

A Reign of Burnt Wounds and Crowded Cells: Exploring how political power is upheld at street level through observations of the municipal police in Mexico City

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PhD in Development Studies

Submitted: 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2020

This dissertation is submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements of the of the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

## **Declaration**

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

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**Abstract**

Recent studies of police, particularly those that have followed an ethnographic approach in diverse settings across the Global South, have unmasked policing as an everyday exercise of power, a source of mediation between state and non-state actors and an apparatus that enforces the status quo. But if these findings entail a conceptualisation of the police as a political actor, then how does it enact politics at street level? Moreover, how are political elites upheld through police practices? This dissertation follows the methods and aim of the aforementioned ethnographic studies in order to explore whether policing in Mexico conceals answers to these questions. For that purpose, this dissertation draws on eight months of participant observations conducted within a municipal police precinct located in the outskirts of Mexico City. Through this method, I examine how municipal police officers and detectives operate through gendered assumptions and racist logics. Indeed, the practices, words and gestures of municipal police officers and detectives exposed how their way of conceiving and reacting to crimes and violence unearthed the systematic reproduction of a hegemonic masculinity. Concurrently, their treatment of alleged suspects revealed the enforcement of a long-established social hierarchy that is based on privileging whiteness. As this dissertation argues, the exercise of street level power on gendered and racial terms points to why these police officers and detectives represent a political elite that has ruled over that area of the city – and until recently, over the entire country - for nearly a century. Crucially, these exercises of power are largely obscured by everyday policing techniques that systematically produce arrested subjects, therefore creating a façade of law enforcement that allows for the police to be justified in a moment when its role is increasingly questioned and scrutinised, moreover in the face of ever-expanding violence and the incipient militarisation of municipal policing.

## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation could not have been written without the intellectual generosity, relentless support, invaluable guidance and kind understanding of my supervisor, Professor Graham Denyer Willis. Thank you for believing in my work and showing me the way when my own limitations seemed to darken the process. I am also immensely grateful to the kind and helpful academic staff at the Centre of Development Studies.

This dissertation is owed to the financial support of the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) in Mexico, as well as the Cambridge Commonwealth, European & International Trust. My exceeding gratitude goes to these generous and supportive funding bodies, particularly for their kind attention, help and understanding in times of a global pandemic. I am also grateful for the fieldwork funding provided by the Department of Politics and International Studies, as well as by the Worts Travelling Scholars Fund. I would also like to thank Jesus College for being a home in the warmest sense of the word throughout my time in Cambridge, as well as to the University for making me part of its timeless community.

I am indebted to the authorities at the General and Regional Prosecutor's Office of the State of Mexico for making this research possible. As my research reached its writing stages, the advice and kind feedback provided by Mathew Mahmoudi, Lorena Gazzotti, Giulia Torino, Alejandro Lerch, Shreyashi Dasgupta, Max Curtis, Surer Mohamed, Niyousha Bastani and Noura Whabi was decisively helpful. Thank you to all of you.

My warmest thank you to Isa, the love of my life, who bore, cared for and looked after Javier and Pablo, our treasures – and inspiration – while this dissertation was written. Thank you for giving me strength and belief every day. Thank you to Luis, my father-in-law, for crossing the world to help us amidst difficult moments. Thank you to my mother, for looking down and guiding me, and to my father, for carrying me with your example and love. Most of all, thank you God for blessing me with all of the aforementioned.

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## Introduction

“The commander is in the ‘cave’ if you want to go and see him”, one of the clerks told me. By that time, almost two months into my fieldwork, I knew exactly where that was. The ‘*cueva*’ (‘cave’) was a common room adjacent to the commander’s office. It had initially been intended to be furnished as a conference room two years prior, when the precinct was built, but the construction works were interrupted and the room was left unpainted and dark. As one of the police officers working there once explained to me, they liked it that way as they thought it was an ideal place to interrogate alleged suspects. “*Se sacan de pedo bien cabrón ahí*” (which once translated means “they get really scared and confused there”), he told me with a mix of amusement and pride. This statement had startled me at the time but then I had written it off as what Moskos (2008) calls ‘tough police talk’ until that day. Much to my concern as an observer, the description of the room and its effect on people turned out to be accurate.

I followed the clerk’s instructions and made my way to the ‘cave’ through the precinct’s hallways. I was nervous, as I had not been ‘invited’ to an interrogation until that day. As the commander later confessed to me, he thought I was not ready before that day. Indeed, I was not ready for what I was about to see. I came to the room’s door and noticed it was open. From the outside, I could see the commander and another man in a beige hunter vest. I had never seen the latter before. Both were walking in circles around a younger looking man wearing a white barber apron who was sitting in an aluminium portable chair. I tried not to make a sound, as I preferred the scene to unfold without my presence being a factor. However, the commander quickly noticed me standing at the door and gestured for me to come in with his right index finger. He then put that same finger beneath his right eye, indicating me to watch closely. By that time, the commander and I had informally conversed on many occasions, many times about topics such as football or food. Sometimes I even came close to forgetting that I was conducting fieldwork and he was one of my key informants.



As I walked into the cave and stood at the farthest corner, the man in the hunter vest stopped walking in circles, stared at me, and then carried on. I could tell that for a few seconds he was trying to place me, trying to figure out why I would be invited into that room at that moment. His hesitation somehow revealed plenty to me. It reminded me of what I was to him. Even if throughout the last two months I had slowly established a rapport with the commander and presumably gained at least some of his trust, I was abruptly reminded that, as a white man, I was an outsider. Perhaps being able to understand their slang and their local references, coupled by the fact that I was born ten miles away from that building had made me feel familiar and thus, almost part of the setting. However, the look of the man in the hunter vest quickly conveyed that I belonged to a different world. The very fact that I was standing in that tense room by choice - as a student conducting research - meant that I came from a privileged position and thus, I was imposing what Kienscherf (2019) would call a 'neo-colonial burden' upon my informants. Indeed, that mere gesture made me realise that any closeness I had achieved until that moment had been negotiated through privileged access in my favour and mostly curiosity on the part of the commander.

The man wearing the white barber apron, on the other hand, had barely noticed me. He simply sat crouching his back forward while his right heel shook nervously making his right foot vibrate an inch above the concrete floor. As I looked closer, I noticed that despite his hands not being handcuffed, he had not brushed away the loose hair on his apron - presumably belonging to patrons at a barber shop -, as if he was waiting for permission from the two men circling around him to do so.

At that moment, the brief pause caused by my entrance in the room ended and the man in the beige hunter vest asked - presumably resuming a round of questions -, "are you going to just sit there like a *pinche marica* (worthless sissy)?" The man in the apron remained silent and only crouched his back further forward staring at his feet. "I bet you felt like a real macho harassing that girl", the man in the hunter vest continued.

Then the commander intervened with a slightly friendlier tone. "What really pisses me off is not that you harassed a girl, but that you had to pick one that looked like a Maya

girl, short and *morena* (brown skinned)”. I was astounded by the way sexual harassment had seemingly stopped mattering and the accusation now appeared to hinge on some assumption related to race and gender. “*Bien morenota, así como tú* (really brown, just like you)”, the commander continued. There was still no answer or reaction from the man in the apron. “There was a *güera bien buena* (blonde attractive one). Why not her? What happened? *No tienes huevos* (have you got no balls)?”, the man in the hunter vest asked, aligning with the commander’s approach. At this moment, it seemed as if any concern from the inquisitive men related to sexual harassment as a criminal behaviour had disappeared and the issue in question was now one of racial hierarchies and gendered assumptions. Growing increasingly aware of my privileged position in my corner, I wondered what would have happened if I was a *morena* (brown skinned) woman? Would I even be having this level of access to my informants and their practices? And if I had, would I have been invited to the ‘cave’?

The ethical implications entailed by observing this scene seemed considerable. I felt anguish because of what my presence there could be causing. The fact that both the commander and the man in the hunter vest could verbally abuse the man in the white apron so comfortably in my presence was confusing. Perhaps they had constructed my gender in a way that made them presume I could and should tolerate verbal violence. Perhaps they thought that, as a white man, I should be thankful to them for ridding me of the threat of one more unruly *moreno*, now snatched off the streets. If this was the case, were they performing for me? I chose to believe that maybe my presence there made them behave less violently, as it made them feel observed.

“Well then, what should we do with you?”, Commander Castro asked the man in the apron. Before getting an answer, he briefly stepped outside the ‘cave’, grabbed another portable aluminium chair from under an unoccupied desk, brought it back and sat very close to the man in the apron. “Look, this could be either ‘sexual harassment’ or ‘improper behaviour’”, the commander explained. “You could leave in a few minutes or you could stay here the whole weekend and we’ll have you in front of a judge on Monday”, he continued. “We can also take you to the file room. Do you know what happens in the file room?”, the man in the hunter vest asked standing even closer to the

man in the apron, towering over the latter's vulnerable crouching position. "Trust me, you don't want that", the commander told him, by now sitting almost head to head with the man in the apron. I was mystified by what the 'file room' could mean. Until then, I had thought that room was merely a storage space located at the end of that same hallway.

At this point, I was pondering if I needed to intervene somehow, diverting the commander's attention with a question, interrupting with some research-related need or even calling them out on their verbal and psychological abuse. However, I thought that my purpose at that moment was to observe and that evidencing the act through my research and subsequent writing - adding meanings and a deeper context to this scene - was a more revealing alternative. Additionally, my previous conversations with the commander had taught me that whenever he felt judged, pressed or observed by my questions, he would shut down, becoming less communicative for a few days.

After a tense moment of silence, the commander finally told the man in the apron, "you know what? You caught me in a good mood, just wait outside until the boys (the clerks) write down your data and then leave". The man in the apron stood up nervously, asking stuttering questions about his criminal record and thanking the commander submissively. As he was about to leave, the man in the hunter vest yelled at him, "you're lucky we are not in the times of Durazo, they would have hanged you by your thumbs from wires until you confessed".

He was making a reference to Arturo Durazo Moreno, a notoriously violent chief police officer who became infamous during the 1970s and 1980s for his oppressive and violent methods against those deemed to somehow oppose the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Revolutionary Institutional Party or PRI). The PRI stood as the party in power in Mexico since its creation in 1929 until 2000, and then from 2012 to 2018. As argued by Piccato (2013), Durazo Moreno externally symbolised the political connection that has existed between that party and the police in Mexico, while internally he was revered by his fellow police officers for his displays of bravery and masculinity (López de la Torre, 2013). Now, he was being referenced in the context of police abuse twenty

years after his death in 2000 by another police officer. In some ways, this made sense. In others, however, it made understanding the police in Mexico more complex.

After the man in the apron finally left the cave, I was left alone inside with the commander and the man in the hunter vest. I took this opportunity to ask the commander what the man in the apron had done and if the woman he allegedly harassed was alright. “Nah, nothing like that”, the commander said to my relief and greater confusion. “It was nothing serious”, he then insisted before elaborating. “Some people at the barber shop where he works at had complained about some comments he made that were ‘*pasados de lanza*’ (‘off the line’). We just took him in so they could see that something was being done”. I then realised that this entire scene could have been handled differently but that it was important to create a particular setting, use specific language and send a message, although it was not exactly clear why or for what purpose.

The commander must have thought I needed further clarification of what had happened, for he continued, “look, what’s important for the ‘system’ is that we now recorded an arrest and an investigation’, its our way of saying ‘here we are’”. Against what the commander might have intended, I was now more confused. It seemed interesting that he spoke of a ‘system’. Was this a statistical system, the policing system or did he mean to make a reference to the political system they were part of?

“What about the other one?”, the commander suddenly asked the man in the hunter vest. “Waiting for me in the file room”, the latter replied. At this point I could not ascertain who or what they were talking about anymore. It seemed as if the explanations had stopped. At this point, the man in the hunter vest silently left the cave, went into the hallway, walked towards the file room and shut the door behind him after entering. Before leaving the cave, however, the man in the hunter vest gave a final look to the commander raised his right hand wide open and then closed it tightly by clenching his fist. At the time, I did not understand the gesture and the commander did not appear eager to explain things to me any more. Nevertheless, by the end of my fieldwork I would realise what happened inside that file room, as well as what that gesture meant.

This dissertation is the result of eight months of participant observations conducted within a police precinct in the outskirts of Mexico City. Crucially, during that period a new president and political party came into office substituting a previously hegemonic regime and bringing along an apparent effort to militarise policing across Mexico. In this context, this dissertation is driven by the fact that, while the scene described throughout these first pages took place at one specific moment, it was not by any means an isolated episode amidst what mundanely happened at the precinct. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to explore how similar episodes reveal that the police perform as political actors.

Why were words evoking skin colour and gender, as well as political references all used against someone during the same act of violence and in the context of policing? Why did police officers expose – almost inadvertently – thoughts about race and gender amidst a moment in which they intended to use verbal violence as an instrument of law enforcement? And why did they also reveal – through the reference to Arturo Durazo - to be thinking of men known for institutionalising police brutality? Is this what really makes the police a political actor? This dissertation is about the political relevance of words, gestures, symbols and hidden meanings revealed by police officers in the heat of scenes like these.

Indeed, if issues like gender and race are relevant affairs of the world and thinking about the relevant affairs of the world is thinking politically (Blondel, 2019), does this mean that police officers are more actively and significantly political than what the traditional conception of them as street level bureaucrats suggests? If so, does the use of gendered and racial slurs as verbal attacks by the police say something about how gender and race are conceived by the state?

As much as this is about Mexico, I use what happened inside the cave as a means to suggest that policing globally should be reflected upon as something political and not merely social. This is achieved by analysing how the police conceive and enact race and gender, which at street level become the subject of politically performative practices like creating arrest statistics and the leveraging of a widespread system of snitch-policing. Crucially, these are all exercises of power rather than crime management. However, prior

to claiming this preliminary point, there is a distinct need to clarify how the term “power” will be used and understood across this study.

For all the frequency and recurrence with which police participates in mundane, street level interactions - especially in contrast with other representatives of the state -, there is an inherent difficulty in defining or grasping the limits of their practices. As noted by Dubber (2005), police power has existed since men began exerting authority over their household members and property, even in spite of the broadness and ill-defined nature of how such power operates. Therefore, the term “power” will be used across this dissertation as understood by Dubber – as well as the rest of the legal and political scholarship to which he adheres to and is reviewed in the next section. Indeed, the term “political power” is understood from the outset as a patriarchal source of will imposed by a governing elite as a means to police those who are subject to that will. However, scholars such as Ranciere (2001) continue to argue that “politics is specifically opposed to the police”<sup>1</sup>.

In order to address this view, this dissertation needs to be precise about the use of the term political, as it is a key part of its whole argument. For that purpose, this dissertation faces the preliminary necessity to highlight the difference between the politics of policing, policing policies and the ways in which policing is political. To be sure, the first of these notions were observed across the interactions that were common among police officers and detectives, as well as between them and the public. The second notion refers to specific measures that are put in practice in order for law enforcement to happen. The third notion refers to what this dissertation seeks to discover and discuss in the context of the outskirts of Mexico City.

Bittner (1970) notably found that what characterises the police by definition is their entanglement with violence. As Seigel (2018) later added, Bittner conceived violence as a necessary component of the police as part of a social commitment to fight crime and contain disorder. Yet, as the increasing size and presence of criminal organisations in

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<sup>1</sup> According to Rancière et al (2001), “The police is not a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social. The essence of the

Latin America and across the world have shown, there are other groups that are eminently characterised by how and how much they necessarily relate to violence as well.

Policing needs to be reflected upon as more than a social endeavour in the context of crime, violence and disorder. In line with Dubber (2005), I hold that the police needs to be explored by looking at its practices as broad and unscripted exercises of power, even if – and precisely because - they are obscured by mundane and seemingly uneventful techniques of order maintenance and crime management. As noted by Feldman (2015) police power is effective because it is exercised not only by imposition but also by persuasion, which means that we may be subject to it without even noticing. However, even if we did notice and attempted to defy it, police power is the power of the state and thus its exercise is ordained by law (Bierschenk, 2016). Crucially, this makes police conceptions about gender and race all the more relevant in terms of their political meaning and consequences. In this sense, the true colours of the police are shown by thinking of them politically, however, not just in the sense that their appointment or deployment is ordained by politicians.

Policing is too often cast as a localised problem of crime, violence, bureaucracy or disorder, especially in terms of policy. Rarely does scholarship ask specific questions about the ways that the everyday practices of policing reveal how political, social and racial order is maintained in on-going and mundane ways by the state. Focussing on Mexico, this dissertation examines why such an attention to policing is both required and revelatory, contributing a new interpretation to the significance of police power. Otherwise, the scene at the cave, however violent, maybe reductively conceived as an abusive way of fighting alleged crime with no political implications.

Indeed, until the use of gendered insults and racial slurs are further analysed through a political lens and not as isolated or anecdotal offenses, their function as recurrent categories through which the status quo is taught and enforced remains overlooked. In this sense, it is of key importance to delve into the ways that the police racialise their subjects and focus derisively on their masculinity, and moreover, how this suggests that the stability of political regimes requires particular people to personify the role they

always have, as power holders, women or *morenos*. In this sense, police practices become state-sanctioned reminders of the place to which their subjects belong.

In other words, by failing to address how the enforcement of gendered and racialised assumptions operates through police practices and reproduces a specific status quo, scenes like the one at the cave become one more unknown and unexceptional episode of police over-reach, an unfortunate excess of law and order in fighting alleged crime. And all the while, the state of affairs in regard to race, power and gender endures by becoming uncritically accepted and therefore immutable. Indeed, if concerns about policing continue to focus on how crime is dealt with, the enforcement of a racial order, on the one hand, and the perpetuation of gendered inequalities, on the other, will both remain operational through the police as the undisputed ‘language of the state’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006).

In that context, I advance that concerns about the police should address its capacity to ‘keep everyone in their place’ (Fassin, 2013) while ensuring that political power continues to be exercised in the same way against the same subjects. It is in this sense that the police act as the guardians of a political state of affairs and thus, why their assumptions about gender or race need to be examined in terms of how they contribute to maintaining things as they are.

For that purpose, Mexico offers an adequate field site. On the one hand, it is consistently described by scholars – such as Duran Martinez (2017) – as a terrain of violent and criminal disorder that results in fragmented policies that thus give relevance to the role of the municipal police. On the other, Mexico is a site all too familiar with political hegemonies, long-established mechanisms for the exercise of power and police forces that overtly side with ruling elites as one of many examples of systemic clientelism. Mexico is also the birthplace of ‘machismo’, a place where masculinity is treasured and revered (Lewis, 1961). Furthermore, it is a setting where skin tones – and the countless terms that are used to describe them - define social relationships even if these experiences are systematically denied as racism (Moreno Figueroa, 2008).



In order to penetrate this setting while making sense of the political significance of police practices, I draw on a number of ethnographic studies of policing. Among them are those by Fassin (2013; 2017), who explores how the Paris police enforce the status quo by stopping and searching immigrant populations and ‘teaching’ them how to behave. I also draw on the studies by Denyer Willis (2009; 2015), who captures and describes the political role played by the Brazilian police in the regulation of life and death in São Paulo. I connect these studies with Jauregui’s (2016) ethnographic look into how the Uttar Pradesh police promote channels of mediation between actors and subjects in order to satisfy diverse needs of which police officers are consistently aware. These studies have unmasked the police as a highly political actor that enforces the status quo. Yet, most of these studies have fallen short in describing exactly how police do this and what does it mean to act politically at street level. Furthermore, these studies ask few questions about key aspects related to gender or race, such as the way in which, by acting in deeply racialised and patriarchal settings, the police reproduce a particular form of ‘white’ masculine power in detriment of the populations they interact with.

Building on the findings brought by these studies as well as on their shortcomings, I argue that the municipal police in the outskirts of Mexico City enforces the status quo by hailing and teaching a specific type of masculinity in detriment of femininity, on the one hand, while sorting the suspects they interact with for abuse or privilege according to racial assumptions about skin colour, on the other. Crucially, this enforcement of gendered and racial assumptions is obscured by policing techniques that are designed to extract information and fabricate data in order to produce arrests and guilty subjects as seeming results of police work. In other words, the everyday enactment of racial and gendered inequality in police work makes policing seem effective and justified, most especially in the form of arrests and techniques that appear to ‘keep crime in check’. Therefore, while the status quo is reproduced, the cells guarded by the municipal police remain crowded by non-white detainees, the data on their work remains favourable and their deployment continues to be justified by a façade of policing created by these techniques.

Departing from Mexico, the significance of this work shows how much greater attention needs to be paid to the political techniques that aid the police in reproducing the status quo. Through this lens, policing is about violent control over an inequitable regime of life, which denies recognition and humanity to particular people. Moreover, everyday police practices reveal how political, social and racial order is maintained in on-going and mundane ways by the state. For this reason, such practices cannot be fully dissected by conceiving the police as crime fighters or agents of order.

Indeed, the bigger picture of policing comes to light by looking at it politically. As a result, this leads to an understanding of why the use of racialised and gendered language should not be written off as verbal abuse or ‘tough police talk’. Looking at the police politically acknowledges that police officers, as representatives of the state, interact with alleged criminals as guardians of a specific regime. In this role, the police impose a particular state of affairs over them and, as I show, the most effective channel at their disposal becomes the reproduction of long-established categories according to which these subjects are classified, such as race and gender. This is particularly done by targeting the non-white – *moreno, indio* – man who fails to adhere to specific ideals about masculinity. The implication of this is that policing is not only about crime control but also about preserving the exercise of power through the enforcement of mechanisms that ensure subjection. As Bayley (2001) explains, police are the offspring of politics and they arise out of political need and enforce political education as well as control.

Therefore, those ethnographic studies of the police that have consistently found that the police reproduce the status quo (Fassin, 2013) could arguably be enriched by narrations of more specific instances and mechanisms through which the police do this. To this end, it is necessary for police assumptions about race and gender to become key categories of study, as they emerge prominently from ethnographic observations of the municipal police in Mexico.

This dissertation therefore follows those studies and draws on its own field observations to concur in holding that police practices uphold political power. On this basis, my attention to the status quo as the buttress of political order sheds new light on existing

understandings of the police. Indeed, I advance that the police reproduce the status quo by enforcing superstructural conceptions about race and gender that remain obscured by infrastructural policing techniques that produce criminals and arrests. These techniques revolve around ways to obtain and fabricate information, mainly through informants and diluted statistics, that lead to arrested subjects and thus create a façade of police work that justifies its deployment. As a result, this dissertation contributes to most recent debates on policing in three ways:

First, it proposes that studies of the police should turn to the political through a deep consideration of the enforcement of the status quo as a mechanism to maintain not only order, but power. Indeed, this study holds that the enforcement of the status quo and its dramatically discriminatory patterns of race and gender – among other categories that may emerge from police ethnographies - must not only be recognised as a consequence of police practices but also needs to be revisited as a political concern about policing anywhere.

Second, it focuses on conceptions about gender and race that are ethnographically unearthed from police practices as the specific mechanisms through which the status quo is reproduced by perpetuating an inequitable regime of life. Moreover, it is precisely through such categories that particular people are consistently denied recognition and humanity. By identifying such mechanisms, this study delves into specific avenues that are largely overlooked by the preceding scholarship but are nevertheless used recurrently by the police to reproduce the status quo. In this sense, policing is shown in a novel way as a means of identifying and enforcing race and gender distinctions. Furthermore, these distinctions become indispensable, not only for the performance of police work but also for the perpetuation of a political order.

Third, it describes mundane police practices manifested through everyday techniques that aim for the fabrication of accusations against alleged suspects and the production of data about police work. The former is done through the use of snitches and informants and the latter is achieved through the tampering of crime and police statistics. Both of these practices result in the construction of a façade that justifies police work in a context of

scrutiny and unpredictable accountability. Furthermore, both practices are largely unexplored as topics in the Latin American context of police studies. Therefore, instead of general observations about how the police operates, this study focuses on specific, everyday techniques that would otherwise remain cloaked by their seeming uneventfulness. Indeed, those practices reveal how policing perpetuates categories according to which they racialise and discriminate their subjects while constructing a façade of policing that justifies their deployment.

Additionally, this work broadens the scope of ethnographic studies of the police conducted in Latin America. Indeed, it follows those studies undertaken across Brazil by Denyer Willis (2015), Hautzinger (2007), Pauschinger (2020) and Caldeira (2002), among others, as well as those by Auyero and Sobering (2019) and Sirimarco (2009) in Argentina. It is the first ethnographic study of the police in Mexico in more than twenty years. Prior to this, Arteaga Botello and Lopez Rivera (1998) had joined a police academy in Mexico City and later patrolled a neighbourhood therein for a year. However, that study focused on practices deemed by the authors as ‘corrupt’, rather than on the political reproduction of the status quo by municipal police forces.

This dissertation unfolds as follows. Chapter 1 surveys theoretical contributions that show how policing has always been part of a discussion about power and of ways in which it reproduces the status quo. This chapter also addresses how policing has been reflected upon in the context of decolonisation as a product of colonial rule. However, the chapter suggests that the way policing is currently conceptualised and imagined in Mexico is not a product of decolonisation but of the deployment of zero-tolerance proactive policing that has been uncritically imported from the United States. Finally, this theory chapter shows how many recent studies have benefited from drawing on ethnographic methods in order to explore the political relevance of policing.

Chapter 2 provides historical context by focusing on how certain periods and salient episodes throughout Mexico’s political history reveal that politics, either carried out by the state or not, have shaped policing in that country for more than two centuries. Indeed, the chapter advances that there are two main have defined policing in Mexico as

something intrinsically political: the historical enforcement of a white and masculine form of power, on the one hand, and the persistent use of informants and manufactured statistics to produce a form of policing that has served the ruling classes, on the other. Lastly, this chapter addresses why policing matters in a context like the outskirts of Mexico City. This leads to a presentation of Nautep<sup>2</sup> (pseudonym) as the field site for this study, as well as the informants that took part in it.

Chapter 3 delves on the methodology followed by this study, addressing how access was allowed by gatekeepers and then trust was gifted by key informants. It also discusses the ethical implications of this methodology in a context like the outskirts of Mexico City. Afterwards, the dissertation turns to the superstructural notions fostered within police officers with regards to gender and race.

Indeed, the next two chapters begin presenting ethnographic findings in order to show what the practice of policing means for the making of politics. Chapter 4 explores how male police officers at the Nautep precinct build an archetype of masculinity based on machismo as a result of which femininity becomes associated with weakness and burdensome emotions.

Chapter 5 takes the reader through the social constructs built around the notion of *mestizaje* – as a specific ideology in Mexico, materialised in a set of practices and conceptions about race -, which derives in the reproduction of racist logics that shape the way police officers interact with alleged suspects. Both of these latter chapters show that the reproduction of the status quo by the police is carried out along lines of gender and race. They lay bare the way *mestizaje*, on the one hand, and the patriarchal organisation

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<sup>2</sup> As the field site for my observations, I chose Nautep (pseudonym), a municipality located in the border between Mexico City and the State of Mexico that has largely been ruled by mayors loyal to a single political party throughout the last century. Nautep exemplifies ‘periphery’ in other ways beyond the territorial by clustering together informality and formality, as well as industrialisation and marginalisation. More than anywhere else in the city, Nautep features exclusive areas and gated communities that have been developed next to ‘*barrios bravos*’ (slums) for decades, thus generating an ideal scenario for diverse types of crimes. As a result, Nautep has come to represent a threshold for criminality, as it is the last border before reaching Mexico City for criminal organisations that patiently and productively settle in peripheral municipalities such as this one, as they await to penetrate the country’s largest market. In this context, policing and political power shape much of the urban space in complex ways that were explored through ethnographic observations.

of police work, on the other, respectively hide the everyday exercise of racism and machismo as dynamics of power.

The next two chapters take the reader to the streets of Nautepéc in order to present the way assumptions about gender and race are enacted as shambolic, yet internally coherent policing techniques that result in the criminalisation of subjects targeted in accordance with such assumptions. Chapter 6 discusses the way snitches and informants are incorporated into policing while investigations and subsequent arrests are built in unscripted ways through their decisive contribution. Furthermore, the practice of snitch-policing is presented as a specific example of the systemic ambivalence of the police, which reveals the police as a political institution that trades information with civil society and extends the role of policing – mostly of race and gender – across segments of the population.

Chapter 7 addresses the way the use of statistics by the Nautepéc police offers not only a mechanism for the fabrication of crimes, but also a way to justify their deployment in a context of scrutiny and public pressure in the face of violence. In this sense, the Nautepéc police count crime in a way that favours their work statistically. Both of the latter chapters show how power relations are reproduced through specific practices that, despite being frequently overlooked as uneventful, reveal the exact ways in which policing works towards upholding a political regime as well as the racist and masculinist status quo entailed by it.

Finally, chapter 8 discusses the bigger picture of these findings, bringing the empirics back to the police as keepers of status quo and guardians of political order. This discussion thus aims to zoom back out of the practices observed at street level in order to answer how the police are political. As argued, the police are political by being the only representatives of the state who can impose power in a variety of ways and settings, furthering those political aims that are overtly pursued as well as those that are carried out ‘in the dark’ but are nevertheless crucial to the political order. Moreover, this can be

done publicly or out of sight, during face-to-face interactions or as part of widely enforced programs of reform.

## Chapter 1. A review of policing as the reproduction of the status quo

One morning, I was standing outside ‘the cave’ waiting for Commander Castro to come out. He was menacingly talking to two young men. I could hear him clearly from outside but this time I was not invited in. “*Pinches acapulqueños maricas* (worthless Acapulco sissies)”, the commander told them in reference to the seaport south of Mexico City where they presumably came from. “You’ll stay here until you become as pale as *gringos* (United States nationals), *a ver cuándo les vuelve a dar el sol* (who knows when sunlight will hit you again)”. Somehow, the commander always managed to include gendered insults and references to skin colour in his interactions with suspects. As the two men were then taken out of the cave by two clerks, the commander yelled at them, “trust me, you’ll both thank me some day”. I was mystified by this assertion. Why would the young men thank their verbally abusive captor? Did he expect to be thanked by both men for ‘whitening’ them by depriving them from sunlight during their incarceration? Or did he believe he had taught them a lesson? As the commander came out of the cave, I asked him what they had done in order to find some clarity. In response, he surprisingly digressed by explaining what he thought the ulterior motive of policing was, a pontificating attitude I had not seen in him until then.

Indeed, in contrast to his typically abrupt style, Commander Castro patiently elaborated, “we Mexicans are *incultos* (uncultivated), that is why we are so busy as police officers. We are a nation of uncultivated *indígenas* (native indians) who were colonised by people who were just as *flojos* (lazy) as us”. Afterwards, he felt the need to illustrate his point further. “Just look at the *gringos* (United States nationals), they were properly colonised by cultivated people and they all *jalan parejo* (pull in the same direction)”, he confidently exemplified. I was unsure about what he meant by this.

Becoming increasingly passionate, the commander concluded, “that is why what we do is so important. We talk to people and they listen, they have to. We tell them that they can be in better places instead of locked up in here. If they could only be *hombres de bien*



(righteous men) and good women instead of *ratas cochinas* (dirty black rats) we would be a better country, a powerful country, I promise you we would”. This finishing statement to his remarks made the whole point perplexing to me. Until his last sentence, he had arguably been conveying that his work entailed a social endeavour, which was teaching the Mexican population how to behave. Yet, when he spoke of power and Mexico as a state, his tone somehow became politically aspirational. Did he conceive his role as a police officer as social or political? By the end of my fieldwork, I realised statements like these were key in order to conceive the difference between the politics of policing, policing policies and how policing is political. In any case, he never told me what would happen to the young men from Acapulco.

The following section reviews the scholarly work and studies that, directly or indirectly, lead to an understanding of policing as the reproduction of the status quo, which crucially serves a political purpose in a context like Mexico. In order to avoid a study of policing that remains circumscribed to images of the uniformed contemporary police, this dissertation draws on literature about law and power, legitimate and non-state violence as well as discipline and surveillance, among other key notions. As a result, this chapter draws on studies that show how those concepts contribute to a conceptualisation of policing not only as something previous to the institution of the modern police but, moreover, as a typical form of order maintenance that has consistently featured in debates about power. In this sense, policing becomes more than a social endeavour of crime control. Indeed, as shown by the literature reviewed across this chapter, policing may be more accurately conceptualised as a political instrument that reproduces the status quo than as a social mechanism designed to fight crime. By drawing on such literature, this dissertation suggests a turn to the political when it comes to studies about policing, as it is through this lens that police practices are revealed as exercises of power. As stated in the introduction, the notion of “political power” across this dissertation is used in the way that the scholarship reviewed next in this section conceptualises it.

To that end, this chapter first presents the thoughts of theorists of power in relation to policing as the maintenance of order and the reproduction of the status quo. Afterwards,

this chapter looks at how policing has changed and expanded over time, furthermore referencing scholarly work that shows how a specific conception of it was adopted in Mexico since the turn of the century.

This chapter then contrasts two different scholarly traditions through which policing has been studied. Borrowing Loader's (2006) terminology, this dissertation refers to one tradition as the 'wide and shallow' approach to the police and compares it to the 'narrow and deep' approach. By reviewing studies that pertain to these traditions and analysing how both have evolved, this chapter shows the why the latter approach has more decisively influenced this dissertation, even if it has largely neglected gender and race as crucial categories through which policing reproduces the status quo.

### **1.1. Underpinning notions: Patriarchy, discipline and order maintenance as the reproduction of the status quo**

In order to understand how the reproduction of the status quo is inherent to policing, certain notions need to be reviewed in relation to earlier forms of order maintenance and exercises of power that have endured over time. Indeed, concepts such as patriarchy (Dubber, 2005), the familial mode of governance (Foucault, 1978) and legitimate violence (Weber, 1948) illustrate why policing has operated as a political instrument – which has moreover been consistently imposed in gender defined ways – since long before the establishment of the state-sanctioned uniformed police conceived by Robert Peel in the 1820s (Williams, 2003). In this sense, the work of these scholars, as well as indirectly that of Elias (1939), Seigel (2018) and Biersckenk (2016) provides key notions that are crucial to a conception of policing as political. Indeed, these studies all favour an understanding of policing as the enforcement of the status quo through power.

Through a study of patriarchy across different centuries and latitudes, Dubber (2005) traces early forms of policing to the Greek households and Roman families that formed part of both civilisations. Within these groups, power relations were defined by the

authority exercised by the patriarchal role of the chiefs of households and *paterfamilias*. Indeed, drawing from Arendt's (1958) descriptions of life within the ancient Greek *polis*, Dubber (2005) argues that police power was first conceived for the management of households rather than for the management of city-states. This early form of police power operated through the heads of families, who externally participated in the autonomic forms of self-government motivated by the *polis*, while internally exerting heteronomy, power and discipline over their own households (Dubber, 2005). In this sense, law became enshrined by the communal political government of the *polis* while the management of households by their chiefs was conceived as an internal economic activity – aimed, as the definition of *oikonomikos* suggests, at maximising the welfare of its members – where aspirations of justice or democracy had no place (Dubber, 2005). In this context, the Greek and Roman heads of households had ample powers to discipline people under their protection and control.

As argued by Dubber (2005), the broad and dictatorial qualities associated with the governance of Greek and Roman households shaped patriarchal power and its transition towards state power. Indeed, the heteronomic dominion over households by their patriarchs was also regulated and promoted by medieval systems such as the Germanic *Mund*, which further institutionalised the internal discipline of households and crucially extended this authority to the role of feudal lords and kings (Dubber, 2005). Thereafter, as feudal rulers conquered colonial territories, the internal managerial logic of discipline was extended accordingly (Dubber, 2005). Throughout this evolution, the systematically reproduced logic of patriarchy dictated that “the power to protect the family's welfare against threats from the inside, through discipline, as well as from the outside traditionally has been considered a necessary corollary of household governance, and of governance in general. And that power is of necessity arbitrary because it enables the head of the household to preserve its welfare by any means necessary” (Dubber, 2005, p. 43).

Dubber's (2005) contribution allows for incipient – but nevertheless far-reaching – forms of police power to be identified prior to and independent from the nineteenth century

establishment of the uniformed police. Moreover, Dubber (2005) distinguishes law from police as the two basic modes of Western political governance, which further concedes that police power may also be found earlier than the modern state<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, these ideas suggest that the formation of the modern state had less to do with adopting laws and more with the reproduction of a familial model of governance based on internal discipline and the political rule of men.

By describing how the application of power throughout the development of the modern state gradually focused on the population instead of the territory, Foucault (1977; 1979) also notes how the spirit of the family patriarch is introduced into the management of the state, thus originating the idea of political economy (Donzelot, 2008). Indeed, “the essential component, the central element... in the Prince’s education... is the government of the family, which is called precisely ‘economy’... how to introduce economy – that is to say, the proper way of managing individuals, goods, and wealth, like the management of a family by a father who knows how to direct his wife, his children, and his servants” (Foucault, 2007, p. 94-95; Donzelot, 2008)<sup>4</sup>. As argued by Donzelot (2008), Foucault did recognise the greater complexity posed by the governmentality of the modern state in contrast to the more reduced scale of power wielded by the family patriarch. Moreover, Foucault (2007) posed that the larger dimension of the modern state attributed preponderance to apparatuses of security such as the police. Therefore, in order to police over larger populations, the idea of security gradually became associated with surveillance since the birth of the modern nation states. This was in part inspired by the idea of shepherds, who ‘keep watch’ discretely instead of publicly imposing their authority over their subjects (Foucault, 2007; Donzelot, 2008).

