Tlachinollan" Mountain Human Rights Center—with an office in Ayutla—from now on, the municipality is "under the gaze of police and military authorities. Policies […] are drafted according to the script of the counterinsurgency war. The recommendation of the generals and the police inform the content of policies that the state executive power and the municipal government must adopt" (Tlachinollan 2011: 86). After El Charco, the municipality was militarized, increasing both military operations and grievances to the civilian population. Thus, between 1998 and 2004, a total of 16 cases of human rights violations by the army were registered in seven different villages of Ayutla, always against indigenous communities and individuals (Tlachinollan 2004). One of these cases corresponds to a forced sterilization campaign, implemented in 1998 by the local Ministry of Health, through which 32 indigenous men were sterilized. In those years, several cases of indigenous women raped by soldiers were also reported, as is the case of Inés Fernández and Valentina Rosendo (Amnesty International 2004).

However, the implementation of counterinsurgency measures has not only meant the exercise of external violence on communities, but also an active promotion of paramilitary activities through the recruitment of individuals and groups who enter the army service in their irregular warfare against the guerrillas. "This is precisely what has happened in Ayutla. In many of the communities, the army has embedded itself in the social fabric, linking up with caciques, businessmen, or local groups" (Orraca 2012: 114). Taking advantage of internal divisions and pre-existing conflicts, paramilitarism has allowed the cohesion of the guerrilla base communities to be fragmented, even dividing them into two clearly opposite groups. It has also been an ideal means for the commission of several political assassinations, which occurred in subsequent years (PBI 2009; Schatz 2011).

4. From the Guerrilla to the Community Police

The contemporary evolution of the armed movements in Guerrero has gone through profound processes of transformation and reconfiguration driven by a dual need: on the one hand, to overcome the strategic failure of insurrectional focus, the stagnant Leninism that supports it and the fragmentation that has derived from its sectarian dogmatism; and on the other, to adapt to the structural changes of the political frameworks introduced by the neoliberal leaning of successive federal governments, especially from the 1990s onwards. This is why, at the same time as the EPR, an armed organization arose that nevertheless represents an

alternative in the field of armed movements: it is the Community Police, created in 1995 in the Costa-Montaña region and consolidated in 1998 as the Regional Coordination of Community Authorities—Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias (CRAC).

The Community Police is born as a collective and self-managed response of some indigenous villages to crime, police corruption and judicial impunity. In the CRAC system, policemen are elected in a general assembly of the village and provide unpaid service for one year. The system allows the different police groups to coordinate. Important decisions and the appointment of the governing bodies are agreed in a Regional Assembly. At the same time, the CRAC is created to prosecute prisoners, due to judicial impunity. Detained individuals are judged by the community authorities—often in their own language—in accordance with the principles of local normative systems. In addition, it is worth mentioning that, if found guilty, prisoners go through a re-education process that involves compensation for the damages and effective reintegration into community life, by carrying out work of collective interest on an itinerant basis. This is how the CRAC system begins to function, in fact, around a House of Justice that has its historical headquarters in San Luis Acatlán (a neighboring municipality of Ayutla). Since its first years of life, this system has known undeniable success, characterized by its effectiveness in preventing and reducing crime, the accessibility of its justice, and the usefulness of its re-education process. Consequently, the number of localities that have sought to join the CRAC, from other municipalities and regions, has been constantly increasing. Finally, it is important to note that, due to this growth, it was decided in 2007 to divide the system into several jurisdictions, through the creation of other Houses of Justice.[4]

Although certain features are common to the history of the guerrilla and the Community Police, such as the general conditions of misery, marginalization and injustice that make it a necessity to gain rights by taking up arms, the organizational traditions in which both sides are framed present two different genealogies. Schematically, the guerrilla—based on the model of the Cuban Revolution—comes from a tradition of the peasantry as a class, has a military structure and seeks to transform the dominant political system, while the Community Police draws on the organizational matrix of indigenous peoples, is sustained by community systems of government, and represents the construction of collective responses to the problems that affect village life. Likewise, these are two sides of an armed struggle that faces two different versions of the Mexican state: for the guerrillas, since the 1960s, a strong post-revolutionary State that must be challenged; for the Community Police, since the 1990s, a weakened neoliberal State that must be replaced. On the one hand, it is about changing a State that damages society; on the other, about rebuilding a society damaged by the collapse of the State. The care of life in society is displacing the demand for seizing power.

The gradual weakening of the guerrilla path that the EPR movement had embodied coincides and contrasts with the strengthening of another option for the armed resistance in southern Mexico: community defense,[5]

[4] There is abundant Mexican literature on the Community Police in Guerrero. For further developments, one of the main specialists, María Teresa Sierra (2008, 2010), has published several texts in English.

[5] Community defense is an analytical proposal that I take from the work of Fuentes and Fini (2018) to explain the armed movements in southern contemporary Mexico, entering into debate with the dominant categories of "armed civilians", "vigilantes" or "non-state armed groups", because these are used to encompass experiences so different that they prevent capturing the specificity of defense in an insecure environment and, second, because the characterization of non-state can become ambiguous and complicate its understanding when these defensive groups are related, formally or informally, to the State. In effect, as an expression of the traditional governments, like them, community defense bodies exist between law and custom. Their relationship with the State should not be read in Manichean terms—and thus be seen in continuity with the guerrilla—but as a set of complex contentious processes. For further developments, see Fuentes (2017).

that is to say, the formation of defensive armed forces, established on a grassroots organizational basis and with the goal of guaranteeing the security of the localities. In Mexico, however, community defense is not new in itself, but represents the updating of a historical constant, inherited from the Mexican Revolution, with antecedents in the rural peasant guards, as well as in the police corps of indigenous communities. In this sense, if in their conflictive history the people of Guerrero have had to resort to arms, they did it more to defend themselves against abuse and injustice than to attack the forces of an order that oppresses them. It has been more in self-defense against bandits and caciques than in offense against the government. Even in the case of the guerrillas, it has been more to defend themselves against abuses than to seize power.

The crisis of insecurity at the beginning of the twenty-first century reactivated the latent nature of this organizational tradition. New armed groups emerged—after the pioneering CRAC. Therefore, the new defense strategy seeks, in first instance, to respond to the generalized crisis of violence that has characterized neoliberal governance in Mexico in times of the "war on drugs", and that has been exercised with singular harshness in the deep south of the country. There, starting in the second half of the 2000s, the levels of violent crime and homicides increased dramatically. In Ayutla, the rate of the latter has been systematically higher than the state average, making it the most violent municipality in the entire Costa Chica region from 2006 to 2011 uninterruptedly. The levels were much higher than those of the neighboring municipalities, and proportionally greater in that period than those of Acapulco, epicenter of criminal violence in Guerrero. For the year 2009 alone, the municipal rate reached the record level of 153 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, which placed Ayutla among the 100 most violent municipalities in the country (Resa, 2013).

In this climate of heightened violence, Lorenzo, brother of Inés Fernández—one of the indigenous women raped by soldiers in 2002—was tortured and killed in February 2008. In April of the same year, five members of the local Tlapanec organization were arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned (Amnesty International 2010). Among them was the legal representative of the male victims of forced sterilization. In the following year, in 2009, Raúl Lucas and Manuel Ponce, president and secretary of the local Mixtec organization respectively, were disappeared, tortured, and murdered. These actions sought to break up the organizational processes of the indigenous communities in Ayutla. "The extrajudicial execution of the Mixtec leaders was a duly planned crime against humanity; the orchestrators coldly calculated the impacts that this execrable event would have on their organization. The damages were not only individual or familial but collective" (Tlachinollan 2009: 35).

5. A House of Justice in El Paraíso

Given the gravity of the situation, the localities of Ayutla needed to ensure their safety. Thus, traditional authorities were increasingly interested in the CRAC experience in the neighboring municipality of San Luis Acatlán. There were several approaches and attempts at dialogue with this organization, particularly in 2008 and 2009, but "the murders of Raúl Lucas and Manuel Ponce [...] caused the temporary suspension of the process" (Nicasio 2014: 278). Starting in 2011, another Mixtec leader, Arturo Campos, resumed his promotional work for the organization of police groups through a consultation campaign in the indigenous villages. However, in those years the existence of internal conflicts in the CRAC started to become more evident, covered in the media for the struggle of its leaders, amid the dilemmas created by the need for the organization to adapt to the challenges posed by the scenario of drug war policies (Fini 2019). In a way, the CRAC was a victim of its own success, since

> several of its founders, seduced by academics and politicians, went from forum to forum explaining their successful justice system. On more than a few occasions, the CRAC served to catapult politicians to public office, and other times the leaders themselves were tempted to do so […] What was once a community service became a space of fetishized power. In this way, the coordinators gradually abandoned the work of security, justice and re-education, and they neglected to strengthen the cargo system[6] […] This was aggravated by the creation of other Houses of Justice that were unaware of the CRAC process (Tlachinollan 2014: 132-133).