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<sup>3</sup> According to Dubber (2005, p. 3), “autonomy, or self-government, is the basic norm of modern state governance through law... but it’s not everything. There is another mode of governance, police. While the state may govern its constituents through law, it also manages them through police. In contrast to law, police is defined by heteronomy, or other-government, of the people by the state”.

<sup>4</sup> However, Foucault goes further in questioning how the familial model of governance adapts to phenomena that exceed the role of a good head of household (Donzelot, 2008). In the presence of such phenomena, like epidemics or disasters, the family ceases to be the prototype of governance and becomes only a segment of the population (Donzelot, 2008; Foucault, 2007). In the words of Foucault (2007, p. 104-105), “the family now appears as an element within the population and as a fundamental relay in its government. ... It is therefore no longer a model; it is a segment whose privilege is simply that when one wants to obtain something from the population concerning sexual behaviour, demography, the birth rate, or consumption, then one has to utilize the family” (Donzelot, 2008, p. 119).

Both Dubber and Foucault hold that the modern state resulted from the familial mode of governance, where the heads of household policed over those subject to their authority as an exercise of political economy. Crucially, the reproduction of this model entails the reproduction of the status quo through continuously evolving exercises of policing. The work of Dubber and Foucault also coincides in conceiving gender as a crucial category for policing. Both scholars delve on the importance of the male head of household as the main element of the familial mode of governance, who later inspired the forms of power instituted by the modern state. As shown by the contemporary version of the police, the preponderance of men as heads of household imprinted on modern policing as well, as it remains a world largely occupied and ruled by them.

As explained by O'Neill (1986), Weber (1967) preceded Foucault in noting how the formation of the modern state originated from the familial model of governance. However, in his definition of the state<sup>5</sup>, Weber (1967) continues to attribute importance to territory while Foucault argues that power is now applied to populations. Indeed, Weber claims that the monopoly of the legitimate use of force that characterises the state is ensured by adopting a reliance on a legitimate legal order and a robust bureaucracy over a territory. However, building on Weber's (1947; 1967) view of bureaucracy as an instrument that provides legal domination and "administrative rationality and adequacy" (O'Neill, 1986, p. 45), Foucault (1975) describes how this practice results in "the administration of corporeal, attitudinal and behavioural discipline" (O'Neill, 1986, p. 45). In this sense, Foucault holds that power is applied directly to people and beyond the jurisdiction attributed to a territory. Nevertheless, Weber (1947; 1967) and Foucault (1975; 1979a) seem to complement each other in describing the disciplinary nature of society. They both hold that the modern state required more complex forms of power than the familial model in order to ensure discipline. Moreover, the works of Weber and Foucault intersect in conceiving a 'disciplinary society' as a result of the systematic application of state violence, exercised both through physical and moral channels.

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<sup>5</sup> Weber (2004, p. 33) defines the state as a "form of human community that (successfully) lays claims to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence over a particular territory".

Building on this notion, Seigel (2018) introduces the idea of ‘violence work’ as that which characterises the actions of those situated along Foucault’s (1978) ‘disciplinary continuum’. According to Seigel (2018), the police as well as those who further the aims of the state in general are violence workers in the sense that they place their subjects under a latent and sometimes real threat of violence (Seigel, 2018). This notion, however, is also applicable to the military, marshals, customs officials, private security companies, kindergarten teachers and anyone whose labour legitimises them to constrain people under a specific threat (Seigel, 2018). The institutionalised threat of violence thus becomes key for the internalisation of rules of conduct as self-imposed forms of social control. In furthering the conception of a disciplinary continuum, both Foucault (1978) and Seigel (2018) conceive power as an intrinsic part of human relations and construct a view of policing that extends prior and beyond the modern understanding of the police as uniformed, street-level bureaucrats. This disciplinary continuum moreover ensures the policing of the status quo across all levels of society.

The consequences of this disciplinary continuum for the reproduction of the status quo were arguably foreshadowed by the work of Elias (1939). Through his notion of ‘civilising process’, Elias (1939) effectively describes the reproduction of the status quo through the internalisation of rules, which is one of the ultimate goals of modern policing (Foucault, 1978). As posed by him, the more violent and blunt forms of interaction that were frequent by the thirteenth and fourteenth century have since become repressed by formerly exterior and coercive rules of conduct that have been gradually interiorised as a means for people to achieve ‘calculability’ in their interactions, that is, the possibility of anticipating other people’s behaviour and reacting accordingly. Moreover, as argued by Elias (1939), the forces that guide behaviour became psychological instead of physical in order to achieve the self-control required to belong to political elites (Holloway, 1993).

Crucially, the thought of a civilising process entails ensuring order maintenance across diverse social strata. In this sense, policing is introduced as part of the ‘civilising process’ (Elias, 1939). Indeed, if policing has gradually adopted the more discrete form described by Foucault (1978), then publicly visible exercises of punitive power established first by

ancient civilisations and then by the modern state have been transformed into forms of surveillance and inner shame while formerly external controls have been interiorised.

Bierschenk (2016), however, views such notions as inadequate in order to fully comprehend the police. Indeed, according to his work, conceiving the police as a mere carrier of the state's monopoly over coercion or as a bureaucratic organization of surveillance and control only addresses a part of the societal functions of the police (Bierschenk, 2016). Bierschenk (2016) focuses on the tension between formal and informal practices, as well as between public and private forms of policing in order to argue that police is also any form of education of society, any form of relationship between public service operators and any form of protection of the social order.

Nevertheless, Dubber's (2005) notion of *patriarchy* is at the same time an antecedent of the uniformed police as well as evidence of the existence of policing prior to the police. The broader nature of patriarchy as an earlier form of police power explains why this notion also offers a more complex view of policing, rather than the more reductive conceptualisation of it as an eminently social institution that merely fights crime by relying on the use of force, as understood by scholars such as Bittner (1970). Indeed, as explained by Malka (2018), policing entails the state's intrusion into private life, either through regulation of morals, religion, security, labour and poverty. In Malka's (2018, p. 7) words, "insofar as police forces and prisons represent the state's 'police power', they represent only a small part of it". By drawing on these thoughts, the reviewed literature supports the realisation that policing is something previous to and larger than the police, and moreover, a deeply political mechanism of order maintenance that operates through the reproduction of the status quo. Moreover, this thesis settles on the surveyed authors to establish the what it will understand by 'political power' throughout: a patriarchal source of will imposed by a governing elite as a means to police those who are subject to that will.

## **1.2. From colonial overseeing to mass repression: understanding how the history of modern policing has shaped the way the police is thought of**

### **1.2.1. The birth of the police as a mechanism of colonial power**

As shown by scholars such as Emsley (1997), Malka (2018) or Davis (2013), the evolution of the modern police ranges from its initial conception as the establishment of local constabularies in the nineteenth century to the expansion of the punitive state during the last decades of the twentieth century. The work of Williams (2003), Martin (2018) and Anderson and Killingray (1992) has construed modern policing as an event that followed the erosion of former forms of colonial rule such as the ones imposed across the world by the British Empire. However, this subsection reviews studies that show that the way policing is conceptualised in Mexico is the consequence of a subsequent moment, which is the deployment of zero-tolerance and proactive policing across the Global South. These forms of policing signified an attempt to import mechanisms of order maintenance that became popular in the United States since the 1980s despite entailing, for instance, the inherent criminalisation of race and immigration, as posed by Roberts (1998) and Beckett and Herbert (2008).

As recounted by Williams (2003), the idea of a public police began circulating in Britain since the mid-eighteenth century driven by notions of political economy, on the one hand, and the need to impose the ‘right guidance’ over the growing working classes – arising from the industrial revolution –, on the other. Business organizations supported this idea intending to benefit from repressive measures over the poor (Williams, 2003; Colquhoun, 1969). The formation of proletarian movements also generated a social panic in particular sectors of society that rallied support in favour of the creation of the public police (Williams, 2003).



The idea was finally accepted in 1829, owing to Colquhoun's warnings about how 'crime' brought by the poor was a problem scourging London, an idea that also garnered the support of the working classes (Williams, 2003). Secretary Robert Peel reproduced Colquhoun's arguments to the British parliament when the moment came to advocate in favour of the public police (Williams, 2003). Yet, Peel included his preference for the centralised coercive measures to be implemented in the colony of Ireland, where rumours about terror in the countryside worried the English lawmakers (Hay and Snyder, 1989). Indeed, before the London Constabulary started operating in 1829, Robert Peel had spent decades developing the Royal Irish Constabulary (Martin, 2018; Brogden, 1987; Sinclair & Williams, 2007). These events led to a logic that promoted the police from a local regiment deployed mainly for order maintenance to an armed mechanism of colonial intervention and repression.

Prior to the institution of a police system in the colony of Ireland, order was attained by the collective involvement of the community, with night-watch systems introduced locally (Williams, 2003). However, with religious conflicts leading to disorder and dissent among the rural populations, an imperial response from the capital was demanded by the elites in the Irish colony (Williams, 2003). Such a response was granted through the 'experiment' of the London Metropolitan Police (Martin, 2018). As phrased by Williams (2003, p. 341), "the continual traversing of the police idea (with modifications, experimentations and innovations) between the colony and the metropole during this critical conjuncture of colonial capitalism accounts for the shaping of 'modern policing' as a flexible, institutional form applicable to colonial and class warfare – not as two absolutely distinct contexts but as an emerging imperial institutionalization of repression". In this sense, the failure to transform imperial violence into colonial law thwarted the growth of the colonial state, which became subject to new forms of repression (Williams, 2003). Emsley (1997) coincides with this latter point by posing that, beyond the colony of Ireland, the police have been used as a political instrument since its inception. Indeed, regimes, such as the British Empire have historically utilised the police as a mechanism to limit social unrest and political dissent (Emsley, 1997).

Martin (2018) also notes that the development of policing as an institution began as a colonial project. As a result, he argues, even when imperial aspirations were abandoned across the world and replaced by the neoliberal provision of security services, policing has remained in place (Martin, 2018; Amar, 2013). To this end, the work of Malka (2018)<sup>6</sup> and Feldman (2015)<sup>7</sup> describe how moments of post-abolition of slavery and decolonisation led to the establishment of repressive forms of policing as institutions of order.

Indeed, the latter examples illustrate how the processes of decolonisation resulted in the expansion and reassertion of the police and the pervasiveness of policing across diverse settings, mostly those that emancipated from British rule (Holloway, 1993). As held by Anderson and Killingray (1992, p. 2), “colonial police forces played a major and increasing role in the attempts to maintain the authority of the colonial state and in upholding law and order during the process of disengaging and transferring power to the new rulers”. As held by Arnold (1992) and Rathbone (1992), when the ruling authority over the colonial territories was barely questioned, policing maintained a discrete role. However, as challenges to colonial authority grew, so did the presence and intensity of policing, as evidenced by the decolonisation processes of Cyprus (Anderson, 1992), Malawi (McCracken, 1992) or Malaysia (Stockwell, 1992). According to Anderson and Killingray (1992), the process of decolonisation initially led the authorities of the British Empire to adapt their colonial police services to the standards of the London police. Yet, the tense political conditions of the 1940s and 1950s resulted in nationalism, on the one hand, and monetary demands from colonised territories, on the other (Anderson and Killingray, 1992). Before finally retreating

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<sup>6</sup> The colonial nature of early policing explains why one of the first examples of police growth – which heralded the advent of the punitive state - took place in nineteenth century Maryland, a postcolonial and newly post-racial setting where nearly eighty-seven thousand enslaved people were declared free in 1864 (Malka, 2018). In the years following abolition the police power of the state deliberately fell upon freed people and black men in particular, policing them to the point that “the black proportion of arrests doubled in under a decade...at decade’s end, nearly seven in ten inmates in the prison were black. That number was all the more remarkable considering that at the decade’s start three of four inmates had been white” (Malka, 2018, p. 1-2).

<sup>7</sup> Feldman’s (2015) study of the police in Gaza under the Egyptian rule also points to how decolonisation leads to the growth and reassertion of the police. According to her, “the administration worked to manage and control the Gazan population by significantly expanding police presence and by maintaining a degree of uncertainty about when and where that expansion would be found” (Feldman, 2015, p. 14).

from newly independent territories, the British colonial police had reached a vastly larger size and dimension than what had been initially conceived (Anderson and Killingray, 1992). This shows that policing is a fundamental quality of post-colonialism. Moreover, it shows how the police became ubiquitous globally.

But beyond the mere growth of policing across colonial territories, the performance of the police throughout ante-colonialism, colonialism and post-colonialism has also been studied and compared by scholars such as Tankebe (2008). Indeed, Tankebe (2008) argues that the systemic shortcomings that characterised the colonial police in Ghana - namely a lack of accountability and respect for the human rights of citizens -, have endured in the post-colonial era.

The subsequent work of Tankebe (2009; 2012; 2013) shows that the growth of the police as a colonial legacy is also a matter of empirical analysis. Having conducted a study of UK National archives, as well as the archives of former colonies, Eck (2018) argues that in those cases where colonial rule was met by armed insurgency, an increase in police expenditure by the British Empire in order to counter such aggressions resulted in higher perceived levels of police capacity. Indeed, the security inputs with which colonial powers sought to repel armed insurrections led to more widely perceived policing practices (Eck, 2018). In her own words, “the experience of colonial-era armed conflict is associated with a redistribution of resources towards strengthening policing, and this in turn had a lasting impact on police practices” (Eck, 2018, p. 157).

Crucially, the literature that conceives policing as a product of post-colonialism fails to explain the current shape of policing in Mexico since it was never a British colony nor did it feature expansive forms of policing during or immediately after its own subjection to Spanish colonial rule (Pulido, 2011). Indeed, most of the recently reviewed scholarly work on the colonial origins of policing anchors its arguments on

what Quijano (2000)<sup>8</sup> calls the ‘coloniality of power’ and how Eurocentric notions about order and control were uncritically deployed over the colonised world<sup>9</sup>. Yet, even if Mexico was a Spanish colony from the early sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, the establishment of its most expansive forms of policing arrived in the mid twentieth century (Pulido, 2018).

The following subsection therefore reviews studies that show that policing in Mexico did not expand with decolonisation, but as a result of a subsequent stage originated in the United States in the 1980s. As explained by Davis (2013), specific forms of proactive and invasive policing that became popular in the United States as apparent forms to fight crime appeared as ideal mechanisms to deal with the widespread violence experienced across Mexico. Therefore, these latter forms of proactive policing played a decisive role in shaping how policing works in the current Mexican context.

### **1.2.2. Understanding the growth of the police within an increasingly punitive state**

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the punitiveness of the state grew through a vigorous and repressive police. If the role of the police during colonisation was reactive upon revolts (Anderson and Killingray, 1992), the growth of the police in the decades that followed featured a shift in ethos towards proactiveness .

As Beckett (1999) and Smith (2001) note, the security paranoia that marked the early cold war years and the vacuums of authority left by the fall of the welfare state

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<sup>8</sup> Quijano’s (2000) assertions about how Eurocentrism exposes the coloniality of power in Latin America allows for policing to be considered one of the most visible exercises of Western power oppressing the colonial world. Moreover, his thoughts also lead to the realisation that doing research about those exercises of power continues to reproduce the notion that rationality is an exclusively European product (Quijano, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Mignolo’s (2000) notion of ‘global design’ provides this dissertation with an appropriate construct to make sense of what policing is in the context of decolonisation. Indeed, according to Mignolo (2000), the Western expansion of knowledge – alongside religion and specific economic systems – produced hegemonic forms of ‘representational’ cognition. As a result, knowledge rooted in Occidentalism has promoted macronarratives and abstract universalisms that have been imposed in the colonial world, instead of conceding validity to the “local histories and multiple local hegemonies” that define that world (Mignolo, 2000, p. 22). Arguably, the concepts that underpin policing and the institution of the uniformed police are shaped by Eurocentric macronarratives that were thrust upon the colonial world with little regard for its local histories and hegemonies.

produced a setting – particularly in the United States - where incarceration rates rose steadily notwithstanding the fluctuating behaviour of crime rates. Additionally, the demands brought by the civil rights movement, coupled with the expanding presence of the state favoured by the welfare movement led to a punishment boom (Hinton, 2016; Beckett, 1999). As argued by Hinton (2016), political conservatives and former segregationists used policing and crime in order to discredit those who demanded civil rights reforms (Beckett, 1997; Hinton, 2016). The growing presence of crime and the first glimpses of the war on drugs also pressured the US federal government to prioritise the punishment of disorder (Beckett, 1999). This was materialised through President Lydon B. Johnson’s ‘war on crime’, later driven by the more aggressive narrative of President Ronald Reagan’s ‘war on drugs’, a conflict fuelled by a narrative according to which expansive policing was presented as the panacea against growing crime rates (Hinton, 2016).

On the other hand, Garland (2000) argues that the culture of crime control that surfaced in this context is owed to the advent of a new collective experience of crime and insecurity, an experience shaped by the social, cultural and economic phenomena that characterise capitalism. As explained by Garland (2000), the populations that came of age in the 1960s and 1970s experienced crime as an *institution* in the sense meant by Berger and Luckman (1966). According to them, institutions result from systematically repeated habits that exist prior to those that practice them. Thus, by being perceived as something previous and external to them, habits and interactions are reproduced as social controls and finally reified as institutions (Berger and Luckman, 1967). With the institutionalisation of crime, an ensuing ‘crime complex’ was created within society (Garland, 2000). Pressured by this complex, “policies of crime control in the US and the UK abandoned a penal-welfare philosophy to incorporate *adaptive strategies* – stressing prevention and partnerships with civil society through community policing for instance – and *sovereign state strategies* – stressing control and expressive punishment” (Garland, 2000, p. 348).

Making a similar argument, Simon (2007) claims that since the assassination of President Kennedy, communities across the United States have shaped their political views around the notion of violent crime as a social problem. However, Simon (2007) also notes that new forms of power have been institutionalised with the aim of repressing violent crime. By the same token, public servants become immediately legitimised when they are perceived as interested in preventing crime (Simon, 2007). In this context, Simon (2007) introduces the notion of ‘governing through crime’, which crucially illustrates the political nature of policing. Instead of dealing with crime as a threat, ‘governing through crime’ entails using criminality to legitimise the exercise of power. This form of governing capitalises politically on a culture of fear that turned the welfare state into an ever-expanding penal state. The political implications of ‘governing through crime’ have led to presidents and governors being assessed solely by their performances as crime-fighters (Simon, 2007). In this sense, Simon’s (2007) work suggests that crime may be conceived as a social problem, but crime-fighting has become a political endeavour.

Through an analogous reasoning, Massumi (2007) holds that the logic of pre-emption also contributed to the rise of the punitive state. This logic was first exposed in the narrative that led the US to declare war on Iraq by arguing in favour of a pre-emptive approach. As argued by Massumi (2007), the pervasive logic of pre-emption then irradiated from the agencies of external security to the bodies of internal control such as the police.

As this review shows, paradigm shifts such as the logics of pre-emption, the collective experience of crime and *revanchism* against civil rights demands among others led to a turn towards *punitiveness* and the growth of the police. As phrased by Novak (2008, p. 760), “the power of the US government to regulate, study, order, discipline, and punish its citizens... has never been greater”. Moreover, the police transformed its ethos from reactive to proactive (Denyer Willis, 2020), giving way to notions that conferred the police a broader and more relevant role such as ‘broken windows’ policing and zero-tolerance (Wilson and Kelling, 1982). These notions were built upon

the public premise that the role of the police is maintaining order, which is achieved in part by ‘fixing’ the population and promoting good citizenship.

As outlined above, Wilson and Kelling (1982) - whose ideas were influenced by a conservative approach focused on order maintenance (Smith, 2001) - posit that ‘broken windows’ are fixed through good citizenship. This theory underpinned the expansion of the police, fuelling a proclivity for punishment and an obsession with surveillance by the state (Harcourt, 1998). As a result, order-maintenance policing began permeating the streets proactively while severe punishments increasingly began saturating prisons (Harcourt, 2010).

Indeed, these ideas became materialised through public policies such as the ‘quality-of-life’ initiative implemented in New York City, as well as gang-loitering ordinances such as one that was passed – and then constitutionally challenged – in Chicago (Roberts, 1998). These policies expanded police authority as a means of maintaining order (Roberts, 1998). According to Beckett and Herbert (2008), the techniques employed by governments in order to achieve social control such as parks exclusion laws and off-limits orders result in an increasing number of behaviours identified as criminal. By excluding marginal populations from contested public spaces, these state mechanisms broaden the definition of crime while enhancing the power of the police to abuse their capacities for surveillance and violence (Beckett and Herbert, 2008).

Aiming to question ‘broken windows’ policing, Harcourt (1998) examined data from New York City’s quality-of-life initiative by reviewing Skogan’s previous study for that purpose. Harcourt’s (1998) aim was to discover whether if the declining crime rates showed across New York City since the implementation of this initiative could be attributed to the zero tolerance approach, which is largely based on order maintenance. As a result, Harcourt (1998, p. 295) found that “certain types of crime like rape, purse snatching, and pocket-picking are not significantly related to disorder; (b) other types of crime like physical assault and burglary are not significantly related to disorder when neighborhood poverty, stability, and race are held constant; and (c)

although robbery remains significantly related to disorder, a cluster of five Newark neighborhoods exert excessive influence on the statistical findings”. He also noted that this type of policing combined old strategies of excessive force with modern techniques of surveillance and spatial control (Harcourt, 1998). Furthermore, by concentrating police efforts on achieving misdemeanour arrests, ‘broken windows’ policing leads to the criminalisation of categories such as ‘rowdy teenagers’, ‘loiterers’, ‘drunks’ and ‘addicts’ and moreover, motivates a disproportionate focus on minorities (Harcourt, 1998). Indeed, as noted by Soss and Weaver (2017), ‘broken windows’ policing and zero-tolerance have had repressive effects on class and race.

Crucially, as explained by Smith (2001), zero tolerance policing was exported to other latitudes – mainly to the Global South - as part of globalization, notwithstanding the fact that the quality-of-life initiative had been designed thinking specifically of New York City. Once globalised, zero tolerance becomes a project of “social cleansing passed off in the name of decency and civility”, thus promoting policing across the world as an antidemocratic form of global social control and frequently deployed in already violent contexts (Smith, 2001, p. 64). In this regard, Swanson (2013) highlights how diverse Latin American governments have made use of zero tolerance in order to enact *mano dura* (iron fist) policing. However, this type of policing has become more punitive in that region than initially intended (Swanson, 2013). Indeed, “deep social and racial inequalities, high levels of police violence and chronically underfunded police forces result in an approach that goes above and beyond punitive strategies employed in the United States” (Swanson, 2013, p. 56).

To this end, the work of Davis (2013) is also crucial for the purpose of understanding how the police in Mexico was influenced by the expansion and aggressiveness posed by zero-tolerance policing. Impressed by the success of this form of proactive and data-driven policing, the Mexican elites considered its deployment not only useful for the purpose of fighting crime, but also politically rewarding (Davis, 2013; Smith, 2001). However, the uncritical adoption of this conceptualisation of the police overlooked how it also entailed the systematic criminalisation of race and vagrancy,



for instance, as well as a de jure entitlement for police officers to engage in pre-emptive violence.

However, as zero tolerance policing began being deployed across the Global South, crime rates in the Global North started to decrease, which has gradually introduced a need for policing to justify its continuous growth (Denyer Willis, 2020). In this context, law enforcement turned to positivistic methods to uphold its effectiveness and justify requests for funding (Denyer Willis, 2020). Crucially, the positivistic legitimization of the police gave way to a robust body of literature that endorses an evidence-based lens as an approach to policing, a current that exalts the use of quantitative methods and statistic measures to study the police. Indeed, the combination of the practice of policing with applied social science resulted in a new field of study that is fundamentally problem-oriented and concentrates on ‘what works’ for policing as a universal, globalised category (Sherman, 2013; Denyer Willis, 2020). The following paragraphs review some of the studies that have come to represent evidence-based approaches to policing.

### **1.3. The ‘wide and shallow’ study of policing: evidence-based approaches to the police**

The work of Sherman (1980; 1997; 2013) is one of the main precursors of evidence-based policing. It is guided by the notion that research can help improve democratic policing. As Sherman (1984; 1998; 2013) explains, the work of the police must be subject to evaluation and testing in order to find ‘what works’ for law enforcement. With that aim, scholars like Sherman (2013), Skogan and Frydl (2004) and Goldstein (1979) have led empirical studies that have transformed policing from a focus on what Berkow (2011) calls the “three Rs” – random patrol, rapid response and reactive investigations – to what Sherman (2013) calls the “three Ts”: targeting, testing and tracking.

Indeed, numerous studies have used empirical methods and a positivist approach to highlight specific findings that allegedly improve policing. One of the concerns that is more continuously tested by studies that pertain to evidence-based policing relates to the importance of identifying areas where crime is heavily concentrated, also known as ‘hot spots’ (Braga and Weisburd, 2010; Weisburd and Lum, 2005; Sherman, 2013). A more recent focus of evidence-based policing is testing the empirical results gathered from the use of body cameras by police officers (Ariel et al., 2016). Through studies such as those by Weisburd and his colleagues (2004), as well as Kelling (1974), evidenced-based policing has also made continuous efforts to assess the ‘professionalism’ of those involved with policing as human resources. The speed at which police officers and patrols respond to calls and attend crime scenes has thus been the recurrent theme of numerous studies such as those by Goldstein (1979; 1990) and LaFavre (1965). As Johnson (2010) elucidates, the strength of evidence-based policing comes from its intention to adapt an idea used other settings - such as evidence-based medicine – to the setting of policing (Sherman, 2013).

As noted by Reiss (1992), combining the practice of policing with social sciences required a belief in innovation and evaluation. This belief is fuelled by the suggestion that targeting ‘hot spots’, promoting the use of body cameras and the rest of the innovations promoted by this current are associated – or ‘correlated’ - with reductions in crime rates (Sherman, 2013). Indeed, this field of study is underpinned by the apparent materiality of objective results. As phrased by Willis, Mastrofsky and Weisburd (2007, p. 182), “using data and statistics, conducting evaluations, and mobilizing and coordinating resources outside the police agency need to become central concerns in the recruitment, training, and socialization of the police”. The ultimate goal of evidenced-based policing is, as outlined by Sherman (2013), to orient public policy by anticipating recurring issues for which the police is blamed by the constituency and having research evidence ready for the moment in which those issues come to light through critical events.

However, evidence-based policing has been criticised for over relying on statistical measurements and the quantification of knowledge (Denyer Willis, 2020). Furthermore,

evidence-based studies have globalised the advantages of its methods with little consideration for the fact that its approach was conceived in the Anglo-American context of the 1970s and 1980s. This generates views of the police that are far too neutral, on the one hand, or too technologically advanced, on the other, for the Global South. This approach also overlooks systemic problems fostered within the historic relationship of citizens and the police in specific times and places, as evidenced in those communities that are continuously racialised or abused by the police. Evidence-based policing thus neglects these structural problems and turns low crime rates in the measure of success for law enforcement (Ericson, 1982).

In order to illustrate paths for policing to become more democratic, Loader (2006) argued that policing might be either viewed from a wide and shallow perspective or from a narrow and deep one (Loader, 2006, p. 208; Feldman, 2015). The former view results in looking at the police as an institution that fights crime and disorder and that is therefore legitimised to penetrate the private sphere of citizens (Loader, 2006, p. 214). The latter view entails acknowledging the importance of policing in “shaping subjectivities and political belonging” through their everyday role in a specific setting (Feldman, 2015, p. 12; Loader, 2006, p. 215). This dissertation ‘twists’ Loader’s thoughts by focusing on the methodological approach to the police instead of its aspirations as an institution.

By neglecting historical problems and context-specific realities, as well as by standardising a measure of success for policing, evidence-based approaches seem to fit in what Loader (2006) called ‘wide and shallow’ views of the police. This dissertation therefore moves away from that field of study, and towards a focus on broader aspects that form the more complex ‘world of policing’ (Fassin 2017).

Indeed, as recounted by Fassin (2017), quantitative and experimental studies such as those characterised by an evidence-based approach to policing “contributed to the marginalization of qualitative and observational works” (Fassin, 2017, p. 2). More recently, however, research on policing has been renewed by what Fassin (2017) calls the ‘reinvention of police ethnography’. In contrast to the way previous studies relied on

statistics or surveys, ethnography looks beyond numbers and data in order to observe details in the field, making sense of what people manifest through signs or actions (Fassin, 2017). By grounding observations on a specific setting and producing subjective assessments, police ethnography as a new field of study promotes a view of the police that is – once again using Loader’s (2006) terms - ‘narrow and deep’, in contrast to the ‘wide and shallow’ view fostered by evidence-based studies.

Both approaches to policing may have arguably been bridged together by the aims and focus of cultural criminology. This body of literature, aided by the social constructionist work of Berger and Luckman (1966), as well as by subcultural theory, began focusing on lifestyles rather than culture and found that people generate meanings in their interactions with the police (Hayward and Young, 2004; Zedner, 2007). Following this finding, the work of Young (1971), Cohen (1972) and Pearson (1975) stresses “the need for a humanistic sociology of deviance that had at its core a sensitive ethnographic method” (Hayward and Young, 2004, p. 261). This movement re-worked American Sociology and gave more prominence to subcultures “bringing notions of expressivity and style, relocating transgression as a source of meaning” (Hayward and Young, 2004, p. 261; Zedner, 2007). Therefore, cultural criminology arguably marks the transition between evidence-based policing and police ethnographies.

Crucially, the themes brought forward by cultural criminology allow for a deep focus on issues like gender or race from the perspective of the police. According to Ilan (2018), race and gender as categories play key roles in shaping the interactions between society and police officers. They also lead to the formation of cultural meanings and imperatives in each group that place them in emotionally animated opposition to the other side. Therefore, cultural criminology not only serves as the link between the ‘wide and shallow’ and ‘narrow and deep’ approaches to policing, it also explores the way categories like gender and race impact and are impacted by policing.

However, cultural criminology does not necessarily aim to examine police practices at street level. Indeed, a sector within cultural criminology considers ethnography unethical

for its frequent leniency with regards to consent forms (Adler and Adler, 1998). Moreover, even if cultural criminology reacts against the “positivistic fundamentalism bent on rendering human action to the predictable, the quantifiable and the mundane” and turns its focus towards “a more expressive society where the vocabularies of motives, identities and human action begin to lose their rigid moorings on social structure” (Hayward and Young, 2004, p. 263), such a focus is still anchored in the Anglo-American model of policing. For this reason, more recent conceptualisations of the police have profited from studies conducted elsewhere, particularly in settings across the Global South, where motives and human action drift even more from ‘northern’ social structures and expose the police as a highly political apparatus that mediates between state and non-state actors while systematically enforcing the status quo.

#### **1.4. The ‘narrow and deep’ study of policing: a turn towards ethnography**

As noted by Karpiak (2016), several anthropologists since the beginning of the twenty-first century have conducted long-term ethnographic research among the police as part of an emergent sub-discipline. Anthropologists, however, are not alone in having found investigative robustness through methods such as participant observations to study the police, as numerous scholars from diverse fields have joined this turn towards ethnography (Fassin, 2017). Indeed, many disciplines have benefited from what ethnography offers to the study of policing.

Crucially, “not only does ethnography render visible practices of abuse, violence, discrimination and provocation that are usually denied by the institution and overlooked by other methods, but it also makes it possible to account for the police’s view on these practices while embedding them in a larger picture” (Fassin, 2017, p. 6). For this reason, as argued by Fassin (2017), ethnography introduces the irreplaceable contribution of grasping facts that cannot be measured or identified without the use of long-term observations.

The work of Van Maanen (1973; 1975; 1978; 1984) is among those studies that have come to represent the turn towards ethnography. Having joined the Union City Police Academy in 1970, Van Maanen conducted participant observations in order to experience the world of policing. The work of Van Maanen thus sets a blueprint for the discovery of the shared meanings and internal logic of the police. It is partly due to his work that greater attention has been placed on studying the police through ethnography. Crucially, Van Maanen points to the importance of studying the police ‘from the street’ (Van Maanen, 1973; Manning and Van Maanen, 1978).

By viewing the police ‘from the street’, Van Maanen (1978) uncovers a number of conditions that contrast with the common expectations of the police as an institution, such as preserving the peace and arresting law violators. Instead, Van Maanen’s (1978) approach to the everyday working environment of police officers provided him a look into mundane problems and personal concerns that decisively shape the practices of police officers. This focus crucially links Van Maanen’s studies of the police with Lipsky’s (2010) approach to street-level bureaucrats. As an object of study, the notion of street-level bureaucrats shows how state officials wrestle with “dilemmas” – as termed by Lipsky (2010) - in their pursuit of their supposed function when faced with the public. Drawing from Lipsky, if the police is to be studied from the street to address the seeming ambiguity or informality of the state, the concept of street-level bureaucrats is helpful for the purpose of distinguishing how the state thinks of and presents itself from how it works in practice.

The use of ethnography by Van Maanen leads to questioning the widespread belief held by police officers themselves as law-enforcers that they are heroic figures that determine right from wrong and friends from foes across society. Instead, Van Maanen (1978) discovers that the largest portion of everyday police work is not devoted to capturing criminals. Conversely, he observed that the police systematically construct and reproduce social types and categories according to which they classify those they interact with (Van Maanen, 1978). In doing so, Van Maanen (1978) uncovers the meaning attached to terms and archetypes used by the police for the purpose of attributing individual responsibility

to diverse types of citizens. These archetypes are used as guidelines for police officers in particular situations.

Focusing on similar practices, Moskos (2008) also conducted participant observations of the police during his time patrolling the streets of Baltimore's Eastern District. Similarly to Van Maanen's (1978) elaborations on the notion of 'asshole', Moskos (2008) found that colloquial expressions used by police officers to describe the people who interacted with them, such as 'junkie' or 'crackhead', were used as discursive instruments to dehumanize them while fostering an 'us versus them' mentality (Ralph, 2020). Moskos (2008) also describes the reproduction of a process by which police officers learn formal rules and combine their application with informal mechanisms to make police work more effectively. This includes creating suspicious circumstances to make warrantless arrests legal.

Also following Van Maanen's approach, Holdaway (1983; 1988) carried out observations of the British police in order to examine what produces the reliable image of the professional 'bobby' across civil society. He therefore found that police work is shielded by an institutional rationality that hides the impulsivity and hedonism that characterises the police on the streets (Holdaway, 1988). Reinforcing the narrative behind the turn towards ethnography, Holdaway (1988, p. 106) argues that "police work is not what the law, formal policy or some other set of directives says it should be: policing is essentially what the lower ranks do in their day-to-day work...To understand police work it is necessary to probe beneath the public imagery gleaned from formal and from popular accounts to observe and participate in policing-in-action".

Furthermore, beyond the access into everyday policing-in-action that ethnography provides, this method also offers the possibility of experiencing the world of those who are subject to policing. The work of Goffman (2009; 2015) illustrates this, as she conducted six years of ethnographic fieldwork with young men living in underprivileged conditions in a Philadelphia neighbourhood while being continuously racialised, harassed and persecuted by the police. Instead of the police, Goffman (2009; 2015) focuses on

those stopped, frisked and searched by them and their relationship with the criminal justice system. Among other findings, Goffman (2009) illustrated how the young men she interacted with lived in constant fear of capture by the police, which also leads them to feel as fugitives<sup>10</sup>.

Indeed, the turn towards ethnography gave way to thoroughly descriptive studies about the police and their subjects. However, even if the aforementioned studies extract deep meanings and revealing stories from ethnographic observations, they seem to remain immersed within the structures of policing while neglecting the broader implications that its practice has for the state, power and violence.

Fassin's (2013) study about the police in the *banlieues* (suburbs) of Paris is relevant for this dissertation not only for the way it exposes the police in its everyday interactions with civil society, but moreover for how it introduces broader questions about order and the state. Drawing on ethnographic methods, Fassin (2013) explores the inner customs of the police to further ascertain a number of political repercussions entailed by their work. Most notably, Fassin (2013) describes how the Paris police devote their days to upholding the ruling system and 'keeping people in their place'. Indeed, Fassin (2013) argues that the main goal of policing is to reinforce the political structure in which the public are subject to arbitrarily administered violence. Indeed, Fassin (2013), like Neocleous (2000) before, found that the police's role in the *banlieues* is 'teaching' the immigrant populations how the social order works instead of focusing on more pressing threats to the peace.

In addressing order and the political status quo, Fassin (2013) shows how studying the police through an ethnographic lens may also grasp the state itself, as well as its entanglements with other sources of power. As held by Bierschenk (2016, p. 171), "stateness – which like other abstract categories (such as capitalism) is not directly

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<sup>10</sup> Also focusing on the subjects of policing, Alves (2018) illustrates the stories of relatives of people killed by the police in the marginalised outskirts of Sao Paulo, the city he calls the *anti-black* city. Alves (2018) describes how the young populations from São Paulo's favelas are continuously persecuted by the police as a result of being identified with crime and violence. Analogously, the work of Rios (2011) is centred on the experiences and continuous police encounters of forty boys living in Oakland.



accessible to empirical observation – is a quality emerging from the practices of the police” (see also Loader and Walker, 2006).

In this sense, the study of the police is never as multivoiced as when it comes through the ‘narrow and deep’ approach posed by ethnography. In light of such aptitude to capture the state in its street-level facet, ethnographies of the police have recently been conducted across the Global South, in many cases as a way to explore violence, power and sovereignty.

As reviewed by Martin (2018, p. 136), “in places where the idea of the state as an all-encompassing order is implausible enough to function more as a fetish than a rule, the horizontal pluralism involved in policing practice comes squarely into the empirical foreground. Ethnographic accounts of policing in such places describe it as a project of staging nodal performances of exceptional clarity, which stand out as orderly by contrast to the qualities of confusion and ambiguity that characterize ordinary life” (See also Comaroff & Comaroff 2006; Ferguson & Gupta 2002; Schielke 2008).

For this reason, studies of the police such as the one conducted by Denyer Willis (2015) in Brazil offer overarching conclusions about the state and its claim to sovereignty. Through his observations within a homicide detective unit in Sao Paulo, Denyer Willis (2015) shows that sovereignty – materialised in the power to regulate over life and death - does not belong solely to the state. Instead, the regulation of killings and the resulting increases and decreases in local homicide rates are the result of a frail and uneasy *symbiosis* that is cyclically established between the violent police of Sao Paulo and a criminal organisation known as *Primeiro Comando da Capital* or PCC. In this sense, Denyer Willis (2015) elucidates how classic concepts like sovereignty or democracy are uncritically assumed across the Global South, mostly in settings where absent states, pervasive exercises of police abuse and a ‘shared’ organisation of violence make such concepts anachronistic and dysfunctional (Magaloni et al, 2020).

Similarly to Denyer Willis, Diphorn (2015) also conducted ethnographic observations of the police that led her to question long-standing assumptions about sovereignty. Indeed, after conducting participant observations of the police in Durban, South Africa, Diphorn (2015) found that private security corporations exercise everyday forms of violence that were formerly exclusive to the state, thus perpetuating a power struggle between them and the police (Diphorn, 2015). This power struggle is characterised through the notion of *twilight policing* by Diphorn (2015), in reference to a version of policing that mixes the involvement of public and private ranges of action in maintaining order (Diphorn, 2015; Caldeira, 2000; Cooper-Knock and Owen, 2015). These findings follow Denyer Willis' (2015) arguments by posing that "the state is not the sole sovereign body and that there are in fact 'multiple sovereignties' found within and across states. This is particularly true of the postcolonial world, which is characterized by fragmented forms of sovereignty" (Diphorn, 2015, p. 13).

Diphorn (2015) crucially identifies a 'shared' space where policing oscillates between the public and private spheres. Within that space, both spheres mutually implicate each other as the often blurred borders that define what constitutes the state and the non-state (Diphorn, 2015; Beek, Göpfert, Owen and Steinberg, 2017).

Also focusing on the unconventional spaces created by policing in the Global South, Jauregui (2016, p. 13) conducted ethnographic observations of the police in Uttar Pradesh, as a result of which she argues that the everyday practice of police authority is "recognized and valued as an amorphous and multidimensional social field". Like Denyer Willis (2015) and Diphorn (2015) before her, she notes the importance of turning away from traditional views of authority, power and the state in order to explore these ideas in everyday settings. As such, in the context of northern India, Jauregui (2016) characterises police authority as 'provisional' in reference to the way everyday policing equates to an unstable field of resource exchanges that may be simultaneously productive and harmful. Similar to her ethnographic predecessors, Jauregui (2016) shows that the police are not separate but embedded in the network of political and social relations that they are charged with policing.

As these studies show, “ethnographies of police in the Global South chart a ‘twilight’ space intermediate to state and society” (Martin, 2018, p. 139; see also Beek et al., 2017; Lund, 2006). The possibility of unmasking the state through observations of the police is the reason why this dissertation draws its methodological aims from those ethnographies conducted in the Global South. As stated by Ibrahim (2019, p. 119), anthropological and ethnographic investigations of law and the police, as well as of postcolonial forms of government, particularly those that take place in the Global South, “are best brought into focus when seen through the prism of these differing intellectual genealogies and how they treat the relationship of legitimate authority, monopolies over violence, and the nature of the state”.

The aforementioned studies of policing in the Global South take into account broader notions that make police studies not only deep but also multivoiced, such as patriarchy, discipline and security. Indeed, ethnographies of the police conducted in the Global South are characterised by exploring concepts beyond policing by itself, such as those surveyed in the first paragraphs of this chapter.

However, in spite of the depth at which they arrive through their evidence and arguments, these latter studies many times fail to describe the more specific ways in which the police reproduces the status quo and in so doing, they have overlooked how this is often done in racial and gendered terms. Indeed, even if ethnographic approaches to the police capture how their practices enforce the status quo, few of them have delved into the way police conceptions of race and gender are frequently deployed to maintain order and ‘teach’ how the state operates.

Certain studies, however, do unearth these aspects through ethnography. Among them is the work of Prokos and Padavic (2020), who describe how hegemonic conceptions of masculinity are taught at police academies; Hautzinger’s (2007) exploration of domestic violence against women from the perspective of the first women’s police station in Brazil; or Fassin’s (2015) analysis of the moral implications of the murder of Michael

Brown in Ferguson in 2014. This study similarly draws from ethnographic observations in order to explore how race and gender are some of the main avenues through which the police reproduce the status quo.

As this section reviewed, policing has been subject to historical transformations: from a form of domestic authority (Dubber, 2005) to a key actor in the internalisation of shame and restraint (Foucault, 1978); from a mechanism of metropolitan-colonial control deployed to submit waves of alleged disturbance and crime (Williams, 2003), to a an ever-growing apparatus of order maintenance, as currently conceived in Mexico (Harcourt, 1998); from the main carrier of state coercion (Weber, 1967) to one of various power-holding actors engaging in diverse forms of violence (Denyer Willis, 2015; Diphoom, 2015).

If policing has swayed in such directions, then how can it be studied? As shown by the referenced literature, the police may be more richly approached from a ‘narrow and deep’ perspective, focusing on it ‘from the street’ with the intention of experiencing the world of policing and furthermore, aiming to involve broader notions and concepts. Crucially, this latter view suggests that studies of the police should refocus on the police as political and not social, that is, turning away from policing as a mechanism of crime fighting and focusing on its political effectiveness in reproducing the status quo. However, in following this approach, studies of the police should note that reproducing the status quo is very much about gender and race.

## **Chapter 2. Context and research setting: policing in the history of Mexican politics**

This chapter addresses three relevant themes that pattern the relationship between politics and policing in Mexico since the inception of police institutions as we know them today. These themes are: 1) The historical support that different forms of policing in Mexico have shown towards political ‘ruling ideas’ about race and gender, as well as the resulting street level practices carried out in order to enforce them; 2) The use of informant networks and manufactured crime statistics in order to police over those targeted by the aforementioned ruling ideas and; 3) the political creation of municipalities for the purpose of establishing control over spaces - such as *barrios* (neighbourhoods) - through the police. The latter theme also illustrates how Mexico City and its outskirts have become a chaotic landscape of pluralised policing, where federal and local, state and municipal, public and private police forces clash as a result of their commitment to different power holding groups.

This chapter also shows how, among diverse exercises of power reproduced by the police, particular forms of conceiving gender, on the one hand, and race, on the other, have been preserved by their practices since Mexico’s birth as an independent nation. Indeed, exercises of power that evocate and enforce forms *mestizaje* and *machismo* have endured through the way police forces channel the state. In this sense, the police and politics have been outlets for practices related to race and gender that have been systematically perpetuated through mechanisms of power. This is how the Mexican police in general and the municipal police in particular have historically performed a social role that is highly political and reflective of time-resistant ideas that solidified at specific moments, lingering on at street level as persistently enduring notions that appear to be the commonly accepted forms of normality.

This chapter thus explores how and why the police in Mexico is a relevant political actor and then ties this to a narrative of how policing enforces ruling ideas over time through practices that remain widespread at street level, particularly in Mexico City. Afterwards,

these ideas contribute to describe Nautepéc (pseudonym), the location selected as a research setting, while also addressing its adequacy as a field site. Once situated there, the chapter introduces the research informants who took part in this study, naming them only through pseudonyms in order to protect their identities.

## **2.1. The historical enforcement of ruling ideas about race and gender by the police in Mexico**

The next paragraphs survey how Mexican policing institutions have reproduced a specific racial hierarchy, on the one hand, and on the other, a series of gendered assumptions both of which have been continuously enforced during Mexico's political history and through the language and mechanisms of police power. A review of varied sources about the police in Mexico - from the strictly historical such as Katz (1981) or Knight (1990) to the more police-focused such as Pulido (2011; 2015) or Davis (2014) - shows that there was never a pretension from the Mexican police to be a neutral security-driven actor, as police forces from other latitudes at least claim (Bowling, 2019). Conversely, this section argues that policing in Mexico has always been an exercise of translating what Gramsci (1926) called 'ruling ideas' – in reference to the superstructural notions that define ruling classes (Bates, 1975) - into the enforcement of street-level forms of normativity.

By briefly referring to key historical moments, this section claims that throughout Mexico's first century as an independent nation the young nation not only struggled with warfare, political uncertainty and instability<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, the newly independent country also transitioned from being a colonial site where the population was divided according to racial labels placed on mothers and their offsprings to a nation where those tasked by the ruling elites with doing some form of policing resorted to abuse in the name of order.

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<sup>11</sup> In 1821, the former New Spain achieved its independence from the Spanish crown after eleven years of conflict. This brought along the abrupt end of a political system, the birth of Mexico as a modern state and the beginning of a process of emancipation from colonial forms of power (Katz, 1981).

As a result, those ruling elites were protected and perpetuated, and so were their hegemonically masculine ideas about political power.

Mexico's second century as an independent nation, on the other hand, was characterised by the apparent stability brought by a hegemonic party that suppressed unrest through violent forms of policing and obscure techniques of 'law enforcement' – exemplified in part by an overreliance on informants and the unilateral control of crime statistics. Moreover, that hegemonic party personified the post-revolutionary ideals that sought to unify the population. This objective was arguably achieved by ruling upon a rhetoric underpinned by key constructs, chief among which was what Moreno Figueroa (2008; 2010) calls the "myth of *mestizaje*", a popular notion according to which Mexicans stand united beyond racial divisions, as 'all Mexicans are mestizos' or racially mixed. However, as argued by this thesis, the myth of *mestizaje* has obscured the intrinsically racist practices that have been historically carried out by policing groups in Mexico in their attempts to enforce ruling ideas that relate to race and gender.

From the mid 1520s until Mexico's independence in the early 1820s, the Spanish Crown imposed and enforced a caste system throughout colonial Mexico (Martínez, 2004; Knight, 1990). This system functioned as a stratification scheme that defined social interactions in the New Spain for three centuries (Knight, 1990). Promoting the notion of '*limpieza de sangre*' (purity of blood), the Spanish Crown deliberately designed a system of social hierarchy that sought to deal with the large indigenous groups found across the Mexican territory, the importation of African slaves and the miscegenation of these groups with the European population (McAllister, 1963). Thus, various classifications focused on ethnicity were created and elaborated taxonomies appeared according to which the product of a Spaniard and an Indian woman was a *mestizo*; the product of a *mestizo* woman (*mestiza*) and a Spaniard was a *castizo*; a *castizo* and a Spanish woman produced a Spaniard; a Spaniard and a black African woman produced a *mulato*; a *mulato* woman (*mulata*) and a Spaniard produced a *morisco*; and so forth (McAllister, 1963, p. 354).

Through this taxonomy, society in the New Spain had been structured in accordance with a hierarchical system based on racial discourses about miscegenation and ‘mixing’, as well as a specific conception of the role of women – for mothers were the ones who defined their offspring’s place in that hierarchy (Moreno Figueroa, 2008; Basave Benítez, 1991). In this sense, the colonial political system entailed not only adherence from all colonial subjects to the Spanish crown, but also to a specific social composition where race and the role of women were key elements.

This system was kept in place by distinct forms of policing, which ensured this hierarchy was experienced at street level through reminding the population of the position every subject occupied. During the colonial period, however, the political sphere – represented by the Spanish Viceroy – was not protected by the police but by a specific guard called ‘*alabarderos*’ (Perez Ricart, 2018). Nevertheless, according to Perez Ricart (2018) and Pulido (2011), the police in colonial times were not charged with security but with the general observance of courtesy, cleanliness and good behaviour - which in other words meant that they ensured that subjects acted in accordance with their deeply racialised position.

The *Alabarderos* notoriously represented a white elite by being a group of Spain-born men who protected and upheld the rule of the colonial authorities (Pulido, 2011). Conversely, the products of mixes like *mestizos* and *mulatos* were deemed racially unfit to protect the Spanish Viceroys and their courts. However, they were allowed to act as informants for *alabarderos*, who were reluctant to police over *mestizo* subjects, areas and neighbourhoods (McAllister, 1963). Thus, by passing on information about other social groups, *mestizos* were incorporated into the lower ranks of the colonial police. Crucially, these racially charged notions endured at street level after the independence, a dimension the new state would penetrate mainly through subsequent forms of policing. As this racially mixed colony became a setting for a war of independence as well as various successive conflicts of power, new forms of incipient policing not only focused on enforcing a racial hierarchy inherited from the colonial period, but also on personifying a specific version of power based on evocations of masculinity.



As reviewed by Davalos (2018), a sequence of violent conflicts that marked Mexico's process of decolonisation forced those groups that achieved power during specific periods to implement repressive forms of order maintenance in order to avoid insurgencies<sup>12</sup>. Throughout most of the country's first century as an independent nation, policing offered a mechanism of control in a context of "longstanding battles between agrarian and industrial elites about the nature of the state and the direction of the economy; pervasive social uprisings and rebellion on the part of the nation's most impoverished citizens" (Davis, 2010, p. 35). As a result, those groups who held policing powers became essential to elites in power, who saw in the police an army of enforcers (Pulido, 2013)<sup>13</sup>. Consequently, the term 'police' was rationalised as 'power' in Mexico since the independence (Pulido, 2011).

But what was being enforced by the police power in Mexico? The work of Vanderwood (1992) and Perez Ricart (2018) illustrates how the first forms of national policing were created as instruments of power midway through the nineteenth century. In response to banditry and other forms of crime that ravaged most of the countryside, the newly installed Liberal government - led by President Benito Juarez and his idea of a federal system of governance - armed and instituted a rural police force with express authority to apply repressive measures against the population (Vanderwood, 1992; Oppenheimer, 1998; Perez Ricart, 2018)<sup>14</sup>. This police force became known as '*los Rurales*'<sup>15</sup> (or 'the

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<sup>12</sup> During the century between 1810 and 1910 - the year when the Mexican Revolution broke out - a number of social and political movements in the 1810s, the 1850s, the 1860s and the 1910s cyclically replaced the existing state and its military with a new state and military (Katz, 1981; Joseph and Nugent, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> A number of sources, however, overlook the formal and deliberate establishment of this partnership. The work of Gil Martinez and Villarreal Brasca (2017), for instance, chooses to address the relationship between power holders and the police during the first half of the nineteenth century as a systematic exercise of corruption. Similarly, Sanz Tapia (2009) conceives the way policing liaised with post-independence governments in Mexico - national and local - as an 'auction' of positions within an inexperienced public service. However, these approaches neglect the need for control experienced by the newly established governments, which could only be achieved by incorporating forms of policing as loyal enforcers of order in their name.

<sup>14</sup> Midway through the 1850s, numerous struggles ensued throughout the Mexican territory due to the constant conflicts that took place between two groups feuding over the new nation's control: the liberal factions, who advocated for a federal system of governance, and the conservative groups, who preached in favour of centralism. Except for certain areas of the north, president Benito Juarez and his supporting Liberals had asserted control over almost the entire country by weakening the Church, the indigenous populations and the military, famously dispossessing them of their assets (Vanderwood, 1992). The power of these groups was hindered through the nationalisation of their properties, which were claimed by the newly established government (Vanderwood, 1992). The liberals aimed at obtaining citizen support for their regime while at the same time 'teaching good citizenship' - as they viewed it - to the indigenous populations (Vanderwood, 1992).

Rurals’) due to their strong presence across the Mexican countryside (Bazan Alarcon, 1964; Perez Ricart, 2018; Vanderwood, 1992)<sup>16</sup>.

Far from the countryside and within the highest echelons of government, another police corporation was formed with the name of *Policía Reservada* (or ‘Classified Police’), a name that alluded to its secrecy and exclusive service of the power holding elite (Pulido, 2017)<sup>17</sup>. The deployment of the *Policía Reservada* was a crucial component in favour of the dictatorial government of president Porfirio Diaz, a period known as *Porfiriato* (González, 2002). President Diaz had risen to power after successfully rebelling against his predecessor Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada in 1876, (Knight, 1992)<sup>18</sup>.

Crucially, both the *Rurales* and the *Policía Reservada* institutionalised exercises of power that over time became associated with a specific type of exacerbated masculinity (Vanderwood, 1992). Through the power personified by these police corporations,

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<sup>15</sup> The establishment of the ‘Rurales’ was carried out by a Spanish-born Minister of the Interior, Jose Maria Lafragua, whose design of the police was inspired by the Spanish Guardia Civil (or Civil Guard) that had become infamous after successfully dealing with banditry during the guerrilla war against Napoleon I. Similarly to the origins of the police in France and Italy, where constabularies were installed as political power became increasingly concentrated, “the Rurales became the president’s police as Mexico’s executive acquired power,” (Vanderwood, 1992, p. 48). Indeed, the only centralized institution devised by the federally inclined Liberal government was the police (Vanderwood, 1992; Perez Ricart, 2018). In this sense, the original Mexican model of policing incorporated European elements according to which police power evoked a notion of order (Pulido, 2011). However, the Mexican context of decolonisation also produced a rupture with ideas brought from Europe, which caused policing in Mexico to be sceptically questioned as an impartial source of order and was instead conceived from the outset as an extension of rulers and politicians.

<sup>16</sup> As Pulido (2011) notes, a number of sources such as those studies by De Acosta (1962), Bustamante (2001) and Covarrubias (1943) neglect considering the *Rurales* as one of the main sources of the relative stability of Juárez’s administration. However, more recent studies such as those by Exbalin (2012) and Speckman (2014) increasingly suggest that Mexico’s early federal governments owed much of their strength to partisan police forces.

<sup>17</sup> As noted by Pulido (2015), there are few studies about the *Policía Reservada*. Among them, one by Barrera Bassols (1996) particularly focuses on the violent background of those who formed part of it. However, despite its modest echo across the literature, the *Policía Reservada* is a corporation that crucially exposes the political relevance of the police in Mexico in light of its intimate bond with the power structures that ruled the country before the revolution.

<sup>18</sup> Once President Diaz assumed office, numerous indigenous populations such as the Purépechas of the state of Michoacán, or the inhabitants of the valley of Chalco sought to be restored with the lands that had been expropriated from them during Juárez’s presidency (Serrano, 2012). In response, President Diaz instructed the *Policía Reservada*, among other police corporations, to repress such claims violently. Episodes such as these show how the partisanship of police corporations played a key role in favour of Diaz’s long-lasting government. In order to secure the loyalty of the Rurales and Policía Reservada just as Lerdo de Tejada had, President Diaz elevated their powers to federal status, making them able to rule over large areas of the country, most of which were inhabited by defenceless indigenous populations (Martínez de Murguía, 1999). Therefore, as unrest surged across Mexico, Diaz invested more than half of the country’s revenue in police services (Perez Ricart, 2018). With his endorsement, the presence of the *Rurales* grew from hunting down solitary thieves to suppressing strikes and protests while the Policía Reservada unearthed alleged acts of sedition all over the country (Martínez de Murguía, 1999; Pulido, 2017). In this sense, policing in Mexico was institutionalised as a mechanism that allowed power holders to secure control through violence and repression.

displays of strength and a propensity for violence were constructed as ‘manly’ traits that contributed to the enforcement and reproduction of machismo throughout Mexico.

In this sense, the acts of oppression carried out by these partisan police corporations were not only expressed through direct forms of violence, but also through the imposition of racialised and gendered hierarchies. As Vanderwood (1992, p. 54 and 55) recounts, “the *Rurales* dressed much like the most powerful bandits of the time... and everyone understood what it meant: [they] could outride, outtrope, outshoot, outdrink, and outwomanize any other cowboy, from whatever land...emphasizing the idea that ‘this man is a MAN [emphasis in the original]’”.

Accurately perceived as power holders by society in Mexico, the *Rurales*’s traits and symbols have also been reproduced and institutionalised. Their own version of masculinity, originally formed in the Mexican countryside, was part of their characterisation. In this sense, their personification of manliness was intrinsic to how they exercised power throughout the country.

On the other hand, these forms of policing also perpetuated a specific, hierarchical conception of race, further demonstrating the influence of colonial categories upon which an entire racial taxonomy had been enforced for centuries. Indeed, the *Rurales* had been endorsed by Porfirio Diaz to silence the demands of indigenous groups<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, policing became associated with the persecution of indigenous populations, which moreover favoured a conceptualisation of the latter as criminals or enemies of the state. In order to brand these populations as such, the police unearthed the language inherited by the logics of mestizaje since colonial times. Indeed, according to Wolf (1956), the police would refer to those they deemed enemies of the political elites<sup>20</sup> by using terms borrowed from the hierarchical system established by the Spanish empire to identify the products of racial ‘mixes’. As a result, *Rurales* would refer to members of indigenous

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<sup>19</sup> Until the revolution, there were few elements of national cohesion across Mexico (Knight, 1986). Indeed, before this crisis, allegiances among Mexicans were mostly ethnic and regional, while after they became ideological and clientelist (Knight, 1986).

<sup>20</sup> By using ‘political elites’ as a category, this dissertation refers to those groups of power that have ruled over Mexico, either as a political party, such as the PRI; a dominant collective, such as Benito Juárez’s *Liberales*; or as a circles of influence to presidents.

communities as ‘*salta atrás*’ – the offspring of a Chinese man and a native Indian woman – or ‘*sambaigos*’ – the offspring of a black man and a native Indian woman.

As noted by Wolf (1956), these words were used derisively and, due to being uttered by power holding police officers, also reinforced a specific, well-known social hierarchy. Despite being anachronistic and evocative of a previous colonial time, this hierarchy was underpinned by racialised constructs that had very real implications for those placed in it. According to Katz (1981), systematic acts of physical and psychological violence such as these are one of the causes that ultimately led to the Mexican revolution<sup>21</sup>. In return, and also through the use of racial categories of old, *Rurales* were widely conceived and described as “rootless, macho, power-hungry mestizos” during the years immediately prior to the armed conflict (Wolf, 1956, p. 77).

After the revolution, however, the police continued to shape the landscape of Mexican politics. Their entanglements with power solidified through their role in securing the long-standing success of a political group. Indeed, the revolution itself was followed by a post-revolutionary process of state formation (Joseph and Nugent, 1994). This process was marked by the ascension to power by a political party in 1929, initially named as the National Revolutionary Party (*Partido Nacional Revolucionario* or PNR), and renamed in 1946 as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or PRI), which would govern the country uninterruptedly until 2000 and then from 2012 to 2018 (Garrido, 2005; Joseph and Nugent, 1994)<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> The impact of repressive policing during the *Porfiriato* is seldom viewed as a direct cause of the Mexican revolution throughout studies such as those by Womack (1969) or Gonzalez (2002), who instead focus on the political unrest generated by the economic and social crises that preceded the armed conflict. Moreover, the earlier work of Tannenbaum (1933), Wilkie (1970) or Gruening (1925) centres on the revolution as the rising of rural groups against President Diaz, conceptualised as a tyrant, in order to confer ownership of the lands to the peasantry and ultimately achieving the nationalization of foreign-controlled industries, prominently the extraction of oil (Joseph and Nugent, 1994). However, since the 1960s, this initial trend was contested by studies such as those by Bailey (1978), Carr (1980) and Fowler-Salamini (1993), who focused in the consequences brought by the insurgency itself (Joseph and Nugent, 1994; Miller, 1988)<sup>21</sup>. Yet, these latter sources also attribute a secondary role to repressive episodes of policing as precursors of the revolution. However, as noted by Katz (1981), the frequently repressive and violent practices by the *Rurales* and *Policia Reservada* crucially motivated the revolution. The abusive measures that made those police corporations infamous produced outrage and numerous grievances across Mexico, therefore becoming one of the main causes that led to the conflict (Katz, 1981)<sup>21</sup>. Beyond the revolution, a focus on salient episodes involving the police in Mexico consistently sheds light on the circumstances that resulted in other political transitions that took place thereafter.

<sup>22</sup> Prior to this, it is important to note that, as Abrams (1977) indicates, in order to avoid studying the state in a reified way, its process of formation and dynamic evolution must be addressed. As explained by Corrigan and Sayer (1985), state formation takes place through impositional claims that designate specific categories - such as ‘citizen’, ‘taxpayer’ or ‘local police officer’ – that ensure stratifications according to class, age, gender, locality or ethnicity. Thus, the state is formed through a cultural process embodied by

Most sources, such as the work of Hart (1997) and Gonzalez (2002), address the way in which the PRI secured hegemony by focusing on factors such as its ideological identity with the notions that fuelled the revolution – such as a belief in the fair distribution of agrarian land and the nationalisation of key industries -, or the absence of stronger parties that could have acted as political opposition. However, those sources seem to neglect or overlook the role of the police in securing the one party dictatorship through the use of – this thesis argues – racist practices veiled by the ‘myth of mestizaje’ (Moreno Figueroa, 2008; 2010), as well as symbols and expressions that contributed to the institutionalisation of machismo.

Indeed, the post-revolutionary period was marked at a political level by the efforts of the initial PRI administrations aimed at solidifying ruling ideas about nation building, either through laws, rhetoric or the example set by strong party leaders and public officials. Chief among those ruling ideas was the notion that ‘all Mexicans are racially mixed’ because everyone is a *mestizo* or *mestiza*.

As this thesis argues, the ingrained nature of the myth of mestizaje has obscured one alternative explanation to acts of police brutality that have scarred Mexico’s history under the PRI hegemony. Indeed, most sources and accounts agree that infamous massacres conducted directly or indirectly by the Mexican police against civil society such as those of Tlatelolco<sup>23</sup>, *Corpus Christi*<sup>24</sup>, Acteal<sup>25</sup>, Tlatlaya<sup>26</sup> and Ayotzinapa<sup>27</sup> were carried out

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rituals, routines and notions of rule (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985). In this sense, the police act as an effective representative of the formed state by making its subject live and experience power, rather than transmitting it in an abstract way.

<sup>23</sup> In 1968, a student movement was formed in order to express demands and concerns over the state of government. Members of the two largest public universities in Mexico united in protest against President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz and his use of police brutality. After months of growing tension between the students and the Federal Government, a large protest was held on 2 October in Tlatelolco Square in Mexico City (Krauze, 1997; Castellanos, 2014; DeTura, 2018). During the protest, the DFS along with military forces took the square through gunfire, killing hundreds of students (Castellanos, 2014; Aristegui, 2019). As posed by Piccato (2013, p. 92), the 1968 massacre of students “meant the beginning of the end of the post-revolutionary regime, the moment when the true authoritarian nature of the presidency and the PRI was unveiled and radicalised”. The work of Aguayo (1998) also traces the political impact of the actions carried out by the police that day. According to him, the police justified its means by inflating the threat of social movements in order to then eliminate them through repression (Aguayo, 1998; Piccato, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> In 1971, three years later after the Tlatelolco massacre, unrest among students had only increased against the then-president Luis Echeverría Álvarez – Secretary of Interior during in 1968. In response, surveillance and violent acts of repression by the police also increased (Krauze, 1997; DeTura, 2018). As instructed by President Echeverría, the police armed and trained a paramilitary group called ‘*Halcones*’ (or ‘Falcones’), who then conducted a series of killings – approximately one hundred and twenty (Notimérica, 2016) - during a student demonstration held in Mexico City on 10 June 1971 (DeTura, 2018; Castellanos, 2014). These killings became known as the ‘*Corpus Christi* massacre’ (Castellanos, 2014).

in order to protect or uphold different PRI administrations. However, no study has yet delved into the racial constructs that were involved in the way the Mexican police executed hundreds of fellow mestizos – as the myth of mestizaje would suggest. In reality, the victims in most of the aforementioned massacres were largely indigenous populations and the rest were people who would unequivocally be classified as dark skinned Mexicans or ‘*morenas*’ and ‘*morenos*’. Even if this argument requires further development, it poses that not only were the Mexican police the perpetrators of Tlatelolco, *Corpus Christi*, Acteal, Tlatlaya and Ayotzinapa, but moreover, that their victims were those who would have been situated in the lower ranks of the racial hierarchy instituted by the Spanish Crown during colonial times.

Furthermore, this argument also poses that the Mexican police has also systematically upheld another set of ruling ideas, that is, the enforcement of gender-defined power and the perpetuation of a hegemonic masculinity. As this idea suggests, the partisan Mexican police under the PRI hegemony has continuously instituted machismo at street level. In addition to the enforcement of a colonial racial hierarchy, the police under the PRI rule also constructed and upheld a notion of masculinity that contained vestiges of how the nineteenth century *Rurales* and the colonial *Alabarderos* conceived gender.

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<sup>25</sup> In 1997, forty-five people belonging to an indigenous minority in the town of Acteal, in the state of Chiapas, were executed by a para-policing group (Mosknes, 2004). As Mosknes (2004, p. 109) holds, “that the massacre could happen in the vicinity of stationed police forces lead to questions concerning the involvement of the Mexican government in spurring the violence in Chiapas”. It was well known that the site of the massacre was also an area where a growing movement of indigenous farmers continuously protested against the PRI (Mosknes, 2004). By then, the public had grown discontent with the PRI and by the same token, oppositionist parties had gained enough support to contend for presidential power three years later, by the time the 2000 elections arrived.

<sup>26</sup> According to journalistic sources, a group of soldiers aided by local police officers entered two houses in the State of Mexico and executed 12 civilians under the false belief that they were a criminal group (*El País*, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> According to two official reports (PGR, 2015; GIEI, 2015), 43 students from the town of Ayotzinapa had seized a public bus in order to attend a political rally in Iguala when they were intercepted by the local police and then delivered to a drug cartel known as ‘*Los Rojos*’ (or ‘the reds’). None of the students have been heard of since those events took place, however, according to the aforementioned reports, it is suggested that all students were executed by *Los Rojos*. Similar to massacres that occurred during the ‘old PRI’ administrations, the tragic events that ensued in Ayotzinapa and Tlatlaya featured the involvement of the police. However, that involvement became indirect and accessory to the actual perpetrators of the crimes. In the case of Ayotzinapa, the police delivered the victims to a drug cartel called ‘*Los Rojos*’ (or ‘the reds’) who allegedly conducted the mass murders. In the case of Tlatlaya, the armed forces incurred in fatal gunfire while the police merely pointed to the site where the killings unfolded. What was perplexing about these massacres is the extent to which the ruling party had intended for them to develop in such a way. The scarring mass killings of Tlatelolco, *Corpus Christi*, and Acteal left little doubt about the active involvement of the old PRI. However, the massacres of Tlatlaya and Ayotzinapa, now under the new PRI, suggested that the party had little control of the circumstances in which they took place, much less about their outcome. Yet, what remained clear is that the police had played a significant role in both episodes.

Indeed, the two most popular chief police officers in Mexican history two of its chief officers, Arturo Durazo Moreno and Miguel Nazar Haro, became notorious for their violent practices and political involvement (Lopez de la Torre, 2013; Piccato, 2003; Pelayo, 2004)<sup>28</sup>. Few sources, however, have addressed what these chief officers meant for the world of policing in Mexico. As stated by Lopez de la Torre (2013), Arturo Durazo - who acted as Chief of Police in Mexico City from 1976 to 1982 - was construed as an archetype of masculinity within the Mexican police due to his entanglements with the highest echelons of power and displays of leadership at the helm of a system largely occupied by men. Furthermore, as his actions gained resonance throughout the country, his conception of manliness irradiated to all police ranks. Crucially, as Durazo gathered cult status among the police, a specific form of masculinity was equated with the violence that characterised his methods (Lopez de la Torre, 2013). Durazo's symbolic importance, however, has been overlooked as an explanation of why police corporations during this period represented the brute force of a regime that spurned the impartial mechanisms of the courts and preferred their own 'effective' measures based on violence (Piccato, 2003).

And just like acts of police brutality against racially disfavoured groups such as the ones that took place in Acteal – and more recently -, Ayotzinapa and Tlatlaya indicate the endurance of racist ruling ideas within the Mexican police and their practices, the disdain shown towards the increase in femicides suggest also the presence of lingering views related to those hegemonic masculinities instituted by the popular chief police officers. As an indication of this, during the period in which my fieldwork took place, only 726 out of 2,833 cases involving murdered women in Mexico were investigated as femicides by the police (OCNF, 2019).

Thus, as argued by this thesis, similar to the way colonial ruling ideas were reinforced by historical police corporations, the post-revolutionary PRI ideology – partly based on the myth of mestizaje and the omnipotence of strong men - was adopted and enacted by the Mexican police by perpetuating a hegemonic form of white masculine power. Therefore,

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<sup>28</sup> As narrated by López de la Torre (2013), Miguel Nazar Haro orchestrated the torture and forced disappearances of PRI detractors between the 1960s and 1980s. Charged with silencing revolts and student movements, Nazar Haro carried out systematic acts of violence with the support and endorsement of the state (López de la Torre, 2013).

this chapter poses that, as crucial allies of political groups of power, the Mexican police's views on issues like gender or race, arguably inherited from uncritically accepted colonial mechanisms of miscegenation and machismo, crucially define the way specific forms of power are upheld every day.

## **2.2. The historical use of informants and manufactured crime rates by the Mexican police.**

Another theme that has historically patterned the relationship between politics and policing in Mexico is the use of informants and the manufacturing of crime rates through obscure means. If policing in Mexico has been an ongoing source of enforcement for ruling ideas related to race and gender, that has been made possible in large part due to the mechanisms offered by systems of informants and the unilateral control of crime rates. Even if both of these practices can arguably be traced back to the way the *Policía Reservada* operated during the *Porfiriato*, their use became a characteristic trait of policing and power in Mexico during the PRI hegemony.

The first PRI administrations drafted the legislative directives according to which federal police would operate, crucially extracting control over policing from local councils and boroughs (Rodríguez Kuri, 1996). Furthermore, during the first months since the creation of the PRI in 1929, its leaders requested two amendments to the Federal Rules of Policing of 1928 (Davis, 2004). The first consisted in increasing the income of inspectors and high-ranking police officers and the second granted inspectors the right of assuming tasks not only related to criminal investigations, but also to administrative duties, public records and even taxes (Speckman, 2001). These changes resulted in a new federal police that acted with great political involvement and gratitude towards the PRI, especially throughout the 1930s and 1940s (Davis, 2004; Garrido, 2005). The fact that police inspectors were selected “from within the president’s inner circle” (Pulido, 2017, p. 13) evidenced the strong link that existed by then between law enforcement and the ruling



party. In instituting these changes, the PRI had arguably found that the police was a key actor for the perpetuation of its regime.

Once the police's allegiance was secured, the PRI sought for an intelligence-driven ethos in policing instead of an overtly repressive one as the preceding nineteenth century governments had done. This led to the creation of the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (Federal Directory of Security or DFS) in 1947, initially presented as a secret intelligence agency (Fondevila, 2013, Cuellar, 2007).

However, the DFS quickly became known as a group of specially trained policemen who fostered various networks of informants (Cuellar, 2007; Fondevila, 2013). As DeTura (2018, p.1) explains, "from its earliest years the DFS existed as a highly polemic bureau unlike standard intelligence agencies both domestic and foreign". The DFS operated through informants and street gossip, normalising behaviours that have since become everyday realities for the police, such as liasing with criminals to secure information or underreporting crimes.

By the 1960s, the DFS were mostly tasked with persecuting those who protested against the PRI hegemony (Cuellar, 2007; Fondevila, 2013). In order to do so, this police force resorted to '*pájaros*' ('birds'), that is, people who would go on political meetings and demonstrations in order to later inform DFS officials about dissident leaders (Fondevila 2011; 2013). However, after the aforementioned Chief Officer Miguel Nazar Haro carried out a number of institutional changes within the DFS, the focus of this elite police bureau shifted from political dissidence and ideological opponents to criminals (Fondevila, 2013). Instead of informing about suspicious political figures, *pájaros* now provided intelligence about alleged thieves, rapists and murderers (Fondevila, 2013).