The process of dialogue between the Ayutla communities and the CRAC gained strength in 2012, not only as a result of the leadership of Arturo Campos, but also due to the consolidation in the municipality of another recently created organization: the Union of Peoples and Organizations of the State of Guerrero—Unión de Pueblos y Organizaciones del Estado de Guerrero (UPOEG). Although this organization's agenda is aimed more towards the management of local development projects, the origin of its founders is of crucial importance: they have played an active role in the history of the CRAC and so have extensive community organization experience in matters of security. Therefore, it is this coincidence of organizational processes, together with the confluence of collective demands for security on the one hand, and the concurrence of social leadership with a strong militant capital on the other, which in Ayutla allowed "the UPOEG to promote the formation of a community police in the southeast of the municipality simultaneously to the management of productive projects, social demands and political participation" (Hernández 2014: 192). In this way, in October 2012, during the Community Police's XVII Anniversary, the public presentation of the police groups of 27 Ayutla localities was organized for their formal incorporation into the CRAC system, thus forming the basis for the foundation of a new House of Justice. It was finally created on December 22 based on a decision of the representatives of the other Houses of Justice. The new House was established in the village of El Paraíso, in Ayutla, a few kilometers from El Charco.

The foundation of this House of Justice is part of a critical juncture, marked by the teachers' movement against a federal educational reform and by the emergence of a series of community defense organizations throughout Guerrero. At the beginning of 2013, an armed uprising of civil self-defense groups took place in Ayutla, which in the following weeks spread to the neighboring municipalities, integrating a Citizen Police system—based on the CRAC—under the auspices of the UPOEG. Likewise, between the end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013, community defense movements were taking place in other regions of Guerrero. This is the case of La Cañada, where the inhabitants of the cities of Huamuxtitlán and Olinalá instituted their own security forces (Ortiz and Torres 2018). This is also the case of Tixtla, a municipality in the Center region—neighboring the state capital, Chilpancingo—where a community defense was organized by various villages and urban neighborhoods (Gatica 2018).

Despite the internal conflict that was weakening it, outwards "the CRAC shines as an alternative of justice and security with community roots [...] It is not surprising, therefore, that indigenous and rural localities have