The recurrent and more widespread nature of crime in comparison to political meetings created the need for a larger and more complex system of informants who became known as '*Madrinas*' - which literally means 'godmothers' but can also be used as a vulgar way to refer to a violent physical beating (Fondevila 2011; 2013). *Madrinas* thus were used so

that false or invented charges could be brought forward against alleged criminals (Naval and Salgado, 2006).

Alongside *Madrinas*, other sources of snitching were also systematically fostered by the DFS, such as ‘*caciques*’ - who were gang leaders or drug cartel operators that liaised frequently with police officers (Pansters, 2018) - or ‘*orejas*’ (which means ‘ears’) – who were street level acquaintances of the police who kept them apprised of what was thought and said within specific urban areas. In that sense the political system, through the work of the police, relied on the role of informants, gossip and the blurred lines between official, recognised, state agents, and those that operated like or for the state.

In addition to the long-standing and systematic use of snitches and informants, the control of crime statistics is another police practice that gained particular importance since the PRI lost power for the first time in 2000. Now in the context of increasingly visible waves of drug-related violence, the presidential administrations of the twentyfirst century in Mexico have been praised, criticised and deposed in attention to their crime-fighting abilities. For this reason, crime statistics became key for the political system’s rhetoric about security and for the police, as its main street-level operator. Indeed, the police in Mexico hold a privileged position in this regard as well, as they report and generate the statistics according to which they are assessed by political authorities, the media and civil society.

In 2000, an overwhelming majority of Mexicans voted the PRI out of government and welcomed a transition in power through the National Action Party (*Partido Acción Nacional* or PAN). As held by Arzt (2003) and Caparros (2010), the triumph of the new ruling party was founded on the need to strengthen democratic institutions and secure transparency. The new PAN administration, aided by an unprecedented minority of PRI members in Congress, favoured the creation of new institutions that were less focused on exerting authority and more preoccupied with demonstrating a will to establish bipartisanship and electoral transparency (Morton, 2005). However, widespread discontent with policing practices was also a defining factor against the PRI. Indeed,

police abuse and the old repressive practices, by then condemned as ‘typical PRI methods’ by civil society, propelled not only the PRI’s defeat, but also a growing presence of activism and human rights organisations (Morton, 2005).

Six years later, President Felipe Calderon, who assumed office as the second elected leader affiliated to the PAN, immediately declared war on drug cartels (Medel and Thoumi, 2014; Williams, 2011). As part of his strategy, President Calderon appointed the Mexican Military and Marine forces, as well as the Federal Police to patrol over entire areas of the country (Medel and Thoumi, 2014; Williams, 2011; Serra, 2014).

In addition to crime statistics – almost entirely produced by the police -, various media outlets that reported on everyday violence named the conflict ‘Calderon’s War’ (Animal Político, 2012; Reforma, 2010) and attributed every drug-related homicide to the work of the government, armed forces and the federal police (Reforma, 2008; IPN, 2018). These outlets, represented by Mexico’s most popular newspapers, kept count of drug-related homicides through the ‘violéntómetro’ (or ‘violence-meter’), an ever-increasing statistic of fatalities that grew according to reports that the media obtained from murder scenes, official police registers, national statistics or testimonies gathered by their journalists (Reforma, 2008; IPN, 2018; SSP, 2011). The police were now exposed and scrutinized, not only owing to accusations of corruption and ineffectiveness but also due to being portrayed as responsible for most drug-related homicides during ‘Calderon’s war’ (Sabet, 2010; Marín, 2012). Indeed, the incessant portrayal of the police as corrupt and ineffective throughout ‘Calderon’s war’ played a crucial role during the 2012 presidential elections (Casar, 2015).

Openly chastised for being perceived as responsible for the escalation in violence, the PAN and its policing strategies fell to third place in preferences as the PRI regained the voters’ favour. As a result, the PRI returned to power through President Enrique Peña Nieto, now at a time when ensuring favourable crime statistics, or at the very least controlling them, seems key for the purpose of coming into political power or keeping hold of it.

### **2.3. Mexico City and its encircling municipalities as clusters of control**

Alongside the enforcement of specific ruling ideas - such as those akin to machismo, on the one hand, and a colonial racial hierarchy hidden by the myth of mestizaje, on the other – and the use of informants and statistical control, the creation of the municipality as a political entity is another theme that has come to historically define policing in Mexico. Indeed, the insertion of the municipality in Mexico's legal and political landscape is not a mere normative or programmatic addition, but a crucial shift that shaped policing in that country. Furthermore, due to a *sui generis* political condition that legally defined Mexico City as a federal district instead of as a state until 2016, different police corporations from varying levels of government have been disputing jurisdictional limits, styles of law enforcement and more importantly, political allegiances, much prior to the deployment of the National Guard or the war on drugs.

In the streets of Mexico City and its outskirts, federal and local forms of policing collide, mostly as a result of their affiliation to different power holding elites. Crucially, the city expands into municipalities that belong to neighbouring states. In this context, state and federal police forces typically clash over jurisdiction related issues throughout the borders of Mexico City.

The work of Pulido (2011; 2017; 2018), Azaola (2014) and Alvarado (2011) is important for the purpose of tracing how the police became important in Mexico City. As recounted by Pulido (2017), during the first years after the independence policing was something that happened at macro levels, across states or great spaces. Conversely, communities and neighbourhoods such as the ones that formed Mexico City were privately policed by 'neighbourly' figures called '*alcaldes de barrio*' ('neighbourhood mayors'). However, during the violent nineteenth century, characterised by conflict and instability, policing in the city gradually militarised through federal intervention and adopted a defence ethos (Pulido, 2017). As a result, policing became increasingly specialised and impersonal.

After the end of the revolution, the social composition of most areas of the city changed as a result of the advent of new groups that had been favoured and enriched by the entire conflict (Piccato, 2003). Indeed, with the nationalisation of formerly foreign enterprises and the reconfiguration of ownership over rural lands that resulted from the revolution, new classes with increasing resources resettled in Mexico City and its outskirts. This new social composition also led to an increase in violence across new communities and recently urbanised neighbourhoods (Reyes and Rosas, 1993).

Indeed, Mexico City's expansion during the post-revolutionary period is identified with the outgrowth of informal settlements on its outskirts, which a number of scholars such as Azaola (1990; 1997) and Piccato (2003) associate with a notable proliferation of gang-like delinquency - commonly known as *chavos banda*. These gangs prompted violence and illegal commerce among the recently settled populations throughout the 1910s (Azaola, 1997).

Arguably bearing in mind how a series of uprisings across uncontrolled areas of the nation led to the revolution, the new – and currently valid – constitution of 1917 crucially included the normative guidelines and regulations for municipalities, which had been areas overlooked by federal laws until then (Azaola, 2014; Andrade, 2006; Adame, 2009). As the PRI established hegemonic power over the country, the novel regulations on municipalities allowed for these dense urban spaces to have their own police precincts. By the first year of PRI government, “Mexico City’s police grew in numbers, diversified its composition and adopted the municipal or local system. This institution was conceived to prevent disorder in the urban society, replacing a variety of former police forces in charge of public security” (Pulido, 2017, p. 239).

As a result, during the 1930s and 1940s, a blend between modern-day police officers and detectives called *gendarmes* patrolled the municipalities of an increasingly urbanised Mexico City (Pulido, 2017). As Pulido (2017, p. 26) argues about *gendarmes*, “far from preventing crime, they managed the every-day limits of disorder”. Similarly to inspectors,

*gendarmes* were seen as loyal to the PRI, which led to them being known as ‘sidewalk bureaucrats’ (Piccato, 2010; Pulido, 2017). Due to their allegiance to the now hegemonic party, *gendarmes* policed at will, “intervening in the urban space through a range of practices that went from surveillance to suspicion-based arrests, systematic extortions and the discretionary use of violence” (Pulido, 2017, p. 45). In this context, the police carried out the state’s political, economic and social purposes at street level, bringing coercion and repression into the everyday life of civil society (Davis, 2014).

As these paragraphs have shown, even if the work of Pulido and Azaola reviews the transformations that shaped policing in Mexico City, they largely overlook how such transformations came as a result of the PRI’s quest for the control of spaces such as neighbourhoods and municipalities. By enforcing a legal framework that allowed for municipalities to be policed locally, the PRI achieved control over reduced urban spaces therefore preventing large uprisings across vast areas and popular movements such as the ones that led to the Mexican revolution. In this sense, the PRI solidified its political power through municipal policing. Even if this was not apparent at the moment, those amendments in the federal police’s competencies that allowed for them to conduct police work across more concentrated areas – such as neighbourhoods and municipalities - crucially altered the municipal police’s sphere of action, particularly in Mexico City.

In this context, when the PRI hegemony ended – or rather, experienced a twelve-year interlude – and the PAN rose to power from 2000 to 2012, the war against drug cartels brought a notable increase in homicide rates across Mexico (Igarape, 2012; SSP, 2011), as well as a growing perception of insecurity among its population (ENVIPE, 2008; 2009; 2010; 2011). And while homicides reached unprecedented numbers, the public associated the PAN government with violence and intrusive policing. This situation led to what Bailey (2014, p. 8) calls ‘Mexico’s security trap’, a situation where “crime, violence, corruption and impunity become mutually reinforcing in civil society, state and regime, and override efforts to build ethical democratic governance”. Mexico’s security trap favours an environment where crime statistics become the main source according to which entire administrations – and political parties - are considered fit to rule or not.

This study was conducted in the outskirts of Mexico City at a time when a new change in the federal government took place. Indeed, after the 2018 presidential elections concluded, the founder of a new party named National Regeneration Movement (*‘Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional’* or MORENA), Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, was elected President by an unprecedented margin of thirty per cent of the total votes (Mitofsky, 2018). Lopez Obrador had been mayor of Mexico City from 2000 to 2006 and was also a popular candidate who led left-wing coalitions in the 2006 and 2012 federal elections. At present, his administration has reached its halfway point. Lopez Obrador remains a popular figure as a result of his apparent favour towards the underprivileged majorities and his frequent attacks on diverse acts of alleged corruption – past and present - from affiliates of the PRI and the PAN, a group he calls ‘the power mafia’ (*Proceso*, 2020).

Even since his successful presidential campaign, Lopez Obrador announced that he would create a National Guard (or *Guardia Nacional*), using the manpower and resources of the armed forces to counteract crime across Mexico. Early into his tenure, President Lopez Obrador and his party drafted and presented the general law for this new institution, which empowers former – and current - members of the Mexican Armed Forces to police over municipal, local and federal matters regarding security, which equates to everyday policing (*Proceso*, 2018).

The introduction of the National Guard thus became the latest political event to reshape policing in the urban context of Mexico. It is therefore crucial for this dissertation to address how the aforementioned episodes have impacted Mexico City through changes in policing strategies. Until 2016, Mexico City was not legally a state but a federal district. As a result, the city had been policed through a frail balance between local and federal authorities. However, changes in policing strategies brought by the war on drug cartels and the most recent deployment of the National Guard have reconfigured that frail balance that was erratically kept by police corporations across Mexico City and its outskirts. Most notably, these changes generated a considerable interference between

levels of policing within the city. Both of the aforementioned events resulted in the withdrawal of municipal policing from its historical sphere of action in favour of the growth of federal police, now focused in the city more than ever before.

Today, with the involvement of federal police and armed forces in the everyday reality of most municipal areas throughout Mexico City, local policing corporations are now in the process of being dispossessed from most of their former authority. Municipal precincts significantly lost power over territories where they used to police undisturbed by other levels of law enforcement. The involvement of federal and armed forces thus left municipal police precincts in a delicate position where their deployment needs to be continuously justified in a context where their actions are increasingly scrutinised.

In that sense, policing in Mexico has always been an effort to maintain the status quo, as well as a way to re-establish order when it is in question. However, most studies focusing on the history of the Mexican police mostly neglect this view. These latter sources also neglect addressing how plural and chaotic forms policing have shaped Mexico City and its outskirts as places where power is enforced at street level through everyday police practices. Nautepéc is a distinct example of those areas encircling Mexico City where the work of the police conceals crucial notions about power and politics. For that purpose, municipal policing must be read from the street, where the actual status quo and efforts to maintain or reassert order are acutely visible.

#### **2.4. Nautepéc as a microcosmic field site: An urban setting shaped by the police**

As posed by HC<sup>29</sup> (2003), Nautepéc (pseudonym) offers a microcosmic view of the way the PRI operated throughout Mexico during their hegemonic regime. As part of the State of Mexico, one of the party's last bastions, Nautepéc has been continuously ruled by PRI-affiliated municipal presidents or mayors since the 1930s (HC, 2003). In light of the

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<sup>29</sup> Bibliographical reference reserved in part in order to protect the fieldsite's anonymity.



enduring presence of the formerly hegemonic party, I chose Nautepéc as a field site in order to observe what police practices reveal about politics and power in Mexico. Moreover, due to its proximity in Mexico City, Nautepéc is also a site currently occupied by criminal groups that presumably intend to penetrate the city (Hope, 2013), which crucially renders police work in that municipality particularly relevant.

Nautepéc is a municipality formed by 119 neighbourhoods, 71 residential developments, 18 small villages, and two rural housing developments (INEGI, 2010). It expands over an area similar to Liechtenstein in terms of size and to Fiji in terms of population (INEGI, 2019; UN Stats, 2019). However, being in Nautepéc feels like being completely immersed in Mexico City as it is surrounded by intricate and erratic borders that faintly separate it from other similarly complex municipalities that belong to the State of Mexico, as well as several districts that form part of Mexico City. Indeed, as part of a different state, Nautepéc epitomizes the territorial growth of Mexico City, which has produced an urban expansion - uncontrollable by law or policy – so vast that it stretches in all directions to neighbouring jurisdictions.

The most prominent urban settlements throughout Nautepéc were formed during the post-revolutionary period, after the 1917 constitution configured its territory as a municipality. New commercial sectors enriched by the revolution – after the nationalisation of key industries - found it convenient to build their factories contiguous to Mexico City and settled in Nautepéc (Azaola, 1997). Working classes also settled there as they abandoned the war-ravaged countryside with the hopes of working at the new factories, even if they could not afford to live in the city (Piccato, 2003). This created a combination of formal and informal urbanisation across Nautepéc that remains characteristic to this day (HC, 2003)<sup>30</sup>. In this context, “as cities expand and urban security is becoming one of the most significant policy concerns globally, the role of the police in urban ordering is becoming equally more acute and prominent” (Albrecht and Chirstensen, 2020, p. 386).

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<sup>30</sup> Bibliographical reference reserved in part in order to protect the fieldsite’s anonymity.

Throughout Nautepéc, like in other areas of Mexico City, gated communities are continuously being developed alongside marginalised neighbourhoods (HC, 2003). In between, many areas within the municipality are famous for housing many medium-sized businesses, pharmaceutical laboratories, large shopping malls and textile manufacturing plants, all of which contribute to making Nautepéc one of the most powerful municipalities in Mexico (R, B and R, 2007<sup>31</sup>; HC, 2003). Nevertheless, Nautepéc also features numerous disadvantaged areas, as well as neighbourhoods continuously struck by marginalisation and lacking public services. In the northeast of Nautepéc, for instance, a thin brick and plaster wall divides the famously impoverished neighbourhood of *El Remedio* from a private golf course large enough to fit the entire neighbouring area inside. As reported by a national media outlet, while the golf club offers a spa to its members, the inhabitants of *El Remedio* get their drinking water from trucks that visit its streets twice a week (*Excelsior*, 2018). As posed by Anderson (2001), urban borders such as these shape dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, producing gateways for some and walls for others.

The merging of urban villages with residential developments, favela-like neighbourhoods with rural housing projects and, more generally, state municipalities with city districts produces a convoluted arrangement of jurisdictional borders throughout the urban area where Nautepéc is located. In this chaotic landscape, countless “liminal spaces” (Locke and McCann, 2016, p. 7; see also Merleau-Ponty, 1962) are produced by municipal police forces that thrive on the widespread uncertainty about who is charged with governing and policing such spaces (Herbert, 1997).

Nautepéc, as well as its neighbouring municipalities and districts are political entities that operate through largely independent jurisdictions, each with different governmental administrations, including different police forces and precincts. In this complex landscape, police work produces urban space by bordering it (Albrecht and Christensen, 2020). Indeed, Albrecht and Christensen (2020) elucidate how, by institutionalising the practice of bordering urban space, the police reconfigures mobility and flows in order to

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<sup>31</sup> Bibliographical reference reserved in part in order to protect the fieldsite’s anonymity.

uphold liberal notions of security and order. By the same token, urban spaces and their defining features produce policing by presenting elements that are deemed a threat to the social order (Albrecht and Chirstensen, 2020). This reciprocal production lends support to Herbert's (1997) claim according to which police work and space mutually shape each other (Pauschinger, 2020)<sup>32</sup>. For this reason, conceiving Nautepéc as an urban space defined by borders becomes important for the purpose of studying those who police over such space and within those borders.

Moreover, Nautepéc's recent political history also contributes to making this municipality a microcosm of Mexico. As posed by HC (2003), the construction of six industrial areas and the development of two architectural projects in the 1950s and 1960s attracted rural populations into Nautepéc and produced a polarised social composition within the municipality. However, the economic and social context of Nautepéc slowly resulted in what HC (2003, p. 457) refers to as "*una amplia capa de clases medias*" or "a wide layer of middle classes". These new middle classes became a social sector that, due to being socially and economically favoured during the rule of the PRI, remained a loyal constituency to the party. Unfazed by authoritarianism, the Nautepéc middle classes were happy with the PRI in power within the police-defined borders of Nautepéc. Indeed, as recounted by Segovia (1999), Nautepéc was one of the municipalities that more slowly registered abstentions or votes in favour of different parties since the late 1960s. Simultaneously, increasingly organised criminal groups, particularly familiarised with drug traffic, settled in Nautepéc while aiming to eventually establish their operations in Mexico City.

As a result, local PRI governments endured in Nautepéc, even while other municipalities began being ruled by alternative political parties. Crucially, the strong presence of PRI bureaucrats within Nautepéc's political elites has secured the reproduction of police practices that are rarely contested or questioned, at least in comparison to the way these practices have been condemned in other parts of the country. Indeed, Alvarado Mendoza

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<sup>32</sup> Pauschinger (2020) then approaches the production of police territoriality by considering the role of the emotions of police officers, particularly in relation to risk.

(2012) highlights how shortcomings by the police elsewhere in Mexico have recently come to entail a political cost for those responsible. He illustrates this by recalling how Marcelo Ebrard and Joel Ortega, two Chief Police Commanders of Mexico City between 2000 and 2010, were forced to resign their posts due to specific episodes of police misconduct<sup>33</sup>.

Conversely, police practices across Nautepéc have largely evaded accusations and their corresponding political cost. Even so, Nautepéc features widespread crime and episodes of violence. Most scholars focus on the fact that this municipality is a threshold, “the last frontier” for criminal organisations trying to reach Mexico City (Alvarado Mendoza, 2012).

## **2.5. The Regional Prosecution Unit as a space and the Nautepéc police as its occupants**

As a political mechanism that institutionalises the police practice of bordering throughout Mexico, regional prosecution units were established across municipalities by general prosecutors in each of the thirty-two Mexican states. These units are established every time a new local crime policy demands it or when demographic factors for municipalities such as population density reach certain levels. As typical municipally funded projects, regional prosecution units are placed in cost-effective buildings that require little expenditure for refurbishments or analogous costs. These buildings are bought or – more frequently - rented by municipal administrations in areas that are already urbanised, typically in the vicinity of other government-owned buildings.

These prosecution units house law enforcement and security agencies that typically fulfil three purposes: overseeing the investigation of crimes, housing the headquarters of the municipal police and finally, acting as pre-trial detention centres for those arrested by the

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<sup>33</sup> As Chief Police Director of Mexico City, Marcelo Ebrard was held accountable for the lynching of two police officers in a popular neighbourhood. Joel Ortega, on the other hand, resigned after 13 teenagers died as a result of overcrowding in a nightclub called *News Divine* and where the actions of the police were deemed unfit to deal with such situation (Alvarado Mendoza, 2012).

municipal police. In light of these attributions, regional prosecution units are de facto police precincts, thus perennially filled with detectives, police officers, people reporting crimes and people accused of committing them.

The following descriptions of the space that housed the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc, as well as of the people that worked inside, are made from my own impressions after the first time I entered the building and met its occupants. The prosecution unit operated from within an unimpressive structure located deep within the municipality, encircled by local street markets and next to other public buildings such as the City Hall and the public registry. Dwarfed by the former building, the regional prosecution unit operated in a pale white two-story building already in visible decay after its last refurbishment only three years prior. Most of the detectives and police officers working there nicknamed their own headquarters “*el baño de gasolinera*” (“the gas station bathroom”) in reference to its small size and deteriorated façade.

Getting to the prosecution unit typically entailed enduring chaotic traffic, which was normally produced by the street markets that surrounded the area. Even before entering the precinct’s building, I typically started experiencing uneasiness as soon as I heard young boys - who operated as informal valet parking - offering to take care of my car when I parked it outside. “Trust me, you’ll be here for many hours, and there are really bad guys stealing cars”, the boys would initially tell me, as they were under the impression that I was there to report a crime. In fairness to their warning, Nautepéc is an area that features frequent robberies and thefts.

A paved patio needed to be crossed on foot just before entering the building. The car assigned to the Regional Prosecutor, as well as two patrol cars – the only ones that belonged to the precinct – were often parked in the middle of the paved space, blocking the people’s paths and forcing them to walk around the sides. At those sides of the patio, several groups of mostly men dressed as civilians – and frequently accompanied by police officers - offered legal or private detective services to the people who passed by in and out of the precinct. Those who did not offer their services – because they looked as if

trying to avoid looking suspicious - remained staring in ominous silence until people finally entered the building.

Once inside the Regional Prosecution Unit, I could immediately feel the air thicken due to the humid heat emanating from over crowdedness. At the ground floor, a large hall filled with rows of benches was perennially filled with people going through diverse experiences, such as being informed of the death of a relative, the incarceration of a loved one or the lack of results in the search of their stolen possessions. Almost every time I passed through, alleged suspects could be seen handcuffed to one of the benches next to police officers using two or three of the adjacent benches to take a nap. Other times, people could be seen being questioned by detectives or even stripped of their shirts to be searched in front of everyone present. It was also common to find people crying or visibly stressed, desperately trying to make phone calls on their mobile phones while coping with the absence of public payphones or a signal anywhere in the building. At busy times, it was hard to differentiate people who were being held as suspects from those who were there reporting crimes.

The south corner of this large hall at the ground floor was connected to a narrow corridor that led to a three-step stairway that went down to what was known as the ‘Detectives’ area’. Most people at the prosecution unit called this area “*el sótano*”, which means “the basement”. The nickname seemed appropriate, as it was a dark and humid room that always smelled like a mix of Lysol and salsa. The basement was furnished with two large desks that were meant for people to stand in front of if they intended to report crimes. At the other side of the desks, one or two clerks would sit and ask questions to those reporting in order to produce a document containing the report itself, as well as all the circumstances surrounding an alleged crime. Beyond those desks, however, only clerks, police officers and, moreover, arrested suspects were allowed. Indeed, beyond the main desks and several smaller desks behind them a large hallway was found. Two offices – belonging to the first and second chief commanders respectively - and a file room were found at one end of this hallway. At the other end, however, there was a large iron gate.

This gate led to the cells where arrested suspects could spend a maximum of seventy-two hours while they awaited trial or transfer to a prison.

The detectives' area was constantly occupied by detectives, clerks, secretaries and police officers, as well as their immediate superiors, Commanders Castro (pseudonym) and Antonio (pseudonym). The commanders, as well as some of the detectives and clerks would become my key informants throughout this study, both inside and outside the precinct. Below is a brief description of those who I engaged with the most.

Detective Carlos (pseudonym) was a short young man – presumably in his thirties - with spiky hair, Le Corbusier-style glasses and a passion for motorcycles. He frequently dealt with people reporting alleged crimes, many of which were often in visible distress. Yet, he never showed any resemblance of empathy towards the people narrating very difficult situations. He never offered words of comfort or even commitment to the investigation being opened. Detective Carlos was, however, very honest about what he thought would happen once any police work was initiated. He often would venture an opinion regarding the fate of a report. “We probably won’t get the guy if you don’t give us more information”, he once told a young girl who tearfully reported how she was allegedly touched inappropriately by a group of older men in a bus, including the driver. Indeed, Detective Carlos was known around the precinct by his relaxed yet brutal honesty. He was also renowned for receiving orders with an annoyed look and frequently asked if there was no one else around to do what he was told. His commanders met his attitude with amusement, as they interpreted it as a joke, although he never made that clear.

Detective Raul (pseudonym) was often beside Detective Carlos, as he was his unofficial search partner. Raul was a tall, large man – possibly in his early forties - who enjoyed combing his hair at least three times every day. Like Carlos, his skin was a lighter brown than Commander Castro’s. He strutted around the precinct, high fiving most of his male colleagues and flirtatiously winking at most of his female colleagues. His demeanour was more relaxed than that of Carlos, and he was certainly more charismatic, as even the street-food vendors outside the precinct greeted him with visible joy. Raul was also

known around the precinct for having long, calm conversations with most of the people that were brought in as suspects. Instead of insulting or mocking the suspects as many of his colleagues did, Raul showed them magazines – most of them filled with female nudity – and commented on the pictures with them. I never understood whether this was a tactic used to achieve closeness or if rather, he was just being himself around the suspects.

The main authority over both Raul and Carlos, as well as over everyone at the detectives' area was Commander Castro, a short bald man who always wore black t-shirts with black joggers and black trainers. His skin was dark brown, which, even if I did not realise it immediately, would become a key issue later on. He had an energetic demeanour and a loud voice. Amidst the permanent over crowdedness at the precinct, I could always see him coming from a distance as the police officers made way for him to cross the central hall, opening the crowd and remaining silent while he passed by on his way to his office. He seemed to enjoy his work, even if he delegated most of it to the Second Commander, Antonio.

Antonio was Commander Castro's "right hand", as everyone called him. His personality seemed right to counter that of his superior. He was peaceful and composed; he often smiled but made no jokes; most notably, he never verbally abused any of the detained suspects. Second Commander Antonio also knew the names of every policeman, detective, clerk and young recruit, all of whom he spent hours talking to during tough days or dangerous assignments, always attempting to calm and prepare them.

Both Commander Castro and Commander Antonio notoriously relied on the former's secretary, Ms Ana, also called "Annie" within the Regional Prosecution Unit. Ms Ana was known by all those working at the precinct and more importantly, she seemed to know everything about everyone. She had a strong presence and a confident, fast-paced speech that frequently gave the impression that she would eventually overpower any of her interlocutors if they dared to debate her on any topic. "Annie" was also famous inside



the precinct for how she appeared to enjoy making people blush with sexualised jokes. As I later found, there was more to these sexualised jokes.

Commander Castro enjoyed the largest of all workspaces, as he had a sizeable, four-walled office. His office was the only space where some form of solitude could be found, as the rest of the officers – who were significantly more numerous than the desks and chairs available at the basement – had to rotate from desk to chair to bench, many times finding themselves without a place to work. For this reason, most clerks, detectives and policemen congregated at Commander Castro's office, which was furnished with two very old leather couches, a large desk filled with bottles of water and a small refrigerator filled with coca cola cans.

Among the clerks, Diego (pseudonym) was the most experienced one at the precinct, even if he looked to be in his late twenties at most. He was confident, dressed impeccably and acted solemnly. Moreover, he displayed great leadership. His tone conveyed such authority that most policemen and detectives – who were hierarchically situated above the clerks – took orders from him. Diego's confidence was immediately noticed by Commander Castro, who eventually made him his personal assistant and seemingly confided in him, as he always had a chair placed next to the commander's seat in his office.

Ms Laura, widely referred to as "Laura" or "Laurita", was also part of the clerk team and one of the youngest ones at that, as she looked to be in her early twenties. In contrast to the way most of the people at the precinct would eventually reveal to have specific aversions, Junior Clerk Laura appeared to like – or at least be comfortable around – everything and everyone. In return, all those at the precinct visibly enjoyed her company and opinions about most topics, especially those unrelated to their work. Indeed, everyone seemed to tell her personal stories and various remarks about their hobbies, likes and dislikes. Just like Ms Ana, "Laurita" was unofficially stripped off their titles every time she was addressed. Unlike the – male - commanders and detectives, who

would always refer to each other through their professional prefix, these two women were only called by their first names.

This balance between detectives, police officers, secretaries and clerks, all of them in a small space, constituted the setting at the detectives' area. Upstairs, however, was the office of the Regional Prosecutor. His office was spacious and luminous. All the furniture in it seemed new and smelled of oak wood. Pictures and portraits of old PRI politicians could be found in each of its four walls. The regional prosecutor's desk was tidy and usually had only two things on it: a silver revolver and a protein shake in a large glass brought by his secretary at least three times a day.

The regional prosecutor, Pablo Güemes (pseudonym), was a short, portly man with a kind yet vacant stare. Notwithstanding his weight, he looked strongly built as he always used a bulletproof vest and carried a silver handgun on a holster tight against his ribs. Every time I visited him at his office, he would approach me with arms wide open, leave the gun in his desk – which he appeared to do as a courtesy –, shake my hand and then hug me while patting my back. He always smelled strongly of cologne and cigars. After our effusive greetings, he would invite me to sit at his office while he passionately shared stories about his past as a policeman. He had also been the chief warden of one of Mexico's most infamous maximum-security prisons, a fact that provided him with fascinating tales. Prosecutor Güemes always spoke slowly and with extreme care in his speech, as if attempting to pick the most proper words for conveying each one of his opinions and expressions. He always seemed concerned by some political event or excited about meeting or having met a relatively prominent politician.

And almost ever present at Prosecutor Güemes's office was Ms Lopez, who in fact should have been addressed as Special Prosecutor Lopez, for she was the Special Prosecutor for femicide at the precinct. Yet, she was merely called "Ms Lopez", which revealed the gendered nature of how the 'office politics' worked inside the Regional Prosecution Unit. Special Prosecutor Lopez was kind, agreeable and noticeably focused on her work. She would rarely engage in 'small talk' for more than a few minutes and

never lost sight of the protocols and dynamics followed – official and unofficial – followed inside the precinct.

For eight months, my fieldwork would be carried out within these spaces at the Regional Prosecution Unit, moving up and down between floors, in and out of the cells and back and forth from the over crowded ground floor to the secluded detectives' basement. Soon enough, I was also allowed to accompany detectives and police officers outside these walls, venturing across the complex and microcosmic municipality of Nautepéc.

### Chapter 3. Methodology

I was sitting in Second Commander Antonio's chair waiting for him to arrive. He had told me to sit there whenever I waited for him so "no one would bother me". I was supposed to accompany him for a *traslado* (transfer), a common practice by which alleged suspects were transported from the precinct - where they were held only temporarily - to a courthouse or prison to stand trial or serve a sentence for the crimes they were accused of committing<sup>34</sup>. I was told by one of the clerks that we were almost ready to go but they were still waiting for "a signature to arrive". I already knew this meant I would wait for another hour, at least, before we left. Noticing this, Commander Castro asked me to step into his office and wait there. Inside, he lit a cigarette – which was forbidden – and began reading '*El Gráfico*' ('The Graphic One'), a newspaper infamous in Mexico City for reporting violent crimes through the use of explicit photos and indelicate language.

"Just look", Commander Castro furiously said as he passed me the newspaper pointing to a section in one of its pages. "All newspapers say *puras mamadas* (a vulgar way of saying 'only lies') about us"<sup>35</sup>. Before I could read the section he was pointing at, the commander grabbed the newspaper back and began rereading in disbelief. "*Mamada tras mamada* (bullshit after bullshit), what do *they* know?". He then told me that this newspaper, like many others, always portrays the police as incompetent or corrupt. "Do you think these newspapers know that we have to pay for our own food and gas? Do they know what we eat?", Commander Castro rhetorically asked me. "I wish those guys were here for a day, eating the shit we eat, you know what I mean", he then told me. By that time, I had observed the commander and his officers working through many long shifts during which they barely ate and did not stop for a break or rest.

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<sup>34</sup> All the alleged suspects at the precinct were only temporarily held inside the cells. The Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc served as a pre-trial detention centre and therefore, the legal situation of those who were arrested and placed inside the cells by the Nautepéc police would be defined at a later time, after an investigation was made in relation to the crime they were accused of committing. Suspects would often be taken to prisons to make an initial appearance before a judge and then stand formal trial.

<sup>35</sup> The literal translation of '*puras mamadas*' is 'only blowjobs', which evokes a very gendered way of conceiving the concept of lies, mainly because the word *mamada* refers coarsely to oral sex but only when given from women to men.

As I had been there for two months by that time, Commander Castro's words made me recall the hardship and complexities I had seen the Nautepec police endure every day. I also remembered instances of suffering caused by them against alleged suspects and their families. I specifically remembered an old lady coming to the detectives' desk and asking a clerk sitting there to deliver a *torta* (sandwich) for her son who was held inside one of the cells located in the adjacent room. Instead, however, the clerk took the *torta* and ripped it apart in front of her. "We've seen people hiding drugs and razors inside these kinds of food, we cannot allow it, your son will have to eat later", the clerk told the old lady before she left in silent despair.

I was remembering this scene in particular - as it had taken me some time to overcome it - while still sitting across from Commander Castro, who continued to rant about the events reported by '*El Gráfico*'. He then turned to me and said, "that's the good thing about you being here with us, you know what really goes on, I am sure you'll write the truth". These final words by the commander did not sound menacing but they did make me reflect on the commitment I had taken on as a researcher, a commitment to write accurately about policing in Nautepec.

This chapter focuses on the methodology according to which empirical findings were gathered in the location I selected as a research site. It addresses how access was obtained while mirroring how access to power operates in Mexico. Thereafter, it explores how my positionality crucially shaped the way I achieved the trust of my informants. The chapter then overviews how observations were analysed, particularly focusing on how violence was reflected upon and then conceptualised in writing. After addressing the ethical implications posed by this methodology, the chapter concludes by presenting thoughts about leaving the field and how this equates to a process of disengagement that is perceived as untimely and premature even if it is necessary.

### 3.1. Entering Nautepéc as a “doctor”: method, access and site selection

This dissertation draws on eight months of participant observations carried out over two periods of fieldwork between August of 2018 and October of 2019. The core of these observations took place at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc (pseudonym), a municipality located in the outskirts of Mexico City as part - and under the jurisdiction - of the neighbouring State of Mexico. The rest of the observations took place while driving around various neighbourhoods within Nautepéc on patrol duty or doing *traslados*; during events held outside the precinct such as meetings and gatherings; and even while eating at quesadilla street stands with some of the Nautepéc officers.

I chose to rely on participant observation as a research method precisely because, as phrased by DeWalt and DeWalt (2002, p. 12), I needed to “take part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture”. Instead of focusing on what statistics and surveys typically capture about the police, this study required picking up on symbols and gestures such as frowns and winks (Geertz, 1973). In order to reach that kind of depth, I drew on the methodology carried out by Denyer Willis (2015) in Sao Paulo, Diphoom (2015) in Durban, Fassin (2013) in Paris, Moskos (2014) in Baltimore and Jauregui (2016) in Uttar Pradesh. These studies were based on long periods of participant observations within diverse areas of the police, extracting views, opinions, representations and meanings that other methods would not have gathered with such profundity.

As noted by Fassin (2017, p. 8), ethnography is “as open to the singular and the unforeseen as it is to the routine and its regularities”. It therefore captures the immeasurable and ambiguous elements that are overlooked by positivist approaches that strive to find generalizable results (Fassin, 2017). Formerly deemed as unscientific for their seeming failure to reach universal findings, participant observations are currently regarded - by scholars such as Denyer Willis (2014) and Karpiak (2016) - as the most

suitable method for entering a complex world such as policing and extracting meaning out of the mundane practices and symbols concealed within it.

However, it did take me longer to reflect on whether if, through this method, I would be conducting an ethnography of an organisation or institution, such as Ho's (2009) ethnography of Wall Street or Rakopoulos's (2017) ethnography on the Sicilian Mafia, as an ethos-defining collective actor, or rather, as the police per se, as individually exceptional of the politics that are analysed – especially those related to race and gender. This latter option relates more to Gambetta and Hamill's (2005) ethnographic study of taxi drivers in Belfast as specifically relevant actors for the purpose of analysing how trust is built at street level, for instance. Approaching the police in a similar way would suggest that ethnographies of the police demand particular methodological treatments different from other organisations. A salient example of these methodological particularities is the way access into the world of policing in Mexico City was obtained.

Obtaining access as a researcher into the everyday interactions of the Nautepc police required a specific ritual. In itself, getting access offered a revealing finding about the politics behind policing in Mexico. Indeed, it evidenced that the most effective way of penetrating the Mexican police was by exchanging specific courtesies and formalities that form part of the ethos according to which political authorities interact. As part of these interactions, titles and apparent symbols of status are favoured and rewarded. In this sense, getting “beyond the blue curtain” (Rowe, 2015; Westmarland, 2015)<sup>36</sup> involved roleplaying amidst a political environment that offers rewards in exchange for gestures and reciprocal flattery. Having worked within the criminal justice system in Mexico prior to my research, I was familiar with these courtesies and formalities. In light of this, I knew which gestures, words and manners were acceptable in order to request favours or assistance from public servants in Mexico. I knew it was crucial to praise my gatekeepers' career, as well as appearing submissive and ready to learn from their

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<sup>36</sup> The metaphor of the ‘blue curtain’ is used to illustrate the difficulty of gaining access into the attitudes, value and behaviour concealed by the police occupation (Rowe, 2015, p. 6).

wisdom, as well as vulnerable in order to benefit from their protection. In this sense, accessing the field became equivalent to accessing power.

Prior to this, in order to request access into the Nautepec police, I used a chain referral method (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981)<sup>37</sup> by writing a Whatsapp text message to a former professor I had studied under during law school, as I knew he had acted as General Prosecutor of Mexico City from 2006 to 2008. In response, my former professor wrote that he would be “happy to help, as alumni from our school must always help each other and protect our school’s prestige”. As hoped, my former professor had acquaintances within the Mexican criminal justice system, specifically in the State of Mexico, where Nautepec is located. In keeping with his offer to help, he was able to put me in contact with the General Prosecutor of the State of Mexico, who I approached via Whatsapp text message as well.

Aided by an informal reference from my former professor, the General Prosecutor allowed me to conduct participant observations “in the municipal precinct that better suited my needs”. The State of Mexico General Prosecutor also wrote that he “would be delighted to offer his help to a former colleague” by giving me his permission to carry out my research. He then put me in contact with his chief of staff who invited me to his office in Toluca, the capital city of the state of Mexico.

As he greeted me outside his office, I could sense I was seen as a burden by the General Prosecutor’s chief of staff, a work-related task at best. Once inside, he proudly told me, “the General Prosecutor likes to help out”. As he spoke, I began noticing a considerable amount of bottles of wine decorated with a ribbon, engraved silver plates and even a wrapped vase, all placed behind the chief of staff’s desk. On that desk, I could also see books written by politicians tagged with a gift card from their authors. “Just some

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<sup>37</sup> Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) hold that the use of chain referral methods is recommended when the focus of the study is on a sensitive issue. They further assert that the method is useful as a means to approach sociological research as it “allows for sampling of natural interactional units” (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981, p.141; Penrod, et al., 2003).



presents, the General Prosecutor is very well liked”, his chief of staff told me as soon as he noticed I was looking at the wrapped and engraved gifts.

During the meeting, I described my desire to conduct participant observations of the Nautepec police. The General Prosecutor’s chief of staff consented and finally put me in contact with the Regional Prosecutor of Nautepec, who I also approached via Whatsapp text message. Across all the aforementioned exchanges, the mention of my university never went unnoticed and, conversely, always elicited awe and respect.

I would have never imagined that obtaining access into the Nautepec police would be so easy. It all simply came down to texting every chain-referee, highlighting the mutual acquaintances that linked us, inserting respect-eliciting words like “law school”, “PhD” or “program abroad”, and expressing as much flattery as possible in every instance of the process. I thought of those ethnographers whose work I had read prior to this, as well as of colleagues conducting similar kinds of research. I could not help but think about the difficulties they had experienced in order to gain access to the police and other secretive and insular spaces. I almost felt thankful for the way power operates in Mexico, but then I remembered that the aim of my study was penetrating and assessing the way political power works through the police rather than benefitting from this.

I also thought of how easy my access through personalistic connections might have been seen by others, research participants and even fellow researchers alike. Was I fuelling a system of influences based on a power trade I was supposed to be observing rather than exploiting? Was it right for me to have easy and total access to the police when other researchers had been filling forms and waiting for responses for months?

Crucially, by benefitting from the way powerful actors referred me, one after the other, I was also allowed to use direct and immediate means of communication with them instead of having to undergo a process of impersonal forms and official requests. Indeed, by being regarded as someone ‘inside their own circle of power’, I used WhatsApp – which additionally offered technological advantages similar to those offered by emails, such as

the storage of communications with evidence of dates and times – in order to request access at every instance.

As a method that addresses the limitations of snowball sampling<sup>38</sup> – namely that it haphazardly restricts participants to those who share the same social network (Morse and Field, 1995) -, chain referral proved useful in order to obtain access by permeating multiple social networks (Penrod, et al., 2003), in this case across different professions and state jurisdictions in Mexico. In this sense, the chains of referral entail multiple snowballs that expand the scope of investigation beyond one social network (Penrod, et al., 2003; Kalton, 2002). Moreover, chain referral methods are recommended as a means to study sensitive issues with limited ways to access them (Heckathorn, 1997; Penrod, et al., 2003). However, what underpinned every instance of this chain referral was a need to observe certain formalities and return political courtesies, such as addressing all the authorities involved in my access by their proper titles, being exaggeratedly grateful for their help and constantly mentioning the good relationship I had with my referee. Indeed, a chain referral would have meant nothing without a former political authority – like my former professor - and his gravitas supporting my request for access.

This was best evidenced by the way that the Regional Prosecutor – who will be called Prosecutor Güemes as a pseudonym throughout this dissertation - addressed me from the moment we met in his office at the Regional Prosecution Unit. As soon as his secretary opened the door to his office, the regional prosecutor solemnly walked towards me with his left hand behind his back and the right one rigidly extended inviting a firm handshake. “Welcome doctor<sup>39</sup>, it is a pleasure to meet you”, he said as he then escorted me inside to the chair across from his desk. This effusive welcome was presumably owed to the fact that the chain referral that had led me to him had come from political authorities that were hierarchically situated above his rank, or that he sensed that I had a privileged position. In this sense, I felt Prosecutor Güemes viewed me as an envoy from his boss.

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<sup>38</sup> Bailey (1994, p. 438) defines snowball sampling as a “nonprobabilistic form of sampling in which persons initially chosen for the sample are used as informants to locate other persons having necessary characteristics making them eligible for the sample”

<sup>39</sup> Usually, those who are referred to as ‘Doctor’ for having a PhD degree within the criminal justice system in Mexico are those who occupy the highest positions. Therefore, there is great significance in being called ‘Doctor’ in terms of power.

Nevertheless, I did clarify that I was not a doctor but merely a student. However, from that moment on I would be called and introduced as “the doctor” around the precinct, a nickname that never failed to produce a solemn response, as well as a certain kind of deference that was often expressed in a submissive way. This revealed the hierarchical nature of politics in Mexico, where certain symbols are used to stratify groups and motivate different courtesies among ranks. As its commonly known in Mexico, privileged treatments may be achieved by boasting academic or professional titles. By the same token, those who have no titles nor occupy imposing ranks must remain submissive and servile, oppressed by a system of flattery and exaggerated gestures. Every time I was called “doctor” at the precinct, someone would typically ask me if I “needed anything”, which initially made interactions rigid and uneasy.

One morning early into my fieldwork, Prosecutor Güemes invited me to his office, greeting me with a proud smile. “I am happy to tell you that we’ll be colleagues soon”, he told me. As I waited for him to elaborate he then continued, “I have just started an online PhD for the University of Toluca (a regional university that does not frequently appear on rankings) and hope to finish by next year”. It became clear that Prosecutor Güemes valued the privileges brought by academic titles within his circle and presumably attempted to access such privileges by becoming a doctor.

I was aware that the generous welcome I had received, as well as the ample permission I had been granted in order to carry out observations was tacitly construed as a favour to my former professor - who was well known even at street level -, a typical courtesy offered among high-ranking politicians that would be returned at some other time if needed. I figured, however, that the best way to correspond to the political exchanges that had resulted in my open access to the Nautepéc police would be to describe and discuss those exchanges accurately. Only by doing so would I bring further light to a common practice among authorities in Mexico. Moreover, due to the powerful figures that had facilitated my access to the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc, Prosecutor Güemes seemed candid and communicative from the outset. I had barely spent five minutes sitting in the prosecutor’s office when he had already unbuttoned his shirt and shown me four

scars across his shoulder and arm. “I have four bullet wounds and five divorces, that is the life of the law enforcer in Mexico”. This strong statement made me wonder about how difficult it would be for a survey or a quantitative study to capture deep and raw views such as this one by Prosecutor Güemes.

Access to these in-depth interactions was clearly achieved through the symbolic practice of acts of deference and political courtesy, as a result of which I was now being called “the doctor”. The openness obtained by adhering to notions that commonly elicit esteem and respect in Mexico such as being referred by a respected mutual acquaintance, having a degree from an elite law school, as well as pertaining to a foreign university, were all factors that granted swift and total access not only to the police, but also to the specific research location chosen as the ideal site for participant observations to be conducted.

As determined before the beginning of my fieldwork, I chose the Nautepéc precinct as a field site because of the political characteristics of that municipality. This followed a theory-based purposeful selection strategy (Punch, 2000), as it entailed choosing one specific research site, as well as the research participants situated therein, in light of their specific qualities (Robson, 2002). The fact that I could choose the field site according to these previously identified qualities felt like an immense privilege from a research perspective. Upon further reflection however, I realised this revealed much about access to power in Mexico, which is something unique to Nautepéc, as a municipality loyal to a power holding elite. Indeed, I chose Nautepéc after considering it ideal for this study in two ways that relate respectively to its social composition and its political situation.

Nautepéc is a densely populated municipality located in the northwestern border between Mexico City and the State of Mexico. Therein, exclusive residential areas intertwine with marginalised neighbourhoods that are frequently pointed as the site of diverse types of violent crimes. Moreover, the municipality of Nautepéc, as a political demarcation, has been steadily ruled by the PRI. Indeed, while the rest of the country turned to other political parties as part of an apparent democratic transition, the State of Mexico in general, as well as Nautepéc in particular have been able to maintain a core of PRI loyal

servants as governors, mayors and prosecutors. Enforced by these local and municipal rulers, the older hegemonic forms of establishing power associated with the PRI have lingered on, arguably conserving former mechanisms of practicing governance and policing.

### **3.2. Leaving the notepad behind: the achievement of trust among the Nautepéc police**

Prosecutor Güemes invited me to meetings, conferences and even forensic autopsies, always ensuring that I could experience as much about the world of policing in Nautepéc as possible. However, notwithstanding his efforts, it was the police officers and detectives under his command who would become my key informants. According to my research design, Prosecutor Güemes was a relevant gatekeeper but not a key informant, as the views and rituals that were aimed to be captured were those of the police. Indeed, I did not end up spending my time in the company of Prosecutor Güemes apart from a specific moment every morning and every evening, when I went up to his office to say hello and goodbye. Instead, I spent my days in the company of police officers, detectives and clerks, all of who worked two floors below the regional prosecutor in the detectives' area.

However, as opposed to their boss, the officers and detectives at the precinct did not appear to feel obliged to extend me any courtesy or welcome me with any sort of pomp. Instead, they seemed impervious and even annoyed by the etiquette associated with politicians and high-ranking bureaucrats in Mexico. This was evidenced by the way one detective discretely rolled his eyes when Prosecutor Güemes made a long and ceremonious introduction of me as “the doctor”.

During my first days at the precinct, most officers and detectives seemed to tolerate my presence as an imposition. Throughout those long and uneventful days, only the chief commanders, Castro and Antonio, would actively speak to me. From the outset, they began addressing me as “*doc*”, which illustrated how they toned down some of the

courtesies promoted by Prosecutor Güemes. Most of the clerks and detectives would provide little space for a conversation or even ignore me. I could hardly blame them. They worked forty-eight hour shifts followed by twenty-four hour breaks all through the week and now they were being asked to take care of a student brought by their boss who would furthermore observe and document details about their activities. As I would find, the trust of the Nautepec officers would not be achieved by being introduced by their boss, but by sharing moments of exhaustion, boredom and even danger with them.

Midway through my seventh week at the precinct, Commander Antonio told me that detectives Carlos and Raul were going on a search of an abandoned warehouse where stolen merchandise had appeared. I asked him for permission to accompany them, which he seemed happy to grant me. He then explained that a truck carrying approximately two hundred boxes of merchandise had been hijacked on its way to a major department store in Mexico City. He presumed that, upon finding that the truck had a GPS installed, the hijackers stored the stolen merchandise in warehouse known to them and then left the truck elsewhere. That evening, the task for us would be to go to the abandoned warehouse and make sure that the store's employees could identify their stolen goods so that they could then be taken to the precinct in order for them to declare ownership over said goods. On our way to the abandoned warehouse, Raul and Carlos barely spoke to me. They merely asked what I was doing there and then asked me to be careful and follow their orders in case we encountered any threat or danger.

By the time we arrived at the warehouse, located in *La Naranja* (pseudonym), a marginalised and allegedly dangerous neighbourhood of Nautepec, the store's employees were already there waiting on the sidewalk outside. Moreover, there were also two police officers I had not met until then that had arrived prior to us in order to secure the area. They were holding a confused looking man. "He says he lives next door", the police officers told detectives Carlos and Raul as we got down from the car. "Have you seen anyone enter this warehouse in the last twenty-four hours?", Carlos asked the confused looking man. The latter started talking nervously about how he sometimes heard people going in and out but he could not recall exactly when. "Are you a *pinche rata* (worthless

rat)?”, asked one police officer as he slapped the confused looking man on the back of his neck. While the man crouched in fear, the officer attempted to slap him again before Raul stopped him. “*Aguenta los madrazos* (hold on the blows)”, he said to my relief. “But don’t let him go until we are finished with the search”, he then ordered the police officer. The detectives then pulled me away as we prepared to enter the warehouse along with the store’s employees.

After a few minutes of police-like explanations, both officers forced the doors open with the help of bolt cutters. Before entering, Raul told me, “stay behind me, we don’t know if one of the hijackers might still be here”. Fortunately, there was no one inside the warehouse, only a very large empty space, large enough to fit various trucks inside. Sure enough, the boxes of stolen merchandise were there, placed on top of each other and surrounded by puddles of muddy water formed by several leaks from the roof. The store’s employees proceeded to count and open the boxes, all of them marked with the seal of their company.

The search was taking a long time and neither the detectives nor I had eaten for hours. Moreover, the evening became windy and cold due to heavy rain outside. After nearly five hours inspecting the warehouse, detectives Raul and Carlos found a skateboard and a football lying on the floor and spent the rest of the afternoon playing with both while the store’s employees reviewed and accounted for the content of their stolen boxes. Standing close to where the detectives were, I was nervously writing down every detail about the search in a notepad I was carrying. At some point, the football came rolling to my feet. After I kicked it back to Carlos, he asked me, “Do you want to kick some passes doc? These guys (the store’s employees) will take a while”. I happily accepted, as I was still shaken after witnessing the slapping of the confused looking man. I was also eager to find a moment in which we could interact normally for a little while, unburdened by labels such as ‘informants’ and ‘researcher’. As Carlos and me calmly kicked the ball around - making the most of the large space at our disposal -, Raul slowly rode the skateboard in circles around us. Feeling increasingly relaxed, we talked about football, food and

movies. During the conversation I almost forgot I was standing in an abandoned warehouse filled with boxes of stolen merchandise.

At some point during our passing session, Carlos kicked the ball in my direction but it bounced on a small puddle in front of me, ricocheting mud and dirt to my pants and shirt. I could not help laughing, which prompted both detectives to laugh as well. At that moment, we began interacting with more ease and effortlessness. “Now you can tell the prosecutor that you got your hands dirty on the search”, Raul told me as we all continued laughing.

As we prepared to leave, I continued jotting on my notepad. Suddenly, Raul came close to me and said, “Can I give you an advice Doc? Leave the notepad behind, it makes you look like a reporter from *El Gráfico*, and we don’t like those”. I suddenly remembered Commander Castro’s aversion for that newspaper and decided it would be prejudicial for my research to be associated with it. From that moment on, I used the ‘Notes’ application on my mobile phone in order to record information and ideas. Shifting between English and Spanish, I typed narrations of events, quotes from conversations and descriptions of places, as well as of my own emotions. I typed even in the presence of my informants in order to avoid losing any key details. This seemed acceptable to the detectives and police officers, who never asked what I was typing on my mobile phone - probably assuming I was texting. Every night, I would expand on those notes and typed them in my laptop while translating them from Spanish to English simultaneously.

On our way back to the precinct, we conversed freely and relaxed. They asked me what living in the United Kingdom was like and I asked them about their families. Then they asked about the police in England. “What do they do? There are no *narcos* (drug lords) over there right?”, Carlos asked. “They must spend their days helping old ladies on the street and then leaving early to be with their families, that must be *chingón* (cool) for them”, he elaborated.



As soon as we got back to the precinct, Carlos told me, “let’s show everyone that you are alive and then lets get some quesadillas”. A street-stand situated on a large sidewalk just outside the precinct’s building sold quesadillas and other ‘*garnachas*’ (a generic term used in Mexico to designate greasy street food). As we ordered and ate, Raul was pleased to find that I requested the hottest salsa for my quesadillas, for he exclaimed, “*eso! Como hombre carajo* (That’s right! Like a damn man)”. By that time, I had shared moments of hunger, cold, relaxation and even trepidation with my informants, all in one day. As a result, I felt as if I had finally gained their trust. Eating quesadillas at the end of the day would become a ritual of ours for the coming months, a daily moment which offered me numerous informal interviews and in-depth conversations about policing in Nautepec. All of this made clear that working through elite social ties was very different than street level socialising. Indeed, the everyday reality of conducting research was not a matter of praising powerful politicians. Contrastingly, it required interacting according to the rules of the Nautepec police, a world of gendered assumptions, racist logics, exacerbated demonstrations of masculinity and mechanisms of instrumental violence.

Earning my informants’ trust, however, did not prevent me from being perceived as an outsider to them. Due to speaking their language, understanding their jokes and sharing street food with them every day, I had naively assumed that they would gradually articulate me as someone they could relate to, maybe even ‘one of the gang’. After all, I had been born less than ten miles away from the precinct and had spent my entire life in nearby areas of the city. I was wrong. Subsequent episodes of verbal and physical violence administered by my informants would illustrate how I would always be an outsider at the precinct because everything about my presence there entailed a colonial privilege or some form of immunity. Indeed, my presence as episodes of violence took place was a reminder for everyone involved, victims and perpetrators, that I could stand there unharmed due to power impositions, mostly related to my gender and skin colour. This notion was unsettling but it also prompted thoughts about how I could use that immunity to expose those acts of violence while pondering about their meaning and implications.

### **3.3. Letting go of villains and heroes: How observations were analysed and presented.**

While eating the quesadillas, we talked about the detectives' favourite kinds of *garnachas*. However, the conversation was interrupted by Raul's ringing mobile phone. His expression was instantly lit in a warm way. He told us it was his wife and children on the phone. He refused to take the call but promptly replied with a Whatsapp voice note sent to his wife. He reminded her to tell their boys to do their homework and concluded the voice note by saying "I love you guys" many times. "That is the worst part, we barely get to see our families", Raul told me after putting his mobile phone down. "Look, it is already dark, I am desperate to go home and see my girls, I haven't seen them in two days", Carlos added.

After finishing the quesadillas, we made the short walk back to the precinct. As we entered the detectives' area, the store's employees were already there looking to prove and claim ownership over the boxes that had been stolen from them. One of the employees was a woman in a suit. Along with her, two other male employees were speaking to Commander Antonio, who was sitting in the main detectives' desk. The three store employees showed a number of documents – which presumably served as evidence of ownership over the stolen merchandise - to the commander, who at some point tried to reassure them by saying, "this looks like enough, don't worry, you'll be on your way with your merchandise soon". At this point, Raul, who was standing right behind them said, "you'll be on your way even sooner if you leave us a couple of your boxes". The employees laughed nervously but Raul did not. After Commander Antonio gave him a stern look, Raul turned and slowly walked towards where Carlos and I were sitting, just a few yards away from the scene.

As Raul joined us, he sat next to Carlos and whispered to him, "did you see her?". "*Bien buena*" (which is typically said as a vulgar way to convey that a woman is attractive), Carlos replied with his gaze fixated on the store employees. From the context, I realised

that they were talking about the female employee. More salacious comments followed until Raul, still whispering, told Carlos, “*checa pero chitón* (check this out but hush)”. Raul then took out his mobile phone and showed Carlos a photo of the female employee taken from behind. Clearly, he had taken the photo when he was standing behind the employees. Carlos laughed and told him, “send it to the group”, presumably referring to a Whatsapp group they were both part of. Sitting right next to both detectives, I could not think of anything to say that sounded neither encouraging nor judgemental so I decided to remain quiet.

I was unsure about how to make sense of my interactions with the Nautepec police officers. I felt as if I had seen different facets to all of them throughout that day. Indeed, at various moments they had watched over me. They had also shown feelings of love for their families and appreciation for their colleagues. At other moments, however, they had abused suspects and harassed women. I could not help but feel ambivalently about my key informants. I felt similarly at the end of many other days. It thus became common for me to simultaneously dread, disapprove, be grateful and sympathise with the Nautepec officers. At specific moments during most days, I felt bad for the way they worked surrounded by danger and violence. At other moments, I thought of them as heroes for overcoming so many difficult conditions in order to undertake their tasks. Many other times, however, frequently on the same day, I feared them for the way violence seemed to flow naturally from their practices. These contrasting images of my informants made me wonder about how I could best represent them in writing.

As described by Jones and Rodgers (2019), ‘ethnography’ is a polysemous word in the sense that it is used to mean a specific methodological practice and also a form of writing. For this reason, Wedeen (2010) notes how there is little consensus as to the definition of ethnography. In this sense, a number of studies have used ethnography as a research method as well as a “literary artefact” (Jones and Rodgers, 2019, p. 298). Among these studies are the works of Geertz (1988) and Van Maanen (2011), which along with that of Mosse (2005; 2006) point towards the way in which ethnographic fieldwork and its interpretation shape each other. Indeed, ethnography entails a

methodological and a representational dimension (Van Maanen, 2011). As phrased by Jones and Rodgers (2019, p. 298), “ethnography as a textual product may shape and be shaped by the methodological process”.

Through the ethnographic method carried out in order to study the Nautepec police, I observed certain acts of segregation, discrimination and violence that were practiced as an everyday routine. These findings from the field shaped the way in which this dissertation was written, for as Jones and Rodgers (2019) hold, when researchers engage with violent actors or their victims, the intense emotions that are engendered by such interactions will likely determine the way ethnography is captured. Such emotions, Wolseth (2019) notes, should be described rather than channelled in the text. Witnessing systematic acts of police abuse resulted in distressing and highly emotional experiences (Wolseth, 2019). This entailed the challenge of writing about such emotions in order to present them as a “desensitised, textual product” (Jones and Rodgers, 2019, p. 312).

As warned by Bourgois (2015), the presence of violence takes over the text and may even become more prominent in there than what was experienced in the field (Jones and Rodgers, 2019). After observing acts of physical and emotional violence committed by the Nautepec police, care needed to be taken in order not to define them as ‘violent’, as this would have been a reductive way to portray them. To be sure, the Nautepec police did administer and promote violence in specific ways. However, most of these practices were carried out in compliance with direct orders or as a result of ‘teachings’ reproduced by the commanders and senior officers at the precinct. Moreover, not all their practices entailed violence, as they also cared for their informants in specific ways, the people around them, and moreover, their co-workers. As for me, I was protected by them at all moments of my fieldwork, as illustrated by the way detective Raul asked me to stay behind him when we entered the abandoned warehouse, or by the way both he and Carlos always made sure I ate something - mostly quesadillas – during long days.

What was the right way to write about a group of people who were observed being violent at times, while vulnerable and protective at others during the course of my

fieldwork? There was a need to consider how to describe acts of discrimination, segregation or even torture carried out by the police without demonising them, and by the same token, also describe their less violent acts without presenting them as victims of their circumstances. Similarly, the representation of what was gathered through the ethnographic method also sought to avoid incurring in what Bourgois (1995, p. 18) calls the “pornography of violence”, by which acts such as the forms of abuse, discrimination and segregation shown by the Nautepéc police are sensationalised and stigmatised (Jones and Rodgers, 2019). As stated by Nordstrom and Robben (1995, p. 6), a “focus on the empirical and experiential keeps us from a singular focus on the devastating consequences of violence and guides us to a more inclusive approach to conflict”. The aim was therefore to present a narrative of certain interactions without crowning or condemning the intervening subjects. This required describing how those acts were rationalised by the Nautepéc police while standing apart from such narrative and showing how their logic reproduced a form of enacting politics in Mexico.

The conflicting way in which I regarded my informants as people who protected me from and exposed me to violence at the same time also defined how I carried out my participant observations. Indeed, according to the way I thought of my informants on the day, participant observations took the form of what Diphoorn (2013) categorises as *active participation*, *reluctant participation* and *passive participation*. I behaved as an active participant every time I assisted my informants with the belief that their actions would prevent harm or provide help to someone in need. Many times, however, my participation was reluctant. Indeed, I refused to take part of what my informants did, for instance, when they told homophobic jokes or when they verbally abused alleged suspects. My participation was passive when I merely watched the Nautepéc police undertake different activities, without assisting them nor being repulsed by their actions (Diphoorn, 2013). This would happen whenever I saw them carrying out various types of paperwork.

Considerations about my positionality also defined how findings were written. Lee (1995) warns that the use of ethnographic methods to study forms of violence may be misconstrued as a ‘thrill-seeking’ type of empirical research. In that sense, it was also

important to avoid portraying the Nautepéc precinct as an adventurous setting (Lewis-Kraus, 2016) that offered danger and excitement to a white(r), privileged man (Betts, 2015) like me.

Conversely, transporting my observations to writing required representing the Nautepéc police officers and detectives not as violent people but as people who incurred in violence instrumentally and occasionally. Moreover, the written representation of my findings aims to fulfil what Bourgois (1995) calls the ‘political role of ethnography’, which consists in bringing light to the way in which specific situations observed in the field relate to larger structures of power. To this end, the writing style adopted by this dissertation strives to remain focused on “the mundaneness of violence” (Jones and Rodgers, 2019, p. 308) in a political context like that of Nautepéc.

An additional challenge faced by conducting participant observations was the natural secrecy entailed by police practices. Indeed, as most endeavours by the Nautepéc police were characterised by the unknown, the observations were not all-seeing as my informants did not wish for many outcomes of their practices to be discovered. Moreover, many of those practices that were openly undertaken seemed mundane and barely worth mentioning. However, as noted by Penglase (2014), it is by accumulating mundane experiences in the field that the exceptional episodes stand out.

Penglase (2019) also argues that ethnography can be drawn to dramatic events due to specific factors that thus influence the writing process. Indeed, according to Penglase (2019), my specific political positioning, the relationship of the acts of violence I observed with my own narration and the general environment of latent danger could have shifted my focus towards the more spectacular forms of violence. Crucially these factors may have made me ignore more banal forms of violence (Penglase, 2019). As Penglase (2019) holds, a focus on those latter forms of violence would require a different ethnographic approach and deeper understanding of violence on my part.

With these considerations in mind, the observations gathered from the field are presented throughout this dissertation via the use of vignettes. Following the work of Auyero (2015) and Goddard (2018), vignettes are also accompanied by detailed descriptions of a limited number of characters. The strong topics and explicit language used by the research participants are transcribed and translated without paraphrasing them for more suitable words. As posed by Diphooorn (2015), this was purposefully done to represent them truly and accurately as representatives from the world of policing in Nautepéc.

Finally, the specific aim and focus of this dissertation made it necessary for the vignettes to attend the issues of gender and race that are revealed by these. As a result, the writing process sought to be explicit about the realisation that policing is gendered and racialised, which required consistency throughout the illustrations of the people and events on the fieldsite in regard to those issues. Failing to do this would have meant regressing to a default notion that participants are male and white. In this sense, characters are presented with the use of descriptors that expressly identify their skin colour and gender. This, as opposed to a more neutral way of depicting subjects, seeks to avoid obscuring racial and gendered differences, which are key features of the everyday fabric of policing. In writing this dissertation, therefore, the gendered and racialised positions of people necessitated being made constantly visible, as one key principle that underlied the writing process – and this thesis as a whole – is that, as stated by Moreno Figueroa (2010), there are no neutral universal individuals.

### **3.4. Watching or aiding? The ethical implications of observing and writing about the Nautepéc police**

One Tuesday morning, after I arrived to the precinct, I walked straight to the detectives' area expecting to find commanders Castro and Antonio. As Diego - the main clerk - told me, both commanders were 'out' with the regional prosecutor. Behind Diego, however, I could see two detectives holding a man with his face against the wall. The man was only wearing underwear while a t-shirt and jeans – presumably his - laid by his feet on the

floor. Facing the opposite way towards me, Diego looked calm. Behind him, however, I could clearly hear both detectives verbally abusing the man held by them. “You thought you were going to *chingarnos* (kill us) right? Now you’ll see”, one of the detectives said while twisting the almost naked man’s wrist, who began groaning in pain. The scene distressed me. Yet, Diego, who was still in front of me, tried to make small talk, asking me about what I had done over the weekend. I decided to ask him if everything was all right in the back. He quickly turned and told me, “wow, these fuckers really make us mad. The worst kinds are guys like this one [pointing at the almost naked man]. They don’t know how to use a gun but when they get nervous and realise they’re getting caught they shoot at everything around them. He was ready to shoot the detectives”.

The difficulties posed by constantly finding myself either dreading my informants or feeling sympathy for them not only had to do with how I would represent them in writing, but moreover, with where I would stand morally in regard to their practices. Many times, I found myself silently judging their actions according to a - white and privileged - moral standpoint, while at others, I would justify them according to that same standard. Indeed, learning what my role should be as an observer of systematic acts of violence entailed the most notable complexity of my research.

As noted by Auyero and Berti (2016), as well as by Bourgois (2002), ethnography as a method many times shows that moral standpoints should not act as binaries that lead to conclusions about good and evil. Furthermore, the everyday interaction among research participants requires some ‘going with the flow’ (Jones and Rodgers, 2019) that blur moral judgements through the experience of fear and excitement. In contrast, however, Jauregui (2013, p. 126) holds that the practices and motivations of the police, on the one hand, as well as those of the anthropologists who study them, on the other, are both complicit with state violence by being “perpetual transgressions and transformations of social boundaries”. For this reason, Jauregui (2013) holds that there is a great responsibility for researchers who analyse any form of state violence. Observing a context where violence is practiced through official channels requires an



acknowledgement of this very fact. Otherwise, that violence risks being reproduced with the researcher's complicity (Jauregui, 2013).

The contrast between these points of view, and moreover, the ambivalent nature of my feelings towards the acts of the Nautepéc police created ethical dilemmas throughout my time with them (Skinns, Woof and Sprawson, 2017; Norris, 1993). The episode with Diego, the two detectives and the almost naked man illustrated one of several instances where I struggled to make sense of the correct ethical approach to take as a researcher.

Was I aiding these practices with my silence and passiveness? According to Skinns, Woof and Sprawson (2015, p. 193), "a researcher's attention is more likely to be focused on watching violence unfold and noting down reactions to it, rather than it being focused on how to stop it or how to report it." However, Manning and Van Maanen (1978) hold that the mere presence of the researcher in the field constitutes a form of involvement capable of having an impact on the study's participants. During incidents such as the one featured by the detectives and the man in his underwear held by them, I struggled to remember that writing about my observations in an accurate way was the only appropriate action I could take in my role as a researcher<sup>40</sup>.

Another ethical consideration to be made had to do with minimising risks for my informants as a result of the way they were represented. As warned by Scheper-Hughes (2000) – who was expelled from the village of 'Ballybran' after the villagers became unhappy with the way they were portrayed –, care must be taken in order not to betray research participants or put them at risk. As stated by Bourgois (2007, p. 327) about ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Global South, "our human responsibility to our research subjects does not imply that we automatically have something concrete to offer in their struggles for survival or for political rights. We are outsiders; and we have a formidable capacity unwittingly by our mere presence to cause them trouble or to

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<sup>40</sup> As illustrated by Manning and Van Maanen (1978), the researcher may assume different roles when observing the police. These roles may take the form of a 'spy', a 'voyeur', a 'member' or a 'fan', which is one of the most frequently assumed on participant observations of the police (Manning and Van Maanen, 1978).

complicate matters seriously”. And similarly, as explained by Theidon (2012), there is no more ‘observation’ when people are experiencing violence and a researcher comes along and asks them about it. At that moment, the researcher becomes a participant in every sense of the word, someone immersed in that world of violence (Theidon, 2012)<sup>41</sup>.

In this case, it was important not to endanger or bring attention to my key informants, as they could have been inappropriately exposed in light of the frequently violent nature of their practices. This underscored the need to thoroughly anonymise them. Indeed, “a focus on violence often makes it imperative to anonymise those being studied in ways that often go beyond standard ethnographic practices” (Jones and Rodgers, 2019, p. 304).

Notwithstanding the decision to fully anonymise participants and locations throughout the entire research process, the risk of becoming identifiable was never raised as a concern by them. Indeed, every time I assured them that their identities would not be made available through my research, they frequently replied that they “would not mind if that was the case” or that “it was ok either way”. This further suggested that the Nautepec police, as participants of this study, did not consider their practices problematic, as they were willing to be identified. Prosecutor Güemes also did not appear to mind being identified, as evidenced by his response when I informed him that I would refer to him through a pseudonym in my dissertation. “You can do that if you wish, though I have no problem with my name appearing on your work”, he told me. This also suggested that the officers at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepec were so comfortable with the way they did things that they saw no reason to hide behind anonymity. This puzzled me, as I expected to find a similar attitude to the one found by Skinns (2012) in her study about police detention in common law jurisdictions, where detectives asked her who benefited from her study – the police or the suspects - before signing the consent forms. However, this was not the case here, as the Nautepec police officers seemed to view ethical protocols as irrelevant. Besides, many of them had already been named and identified in the context of accusations made by newspapers such as *‘El Gráfico’*.

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<sup>41</sup> After conducting ethnographic observations across rural areas of Peru struck by the ‘Shining Path’ guerrillas, Theidon (2012, p.15) concluded that “informing the ethnographer for the sake of knowing is a contrary idea because a word can fix a fate and whoever puts herself in a position to utter the words is formidable. Knowledge is not neutral, and insisting that one is simply there to ‘study’ keeps people guessing what purpose lies behind wanting to know”

I prepared information sheets and consent forms for all the research participants to read and sign, from Prosecutor Güemes to the clerks at the detectives' area. None of them ever questioned the aims of the study or asked about what their anonymity would entail. On the contrary, most of them expressed excitement to be participating, particularly when they saw the university's letterhead on the forms. Prosecutor Güemes even wanted to sign a second copy of the consent form so he could keep as evidence that he had been part of a study related to a foreign university. Their readiness in signing was convenient, as I was expecting much more reluctance from the Nautepec police in opening their practices to a student.

As held by Duclos (2019, p. 182), "renouncing anonymity in ethnographic research can trigger specific implications for both the anthropologist and the participants. If the ethnographer is not methodologically equipped to deal with them, name disclosure can make participants and the researcher vulnerable". In this sense, interacting with political and law enforcing authorities linked to a specific municipality made them entirely identifiable if complete anonymity was not secured. Moreover, the sensitive nature of their practices and views could have resulted in further interest about them as authors. In order to prevent this, pseudonyms are used for names, surnames and locations. In the first two cases, the participants were given fictional names and surnames that are common for people in Mexico, while similar sounding fictional words were given to locations.

As noted by Fassin (2008), breaking the secrecy entails potential perils. For this reason, the decision to use pseudonyms for informants and locations followed the need - illustrated by Scheper-Hughes (2000) - to avoid people identifying participants of an ethnographic study, thus posing a risk of long-term implications for them. It was also done to protect and honour the trust offered by my informants (Driessen, 1998).

However, in light of the infamous nature of many of the participants' traits or stories, this dissertation does fail to guarantee what Tolich (2004) calls 'internal confidentiality'<sup>42</sup>. This means that, even if anonymity is secured beyond those who work at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepc – which guarantees external confidentiality -, most informants would be able to identify each other inside the precinct in spite of the use of pseudonyms. This illustrates Burgess's (1984, p. 206) assertion about anonymity, according to which "whatever precautions are taken to protect those involved in a field of study, nothing is foolproof"<sup>43</sup>.

### **3.5. Leaving the field: letting go of haunted dreams**

"In ethnography, access to a research population or site receives understandable attention", Iversen (2009, p. 10) notes. "Yet, despite the global increase in ethnographic publications and methodological sophistication over the past couple of decades, little attention has been paid to 'getting out'", she concludes (Iversen, 2009, p. 10). Following this observation, it seemed important to reflect upon how leaving Nautepc contrasted with 'going in'. Indeed, while access to the field site seemed to be a question of power, leaving it represented a process of personal disengagement.