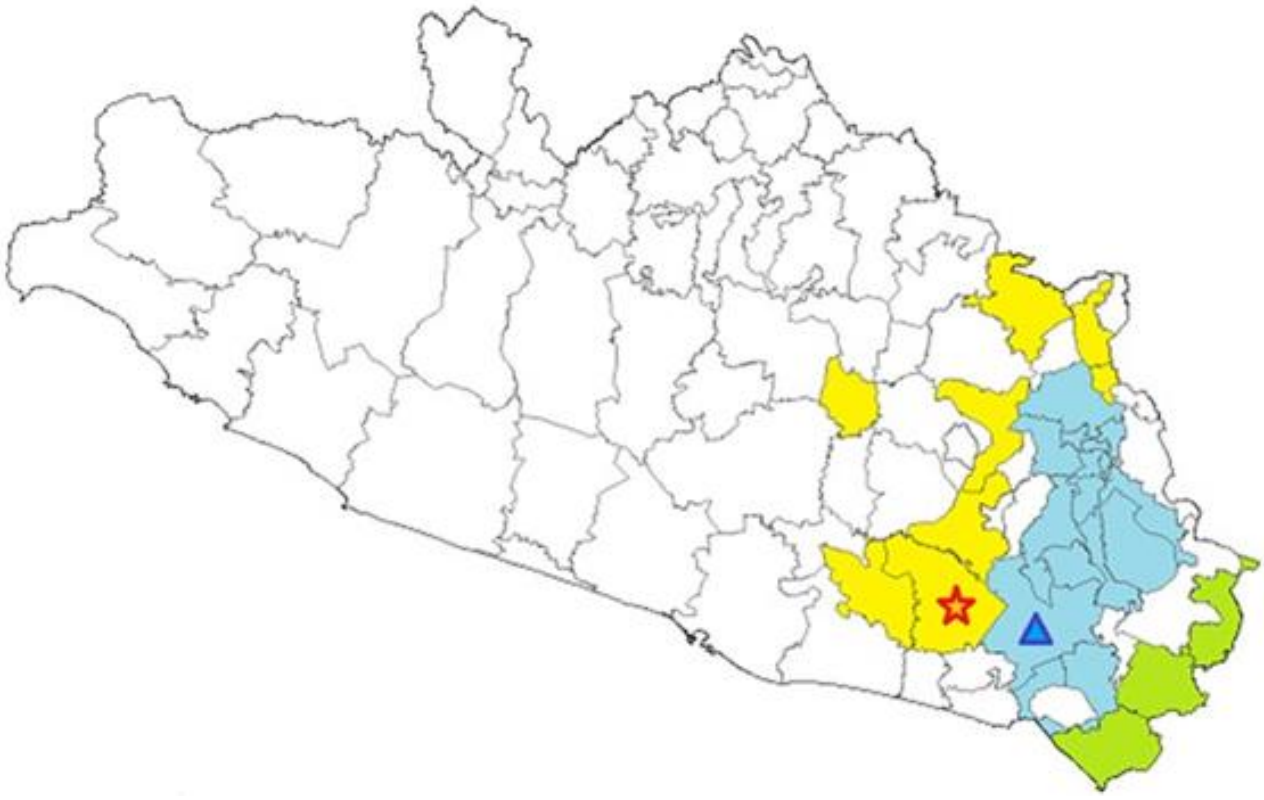
[6] In various regions of Guerrero, the community governments are structured based on what classical Mesoamericanist anthropology conceptualized as the "cargo system." The system is an institutional set of political practices based on an imperative of service to the community, understood as a citizen duty to which all adult or married people in the locality are subject. In turn, the provision of community service is articulated with a hierarchy of positions with specific functions, which everyone must fill throughout their life in an alternating and ascending manner. This principle of community service, then, refers to the fulfillment of assignments by individuals designated for this purpose, whose tasks are indicated by law and custom. On the cargo system in Mesoamerica, see the anthology organized by Korsbaek (1996) with classic texts like those of Sol Tax, Eric Wolf, Manning Nash, Frank Cancian and Andrés Medina, among others.

looked to the CRAC model when facing violence and insecurity in the midst of State negligence" (Tlachinollan 2013: 32). In addition to the legal recognition of the CRAC in 2011 by a local law, more and more localities were seeking to join the organization. Most of the new community defense movements requested their incorporation. In early 2013, police groups from the Tixtla and Tecoanapa municipalities joined the CRAC system, followed in March by those from Olinalá and, in June, those from Huamuxtitlán and Tlatlauquitepec. In turn, all these new additions became part of the El Paraíso House of Justice.

6. August 21, 2013: The Assault on El Paraíso

Due to this series of additions, the recently inaugurated House of Justice in El Paraíso soon faced serious challenges. The first of these was operational in nature and stemmed from the jurisdiction's high degree of geographic dispersion, whose disorderly growth was not based on practical criteria but on political ones. The main result was the difficulty of organizing discontinuous and distant zones [yellow] from El Paraíso in Ayutla [star] and, at the same time, of coordinating them with the San Luis Acatlán House of Justice [triangle], the other Houses of the historical region of the Community Police [blue] and new municipalities in the process of incorporation [green] (Map 2). The operational complications of this dispersion were numerous. In fact, holding assemblies for decision-making, carrying out police actions and transferring prisoners was extremely difficult.

Map 2. Municipalities of Guerrero with CRAC presence in mid-2013



Sources: Nicasio 2014, Fini 2019

Furthermore, the multiplicity of incorporated areas entails a second difficulty, cultural in nature, due to the diversity of local contexts, the difference in political histories and the heterogeneity of organizational dynamics. Both in rural and urban environments, with mixed and not necessarily indigenous identities, the community service that sustains the traditional governments was practiced in partial and differentiated ways. In short, the haste of an accelerated and heated process of incorporation into the CRAC system overflowed the internal channels of regulation and ended "without respect for a set of practices and operating rules that tend to subsume control of the process to community-type instances, such as local or regional assemblies […] These dynamics generated anomalies in the process of incorporating new communities" (Fini 2019: 66).