As this chapter showed, getting into to the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepc required practicing particular political courtesies in order to engage with actors powerful enough to grant me access to the specific site targeted a priori. In this sense, access to the field site equated access to power. In contrast, leaving the field had more to do with letting go of close interactions. Even if prior to my access I had established an extensive communication – through WhatsApp text messages - with powerful figures within the State of Mexico's criminal justice system, by the end of my fieldwork I only sent a final thank you text message to each of them. However, disengaging from my interactions with

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<sup>42</sup> As explained by Tolich (2004, p. 101), "the less apparent aspect of confidentiality is internal confidentiality. This is the ability for research subjects involved in the study to identify each other in the final publication of the research. Internal confidentiality lies below the surface, going unacknowledged in ethical codes. Yet it too has the potential to scuttle both researchers and their informants".

<sup>43</sup> This dissertation uses the notions of 'anonymity' and 'confidentiality' according to Hopkins's (2010, p. 62-63) distinction, which states that "anonymity refers to the protection of the specific identities of individuals involved within the research process, whereas confidentiality refers to the promises not to pass on to others, specific details pertaining to a person's life".

commanders Castro and Antonio, detectives Carlos and Raul, as well as the clerks and police officers in the detectives' area was a hard and confusing task. By the time I had to leave the field, I had had phone conversations with Commander Castro's teenage daughter about career advice; I had talked extensively about parenthood with Commander Antonio; and I had attended the precinct's Christmas party, toasting in genuine friendship with almost everyone there. Moreover, I had experienced many moments of weariness, confusion, hunger and even danger with my informants, mostly with detectives Carlos and Raul. It seemed strange to abandon those interactions and simply go off to write about them. It felt abrupt and untimely.

On the other hand, however, a part of me was eager to abandon Nautepec. During my last weeks at the precinct I had grown emotionally exhausted from witnessing quotidian exercises of machismo, racism and the systematic criminalisation of people by my informants. I felt tired of interacting closely with people who administered physical and verbal violence as a mundane practice. During my final weeks, I found myself having one recurring nightmare where the ground shook around me amidst a massive earthquake, such as the ones that are experienced in Mexico City from time to time.

On my last day, I could only muster the emotional strength to say goodbye to Commander Castro alone. During our last conversation, he asked for my UK mobile number. I hesitated while I thought about what to do. After a few awkward seconds, I told him that I did not have one at the moment and that I would have to buy a new chip as soon as I got back and then reach out to him. The first part was true, although it sounded curt and insensitive.

If by adhering to protocols that facilitate access to power I had been offered an unusually broad level of access in comparison to other ethnographic studies, leaving the field entailed dealing with face-to-face sensitivities, many times in unsatisfactory ways. However, since my last conversation with Commander Castro, I have not dreamed of earthquakes.

#### **Chapter 4. Policing femininity: the production of gendered boundaries through the ‘cauterisation’ of emotions**

The general mood at the precinct felt unusually peaceful one particular fall afternoon. I could hear Commander Castro laughing inside his office at the detectives’ basement while I sat just outside of it with the clerks, detectives and policemen. All of us were seated in scattered desks, across from which they exchanged snacks, drinks and pictures of female models that looked freshly ripped from the celebrity magazines that were usually piled beneath one of the clerk’s desk. This type of interaction made me believe that only male staff were present. However, the loud laughter of Ms Ana (pseudonym), the chief commander’s assistant, revealed her notable presence, which was always appreciated at the detectives’ basement. She was a dark skinned woman with dark eyes and dark hair. The rest of their female colleagues, including the Special Prosecutor for Femicides, were standing right outside the basement door, silently and uncomfortably having lunch on their feet while their colleagues enjoyed all the chairs available.

In the middle of this relaxed scene, an older woman who looked to be in her late sixties and dressed in a brown uniform approached the detectives’ desks looking determined to report a crime. Immediately noticing the uniform, Ms Ana curtly asked her who she was. “I’m in private security, for a shopping mall nearby, but my colleagues are crazy”, the older woman answered. The look on her face and her tone suggested that her story was leading towards something dramatic. However, Ms Ana paid no attention to this and changed the topic – and the mood - with visible disdain. “Be careful with this one”, Ms Ana told the old lady ignoring her concern and pointing to one of the clerks, “he is a *‘mujeriego’* (‘womanizer’)”. The older woman laughed nervously. She clearly did not expect a comment of that nature nor a mood as relaxed as what she found. She then tried to convey her anguish by insisting, “but my colleagues threatened to kill me, they’re crazy, it’s not my fault that they are a band of thieves”.

Still, none of the clerks or policemen seemed to take her seriously or to even acknowledge her accusations. After a few seconds, the commander's assistant sighed, turned her back on the older woman and slowly walked towards her boss's office yelling, "come on fatty, lets gossip". The old lady finally left in visible despair. When noticing this, one clerk asked a detective seated next to him if she was really leaving. The detective stood tall in front of the clerk and mockingly asked, "are you crying? She chose to leave, we didn't kick her out".

This chapter will discuss the assumptions that underpin scenes like this one by returning to its protagonists and spaces. I focus on what the interactions between officers and victims, suspects and acquaintances at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc reveal about how gender and masculinity are constructed therein. Moreover, the chapter addresses how police officers reflect and act upon these categories. In doing so, I argue that male officers at Nautepéc are taught to suppress feelings of fear and anguish by becoming 'cauterised' (*'cauterisados'*). The notion of 'cauterisation' – coined by the authorities at the prosecution unit - evoked a masculine duty by the Nautepéc police officers to heal from their emotional wounds by affirming toughness ("by fire", as they said) as a manly quality while disdaining femininity. By becoming cauterised, they appeared to be able to endure the tragic and violent events they frequently experienced. However, they also appeared to typify the women around them - regarded as inevitably emotional – into specific roles that arguably responded to their suppressed emotions. As a result, this chapter advances that the specific practice of cauterisation reveals how certain assumptions held by police officers about masculinity and gender become systematically 'taught' and uncritically reproduced over time.

#### **4.1. Notions associated to hegemonic masculinities, Mexican men and the police**

As Gutman (1997) notes, gender studies increasingly admit the study of men *as men*. This has allowed for anthropology to examine the concept of masculinity and its analogous notions of manhood and manliness, which may all be defined as anything that men think and do to be 'more manly' than other men (Gutman, 1997). Kerfoot and

Knights (1996, p. 86) also define masculinity as “the socially generated consensus of what it means to be a man, to be ‘manly’ or to display such behaviour at any one time”, highlighting how masculinity remains a social construction (see also Prokos and Padavic, 2002).

Furthermore, the growing interest in studying men as engendered and engendering subjects has led scholars such as Connell (2005) and Rivera-Izquierdo (2016) to explore how masculinity becomes hegemonic. Indeed, these authors contest Butler’s (1990) views on masculinity and femininity, according to which gender is a role that is played in accordance to a script that is culturally provided and maintained through repetitive acts that are long-established and thus perceived as unquestionable. In contestation, Connell (1995; 2005) holds that accepting gendered roles as a script favours and perpetuates the hegemony of the more favoured role, which has thus far been masculinity. To Connell (1995; 2005), the leadership of dominant social groups that is attained by consensus is hegemonic (see also Joseph, 2003). Therefore, the uncritical acceptance of gender roles point towards hegemony by definition (Connell, 1995; 2005). He then defines ‘hegemonic masculinity’ as an ideal of manliness that “promotes men’s dominant position in society by means of the subordination of women and other alternative ways of being a man...Central to the displaying of this form of masculinity is the avoidance of any traits traditionally considered ‘feminine’” (Rivera-Izquierdo, 2016, p. 94).

Through a survey of behaviours associated with men in diverse cultures, Gilmore (1990) explains how maleness is not a mere anatomical condition, but an artificial state – with very real implications - that is gained by passing certain tests. Thus, if masculinity is reproduced as an ‘acquirable’ condition, then such condition may become dominant by those who ‘pass the test’ in order to acquire it and then protect it. Indeed, according to Gilmore (1990), most instances of sociocultural development envision a critical threshold that boys must surpass. In contrast, femininity appears to be evaluated as something given, not achieved (Gilmore, 1990, p. 11-12).



In the context of Mexico, scholars such as Lewis (1961; 1963), Gilmore (1990) and Gutman (1996) have argued how notions that are characterised by assumptions about gender - such as *machismo* - highlight how the acquisition and maintenance of masculinity is related to interactions of confrontation and domination. As recounted by Lewis (1961, p. 38), in places like Mexico City “a man must prove his manhood every day by standing up to challenges and insults, even though he goes to his death ‘smiling’” (See also Gilmore, 1990, p. 16).

Mexico City has often been the site of anthropological studies focused on Mexican men as men and *machismo*, such as those of Lewis (1963), Stevens (1965) and Gilmore (1990). The aforementioned studies describe how the interaction between men and women in Mexico City and its surrounding areas are defined by a cult to virility that favours the construction of a ‘hero-type concept’ (Stevens, 1965) that justifies a man’s proclivity for violence, impulsivity, jealousy and insensitivity, all of which comes to be accepted by women.

However, as Gutman (1996) argues, machismo is not the only type of masculinity that is reproduced across the various social strata that compound a megalopolis like Mexico City. As modern and diverse trends from other latitudes arrive to Mexico City, the meaning of ‘being a man’ evolves rapidly and is reproduced differently by men and women (Gutman, 1996). In order to illustrate how masculinity is not a static concept, Gutman (1996) explores different notions of machismo across different working classes in Mexico City. He concludes that men in Mexico City exercise many different types of masculinities and that these are complex, fluid and changing (Gutman, 1996; Cohen, 1998, p.2)<sup>44</sup>.

In light of Gutman’s argument, the following chapter explores how masculinities are hegemonically reproduced in the everyday practices of municipal policemen. Moreover,

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<sup>44</sup> One type of masculinity displayed in Mexico City is, for instance, identified by Lomnitz (1977) as *cuatismo*. The word *cuate* (‘friend’) in Mexico is directed at friends with whom one engages in mischievous fun, a friend that provides light entertainment and superficial conversations. In the work of Lomnitz (1977), *cuatismo* is a male practice through which group members protect each other, particularly in fights (see also: Ibero, 2004, p. 149).

it explores how, through Connell's (2013) view of "sexual politics"<sup>45</sup> or Morrell's (2012) understanding of "gendered power"<sup>46</sup>, hegemonic masculinities underpin certain political conditions in Mexico. Indeed, as noted by Reiner (2000, p. 97-98) and Tiger (1984), the world of policing has been frequently associated with masculinist principles due to the way law enforcing is assumed to be linked to toughness. Tiger (1984, p. 191) advances this notion through his view of policemen's proclivity for aggressiveness, according to which gentility is perceived as a weakness while "toughness and more or less arbitrary decisiveness are highly valued". As observed by Prokos and Padavic (2002, p. 442), "hegemonic masculinity is a central defining concept in the culture of police work... Male police officers have drawn on images of a 'masculine cop' to enhance their sense of masculinity and to resist women's growing presence" (see also Martin and Jurik, 1996).

#### **4.2. Burning emotional wounds: How feelings become 'cauterised' through masculinity**

One of the most impressive skills displayed daily by the detectives and police officers at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc was their capacity to discuss violence, risk and danger with apparent ease. Moreover, they were consistently capable of appearing banal amidst the palpable sensation of urgency, violence and fear that was transmitted by the people they engaged with everyday<sup>47</sup>. These sensations were felt immediately after entering the precinct. Amidst the disorder and banality that characterised most interactions within its walls, what seemed more shocking was how the officers working there openly ignored the desperation and anguish of people – mostly women –. I

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<sup>45</sup> In his study about gender and politics, Connell (2013) argues how the notion of "sexual politics" sheds light on patterns of power that had been ignored for most of the 1960s and 1970s. He highlights how such notion has been studied in recent decades as an effort to bring further clarity to general theories on gender (Connell, 2013). He argues how, through sexual politics, coalitions can be formed in order to achieve progressive politics.

<sup>46</sup> According to Morrell et al (2012, p. 24), the assertion of a "virtuous, independent, heterosexual...masculinity by public figures" illustrates how the image of a preponderant, gender defined, masculinity still characterises dominant models of politics.

<sup>47</sup> Wai (2014, p. 128) discusses the 'banality of violence' by identifying it not only in "the ubiquity of the routines of violence normalised in the repetition of everyday social and power relations", but also by describing the way violence "incarnates the structures of states and society and thus defines and sustains the very nature of everyday social and power relations" (Wai, 2014, p. 128; see also Mizen, 2017).

confirmed as much when I once overheard a male clerk whispering to one of his male colleagues that he “could not stand the crying of women”.

The stress and confusion caused by everyday scenes of anguish would be frequently worsened by large numbers of alleged criminals being brought to the precinct by policemen looking proud. The alleged criminals would often be shirtless and visibly beaten while being triumphantly paraded by their captors through the building. Sometimes, people – mostly women – apparently close to those brought as criminals would come in simultaneously while pleading for the innocence of their loved ones, or asking the captors about how long would their sons, partners or brothers be held there. I never heard a response.

In this everyday context, policemen and detectives always seemed unfazed by the circumstances. Detective Carlos and Detective Raul always seemed capable of talking about topics like football or food even after spending the morning writing the testimony of mothers who reported the disappearance of their children. On various occasions, people reporting crimes would break down in tears in front of them. Being there, I always found these scenes very hard to witness and emotionally straining. However, Detective Carlos and Raul kept their relaxed demeanour and merely responded to the alleged victims by saying, “yep, I’ve always thought girls shouldn’t go to that neighbourhood at night” – once as he opened an investigation for an alleged rape -, or “he probably just likes you, men do that all the time” – as he once heard a woman reporting acts of sexual harassment by against her.

I initially interpreted their lack of empathy towards the alleged victims’ suffering as a product of emotional exhaustion resulting from extended contact with people’s anguish. I also thought they might have excessively experienced what Van Maanen (2010) calls *grievances*, in reference to continuous heartbreak experienced within the police<sup>48</sup>. It was also clear that the detectives were dissatisfied with the demands of their job. However, I

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<sup>48</sup> As admitted by Van Maanen (2010, p. 341), “ethnographers allow themselves to ‘feel’ subject to a group’s moral regulations, their discomforts, confusions, hard-won competences, grievances, and heartbreaks are all instructive in teasing out the routine practices, normative assessments, rules of thumb, background knowledge, and meaning structures of those studied”.

later noticed that Detectives Carlos and Raul were equally emotionless when they experienced danger or uncertainty in their own skin. Indeed, whenever they were sent to searches that sounded dangerous, they were just as unemotional and unfazed, merely replying things like “what can we do? If this is our day to ‘go’ [die] then this is our day”. Indeed, their own wariness was also treated irrelevantly and was systematically ignored, even joked with.

One afternoon, while eating quesadillas outside the precinct, I asked detectives Carlos and Raul if they had ever felt fear recently, either for themselves during a search or for someone else reporting a crime. I was trying to find out if they feigned courage or disinterest about what constantly happened around them. Carlos thought about his answer for a few seconds but Raul had a sly grin since I began asking the question. Due to what I frequently heard them saying, I was expecting a cynical response, or that they would tell me that they just did not care anymore for they knew most crimes at the Regional Prosecution Unit would never result in the arrests of those guilty of committing them. They usually went on loudly about that. I also expected to hear resignation, something like “we all have to die someday”, as I had heard them say that many times.

To my surprise, Raul gave me an answer that I took as sincere and profound. He told me, “when I began as a cop, I felt I was being haunted by ghosts, haunted by the spirits of the bodies I saw everyday. At some point, every time I was at a crime scene ‘picking up’ a dead body, I whispered to its ear ‘I’ll deliver you to your family, but please don’t come back to scare me’”. Carlos nodded as if he already knew, or moreover, sympathised with the story. I was shocked. I felt sadness for what the story meant and the difficulties it implied about Raul’s life. Nevertheless, it was relieving to hear him talk about his past emotions. In order to understand how he had become impervious to the pain and danger around him, I asked him when had he stopped being haunted. “I became ‘*cauterizado*’ (‘cauterised’) here [at the precinct]”, he replied. “In here, you either forget about fear or you might as well spend your days at the desks with ‘the girls’ [the young female clerks and secretaries at the precinct], though I bet they are tougher than you by now, they also see a lot of horrible stuff”.

At this point, Raul associated feelings of empathy and compassion with femininity, while identifying toughness with masculinity. There was even contempt in the idea of a man sympathising with someone's pain. In Raul's view, being empathetic about someone else's suffering or experiencing fear was part of the role of his female colleagues. Moreover, Raul's remark about them suggested that he had 'surpassed' an initial stage of emotional weakness in order to advance as a man. Through his assumptions, becoming 'cauterised' sounded like a rite of passage towards the courage and resilience that are expected of male detectives.

Carlos intervened in Raul's explanation only to accentuate the crucial term, "See?, 'cauterised'". I was impressed by the fact that both detectives used that expression, as it is not colloquially heard in Mexico unless it is used to describe the healing – by fire - of a physical scar or flesh wound. I asked them what caused their 'cauterisation'. They both looked and smiled while nodding before they respectively took a bite out of the quesadilla and a drink from a coca cola can. "The commander", they both replied in a softer, yet convinced tone. They were referring to Commander Castro.

Commander Castro regularly greeted the clerks and secretaries with some sexualised joke and then would often address the people held as suspects - many of whom would be standing against a wall, shirtless and handcuffed - by making remarks about their masculinity. "You thought you were big, bad macho fuckers right? Soon you'll be crying like little girls", he said on one occasion. These sorts of phrases, which were recurrent in Commander Castro, slowly constructed a gendered boundary between apparent lawbreakers and police officers.

I was always sitting in a chair in the middle of this scene while I waited for him to settle and tell me some of his latest experiences as chief commander. Every time I came in, we would talk until he had to attend to something urgent. Many times, more than an hour passed before the commander had to leave. On more than one occasion, and always through the use of gender-defined imagery, Commander Castro explained the importance

that toughness had for him as a chief police officer and how he constantly tried to instil this notion on his detectives. “Here, you need to be tough, you need the skin of an elephant. I always tell my boys: ‘leave your dolls at home’”, as he liked repeating. By inviting his men to abandon ‘their dolls’, the commander reproduced a hegemonic notion of gender from an authoritative position. The phrase also denoted how the commander equated courage and resilience to masculinity, thus evoking Connell’s (1995) concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’. His assumption was that by personifying masculinity, his detectives – Raul and Carlos among them – would be more effectively cauterised.

Following my quesadilla conversation with detectives Raul and Carlos, I also asked him how he managed fear or anguish in his role at the precinct. He raised his eyebrows, then smiled and pulled down his black t-shirt. “See this bullet wound?”, he asked me as he pointed to a blackened thick scar near his collar bone. “See how it’s cauterised?”. It suddenly became clear that the unusual term used by the detectives had come from Commander Castro. He then elucidated the meaning of the notion he coined in reference to his physical scar. “I always tell my boys that the wounds in policemen need to cauterise them in the outside and in the inside, otherwise they would run to the girls and quit by the first time they see a dead woman lying in the ground”, he explained solemnly.

As the ultimate law enforcing authority at the precinct, Commander Castro promoted the suppression of overt manifestations of fear and anguish by equating them to femininity. It also became clear that, according to the logics of cauterisation, its process was experienced individually by the male detectives and policemen – as a very specific type of ‘police socialisation’ (Van Maanen, 1975)<sup>49</sup> -, rather than as a communal effort to suppress each other’s feelings of fear and anguish. In the commander’s view, the logics of cauterisation evoked a rite of passage<sup>50</sup> towards masculinity that implied the smothering of such emotions. “Believe me, its for their own good”, the commander confidently assured me.

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<sup>49</sup> Van Maanen (1975) assessed the attitudes of young policemen who moved upwards through the ranks at the Union City police department, where he found that motivations decreased as policemen were promoted, favouring low expectations and few aspirations to stand out.

<sup>50</sup> According to Gilmore (1990), most instances of sociocultural development envision rites of passage as a critical threshold that boys must surpass.

These last words sounded cryptic until they were clarified by an episode that took place some days afterwards involving Second Commander Antonio. During one particular conversation between the second commander and a young recruit before a search, he told him, “remember, we are being sent to the kennels, these guys will not be nervous if they need to shoot you, they will go back home and sleep like babies. You need to forget about being nervous”. This illustrated how toughness among policemen at the precinct was not only a way of experiencing masculinity, but also a way of overcoming fears in the face of criminals, whose toughness was beyond dispute. As assured by Commander Castro, becoming cauterised to fear was a means of survival.

The notion of cauterisation also struck me for the way it invited being studied as an emic category. It reminded me of what I had heard psychologists of PTSD call ‘emotional blunting’ or ‘numbing’ (Litz and Gray, 2002). It also reminded me of something I once heard a former high school advisor calling ‘steeling’, which I remembered had to do with how emotional trauma is dealt with during childhood. Even if I was by no means an expert in these notions, I could certainly identify some similarities in the way intense emotions demanded the development of coping mechanisms.

However, notwithstanding how cauterised policemen became at the precinct, there were also brief moments of emotion or ‘weakness’, as they would see it according to the logics of cauterisation. One of these moments also involved Second Commander Antonio. He was always keen in me observing interesting things about their everyday work. However, as soon as he thought certain searches would be dangerous, he recommended that I stayed behind and went to the autopsies being performed at the forensics ward, which was situated in a refurbished garage behind the precinct. One morning, however, I arrived at the precinct minutes after detectives Raul and Carlos had left for a search and Antonio told me “you should just sit here for a while”, pointing at my usual bench. I replied that one of the forensic doctors had told me that there would be an autopsy taking place that morning. “I know, but I would recommend you skip this one”, Antonio told me. When I asked why, he replied, “it’s going to be an autopsy of a baby”. I remained silent and in

shock. Trying to further dissuade me, Antonio said, “I have been doing this for twenty years and I have never been cauterised enough to witness that”. It was relieving to encounter an exception to cauterisation and its resulting suppression of empathy. I wondered if any similar circumstance would have had an analogous effect on Commander Castro, as the main precursor of cauterisation. I also wondered if any detective or policeman at the precinct would have considered Antonio less manly for his refusal to let me witness the autopsy of a baby.

#### **4.3. How diverse assumptions about gender derived in a typology for femininity through the logics of cauterisation**

Cauterisation was not expected of female clerks, prosecutors and secretaries at the precinct, as femininity was associated with emotions that, in Commander Castro’s view, could never be suppressed. Moreover, cauterisation was an emotional practice that operated under the assumption that only sturdy emotions – frequently associated to males – were acceptable. This implied that femininity was incompatible with cauterisation. As observed in the everyday practice of policing at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepec, the emotions associated with femininity therein were repelled by male officers who aimed to become cauterised. This did not mean, however, that women working at the precinct were unimportant for the development of hegemonic masculinities. On the contrary, the different attitudes displayed by female clerks and secretaries in response to the reproduction of certain masculinities by their male colleagues contributed to the construction of specific roles that reinforced those masculinities into hegemonic expressions.

The role of female clerks, secretaries and prosecutors was ostensibly valued in every endeavour that took place at the precinct. Their work was well regarded by their male counterparts, who seemed to greatly rely on and appreciate it. Before doing bureaucratic paperwork, male detectives would frequently ask for the advice of their female colleagues, for instance admitting, “your writing is way better than mine”. Upstairs, the



regional prosecutor would commonly show reluctance to send emails or take calls until “the girls” (his secretary and the Special Prosecutor for femicides) were present.

Furthermore, male police officers, clerks, detectives and prosecutors would entrust their female counterparts with tasks for which they were responsible. Indeed, the regional prosecutor would gladly send either his secretary or his chief of staff to important meetings; Commander Antonio would leave one of the female secretaries in his office every time he was away, explicitly telling her, “order everyone here around, they are forced to obey you and if not, call me and let me know”. In return, female clerks, detectives and prosecutors relied on their male counterparts to aid them every time an alleged victim grew hysterical, or when anyone reporting a crime became unruly. Male clerks were also counted upon by their female colleagues to form queues when the main hall was crowded, or to take them home if they stayed at the precinct after dark. Generally, male officers looked willing to delegate authority in every circumstance that was deemed to be emotionally insignificant – such as administrative meetings or regular paperwork – or unrelated to violence. However, as soon as matters appeared to require cauterised emotions - such as when violent events took place or were discussed -, women would become excluded.

In response, women at the precinct seemed to interact differently with the emotionally-suppressed forms of masculinities they engaged with every day. A salient example of this was the role of Special Prosecutor Lopez. Her demeanour was characterised by her commitment and efficiency. She would greet people by distantly shaking their hand while addressing them by their rank and last name. She was always courteous and avoided asking personal questions. In return, she was addressed by her last name as well, which denoted the distance at which her male colleagues kept her. Her conversations were mostly related to the progress of investigations, meetings, schedules and conference calls. Notably, Special Prosecutor Lopez was not openly sexualised but, rather, respected as an authority.

As stated in chapter 2 while introducing those who acted as participants to this study inside the precinct, the men working inside were referred to by their professional titles as inseparable prefixes to their names. However, for the women working inside the precinct, professional titles were never used. Instead, the ‘office politics’ at this study’s fieldsite revealed to be profoundly gendered, denying women professional status while making men synonyms with their position. For this reason, Special Prosecutor Lopez, Ms Ana and Junior Clerk Laura were simply called “Ms Lopez”, “Annie” and “Laura” – or even “Laurita”, in its diminutive form.

Lunchtime marked a moment when everyone, regardless of ranks or gender, would congregate in the private offices of Commanders Castro and Antonio and hastily eat ‘*garnachas*’ while exchanging jokes. Yet, Special Prosecutor Lopez was never present at this moment.

The regional prosecutor recurrently called her to his office, where they would discuss the schedule for the day, as well as the details of pressing issues. However, as soon as he diverted the conversation towards his personal stories – as he often did – or made elated remarks about office parties and team dinners, she would nod along and remain silent.

Most notably, Special Prosecutor Lopez seemed to counteract the emotional intensity that was experienced at the precinct with a work ethic that looked calmed and composed. Every time the policemen and detectives showed excitement before going on a search, or belligerent after questioning alleged criminals, she would solemnly remain focused on the tasks at hand. It was common to see clerks becoming caught on the exhilaration shown by people reporting crimes. However, when dealing with reports, she would remain focused on the technical aspects of the testimonies provided<sup>51</sup>.

In response, Special Prosecutor Lopez’s male colleagues placed her within a dichotomized construction of roles at the precinct, in which men and women were treated

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<sup>51</sup> As argued by Ilan (2016) in his ethnography on the interactions between police officers and street-based youth, it appears that, due to idealised notions of masculinity, only men are identified with intense expressions of emotions in the world of law enforcement, while women, who are construed as to be out of danger, can only show composure as they fail to relate to the perils of policing.

according to the established ‘*macho*’ notions identified by Lewis (1963), Stevens (1965) and Gilmore (1990). Indeed, she was entrusted with ‘feminine’ tasks that were barely related to her rank and responsibilities, such as looking after the young clerks’ lunch, or fixing the regional prosecutor’s fibre shakes every morning. She was also asked to order dinner for the detectives and police officers whenever they had to stay late at the precinct. This view of her role also excluded her from the mischievous fun that took place at the detectives’ basement during lunchtime, or the moments in which clerks relaxed and told jokes.

Most of the interactions involving Special Prosecutor Lopez suggested that she was viewed as a mother figure at the precinct, as she was trusted to undertake duties of care. The construction of “Ms Lopez” as a mother figure also carried relevant consequences, such as the fact that she was allowed to be taken home by one of the only two available patrol cars at the prosecution unit. She was also offered front-row seats during presentations at the auditorium, as well as the chair at the head of the table next to the regional prosecutor at meetings and team dinners. The ‘highlighted image of manhood’ (Gilmore, 1990) that was reproduced at the precinct meant that Special Prosecutor Lopez could always be trusted to do things right without anyone expecting her to be rewarded or even thanked. By the same token, she was cared for as that motherly figure who was appreciated but kept at a distance from the moments of fun and camaraderie that took place. At every ‘ritual’, she was limited by gendered boundaries.

In contrast, the role of Ms Ana or “Annie”, Commander Castro’s secretary, was something like that of a companion, almost a *cuate*. As studied and illustrated by Lomnitz (1977)<sup>52</sup>, the word *cuate* (‘friend’) in Mexico is directed at friends that provide mischievous fun and light entertainment. Indeed, Ms Ana was ever-present at the male detectives’ office during lunchtime. She would casually address everyone by their nicknames or at least their first names. As a *cuate*, she was not sexualised but regarded as ‘one of the gang’ by the male officers at the precinct. At meetings and during

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<sup>52</sup> In the work of Lomnitz (1977), *cuatismo* is a male practice through which group members protect each other, particularly in fights (see also: Ibero, 2004, p. 149). Crucially, a *cuate* bond is formed through joint drinking (Lomnitz, 1977). This, in turn, signifies an assertive decision to sacrifice time with one’s female partner in favour of friends (Ibero, 2004).

presentations at the auditorium, she was never offered front-row seats. Instead, her male colleagues would convince her to sit at the back where they would exchange unrelated remarks during the presentation. Furthermore, Ms Ana would frequently engage in sexualised jokes – or *albures*–, most of them overtly misogynistic, without ever being offended. On the contrary, she always seemed amused by her male colleagues’ macho comments and sexist complaints about their wives and girlfriends. In the context of a joke made at the expense of Commander Castro’s masculinity, “Annie” once told him, “you have become a real pussy lately boss”. As the opening vignette for this chapter illustrates, Ms Ana once dismissed an old woman reporting threats on her life by ignoring her and telling Commander Castro, “come on boss, I am fed up with this ‘*vieja*’ (‘old hag,’) lets go to the office and gossip”. It was frequent of her to respond to jokes made at her expense by saying, “go right ahead and fuck your mother, right ahead”.

Moreover, Ms Ana seemed to be unconcerned when engaging the alleged criminals that were questioned by her boss, as well as nonchalant when apparent victims described disturbing situations. During a conversation with her, “Annie” used her mobile phone to show me photographs of a gang of gasoline traffickers who had been severely beaten by the male police officers during their arrest. “These fuckers had it coming”, she said. Through her relaxed demeanour, she displayed that same fearlessness that was demanded by Commander Castro of the male police officers who struggled to be cauterised whenever they showed anxiety or wariness. Indeed, Ms Ana’s attitude demonstrated that women working at the regional prosecution unit were just as capable of achieving cauterisation. The fact that she was Commander Castro’s closest day-to-day colleague suggests that she was more exposed to the rhetoric of cauterisation – even if it might not have been directed at her – than the rest of her colleagues, male or female.

Through the reproduction of behaviour that evoked the courage and brazenness of her male colleagues, Ms Ana arguably mimicked a manhood that, in the world of policing, is seen as above ‘anatomical maleness’ by Gilmore (1990) and Ilan (2016). She would interact with her male counterparts similarly to how they interacted amongst themselves, and would therefore access the same privileges entailed by such camaraderie. She was

also never forced to eat lunch by herself, or miss relaxed moments of fun. Furthermore, she was never asked to serve the wishes of male clerks, nor to order anyone's food<sup>53</sup>.

A third type of interaction with male colleagues, different to those shown by Special Prosecutor Lopez and Ms Ana, was typified by Junior Clerk Laura (pseudonym), one of the female clerks working at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc. "Laurita" was in charge of filling the initial statements of the people who were arrested and brought to the cells. This meant that she would sit beside the main detectives' desk. Every day, policemen would present a number of alleged criminals at her desk and she would ask them about their age, level of education, marital status, job and even religion. Most of the people brought to her would have been previously beaten by the policemen, and they would appear before her with their shirts torn and their faces bruised. She would then proceed to fill a form and pass it on to Ms Ana. She would spend many hours sitting at her desk, typing incessantly while seemingly dangerous people were brought before her until the early hours of the morning.

During one of our conversations, Junior Clerk Laura described how her demanding tasks resulted in exhaustion, particularly as she worked 48-hour shifts. She also complained about the way her colleagues provided scarce assistance, as they were not aware of the proper way to fill the forms for the initial statements by the accused. Nevertheless, she was regularly cheerful and helpful. She was frequently aware of what was happening with her colleagues' personal life and would seem to enjoy conversing with most of them.

In response, the male clerks, detectives and policemen at the precinct seemed to strive for Laurita's attention. While she worked at her desk, one clerk or detective could always be seen sitting by her side, frequently trying to make conversation and presumably trying to impress her. One of the male clerks would tell Junior Clerk Laura about how he was greatly interested in *reggaeton* music. Another one would tell her about his collection of

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<sup>53</sup> Through a study of the wives of the Japanese Yakuza members, Alkemade (2014) described how women within that criminal organisation adopted mimicry as a mechanism for coping with the way they are pushed aside by the men leading it. Alkemade (2014, p. 13) holds that Yakuza wives, reacting to their marginalized position as women, have mimicked the way their husbands interact and distribute power amongst themselves as a mechanism that allows them to gain control of their agency.

ninja weapons. Generally, most male policemen, detectives and clerks would always make sure that she was present at lunchtime and seemed to be more vocal about their fighting prowess and courage whenever she was around. Laura, in turn, appeared happy to learn about the many stories she was told and seemingly enjoyed lunchtime in that friendly context. Crucially, her male colleagues perceived Laurita's kindness and emotional availability as traits associated with her being a woman. This, however, did not mean that she was visibly sexualised, although she may have been. Nevertheless, what was more noticeable was the way her male colleagues engaged with her emotionally rather than affirming their toughness, as they did amongst themselves.

As Junior Clerk Laura's friendship with her male colleagues evolved, she became an outlet for the emotional stories and opinions that they could not freely express at the precinct in order to appear properly cauterised. On various occasions, male clerks and even detectives came to her desk to tell her about problems they were having with their girlfriends, their concerns over the health of family members, doubts about parenting or, in general, personal topics of conversation. These conversations frequently took place after long and exhausting days, or those filled with violence. Typically, her male colleagues would approach her by themselves, presumably looking to avoid the toughness demanded by other men. It was in these moments that male clerks, detectives and policemen seemed truly at ease. Arguably, Junior Clerk Laura provided a familiar space for them to talk about those topics that would otherwise be censored for their emotional content. It frequently looked as if she helped her male colleagues make sense of things. Crucially, her gentle demeanour, which her male colleagues associated with femininity, was a quality they found relieving and necessary after routines characterised by violence and danger.

As a consequence, Junior Clerk Laura was never kept at a distance by her male colleagues – like Special Prosecutor Lopez was –, but instead, she was invited into every setting of male interaction. Yet, it never seemed as if Laura attempted to mimic their behaviour like Ms Ana presumably did. Laurita's femininity was accepted as such among everyday interactions and, moreover, it seemed to offer a healing moment along the

emotional process of cauterisation. In this sense, her femininity was not obstructive but necessary to the reinforcement of cauterisation.

Most notably, by transcribing the initial statements of alleged suspects and sitting face to face with those arrested every day, Junior Clerk Laura managed to conduct her work competently without ever seeming cauterised, much like Special Prosecutor Lopez did. Laurita never seemed to suppress her emotions but instead, she was open about them and still achieved that strength that was sought for by her male colleagues through cauterisation. Arguably, what the male detectives and policemen achieved through a hegemonic notion of masculinity – based upon the suppression of fear and anxiety –, she achieved through her commitment to her work, thus proving the inadequate nature of Commander Castro's gendered perception of toughness.

As observed in the interactions of male detectives and policemen with “Ms Lopez”, “Annie” and “Laurita”, the roles attributed to them as women were important in the logics of cauterisation and the subsequent achievement of toughness associated with masculinity at the precinct. In consequence, the way that male officers chose to place themselves in relation to those three women resembled the way that Mexican men patriarchally interact with women within their own families, where female authorities – such as Special Prosecutor Lopez – are respected and cared for. By the same token, what was seen in the cases of Ms Ana and Junior Clerk Laura - who respectively assumed the role of being ‘one of the gang’, as the former, or a confidant, as the latter -, resembled the interactions that take place between men and their sisters.

#### **4.4. How cauterisation led to disdaining emotions associated to women**

The typology of femininity assigned by the male police officers to their female colleagues was not observed in their interactions with other women, namely those who visited the Regional Prosecution Unit as alleged victims, family members of people held

there or even as alleged suspects. The male clerks, who were in charge of accompanying and assisting the alleged victims who reported crimes, notably showed more impatience towards female victims, who they also questioned more extensively and more sceptically than male victims. Also, a number of gestures that were common in male clerks indicated that whatever women were reporting could have been easily avoided or, even more frequently, had been brought upon themselves.

I observed a particularly problematic example of such attitude one morning as a short woman – seemingly in her early thirties - came to the detectives’ desk holding a wrinkled picture and requested to report a disappearance to a male clerk. She was tearful and visibly distressed. “I have not seen my husband in three days, I have looked everywhere for him, morgues, prisons, hospitals, everywhere”, she sorrowfully whimpered. At that moment, the male clerk responded by showing a committed demonstration of cauterisation. He seemed unfazed and annoyed. After an entire minute, and without ever looking away from his computer screen, the male clerk finally said, “you guys probably had a fight, right? That always happens”. The woman looked desperate. “Not at all, my husband is not like this, something is wrong”, she insisted. With an increasingly annoyed tone, the clerk asked, “what does he like doing?”. “Sports”, the woman swiftly replied. She might have expected to be told they would investigate based on that information. However, the last thing she was told was, “well, go look for him in parks and gyms and come back when you’re through”. The woman looked down, folded the picture in her hand and left quickly, as if she was trying to avoid being seen crying.

This example contrasted sharply with another incident that took place that same day. A few hours after the short woman left, a robust man – seemingly in his late thirties - came to the detectives’ desk and claimed to have had cheques ripped off his check book, allegedly, by valet parking workers in a shopping mall he had visited earlier. In response, the same clerk that had just dismissed the short woman went to get Commander Castro, who came out of his office and invited the robust man in. Moreover, the commander asked all the clerks to come into his office as well, so they could “all help the gentleman with his report”. He gave the clerks many details about the circumstances in which he



claimed his cheques had been stolen, while they all filled a report format he was supposed to fill by himself. Afterwards, he left claiming to be in a hurry.

The contrast between the two episodes was palpable. While the alleged disappearance of the short woman's husband was met with contempt and impatience, the robust man's stolen checkbook was treated as a priority. Arguably, what motivated the clerk's impatience was a belief that the short woman's grievance had been brought upon herself, or that the matter was merely an unimportant lovers quarrel. What was even more alarming was the lack of empathy for the distress provoked by a likely estrangement or disappearance. Both of them are situations that are widely experienced in Mexico, mostly by women. As a consequence of the current context of violence, there are at present 60,053 unsolved forced disappearances across the country (*El País*, 2020)<sup>54</sup>. On the other hand, 16 per cent of every type of domestic distress in Mexico leads to home abandonment and estrangements by men (INEGI, 2013). Yet, the short woman's grievances caused no concerns to the clerk, who failed to appreciate the dramatic situation presented before him. His demeanour showed no understanding of what a prolonged absence means for a Mexican family settled in this region, a violent area.

I was saddened by the incident, as the voice and expression of the short woman was heart breaking. It was the expression of someone realising to be defenceless due in part to being a woman. The indifference shown by the male clerk also made me wonder if this was another consequence of cauterisation. It seemed as if, in the process of becoming tougher by supressing fear, anxiety and, most notably, anguish for other people's tragedies, male police officers at the precinct had become insensitive to the difficulties experienced by women especially, who are identified as emotional and thus, weaker subjects in the logics of cauterisation. Arguably, the emotional mechanism that prevented male officers from admitting to feel fear in their own skin – which was associated to femininity – had also thwarted their ability to be compassionate of the particular fears experienced by women.

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<sup>54</sup> The most recent figures regarding forced disappearances across Mexico were released on 7 January 2020 by the National Commissioner for the Search of Disappeared People in Mexico, Karla Quintana; the Undersecretary of Governance of Human Rights, Alejandro Encinas and; the Madame Secretary of Governance, Olga Sánchez Cordero. Out of the 60,053 forced disappearances on record, 45,168 are men and 14,885 are women (*El País*, 2020; BBC, 2020).

In this sense, the logics of cauterisation promote an unachievable vision of masculinity by disavowing emotional responses in detriment of femininity, which remains unexplored due to the reproduction of gendered assumptions, as well as neglected once that emotionless masculinity is apparently achieved. As such, the logics of cauterisation that were conceptualised by Commander Castro – through a reflection of his own assumptions about masculinity – appeared to achieve two simultaneous outcomes. On the one hand, it purportedly protected the emotional state of the Nautepec policemen and detectives by providing them the means to heal and survive emotionally. On the other, however, cauterisation appeared to prevent male officers at the precinct from sympathising with the anguish of female victims.

#### **4.5. Analysing how hegemonic masculinity ‘cauterises’ emotions**

This chapter has shown that the interactions between male officers in Nautepec and their female colleagues, as well as the people who visited their precinct as alleged victims, are defined by gendered assumptions through the notion of ‘cauterisation’. This notion becomes demanded from male officers at the precinct as a practice of emotional suppression that equates fear and anguish to femininity. Furthermore, by equating these feelings to femininity, male officers in Nautepec become insensitive to the despair of women.

The term ‘cauterisation’ itself becomes gendered when considering how it was coined, evoking how wounds suffered by men need to be burned away in order to erase emotions associated with femininity, as these are viewed as signs of weakness. Indeed, the logics of cauterisation imply that only men can – and *must* - tolerate the searing of their emotional wounds while the feelings associated with women, such as fear and anguish, become burdensome.

If understood through Rivera-Izquierdo’s (2016, p. 94) notion of hegemonic masculinity, according to which such notion entails “the avoidance of any traits traditionally

considered ‘feminine’”, it becomes apparent that cauterisation is an example of hegemonic masculinities at work. Indeed, the logics of cauterisation seek to eradicate the emotions of fear and anguish from male officers by identifying them with femininity.

For this reason, cauterisation needs to be reflected upon by considering the “often ignored emotional worlds of police officers” (Pauschinger, 2019, p. 511). Indeed, the gendered implications of police practices are better grasped by seeking an emotional understanding of what the imposition of a hegemonic masculinity means for policemen.

As I observed during their everyday practices, the police officers at the Regional Prosecution Unit operated in a context of constant anguish and fear. Thus, Commander Castro, as their chief commander, introduced the concept of cauterisation, which equates courage and resilience to masculinity. Crucially, once cauterisation was apparently achieved, male officers seemed to also regard empathy and compassion as burdensome emotions that were, moreover, associated to femininity.

However, the attitudes shown by detectives Carlos and Raul when recalling their difficult path towards cauterisation, as well as by Antonio when refusing to witness a baby’s autopsy, showed awareness and reflection about the emotional process demanded by their chief commander. This could even suggest disagreement or refusal in equating compassion to femininity and toughness to masculinity. More evidence of what the male officers at the precinct associated with femininity was observed during their interactions with female colleagues at the precinct.

Indeed, as a result of being unable to act emotionally due to being cauterised, the male officers at the precinct enacted a typology through their female colleagues in order for their feelings to find an outlet. According to this typology, one female colleague – Special Prosecutor Lopez -, associated with commitment, could care for them as a mother figure; another one – Ms Ana -, regarded as a relaxed and fun co-worker, could befriend them as a playful friend and; a third colleague – Junior Clerk Laura -, viewed as kind and sensitive, could listen to them and offer advice, similarly to an aunt, sister or cousin. The

presence of these distinct types of female roles allowed for the male officers at the precinct to interact emotionally.

As for the women who personified these typologies, the logics of cauterisation built and maintained a gendered boundary between them and their male counterparts, according to which they were deemed unable to reach their emotional suppression. However, the roles played by “Ms Lopez”, “Annie” and “Laurita” were relevant for the men in the process of becoming cauterised. Indeed, each type of female role interacted with and responded to the cauterised emotionality of the male officers in a key way. Special Prosecutor Lopez’s composure commitment and maternal oversight of operations provided a certain calm when the sense of danger exhilarated the male policemen and detectives. On the other hand, Ms Ana’s relaxed mood and willingness to engage in masculine interactions offered distraction in a context where traumatising events were collectively experienced. Finally, Laura’s empathy offered her male colleagues an opportunity to vent those emotions they were forced to suppress. Nevertheless, the fact that Ms Ana did achieve cauterisation - presumably by mimicking her male colleagues -, or moreover, that Junior Clerk Laura and Special Prosecutor respectively worked with complete emotional stability by relying on their focus as a coping mechanism – rather than cauterisation –, further showed the inadequacy of this gender-defined concept

But beyond the way in which each individual type of feminine role responded to the men’s cauterised feelings, what seemed meaningful about these typologies was how the three roles entailed by them combined to provide their male colleagues a sense of ‘family’, which further indicated the emotional void left in them by cauterisation. In these sense, the three types mutually reinforced each other, as the absence of any of them would have rendered the sense of ‘family’ incomplete. Indeed, the emotional suppression that resulted from cauterisation meant that specific types of female interaction needed to be constructed as a way to relate to a mother figure, a friend or a confidant that could in turn relate to the feelings that male officers were forbidden to express. The fact that none of the types were visibly sexualised suggests that the need to relate emotionally was

greater than feelings of lust or desire and that the sexualisation of female interactions took place elsewhere.

Moreover, the construction and reproduction of cauterisation by male officers, as well as the assignment of familiar female types in response to their colleagues' emotional suppression reveals the creation of gendered boundaries at the precinct. In this context, all constructions surrounding agency and interaction seemed to be determined and controlled by men. Even if the roles undertaken by women according to their assigned types were aptly portrayed and aided in making of cauterisation a 'family-supported' process for their male counterparts at the precinct, their interactions were, for that reason, shaped according to the needs of men. Therefore, due to the secondary and merely supporting role of women at the precinct in light of cauterisation, policing maintains a gendered status quo in a context of emotionally damaging violence.

Furthermore, in seeking to suppress emotions associated to femininity, such as fear and anguish, cauterisation becomes a gender-defining mechanism. Indeed, male recruits, policemen and detectives are systematically taught to become cauterised 'for their own good', thus reproducing their version of masculinity as a superior emotional state that is reached by abandoning feelings. As a consequence, attitudes of fear and despair expressed by women are met with contempt by male officers. The indifference shown towards the short woman, particularly compared to the attention received by the robust man, is an illustration of this.

As revealed by that scene, cauterisation has seemingly produced an adverse effect in the way male officers interact with alleged victims and suspects who are women. Due to the negative association that the logics of cauterisation entail about femininity, the male personnel at the precinct were observed treating women's feelings of fear and anguish with contempt and impatience. Presumably, the process of becoming impervious to their own anguish has also brought male officers an undesirable response to such feelings in women. In this sense, a gendered boundary is created with respect to emotions.

Beyond interactions at the precinct, the disdain and annoyance shown by the male clerk at the short woman's anguish illustrates how a number of grievances suffered by women appear to be systematically ignored across Mexico. It seems as if this enforced form of masculinity requires to directly relate to specific problems before these are generally acknowledged and tackled by the political strata. The increase in femicides across Mexico is perhaps the most salient example of how dramatic grievances that are exclusively suffered by women are met with disdain by men. The State of Mexico, where Nautepec is located, is the second state with the most femicides in the country, allegedly having recorded 81 cases only between January and September of 2019 – that is, the period of time when the core of my field observations took place (*Animal Político*, 2019; OCNF, 2019). Furthermore, no year before 2019 had featured as many cases of murdered women because of being women in the State of Mexico (*El Sol de Toluca*, 2019). According to the National Observer of Femicide (*Observatorio Ciudadano Nacional del Femicidio* or OCNF for its acronym in Spanish, 2019), out of the large number of murdered women across Mexico, only a reduced minority are treated as femicides. Between January and September of 2019, only 726 cases involving murdered women out of 2,833 were investigated as femicides, (OCNF, 2019). The fact that the vast majority of law enforcing agencies across Mexico are directed by men illustrates a similar disdain to that shown by the seemingly cauterised male clerk towards the short woman.

The promotion of cauterisation is also considered hegemonic because it is 'taught' from a position of authority and reproduced uncritically. In this sense, the enforcement of cauterisation becomes an exercise of power. Furthermore, the fact that the roles of women at the precinct are defined by their male colleagues suggests that such power is, moreover, patriarchal power. This makes Dubber's (2005) work on the patriarchal origins of police power all the more relevant. Indeed, if according to Dubber police power evolved from the authority imposed by the male heads of Greek and Roman households that the modern state then adopted as the 'familial mode of governance' (Weber, 1947; Foucault, 1978) – based on the broad power to manage and discipline those under the protection and control of male authorities -, then it seems conceivable that policing institutions are ruled just as patriarchally as those ancient households. As shown, the

gendered arrangement of power within the precinct evoked Dubber's (2005) take on patriarchy, illustrating how the Nautepc police's inner circles, on the one hand, as well as their interactions with women in general, on the other, were ruled according to masculinistic notions of heteronomy and authority.

## Chapter 5. Policing skin colour: The enforcement of racist logics

The procedure by which alleged suspects were detained and brought to the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc – more specifically, to a cell where they would be held for at least twenty-four hours – was practiced as a ritual of mockery and abuse by the municipal police officers. Most clerks, detectives and police officers on call at that time would congregate at the detectives' basement, which was also the anteroom to the cells, and stand in waiting for the suspects to arrive. Before they did, one of the female clerks would have prepared a brief file for each suspect. This file contained all the basic information they possessed on them, such as their name and alias, the circumstances of the crime allegedly committed, and most important to the 'welcoming committee', a detailed physical description of them. The file was passed around by each one of the officers present at the detectives' basement. Once all of them were familiarised with its contents, they would use it to devise insults and slurs they could mockingly whisper at the suspects when they were finally paraded in front of them on their way to the cells. One morning, as a man was brought in for alleged theft, a clerk standing next to where I was sitting seemed to have focused on a part of the brief that mentioned a "scar indicating facial reconstructive surgery", for he unsubtly mocked the scar, as well as his physical appearance.

One Wednesday evening, as I was sitting in the detectives' basement, a clerk announced that they were bringing in two men that had been caught fighting outside a bar nearby. The brief file prepared by her was already circulating through the hands of the policemen and detectives as she announced this. Though it seldom happened, I was not given the file because it contained "sensitive information". The detained men were brought to the basement shortly after. As the first man came in - escorted by two policemen who were grabbing him by the back of his t-shirt -, they all began incurring in verbal abuse. "*Burro culero* (ugly idiot)", "*pendejo borracho* (dumb drunk)", could be heard simultaneously as the man crossed the detectives' basement. He looked like any of the young men seen around the bars near the Nautepéc area.



Frequently appearing amused, the Nautepéc clerks, policemen and detectives would use the information of the brief file to elaborate offensive comments against the detained suspects, particularly in reference to their appearance and background. Gendered insults and homophobic remarks such as the ones reviewed in the previous chapter were frequently heard. Generally, the Nautepéc police officers strived to identify any trait contained in the in the suspect's file that could be targeted for mockery. This commonly was gender or sexuality, as well physical attributes such as their height or skin colour. In this sense, race and sexuality were indistinctly targeted in a blurred way, equally earmarked for abuse.

As the iron door to the cells closed behind the first detained man, I was expecting another round of slurs directed at the second detained man who was about to come in. However, with the shutting of the iron door, the detectives' basement grew silent. Suddenly, the police officers congregated at the basement became quiet or concerned with other things as the second man was brought. Most of the clerks returned to their desks even before he was paraded through the room, eliminating the parade itself. This second man did look slightly out of place to me. From a quick glance, I thought he could have come from a more exclusive area of Mexico City, even if I was not quite sure why I thought that. I only got to hear how one of the detectives mockingly whispered "welcome" as the man passed by his side. By the time the iron door closed behind him, all the welcoming officers had scattered or began talking about something else.

I was struggling to understand why both men had been treated so contrastingly. However, I did not dare to ask why the second man had not been mocked out of worry they had just been distracted from doing so. As I left the room, I noticed that both brief files for the men were left on the main clerk's desk just a few steps away from where I was. I leaned over to see them. They both contained the same information about the circumstances of the bar fight. The only difference I could immediately see was how the file for the first man described him as having "*complexión morena* (brown skin)" while the file for the second one described him as having "*tez blanca* (white faced)".

I initially thought the episode had evidenced an instance of ‘white’ people being privileged over ‘brown’ people. However, further interactions would reveal how such inequalities further symbolised how power is hegemonically exercised at the precinct. Through this form of power, racialized groups are uncritically sorted and selected for privileges or abuse under the appearance of normal police-suspect entanglements.

This chapter describes practices where assumptions about skin colour were openly or subtly manifested at the precinct with very real implications. In a context where - according to the relevant literature - the existence of racism is denied, interactions determined by race were continuously observed. I explore how notions construed in reference to skin colour regulated the access to undue privileges at the precinct, while they also motivated the reproduction of segregated interactions. I also describe how the Nautepéc police officers categorised suspects through racially charged constructs that allowed for them to place themselves in relation to the latter; at a distance, in some cases, or as a ‘mirror reflection’ – as the officers called it - of them, in others.

Moreover, I draw on the ideas of Moreno Figueroa (2010), Dwyer and Jones (2000) and Martin (2018) to argue that the everyday modes of racial meaning enacted by the Nautepéc police, including those expressed through symbolic performances of violence, solidify hierarchies of whiteness and law. The recognition and denial of race, as well as how it is read and performed by the police, reveals not only racial hierarchy but also racial power.

The following paragraphs illustrate how a law enforcing system operates under certain assumptions about race that are hegemonically perpetuated through their interactions with their subjects and colleagues. For that purpose, the chapter presents and discusses episodes involving the Nautepéc police where privileges were assigned to people regarded as ‘white’ while certain forms of abuse were directed at subjects considered ‘not white’. These instances are analysed as expressions of power that are reproduced in a context where racism is denied. They also show how municipal police officers classified

their suspects according to racially defined categories. As a consequence of Mexico's colonially constructed miscegenation – conceptualized as *mestizaje* –, a number of post-racial notions have caused those practices to remain overlooked or unexplored as overt forms of racism. As this chapter argues, those practices indicate the existence of racist logics in the way police officers operate every day at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc.

### **5.1. Racist logics, *mestizaje*, and ‘white privileges’: concepts from the literature on racism and policing in Mexico**

As scholars such as Moreno Figueroa (2008; 2010), Knight (1990) and Goldberg (2002) argue, the existence of racism in Mexico has been denied due in significant part to the notion of *mestizaje*. This term originated as part of the miscegenation that took place in the Latin American territories conquered by the Spanish Crown in the Sixteenth Century. The notion of *mestizaje* was coined after the Spanish Crown colonised the territory that was then called the ‘New Spain’ and defines the biological and cultural ‘mixing’ of Spanish and Latin American indigenous people (Wade, 1997; Moreno Figueroa, 2008). However, beyond describing the factual mix of cultures that characterised the colonial period of the New Spain, *mestizaje* determined the “‘ways of belonging’ to the family and to the nation in the context of Mexico” (Moreno Figueroa, 2008, p. 286).

During the colonial period in Mexico (1521-1810), the three main social actors – the Spanish, *indígenas* and African slaves – interacted without strong laws or social norms regulating the separation of each group and, moreover, with the possibility of passing to other groups through family ties, thus favouring a growing *mestizaje* (Moreno Figueroa, 2008)<sup>55</sup>. Indeed, “the colonial social system was completely unstable and it was possible to move up or down in a transgenerational fashion” (Moreno Figueroa, 2008, p. 287). As

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<sup>55</sup> As the offspring of Spaniards and indigenous women, *mestizos* were considered ‘bastards’ due to the caste system brought by the Spanish and their genealogical conception of class (Knight, 1990). Scholars like Aguirre Beltrán (1944) and Basave Benítez (1991) argue that one of the main causes for the success of *mestizaje* was the initial reluctance of Spanish women to travel to the New Spain. For Vieira Powers (2002), the shortage of Spanish women during the first half of the colonial period hindered the spatial segregation that the Spanish intended to institute in order to exploit their new territories (Moreno Figueroa, 2008).

Lomnitz (1993) explains, people in colonial Mexico could plan and negotiate their racial belonging by successfully procreating with the Spanish group. As such, the socially accepted formula of ‘ascending’ through the racial and social strata dictated that the offspring of Spaniard and *indígena* was a *mestizo* (Lomnitz, 1993).

However, throughout the nation-building process that took place in most of Latin America across the nineteenth century, *mestizaje* was construed as a democratic and inclusive idea that allowed people to ‘improve’ by race mixture (Wade, 2001; Knight, 1990; Martínez, 2004)<sup>56</sup>. During this period, the status of *mestizo* shifted from being identified with ‘illegitimate’ children out of marriage to being regarded as an achieved and improved status (Knight, 1990). In this sense, *mestizaje* became similar to what has been called ‘honorary whiteness’ (Valdez Young, 2009; Lee, 2016) in other contexts of the postcolonial world. This notion solidified with the Mexican Revolution of 1910, when the concept of *mestizo* was discursively extended over the entire population in order to ideologically create a sense of nation and belonging. After the revolution, the new political classes continued to address the need to homogenise a nation by denying racism (Knight, 1990). Indeed, Knight (1990, p. 99) holds that Mexican society features an “omnipresent dimension” of racism. This dimension is reached and maintained by equating the notion of *mestizo* to that of ‘Mexican’ (Moreno Figueroa, 2010).

Building on these conventional views, Moreno Figueroa (2010) argues that racism in Mexico is not only omnipresent but, furthermore, experienced with different levels of intensity. According to Moreno Figueroa (2010), the success of *mestizaje* as a mechanism of cohesion hides a number of racist dynamics that are experienced throughout the Mexican population. Crucially, *mestizaje* not only hides these dynamics but also bears fundamental political implications by hegemonically reproducing a particular racial power. The construction of the *mestizo* has created the appearance of an ethnically homogenized society and thus, a “raceless” (Goldberg, 2002) context “where people are

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<sup>56</sup> During the seventeenth century the *mestizo* population grew considerably despite the practical disadvantages of being considered illegitimate by a colonising elite that had intended a more divisive system (Basave Benítez, 1991). Indeed, during the first stages of the colonial period the Spanish attempted to recreate the corporate society of their homeland in order to impose it upon the multiracial New Spain (Vieira Powers, 2002). This entailed emphasising the importance of hierarchy in the definition of the social structure (Vieira Powers, 2002), in line with Spain’s genealogical concept of nation according to which belonging was determined by sharing blood (Vieira Powers, 2002). During this time, Spaniards, Indians and Africans interacted according to a race-based social hierarchy (Vieira Powers, 2002). The mixed nature of *mestizos* rendered a ‘same-blood-nation’ impossible, conversely favouring a transnational colonial context (Moreno Figueroa, 2008).

not recognized as racialized subjects but live through the consequences and everyday presence of racism and its distributed intensity” (Moreno Figueroa, 2010, p. 391). Indeed, the social dynamics of race in Mexico have fostered the idea that all Mexicans are mixed, therefore denying notions of a ‘racial otherness’ while racism is felt and experienced pervasively across three distributed intensities (Moreno Figueroa, 2010). These distributed intensities swing from experiences where racism is never witnessed or recognised, to others where racist dynamics are overlooked by admitting them as ‘the way things are’, to – more rarely – moments where racism is noticed and explicitly discussed (Moreno Figueroa, 2010).

With regards to the first and second scenarios described by Moreno Figueroa (2010), where racism is respectively not recognised or admitted, certain race-focused practices are uncritically reproduced in Mexico. One of them is overlooking the existence of ‘white spaces of privilege’ (Ahmed, 2007). Scholars such as Ahmed (2007), Nayak (2007) and Ferber (2007) have conceptualised ‘whiteness’ as a social construct that favours the building of a space of privilege<sup>57</sup>. The existence of white spaces of privilege evidences how notions of race continuously “underpin institutions, laws, policies, and consequent attitudes” (Lentin, 2016, p. 44). The construction of these spaces of privilege become part of what Wilson (2012, p. 940) calls ‘racial economies’, which are “seldom brutal and blunt impositions onto people and places, but rather nuanced formations that acquire form and legitimacy by working through situated, racialized meanings and understandings”.

In Mexico, ‘white’ privileges may be enjoyed by ‘lighter-skinned’ people, as most people physically appear to be *mestizos* but their skin colours vary, thus making ‘whiteness’ a case-by-case assigned quality. In Mexico, ‘whiteness’ is ambiguously identified and contextually experienced, so that “Mexican people can, at times, occupy the space of privilege, and, at others, because of relational readings, are located on the other ‘side’” (Moreno Figueroa, 2010, p. 397). However, notwithstanding the case-by-case assessment of the varying levels of ‘whiteness’ required by *mestizaje* in Mexico, a specific ‘dance’ –

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<sup>57</sup> These authors concur in pointing that not all ‘white bodies’ occupy the same spaces of privilege, as evidenced by the stereotypes that unfairly portray the Irish or Jewish people (Moreno Figueroa, 2010; See also Ignatiev, 2009).

as explained by Anderson (2015) about ghetto stereotypes in the United States – is frequently performed in order to prove how one belongs to the white space. Indeed, just as black people in the United States are required to prove that they can occupy a white space – by dressing and talking in a certain way – (Anderson, 2015), people in the less dichotomised and raceless context of Mexico also need to behave in a way that is associated to pure whiteness in order to access its corresponding privileges.

As Dwyer and Jones (2000) highlight, these experiences contrast with the case of the United States, where whiteness is overtly held as a normative category that underpins discourses that operate against all other racialized identities. In this sense, contexts such as the US feature an univocal ‘otherness’ in the way race is conceived through language, public policies, law, urban planning and, notably, law enforcement (Dwyer and Jones, 2000).

In the case of Mexico, *mestizaje* evolved from being a discriminatory notion during its prior colonial period to becoming a programme that provided the newly-independent country with a national identity (Moreno Figueroa, 2008; 2010; 2012; Wade, 1997; and Saldivar Tanaka, 2014). *Mestizaje* and the corresponding notion that ‘all Mexicans are mixed’ has resulted in the stratification of Mexico’s social groups through shared meanings of ‘whiteness’ – and its accompanying privileges - that continue to be reproduced and accepted (Knight, 1990; Wade, 1997; Moreno Figueroa, 2008 and 2010)<sup>58</sup>.

As a consequence, discrimination and exclusion are not typically branded as ‘racism’ in Mexico. This evidences the homogenizing notion of *mestizaje*, which furthermore resulted in the reproduction of *post-racial* (Lentin, 2014) notions. These notions are defined by Da Costa (2014, p.2) as forms of “thought, discourse, and action that evade, delegitimize, and seek to eliminate racial differences and their effects from the focus of

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<sup>58</sup> According to Knight (1990), Wade (1997) and Moreno Figueroa (2008; 2010), the pervasiveness of privileges is due to the status of *mestizo* or *mestiza* being susceptible of acquisition by following generations through procreation with ‘whiter’ *mestizos* or *mestizas*. As Moreno Figueroa (2008, p. 288) holds, “people could acquire by effort the status of *mestiza*; they could work on it as a personal project that was both socially accepted and expected”. The logics of *mestizaje* thus allow for privileges and exclusion to be contextually administered according to different scenarios in which one Mexican may be ‘whiter’ than others and then cease to be as soon as someone even ‘whiter’ becomes part of the social sphere or interaction.

academic scholarship, activist struggle, public debate, and state policy” (see also Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka, 2016).

As highlighted by Saldívar Tanaka (2014), post-racial notions and the resulting denial of racism in Mexico originate from a commonly accepted assumption according to which race relates to biology while ethnicity relates to folklore and shared cultural meanings. Owing to *mestizaje*, phenotypes, skin colour and language have mostly remained homogenous across the country, which is why ethnicity, and moreover, class becomes the decisive element for social stratification in Mexico (González Casanova, 1965; Giménez 2007; Saldívar Tanaka, 2014).

Therefore, most academic approaches to social exclusion in Mexico have focused mainly on ethnic discrimination and economic marginalization (Saldívar Tanaka, 2014). More recently, however, scholars such as Castellanos Guerrero (1998; 2003), Martínez Novo (2006) and Saldívar Tanaka (2008) have identified racism as a factor that excludes those groups in Mexico just as markedly. As Saldívar Tanaka (2014, p. 90) holds about Mexico, “ethnicity, national identity, belonging, and ‘looks’ are all intertwined in the racial politics of the country”. However, the study of Mexico’s ethnic relations has not focused on race and racism.

After briefly reviewing how the aforementioned authors conceptually engage with race, it could be argued that the raceless Mexican context described by Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka points to more tangible examples of post-racial interactions. Indeed, the systematic denial of racism originated by *mestizaje* may be counted as an illustration of how racism becomes ‘frozen’ by a historical category that makes future generations think of it in the past tense (Lentin, 2016; Miles and Brown, 2003). Conversely, the work of Dwyer and Jones (2000), Ignatiev (2009), and Lentin (2014; 2014) insist on viewing racism as an ever-present and more obviously divisive practice.

Crucially, the anthropological study of police practices increasingly highlights the need to focus on racialized police violence (Martin, 2018). Indeed, ethnographic studies of the

police have continued to expose anti-Blackness within law enforcement (Burton, 2015). Additionally, as Fassin (2012) argues, multiple incidents of race-driven police brutality around the world have evidenced that, “beyond disengaged theoretical analysis” (Martin, 2018, p. 142), new studies should provide further light on how to witness police violence or racism without losing scientific objectivity.

In the context of police ethnographies conducted in Latin America, the work of Alves (2016) shows how the black youth from Sao Paulo’s favelas is continuously associated with crime and violence. Thus, the black youth’s political agency becomes determined by their racialized encounters with the police (Alves, 2016). Focusing on how Latino populations are policed across the United States, Rosas (2010) criticises how anthropological research on racialized populations has allowed for racist practices to endure by reflecting upon them as *cultural* dynamics. In his view, anthropology should stop admitting cultural exercises of exclusion – such as Oscar Lewis’s concept of ‘the culture of racialized poverty’ (1963) – by stressing its critical standpoint against them, instead of merely describing them.

## **5.2. White Coca-Cola: The regulation of ‘white’ privileges**

Whenever I was at Commander Castro’s office, he would open a small refrigerator under his desk and without even offering, he would take a Coca Cola can and place it in front of me. Even if I usually preferred not to indulge in fizzy drinks, rejecting that gesture would have surely been insulting. Similarly, Detectives Raul and Carlos ritualistically bought me a can of Coca Cola whenever we came back from a search and stopped at the quesadilla stand right outside the precinct. I soon came to enjoy the ritual and the drink, as I associated it with their most communicative and contemplative moment. It was precisely through the importance of Coca Cola that I realised how most of the Nautepéc officers frequently showed me their appreciation

After only a few weeks of observations, I could notice how Coca Cola cans or bottles were not only visibly coveted, but also openly traded or presented as gifts between the



prosecution unit's personnel. As I soon learned, there were few gestures among the Nautepec officers as warm as leaving a cold Coca Cola can in someone's desk. From the words of gratitude expressed and the conversations I heard about the Coca Cola trade at the precinct, I discovered that fizzy drinks were consumed as a source of caffeine that appeared to be desperately needed by the Nautepec police officers in light of how gruelling their 48-hour shifts often were. Coffee and other warm drinks were spurned due to the humid heat that perennially suffocated the detectives' basement<sup>59</sup>.

When trying to make sense of the generous and attentive treatment I received, I figured it was due to the fact that I was a student, which meant that I was unrelated to their tasks. In this sense, I was regarded as a guest. As it is common in Mexico, people frequently give their guests the things they cannot procure for themselves. Additionally, I thought that it might have been refreshing for them to have someone around who did not compel or request them to do anything except talk if they felt like it.

I also thought that the clerks, detectives and policemen at the precinct felt obligated to show me 'their best self' in order to avoid being portrayed in a negative light. Early into my fieldwork, they sometimes looked as if they thought I might reveal their 'secrets'. This was never openly discussed, as we all appeared to be comfortable with the way we engaged each other. Nevertheless, the fact that they always seemed interested in my university and what doing a PhD is like suggested that by being a student, I was fortunate enough to enjoy their kindness, attention and protection.

However, one specific moment made me realise that the source of my privileged status was not the fact that I was a student. One morning, as I was sitting on my usual bench at the detectives' basement, I noticed how a young man approached one of the female clerks at her desk. The young man looked elated while carrying a notepad and a pen. Probably due to his excitement, the young man's tone was perfectly audible to me, even if I was sitting some five meters away. He began explaining to the clerk that he was a

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<sup>59</sup> Among fizzy drinks sold in Mexico, Coca Cola is the most popular as it is widely rumoured that its creation followed a Mexican recipe for mineral water, lemon and brown sugar, commonly drank across the country. Moreover, Coca Cola is associated with luxury as it used to be considerably more expensive than other brands of sodas in Mexico.

criminology student – although I could not grasp what type of degree he was pursuing - who wanted to conduct a study about municipal police practices. As he said, he was interested in understanding how municipal officers work and interact in a context of violence and poverty. I was very interested, as he sounded focused in the same topics I was. I began imagining the advantages of having another student around that I could relate to so we could make sense of data and observations together. While wondering about this, I never doubted that he would be allowed to undertake his research, especially after how easy it had been for me to gain access to mine. Moreover, the young student had proudly informed the clerk that he was enrolled at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM, by its acronym in Spanish), which is widely considered to be Mexico's most prestigious academic institution.

To my surprise, however, the female clerk bluntly told the student, “sorry, we don't allow that”. He looked puzzled and disappointed for a few seconds. Then, he recovered his initial enthusiasm and asked, “in that case, may I conduct a couple of interviews?”, to which the clerk replied, “wait for a minute, let me check”, as she went into an office which I knew no one was occupying at that moment. I suddenly felt confused and hesitant about my own work. I figured my case proved that research at the precinct was in fact allowed, as by then I had been conducting observations for almost four months. After a few minutes, the female clerk came out of the – as I knew, vacant – office and told the young student, “nah, all the policemen and detectives are too busy, sorry”. The student left in disbelief. I tried to imagine his disappointment, as I would not have even been able to witness that scene if I had gotten the same response when I requested access to my research.

I immediately started wondering about the welcoming treatment I received every day. The curt way in which the young man was rejected evidenced that open kindness and generous gestures were not shown towards all students. For a few minutes, I struggled to understand what the source of my privilege was. Soon after, however, another event suggested what that source could arguably have been.

The female clerk who had curtly rejected the young student had remained at her desk, visibly entertained on her mobile phone. After a couple of minutes, a male clerk came to her desk – to present her with a cold can of Coca Cola, no less – and asked her, “who was that?”, in reference to the young student. The female clerk’s answer appeared revealing. “It was only a *morenito* who wanted to do some kind of study about us. I told him no, what are we? Monkeys on a cage?”.

The word she used to describe the young student directly referenced his skin colour. The word ‘*moreno*’ is defined by the Royal Academy of Spanish Language as “dark that verges on black” when it is said from a thing (Moreno Figueroa, 2012; RAE 2020). When colloquially said from a person, the same source defines ‘*moreno*’ as “a man from black race” (RAE, 2020). However, that word is colloquially used in Mexico to reference people of brown skin. The fact that the young man was a student was not mentioned by the female clerk and neither was the aim of his proposed study, which had been extensively explained by him, nor was his university. Furthermore, the word used in reference to the student’s skin colour was used in its diminutive form – not ‘*moreno*’ but ‘*morenito*’ –, which sounded as implying pity or disdain for him.

### **5.3. The ground level: An overcrowded space for ‘*morenos*’**

The use of the word ‘*morenito*’ by the female clerk puzzled me for two reasons. The first one was that I could see no difference between her skin colour and that of the young student. The second reason was that her description implied that the source of my privileged treatment at the precinct had to do with skin colour. In Mexico, people describe me as ‘white’ due to my skin being of a lighter tone than others commonly described as ‘*morenos*’. Moreover, within the precinct I had been openly referenced as “*güero* (blonde)” – despite my hair being dark brown - on two occasions, by an alleged victim and by one of the autopsy assistants. The word *güero* is colloquially used in Mexico to describe people considered as ‘white’, regardless of their hair colour.

After this puzzling incident, I began purposefully observing the way skin colours were referenced and assumed at the precinct. For almost a month, I never heard the word ‘*güero*’ being used in relation to anyone other than myself. The next time I heard it to describe someone else was in the context of a ‘morning visit’.

Morning visits were part of a ritual established by Commander Castro as a means to inspect the people locked inside the cells every day as he arrived at the precinct. The cells (or ‘*galeras*’ as the Nautepéc police called them) could be found behind an iron door at the detectives’ basement. The door slid open in a great clanking roar. Every time I came in, an intense white light and a strong stench immediately struck me. That smell, a combination of sweat and urine, was produced by the total absence of bathrooms, sewerage or ventilation therein. Three cells made of vertical iron bars made the people inside immediately visible, even if most of them hid their faces. All of them seemed exhausted, as if they had not slept for days – which was true in most cases. Yet, none of them could even lie on the floor as every cell was so overcrowded that space was barely available for them to stand. Those who did know someone else inside the cell would press their backs against theirs, back to back, so that both could have some rest.

In these conditions, people would come in and out of the cells at any hour of every day and night. Any suspect confined to that overcrowded space would wait for a number of different outcomes. Sometimes they were released within hours after a visit from their lawyer. Other times, suspects were released for lack of evidence or simply because the sanction for their misdemeanour called for only 48 or 72 hours of arrest at the precinct. In fewer cases, the suspects would be summoned to appear before judges elsewhere, or found guilty of what they were accused of and thereafter transported to prison.

In either case, the three cells located in that concealed, bright corner next to the detectives’ basement were permanently crowded with people who came and left according to the outcomes described in the previous paragraph. As a means to establish control over the movement of people in and out of the cells, Commander Castro instituted the ‘morning visits’. During these visits, he would inspect and briefly interrogate every

suspect at the cells. He always seemed to be aware of the reasons that had brought every suspect to their confinement. The visits would begin after the commander had drank an entire can of Coca Cola in no more than three long sips. He would then open the iron door and yell, “alright *pinches maricas* (worthless pussies), all of you stand up, get in two lines and tell me your name and what you did”. They all complied while the commander usually corrected them. “You not only pushed a woman, you hit her”, he once told a young, scared suspect who was narrating his recollection of the events leading to his arrest. Commander Castro proudly claimed to know the true reasons behind all incarcerations at the precinct.