Added to the above, the fact that the new House of Justice was immersed within the struggles that structured the CRAC internal conflict turned it into an object of dispute for the warring factions. In effect, the creation of the El Paraíso House of Justice preceded the crisis that led to the organization's internal elections in February 2013, with Eliseo Villar being elected as one of the new coordinators of the main House of Justice in San Luis Acatlán. From there, the relationship between the leaderships of both Houses—the one in El Paraíso and the one in San Luis—was characterized by increasing tensions caused by a series of disagreements. In the following months, reciprocal complaints began to circulate within the CRAC, the first House accusing the second of authoritarianism and corruption, and the second accusing the first of politicization and radicalism. In this sense, "the El Paraíso House of Justice was formed on the go, with its own style of acting that was described by the San Luis Acatlán CRAC as 'autonomous,' and should be understood as a product of the convulsive socio-political process that Ayutla has undergone" (Nicasio 2014: 280).

Meanwhile, in Olinalá, the Community Police group attached to El Paraíso and headed by its commander, Nestora Salgado, fought the criminal group that operated in said municipality with the complicity of the city council (López 2019). The result of this struggle was the flagrant capture of an important leader, a member of the local ruling class, who was transferred to El Paraíso. For its part, in Tixtla, the new Community Police group faced the political-criminal nexus that united the local delinquency and the municipal government, in addition to the geographical isolation that characterized it in relation to the rest of the CRAC system. To do this, it took direct actions and engaged with other social sectors, like the mobilized teachers and students from the neighboring Ayotzinapa Normal School. Finally, also in Ayutla, CRAC sectors, UPOEG groups and the teachers' union converged.

As a result of the confluence of these organizational processes, the new House of Justice began to mobilize on the offense against the state government, which is uncharacteristic of the CRAC political tradition, but not without recalling a style more appropriate to the guerrilla model. Immersed from its beginnings within a critical juncture and a highly conflictive general dynamic, both outward and inward, the police groups attached to El Paraíso took actions together with the teachers' movement, participating in several demonstrations. This process of unity culminated in April 2013 with the symbolic but spectacular entry of an armed contingent of Community Police to the state capital, Chilpancingo, bypassing a military checkpoint under the protection of the mobilized teachers. With this action, together with the arrest of the politician from Olinalá, the elements for a new act of repression were in place. Given that year's contentious situation, however, various preparations were required before it could be carried out.

The first government response occurred with the local deployment of military troops, immediately after the different local armed uprisings—particularly in Ayutla, Tecoanapa and Olinalá—with systematic actions of harassment and disarmament. However, sometimes in a contradictory way, at the same time the state government granted subsidies, support, and various equipment—including weapons—in favor of the CRAC. Following Governor Ángel Aguirre's visit to San Luis Acatlán in May, the coordinator of the main House of Justice, Eliseo Villar, shifted from a confrontational position to an openly collaborative one, with a state

government that in exchange reinforced its subsidy policy to the CRAC, for the particular benefit of its leadership. With the partial and discretionary redistribution of this money, in turn, it was possible to corrupt important sectors of the CRAC system, extending its client network under a logic of power. The growing authoritarianism of San Luis Acatlán over the other Houses of Justice ended up precipitating the conflict with the last established House. On August 9, lending himself to the official intrigue, Eliseo Villar publicly declared the unilateral "expulsion" of El Paraíso, leaving unprotected all the police groups assigned to this House of Justice, without organizational support or legal protection.

A few days later, on August 21, a large-scale military operation was carried out, coordinated at the federal level, and deployed simultaneously on three fronts. In Ayutla, a convoy from the 48th Infantry Battalion arrived in El Paraíso accompanied by some marines and policemen who sacked the House of Justice's office, destroying the judicial files, and released the prisoners who were at the time in the process of re-education—including, of course, the local politician. A total of 13 CRAC policemen were detained, transferred to Acapulco, and systematically tortured there, with the participation of some released prisoners (CNDH 2016). At the same time, in the municipality of Atlixtac, military and Federal Police elements reached Tlatlauquitepec, releasing three accused persons and arresting four more CRAC policemen. Likewise, in Olinalá Nestora Salgado, one of the more emblematic social figures in Guerrero, was arrested.[7] Finally, in the days before and after the military operation, arrest warrants were issued against several members of the Community Police, including all those arrested on the 21st. Among the latter is one of the coordinators of the El Paraíso House of Justice, Bernardino García, a member of the local Mixtec organization in Ayutla and a survivor of the Charco massacre.

7. Conclusions

The historical comparison between the two episodes of repression, which occurred in El Charco in 1998 and El Paraíso in 2013, shows the following result: while the field of armed movements has undergone profound transformations, reflected in a general shift from guerrilla to community defense, the counterinsurgency policies against both forms presents more continuities than ruptures. Indeed, if there are any changes in the government response to the armed movement—perhaps the most notable of which is a policy of subsidies destined for leadership cooptation—they seem relatively minor, especially if they are contrasted with the reproduction of patterns and practices among the State security forces. The main reason why this repression has remained relatively stable lies in the maintenance of local forms of government, beyond the changes that have occurred in the national political system. Despite the openness to multipartyism in the 2000s and the end of the single-party regime, an authoritarian way of exercising power,

[7] In 2018, Nestora Salgado was elected senator by the political party of the current Mexican President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (MORENA). Although the election of this new government transcends the time limit of this research work, it can be said, in general terms, that the federal government's strategy of favoring negotiation in its interaction with protest movements has generated a political environment relatively hostile to repression. However, it is striking how this same government has ostensibly ignored the Community Police and other social organizations—which are not usually considered legitimate interlocutors or included in the new policies—simply because they are armed. In Guerrero in particular, the evolution of armed movements and repression, in the coming years, will largely depend on the outcome of the transitional justice process undertaken by the current federal government in the Ayotzinapa case.

known as caciquismo, has been reproduced in Guerrero—as in other regions of Mexico—as a form of subnational authoritarianism (Gibson 2012).[8]

Despite the 15-year gap that separates the two events, both are characterized by a disproportionate use of force and the organization of special intervention operations, under military leadership. These elements are symptomatic of constant human rights violations, not only of those detained but of the civilian population in general, combined with the equally systematic ignorance of the collective rights of indigenous peoples. In southern Mexico, militarization has historically been the main response of the State to armed movements (Oikión 2007), whose strategy lies in criminalizing protests and judicializing social organization as if they were outlaws. In this sense, what makes clear the continuity of the counterinsurgency is, first of all, the domination of a militarist paradigm whose binary schemes equate every armed movement with a guerilla, understood as a regular army capable of advancing into positions and capturing places, when in reality they are not. In Guerrero, the guerrilla has only the name of an insurgent army because "it cannot leave its region. It can grow, expand its strength in the region itself […] but such growth will not, in principle, extend it outside those boundaries" (Montemayor 2007: 15). Besides, the military approach minimizes the sociological causality of the armed movements, reducing them to the core of its leadership, whose support cannot come only from popular solidarity, but also from an external source of resources, a kind of hidden power that would have to be revealed—such as drug trafficking in the case of Guerrero.

What illustrates the consistency of the counterinsurgency is, second, the levels of fear, paranoia and visceral anti-communism that usually characterize the government vision of the armed movements, particularly in Mexico. In this sense, in the 1990s, the EPR was perceived as the ghost of the Zapatism movement beyond Chiapas. In the following decades, despite the transition from offensive to defensive forms, the armed movements have been perceived as no less harmful by government circles. The Community Police of today continues to represent the guerrilla danger of yesterday. This explains the continuity of a counterinsurgency that seems to affect in a differentiated way the defensive forms of social organization, which, as expressions of an evolutionary adaptation to repression, have shown to have a certain capacity for resilience. Thus, despite the assault it had suffered five years earlier, at the end of 2018, the El Paraíso House of Justice was still operating, providing security and justice. In October of that year, the Community Police system celebrated 23 years of existence. The anniversary was celebrated in Ayutla.

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[8] To the extent that the question of counterinsurgency operates as an 'independent variable' in this paper, I acknowledge that the treatment of repression will continue to be more descriptive than analytical. For further developments, I invite readers to consult the work of Knight and Pansters (2005) on the structural function of caciquismo in Mexican politics, as well as my own work for the case of Guerrero, to understand the continuity of authoritarianism for the exercise of political power at the subnational level.

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