One morning, Commander Castro asked me to accompany him for his morning visit as Diego, his main clerk, had not arrived yet. I never enjoyed being at the cells as I always struggled to find a way to conduct myself in front of the people held there. I did not want them to associate me with the people who had verbally abused them but I also wanted to avoid giving them false hopes by making them think I was a lawyer or public defender.

Once in front of the cells, and as the queue clumsily moved forward, the suspects provided their brief testimony. Suddenly, I heard the commander ask, “what about you *güero*?”, but – for the first time in almost a month - he was not talking to me. A taller young man appeared immediately behind the bars before Commander Castro. Not only was he taller, but crucially, his skin had a lighter, almost white tone. Commander Castro seemed nervous and confused. Himself a ‘*moreno*’, the commander seemed as self-conscious about his own physical appearance as I ever saw him. At the same time, his usually loud tone was instantly lowered. Before the tall, lighter-coloured man spoke, the commander told him, “What are you doing here? I told you, you are waiting in my office”. It was unusual for Commander Castro not to use profanities whenever he addressed suspects, as was it also refraining from yelling at them. The tall young man seemed confused but as the commander opened the cell and made way for him, he swiftly stepped outside looking relieved. None of his cellmates uttered a word or even gestured at his release.

As Commander Castro pointed the tall young man towards his office, he told me he was going upstairs to the prosecutor's office – presumably to inform him of the presence of a *güero* inside the cells -. Before going up, he told the tall young man, “there, sit there”, pointing him to the chair I always sat on inside the commander's office. As the *güero* sat in ‘my’ chair, Commander Castro entered behind him, opened his little fridge and presented a can of Coca Cola in front of the former without saying another word before finally going upstairs to see the regional prosecutor.

Right after this incident, I accompanied the detectives on a search outside the precinct. When we came back, the tall young man was not at the precinct and Commander Castro looked to be back to his confident self. I decided not to ask him about the tall young man's fate, in part because I felt as if I had already observed the crucial moment of that episode, and also because the commander had looked so uneasy throughout that I thought I might lose the fluidity of our interactions if I had pressed him on the issue.

#### **5.4. Moving upstairs: A privileged space for “*güeros*”**

In an attempt to make sense of the incident observed at the cells, I decided to visit the upper floor, where the regional prosecutor's office was located, more frequently. I usually only went up there once every morning and evening, as the regional prosecutor had requested me to visit him every time I arrived at the precinct and then before leaving. Up there, I would sit right outside his office – as a row of comfortable couches were available in the anteroom - and normally wait for a couple of minutes before he arrived.

Outside his office, the environment contrasted sharply with what happened on the lower floors of the precinct. Two nice and accommodating secretaries welcomed those who were there, politely assuring them that they would meet with Prosecutor Güemes shortly. These people were always smartly dressed, waited quietly for their ‘appointment’ and acted courteously and composedly. It was hard to believe that most of those people were about to be ‘questioned’ as alleged suspects of crimes or misdemeanours. Only they

would not be questioned by any of the commanders Castro or Antonio, but by the charming Prosecutor Güemes.

This setting is where I decided to spend some more time every day. Immediately after arriving to the upper floor, I realised that everyone there could be referred to as *güeros*, as they were all ‘white’. The notorious and revealing exception to this was Prosecutor Güemes, who was brown-skinned and therefore would be described as ‘*moreno*’ in Mexico.

The small anteroom outside his office featured a shiny wooden ottoman table with the latest issues from ‘Architectural Digest’ displayed on top. Sitting around the table, most *güeros* would comfortably introduce themselves and interact with each other. On more than one occasion, I even observed business cards being exchanged. This gesture further illustrated how sharing names, identities and stories placed no one there in any self-incriminating danger as I had frequently seen among the suspects held at the cells downstairs.

One afternoon, I was sitting outside Prosecutor Güemes’ office when he came out embracing a white man in a dark blue blue suit. I could only hear as this man told the regional prosecutor, “thank you Pablo, I really appreciate this”. Prosecutor Güemes happily replied, “he looks like a good kid, he’ll get the hang of the wheel soon”. I never asked the regional prosecutor what the story behind this conversation was, as it sounded like a story told in confidence between two friends. However, I could not help but speculating about what that fragment of conversation could have meant. I thought that maybe the white man in the suit had a son or young relative who was engaged in a car accident or a driving-related misdemeanour. According to my speculation, the ‘kid’ to whom the white man was related should have been taken to the precinct as part of the procedure related to the car incident, but the prosecutor intervened at the white man’s request, preventing the ‘kid’ from even stepping foot inside his building. In any case, what also stood out was the fact that, by calling him by his first name - “Pablo”, instead of “Prosecutor Güemes” -, the white man showed how he appeared to attribute little

authority to the figure of the regional prosecutor, even if the latter was in a position to oversee a procedure against his relative.

My own conjecture on what the conversation between Prosecutor Güemes and the white man might have meant was based on some of the interactions I had observed in that upper floor, just outside the former's office. One morning, I noticed how one of the regional prosecutor's secretaries nervously typed away in her computer as a white woman stood above her. It then became clear that the secretary was writing a thank you note for Prosecutor Güemes on behalf of the white woman. Generally, the vast majority of the people waiting at the upper floor were almost always of a lighter skin colour than those people usually found downstairs. In contrast to what happened in the lower floors, and particularly at the detectives' basement, those white(r) people did not look to be anguished or distressed. As the episode between the white woman and the secretary showed, people at the upper floor frequently acted more like guests than like alleged suspects.

What was even more contrasting was the way that the detectives and police officers behaved around their white(r) 'guests'. The second day I spent at the upper floor sharply illustrated this contrast. As I was sitting around the ottoman coffee table alongside other white people, I heard the voice of one of the police officers, shyly introducing an old man who would then sit and join us. Prior to this, the policeman, who was known for his aggressiveness towards suspects downstairs, spent an entire minute loudly announcing the old man. He carefully mentioned that the old man was a cardiologist and that he would "only be there for a few minutes". After his introduction, the old man proudly waived hello to everyone present and sat down next to us around the ottoman table.

This made me think of how 'unparadelike' the arrival of white people was at the upper floor in comparison to those brought downstairs. Instead of bringing them in by the scruff of their necks, shirtless and beaten, as they frequently did with those suspects brought to the cells, the Nautepec police officers would show their apparent guests to the chairs outside the regional prosecutor's office, where his polite secretaries greeted them. Instead



of making sexualised jokes, insulting comments about their sexual orientation or mocking remarks about their appearance, the policemen and detectives would submissively ask their white(r) guests to “make sure to tell the whole story to the regional prosecutor”. Crucially, through their submissive demeanour, the Nautepéc police officers seemed to relinquish their authority in favour of the white(r) suspects that were brought upstairs.

The segregated manner in which people were treated at the precinct and the difference in behaviour showed by the detectives and police officers at the different ‘types’ of suspects made me wonder about the contrasting forms of law enforcing that were observed within the same prosecution unit. It looked as if there were two types of policing where one type was aggressive and the other was submissive. Moreover, the fact that almost no one downstairs was referred to as “*güero*” while the great majority of the people upstairs could fit into that description strongly suggested that the seeming segregation operated according to assumptions about skin colour.

Furthermore, the interactions between *güero* suspects and the Nautepéc police officers appeared to be devoid of a sense of authority on the part of the police. Once upstairs, it was common to see police officers and detectives looking ‘shy’ and awkwardly facing the floor when they addressed white(r) people. These interactions seemed entirely different from those observed at the ground level, where most of the people held as suspects or otherwise would rarely be referenced as “*güeros*”. There, the Nautepéc officers typically went to great lengths to impose their authority. This would frequently involve attempts to intimidate the alleged suspects, as well as insulting and abusing them. But even in those interactions where the Nautepéc officers refrained from intimidating or abusing the alleged suspects, there was no question about the fact that the police officers and detectives were the ones personifying authority.

This was not the case when they interacted with *güeros*. It frequently looked as if they were asking for the white people’s permission to engage them. As opposed to the way suspects brought to the ground level seemed unnerved by the Nautepéc officers, those at the upper floor appeared to impose over their captors. Indeed, when interacting with

“*güeros*”, the municipal detectives and police officers appeared to be reduced to irrelevant bureaucrats, incapable of altering their white suspects’ freedom to be at the precinct and then leave. In this sense, ‘whiteness’ appeared to invert the sense of authority between the police and those alleged suspects regarded as white(r).

### **5.5. The ‘wall of mirrors’: The reproduction of a caste system**

Late one Friday afternoon, Detectives Raul and Carlos were brainstorming about ways through which they could apprehend a man that allegedly had sexually attacked more than sixty women in Nautepéc. They discussed strategies and hypothetical outcomes while they ignored my presence. Out of curiosity, I asked them if they knew what the alleged sexual predator looked like. “Sure”, Detective Carlos confidently replied, “one of the victims identified him through CCTV cameras placed at a bus stop”. “Do you wanna see him?”, Detective Raul asked with slight excitement. “Let’s take him to the ‘wall of mirrors’”, he told Carlos before I could answer.

Both detectives took me to the front patio outside and told me to face the building. Then they pointed at one of the glass doors that provided access to the precinct. More than half of it was covered with photos, mug shots and portraits of mostly men and some women. Above all the photos and portraits, a large sign read, “If you see anyone of them, report them immediately”. It was clear I was looking at the pictures of alleged criminals that were wanted by the Nautepéc police officers, mostly for bank robbery, sexual crimes and homicide. Most of the pictures were taken from CCTV recordings provided by banks. There were also a few portraits sketched from descriptions provided by victims.

As I stared at the photos, I suddenly heard Carlos and Raul laughing while they pointed at some of them. “Check it out, that one looks just like Roberto (pseudonym) [one of the recently appointed clerks at the precinct]”, Carlos told me as Raul laughed and nodded. “And that’s the one who could be Pedro’s (pseudonym) older brother”, the latter continued in reference to a young recruit. Both detectives were pointing at the physical resemblance between many of the alleged criminals and their colleagues. Then Raul became serious and told me, “This is why we call this glass door the ‘wall of mirrors’”,

because many of us look like these rats”. Still facing the wall, Carlos nodded in agreement.

This made me think about the largely aggressive way in which the Nautepc officers engaged their alleged suspects. I thought of the way detectives and policemen physically and verbally abused the people they held in custody, most times by focusing on their gender, assumed sexual preference or skin colour. Through those interactions, I had noticed how they strived to create and highlight an ‘otherness’ that separated them from the alleged criminals they so openly vilified. Indeed, by constantly calling detained suspects “little girls”, “*putos* (faggots)” and “*morenos*”, the Nautepc police officers appeared to constantly distance themselves from them, their preferences and even their ‘race’. Yet, the construct of the ‘wall of mirrors’ illustrated how they admitted the possibility of resembling their suspects, at least physically.

Clearly, some of the likenesses were a joke for the police. Nevertheless, by imagining the photos as mirrors, the detectives were momentarily closing the gap of ‘otherness’ and recognising themselves in the faces of those they usually sought to distance from. In this context, it seemed puzzling that they appeared so concerned with the skin colour of the people they interacted with. I wondered why categories such as ‘*güero*’ or ‘*moreno*’ were so commonly used by the Nautepc police officers if they also admitted to be mirror reflections of the people they pursued. I did not understand the need to build racial boundaries when physical resemblances were so evident to them. What followed at that moment offered some answers to these questions.

As Raul and Carlos continued pointing at likenesses between themselves and the suspects in the photos and portraits, they began using words I had not heard before. “Look, a fucking *tamagochi*”, said Raul while pointing at the portrait of an alleged sex offender. I asked them what that word meant, for I had only heard it as the name of an electronic, portable toy manufactured in Japan that was briefly popular in Mexico during the late nineties. Without taking his eyes off the portrait, Carlos said, “that’s the mix of Chinese and ‘*moreno*’”. A few seconds later, Raul exclaimed, “a ‘*tenoch*’! no doubt about this one”. Before I could even ask, he told me, “that’s the mix of ‘*moreno*’ and ‘*mugroso*’ [a

word colloquially used to describe something dirty]”. As used by them, I figured that by *mugroso*, they meant to describe a skin colour that was darker than ‘*moreno*’. Finally, Raul once again pointed, “See? This is the *güero de rancho* [ranch blonde], I told you he looked like one”. The term he used is commonly heard in Mexico when people describe someone who is white even if the rest of his relatives are ‘*morenos*’. It became apparent that the detectives had developed an entire taxonomy to designate the physical appearance of the people in the photos and portraits. Moreover, their classification was created in reference to specific racial assumptions held by them<sup>60</sup>.

The categories through which detectives Raul and Carlos classified people illustrated how descriptions such as ‘*güero*’ and ‘*moreno*’ were not the only racialized notions reproduced at the precinct. On the ‘wall of mirrors’, an entire caste system<sup>61</sup> of racist assumptions was exhibited and reproduced for the amusement of police officers who, moreover, used such assumptions as forms of verbal – and racial – abuse against their suspects.

## 5.6. Making sense of racially defined interactions at the precinct

Throughout the previous paragraphs, certain episodes illustrated how, even within a seemingly post-racial context, as noted by Goldberg (2002) or Lentin (2014), assumptions about skin colour determined the way power was exercised at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc. This exercise of power materialised in the way racialized groups were sorted through a practice by which the police reserved specific privileges for

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<sup>60</sup> To this end, McAllister’s (1963) review of the race-driven social system imposed by the Spanish Crown in Colonial Mexico, specifically addressed in chapter 2, becomes relevant.

<sup>61</sup> The word ‘caste’ in this dissertation is used in the context of Colonial Mexico’s “system of classification that was based on proportions of Spanish, native, and black blood” (Martínez, 2004, p. 483), as opposed to other caste systems considered ‘closed’ such as that of India (Deshpande, 2010), which limits “interaction and behaviour with people from another social status” (Deshpande, 2010, p. 1). As Lewis (2003, p. 4-5) explains, Colonial Mexico’s caste system was a “stratified set of sociolegal rankings. Yet, while race was produced through taxonomies developed to exclude from power...caste constituted a more ambiguous and flexible set of qualities that combined social affiliations, kinship, and inherent differences as it worked to facilitate incorporations into systems of ‘power’, as opposed to prohibiting such access like the Indian caste system does.

people considered white – or ‘*gueros*’ –. Conversely, people considered brown – or ‘*morenos*’ – were pre-institutionally criminalised and paraded to be verbally abused, even if their law enforcing captors admitted to have a physical resemblance to them.

Through the interactions observed at the precinct, a shift in authority, police behaviour and political power was noticed as I moved up from the ‘*moreno*’ ground floor to the ‘*güero*’ upper floor. Indeed, the police transformed their demeanour from humiliatingly parading the suspects to behaving submissively in front of them as they moved up inside the building. Crucially, the shift in behaviour was seemingly motivated by assumptions about race, which in turn defined the exercise of political power at the prosecution unit. This was achieved through race-focused practices that revealed material and social hierarchies being mediated by the police every day.

The release of the tall white man from his cell strongly suggested that whiteness was privileged by the Nautepéc police officers. Illustrating the notion of ‘white spaces of privilege’, introduced by Ahmed (2007) and Lentin (2014), specific areas at the precinct were designated to segregate suspects according to their skin colour. Crucially, people regarded as white(r) – or *güeros* – were placed in close contact with the regional prosecutor who, as the senior political authority at the precinct, ensured not only more comfortable surroundings for the white suspects, but also a gentler treatment by the police. In contrast, suspects regarded as not white – or *morenos* – by the Nautepéc officers were placed below ground, in overcrowded cells and far from any accountable political authority. Moreover, *moreno* suspects were subject to aggressive impositions of authority by the municipal police, as well as varied and frequent forms of abuse.

The indifference shown by the white(r) man’s cellmates at his sudden release further showed that those assumptions about skin colour were also shared beyond the people who worked at the precinct. Indeed, Commander Castro’s segregation of the tall young man evidenced a shared understanding about race, which presumably explained why the victims of such divisive treatment did not show more outrage. Beyond the unfairness everyone present at the scene appeared to accept, what was even more surprising was

Commander Castro's demeanour. At the sight of the young man he referred to as *güero* inside the cells, the commander suddenly became submissive and nervous, similar to the way *moreno* suspects frequently behaved after being abused by him. As this chapter argues, Commander Castro abandoned his authority in the presence of the white man, in consistency to what was more frequently observed at the upper floor. This showed how 'whiteness' seemingly inverted the sense of authority between the police and those alleged suspects regarded as white(r). As a result, while the ground floor could be easily associated with certain forms of abuse against people who were overtly racialized, the upper floor could be associated with whiteness and power. These practices therefore contribute to ingrain the normativity of 'civilised' forms of behaviour as white.

After comparing interactions downstairs with those observed at the upper floor, it became easier to understand the episode described at the beginning of this chapter. The way in which the second detained man was spared from abuse, seemingly due to the colour of his skin, as well as the abandonment of any attempt to intimidate him as he went towards the cells resonated with the way people were treated outside the regional prosecutor's office upstairs.

The 'wall of mirrors', as an attempt by the Nautepéc police to make themselves distinct from criminals in spite of their otherwise similar appearance, illustrated how race is 'pre-institutional'. Indeed the incident showed how law, policing and crime become important as a means for the racially subordinated to fight for recognition by vilifying others on racial terms. This suggests, too, that it is more acceptable for the Nautepéc police officers – as the racially subordinated – not to point to race as the source of their disgust, but to crime. In this sense, a twisted form of 'colour-blindness' makes the use of pseudonyms like 'criminal' to stand in for race without saying it.

This incident also reminded me of the time I was taught the old colonial caste system of the New Spain in elementary school. This is taught in Mexico as a way to highlight the arbitrariness of the vice regal rule during the colonial period. Living in Mexico as a Mexican, those categories always sounded nonsensical and were frequently something people around me joked about. That is why it seemed strange to listen to the Nautepéc

police officers thinking of racial mixes and coining names for categories that were evidently fictional and useless. Then as before, the categories sounded arbitrary and devoid of logic. Yet, the exercise I observed proved a need by the detectives to make sense of their physical appearance as a reflection of the suspects they interacted with. It also showed a vestige of a colonial behaviour that had apparently been lost with the success of *mestizaje* as a program of national homogeneity. Now, I appeared to be in the presence of a classification system devised by police officers as a way to regulate privilege and abuse according to racial assumptions.

The episodes recently discussed illustrate how, in line with common post-racial logics (Lentin, 2014; Goldberg, 2002; Da Costa, 2014), people and situations at the precinct were not openly racialized. However, the interactions involving them made the presence of racism exceedingly felt. Presumably, practices such as these could have seemed overtly arbitrary and outrageous in contexts where racism is undeniably experienced, such as those studied by Dwyer and Jones (2000) in the United States. However, the raceless context of Mexico – as a consequence of *mestizaje* –, as well as the post-racial logics that are reproduced within its municipal police cause those episodes to remain unexplored or overlooked as glaring examples of racism. As a result, and under the invisible cloak of *mestizaje*, the police mediate, reproduce and enforce race both individually and institutionally. The transformation in the policemen's behaviour from oppressive to submissive as they went from the cells to the upstairs offices serves as an example of this.

The implications that the observed interactions have for notions of class, almost as glaringly as they do for race, also appear to go unnoticed amidst the uncritical reproduction of police practices. Indeed, as Flores and Telles (2012) have shown, discrimination in Mexico typically stems from intertwined assumptions about class and race. Furthermore, due to the less dichotomised scenario of race that the Mexican context presents in comparison to that of the U.S. for instance, discrimination blends elements of race and class with a myriad of other arbitrary considerations. As such, even one's accent can lead to discriminatory instances in Mexico City. This chapter focuses on race as a practice and not class only due to the fact that the observed interactions seemed to have

been underpinned by more racially charged expressions such as ‘*güero*’ and ‘*moreno*’, instead of other class-oriented formulations such as ‘*fresa*’ (posh). In any case, however, the findings presented by this chapter relate to wider debates about how race is socialised in institutions across Mexico, which can be further studied by dissecting commonly accepted behaviours such as the poor being generally conceived and referred to in racial terms.

These episodes also allow for a concept of race in the context of municipal policing in Mexico to be adopted. As such, it seems mandatory to use Gilmore’s (2002, p. 261) celebrated definition of racism, according to which “racism is a state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death”. Trying to adapt most of Gilmore’s notions, race for the Nautepéc police officers becomes a group of state produced markers based on assumptions about skin-colour, class stereotypes and behaviour that criminalise – and arguably lead to the premature death of - those associated with such markers.

These interactions showed how race works hegemonically through the practices of the municipal police officers of Nautepéc. Indeed, the racial categories through which the Nautepéc detectives and officers address their subjects and colleagues, as well as the way in which they regulate privilege or abuse according to assumptions about skin colour illustrate how racist logics are reproduced through the uncritical exercise of authority.

As Siegel (2018) argues, the police produce race as an essential category of state-market mechanisms that, in turn, invigorate capitalistic political systems. In this sense, the police operate as an articulation of state interests that sorts, excludes and contains groups that need to be enslaved, imprisoned or exploited for the benefit of state-market interactions (Siegel, 2018). The historical racialization of black and Latino subjects in the United State illustrate this (Hartman, 2018). Indeed, as part of the labour conducted by the police as a human expression of the state, “people of colour [are] recruited to the defence of racial capitalism, given a system of rights and law in which ‘recuperating social value requires rejecting the other Other’... This leads to racialised populations [who] are



rendered criminal, terrorist, or alien as an effect of the operation of law” (Seigel, 2018, p. 28).

Following Sibley’s (2005) argument about legal hegemony, views on masculinity, heteronormativity, class and race have been solidified by uncontested assumptions that are manifested in everyday routines. This ensures - on the surface - that normalised and taken-for-granted procedures go on ‘as usual’ while the threat of physical force in the name of the law and the state is ever present. Furthermore, as those views become normalised through their uncontested perpetuation in everyday life, the problems posed by them remain hidden in plain sight.

## Chapter 6. Hiding badges and exposing secrets: the implications of liaising with informants for the Nautepéc police

Late one afternoon, detectives Raul and Carlos asked me to join them for their break at a street quesadilla stand located on a broad sidewalk right outside the Regional Prosecution Unit. The space provided by the broad sidewalk was initially intended as a parking space but instead was turned into a street food market where people from Nautepéc, alleged victims and police officers ate at all times. Carlos and I ordered three quesadillas with green salsa while Raul stood behind us in silence. However, the man tending the stand already had a plate with four quesadillas with red salsa ready, which he gave to Raul before he had even spoken a word. Refusing to admit the effect that the very hot sauces were having on us – like many Mexicans do - through sips of Coca Cola, the three of us, as well as the quesadilla vendor, engaged in a relaxed conversation about recent Mexican movies until it began raining furiously. This meant that it was time for us three to pay and leave. However, as I reached for my wallet, Raul held the open palm of his hand in front of my face and told the vendor, “don’t take his money”. I insisted on paying to no effect and then, as I thanked Raul, he calmly said, “don’t worry, *they* owe me, many here do”. Raul’s claim bewildered me, not only because of what a debt against the quesadilla vendor might have entailed, but also for the way in which he avoided saying *what* was owed.

A few moments later, as we waited for the rain to stop so we could run back to the precinct, a seemingly homeless man walked right behind us using a sports magazine as an umbrella. He was could certainly be described as *moreno*, though his skin was not darker than Carlos’s or Raul’s. With a sudden turn, Raul grabbed him by the sleeve of his soaked jacket, pulling the man towards him and finally putting his arm around his shoulders. “You owe me too right you little *malandrín* (scoundrel)? Go on, order some quesadillas”, Raul told the seemingly homeless man as he gestured at the quesadilla vendor, then telling him the same thing he had previously told him about not taking my money. Not looking especially surprised – or indeed, amused -, the seemingly homeless man turned towards Raul and asked him, “but don’t *you* owe *me*?”. Raul sighed, looked

upwards and briefly let out a rather controlled laughter as he nodded his head while placing his right thumb and middle right finger each on either side of his forehead. He then looked at me and said, “hopeless”, as he released the man who carried on walking. We then left and made the short walk back to the precinct.

This chapter discusses a number of practices observed within the Nautepec police that revealed how its officers engaged in an information trade that seemingly offered them agency in a context of lacking resources and unaccountability. For this purpose, specific literature on how the state acts ‘ambivalently’ – according to the term introduced by Auyero and Sobering (2019) – becomes relevant. Across this literature, the police frequently features as a biased state representative that, crucially, administers political power through the exercise of violence, typically by liaising with non-state actors who are capable of exerting their own forms of power through violence as well. By showing that the information trade promoted by the Nautepec police was not a violent practice but something more akin to what Jauregui (2016) calls ‘exchange networks’, this chapter then draws away from those studies that view the police only as ‘violence workers’ (Bittner, 1970; Seigel, 2018). But beyond what the observed information trade meant in itself, this chapter further argues that by incorporating informants to their mundane work routines and extracting incriminating accusations from them, the Nautepec police channelled their enforcement of racist and gendered logics through the production of seeming police work that was nevertheless influenced by such logics.

Furthermore, by describing how the Nautepec police officers and detectives incorporate informants to their everyday interactions, this chapter identifies a mechanism that aids the police in the perpetuation of a political order by producing arrests that are arguably influenced by their assumptions related to gender or race. Indeed, this chapter advances that policing is in many ways the incorporation of those long-established hegemonic assumptions to the practice of everyday instrumental actions. Moreover, those instrumental actions mainly seek to force or fabricate certain outcomes in order to mask the limitations of the municipal police as a failing political institution. Therefore, this chapter shows that municipal policemen not only enforce the assignment of particular roles to women, or privileges associated with whiteness – as illustrated by the previous

chapters -, but also seek to deliver results through practices that further reinforce those roles and privileges. In this sense, policing blends in two simultaneous forms of action: one that reproduces long-established assumptions and one that forcibly produces outcomes – largely in the absence of proper accoutrements and means - in a context where the police needs to find a justification for its deployment. This is evidenced by the outcome of most collaborations between the police and their informants, which presumably lead to the arrest and resulting racialisation and genderisation of people in the margins of Mexico City.

### **6.1. Assessing the literature on how the police interacts ambivalently with non-state actors**

A robust body of literature has focused on the interactions between the police, as an expression of the state, and civil society. In this sense, a number of authors such as Denyer Willis (2015), Diphorn (2015), Fassin (2013), Jauregui (2016), Kyed (2017), Larkins (2015) and Penglase (2014) have found that the relationship between those who police – not necessarily the uniformed cops - and those who are policed should be assessed empirically in order to understand what such relationship reveals about state power, sovereignty, violence and politics. As most of those authors do, it seems useful to address these ideas through arguments such as the ones illustrated by Dubber (2005), according to which the state, rather than abiding by a set of laws, operates outside such laws, similarly to the way a patriarch would, discretionally and efficiently seeking the protection of his family (Steinberg, 2020). In this sense, Dewey (2012) goes even further by arguing that the state not only operates outside the law but even against it. As posed by him, “our understanding of stateness should not be restricted to the legal capacity of the state to deliver services to citizens. On the contrary, a broader perspective captures an additional and very common phenomenon: the ability of state actors to act illegally when they are pursuing their duties” (Dewey, 2012, p. 670).

As Dewey, Míguez and Saín (2017) argue, even if the state is most times the main ‘producer’ of social order, a number of challenges posed by civil society or contexts of violence may lead it to liaise with non-state actors involved in illegal endeavours in order for both to provide public services or social demands. In light of this synergy, the state no longer operates alone and as its collaborators may also seek certain forms of social domination.

In the context of state violence in Latin America, Cruz (2016) has also augmented this body of literature by pointing to how state agents extend their legal limits by promoting, tolerating and supporting the use of extralegal approaches to deal with crime. As the author holds, state agents achieve this by partnering with criminal groups (Cruz, 2016). Similarly – although studying the Russian state –, Stephenson (2017, p. 413) has described how the state apparatus is “not a homogeneous colossus, but a highly adaptable structure in which intertwined networks of legality and illegality work in concert in officially sanctioned and non-sanctioned ways; a relationship that sustains and supports the existing system of power” (see also Taylor, 2011).

More generally addressing the nature of most states, Tilly (2005) details how these are formed and maintained through acts that they later brand as criminal. Indeed, Tilly (2005) explains how certain trust networks, such as secret societies or mafias, are adopted in relation to the state. These strategies feature “concealment, dissimulation, clientage, predation, bargaining, enlistment and dissolution” (Tilly, 2005, p. 104).

The aforementioned studies point towards a particular way of approaching the state, that is, by conceiving it as an entity that solidifies its governance “through collaboration, co-optation, bargaining, the forging of tenuous consent and all the strange institutional creations that emerge from such processes” (Steinberg, 2020, p. 11). For that purpose, Auyero and Sobering (2019) address the particularly illustrative notion of ‘ambivalence of the state’. According to this notion, the state acts ambivalently in many contexts across Latin America through its state security actors, who enforce the law and break it at the same time in the same space (Auyero and Sobering, 2019). This ambivalence is not ‘general’ such as the one described by Bourdieu (2015), where the interests of the reified

state are not always aligned with those of its flesh and blood representatives. Instead, Auyero and Sobering's (2019) ambivalence is a concurrent one, as state security actors uphold and undermine the law simultaneously, more akin in this sense to Holland's (2015) notion of *forbearance*<sup>62</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, a number of empirical studies have considered these arguments in their approach to the state. A notable group within such studies have found illustrations of the aforementioned notions through participant observations of the police. These findings show how the police are also ambivalent, prone to illegality and frequently willing to liaise or coexist with criminal organisations (Arias and Goldstein, 2017). Furthermore, their authors have shown specific patterns in which the state, through the police, liaises with other forms of power. As such, Denyer Willis (2015) describes how the Brazilian police strike a temporary consensus over the right to kill people in the margins of Sao Paulo with the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* (or PCC), a criminal organisation that engages in analogous displays of power through those killings. Diphooorn (2015) describes how the growing power and organisation of private security groups in South Africa have eroded the reach of the public police and have thus given way to a 'twilight policing' in which both state representatives and privately bought security providers apprehend, abuse and even kill members of the populations they jointly police. Prior to Diphooorn's (2015) study, Buur and Jensen (2004) highlighted how increasing vigilante groups reproduce the violent practices of the public police in South Africa, who become undermined as a result.

Crucially, by focusing on specific practices, exchanges and entanglements, these studies illustrate a number of ways and contexts in which the police interacts with civil society, always revealing aspects of the state that question the more classic, Hobbesian versions of it. In this sense, the briefly reviewed literature is helpful in framing many of the elements and dynamics that are involved in the relationships between the state in general, the police as its street-level representative and those who are policed, particularly in the Global South.

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<sup>62</sup> Through the notion of forbearance, Holland describes the "intentional and revocable government leniency toward violations of the law, as a distinct phenomenon from weak enforcement" (2016, p. 233). According to this notion, states frequently and voluntarily tolerate transgressions of the law in pursuit of other objectives (Holland, 2015).

However, by largely focusing on violence, most of the aforementioned studies have attributed less relevance to specific, everyday police practices that, even if they are almost imperceptible amidst the countless mundane episodes that take place within the world of policing, also reveal much about the state and the mechanisms that allow for it to supply certain demands (Jauregui, 2016). Indeed, most of the aforementioned literature focuses on the police as state representatives who administer, exploit, allow and institute violence, rather than in the networks they build and promote in relation to specific needs.

Arguably, this focus on violence as the defining element of the police was introduced by Bittner in 1970. Realising that the work generally conducted by the police mostly involved dealing with common complaints across largely uneventful shifts, Bittner (1970) observed that it was the use of force that characterised their work. As he argues, the police's potential use of force defines them as a social actor. In this sense, violence is the work that must be done by the police and not passed on to others, or as Martin (2018, p. 140) quotes from Bittner (1990, p. 96), police violence is "the fire it takes to fight fire".

Following Bittner's (1970) logic, Seigel (2018) introduces the notion of 'violence work'<sup>63</sup> to describe what the core of police power really is<sup>64</sup>. According to this notion, the police rests upon certain founding myths – namely, that they fight crime; that they are civilian, not military; that they are public, not private and; that they are local, not international – and inconspicuously translates state violence into everyday interactions. This notion questions not only the legitimacy of the police but also that of the state, unmasking both as entities that place their subjects under a latent, and sometimes real, threat of violence (Seigel, 2018).

Yet, as Jauregui (2016) poses, police power is maintained not only by violence workers, but also by exchange networks. After conducting participant observations of the police in

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<sup>63</sup> Under Seigel's (2018) concept of 'violence work', other types of violence workers include the military, marshals, customs officials, private security companies and even kindergarten teachers – if the foucauldian discipline continuum is accepted -. However, as he admits, his work focuses on "people whose labours are enabled by the fact that at some point they are entitled to bring out the handcuffs" (Seigel, 2018, p. 11).

<sup>64</sup> As Seigel (2018) explains, the notion of 'violence work' exposes a paradox in the relationship between police and police work. Indeed, "police do things that do not need to be violence work – so much more – and violence work is done by more people than the uniformed public police – so very many more." (Seigel, 2018, p. 12). This paradox also illustrates how the State exceeds its apparent borders (Seigel, 2018).

Utar Pradesh, India, Jauregui (2016, p. 13) noted that “police authority...including but not limited to coercive authority, is a contextual and conditional social resource variously demanded, drawn upon, and deployed to help realize human needs and desires...recognized and valued as an amorphous and multidimensional social field”.

Indeed, against the notion that only violence characterises police power, Jauregui (2016) elucidates that such power is interdependent with the demands of various others who may also exert different forms of power. In this sense, the police uses mechanisms that, through violence or other means, address “competing demands, broadly defined as a multiplicity of pressures, requests or claims” (Jauregui, 2016, p. 14).

The following chapter analyses evidence of municipal police agents acting ambivalently through specific practices without using violence. Through those practices, the Nautepéc police reproduce and maintain exchange networks in order to address their own needs – particularly in a context of lacking instruments and decaying resources to carry out their tasks – as well as those of others. The maintenance of these exchange networks seemed neither overtly violent nor necessarily criminal. Yet, these practices reveal the logic of an ambivalent state that appears to address diverse needs while perpetuating a number of ‘ruling ideas’<sup>65</sup> through municipal policing.

## **6.2. David and Goliath: using ‘gossip’ in lieu of traditional police resources**

I rarely ever saw Second Commander Antonio without a roll of toilet paper in his hands. This initially seemed odd, as there was no clear purpose for this in the context of our interactions, which mostly took place inside Commander Castro’s office or around the precinct’s main hall. Antonio was always accommodating and calm, seemingly considering himself as my host. He moreover appeared to enjoy his role as a host, as he was mostly welcoming and prone to engaging in long conversations in which he expressed his opinions about diverse topics concerning his work as a police commander.

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<sup>65</sup> According to Bates’s (1975) reconstruction of Gramsci’s (1926) theory on ‘hegemony’, this concept advances that people are not solely ruled by force, but also by ideas. In this context, every ruling class in history is characterised by enforcing certain ruling ideas. Building on Marx’s concept of ‘superstructure’, Gramsci argues that these ruling ideas provide societies with ideological unity (Bates, 1975).



But no matter how long our conversations were, a roll of toilet paper always seemed to be glued to his hands.

One morning, I had just spent almost three hours with detectives Raul and Carlos observing an autopsy performed by the on-call forensic doctor - who visited the precinct three times a week to conduct post-mortem examinations of bodies recovered from crime scenes -. Autopsies were conducted inside a furnished garage behind the precinct. At some point during the procedure, I was asked to hold some of the medical instruments, as the doctor had no assistant. After this, he instructed me to go and wash my hands. As soon as I entered the precinct from the back, I visited the washroom at the detectives' basement for the first time intending to do as the doctor had told me. I typically avoided this washroom, as it was located in the same hallway where detained suspects were frequently handcuffed and then placed lying on the floor as they waited for hours before they were questioned inside Commander Castro's office, which was found at the end of that hallway. I always thought the detectives placed suspects there in order to force them to smell the poignant odour coming out of the washroom every time people came in and out.

After washing my hands, I noticed that the towel rail was empty. Still wet, I turned towards the only toilet in the washroom - which was seat-less and mouldy – in order to dry my hands with toilet paper. However, the only thing I found beside – or rather, above - the toilet was an empty cage with a small, broken door. I realised that the cage was meant to keep the toilet paper from being stolen, even if it had not succeeded in this purpose. It was then that I understood why Antonio always guarded a roll of toilet paper in his hands.

After I left the washroom and found Antonio in the main hall – holding the toilet paper as ever -, he began laughing as he realised I had not been able to dry my hands. After returning to his calm and accommodating self, he told me, “Sorry doc, next time come to me for paper. We need to take care of the few things they give us”. I imagined how awkward it must have been for people wanting to use the toilet to forgo of their privacy

by having to ask their boss for paper. However, Antonio's words revealed how he and his officers treasured the few 'resources' they had at their disposal.

Antonio must have thought I was reluctant to request toilet paper in the future, for he continued to elucidate how this safeguarding logic worked at the precinct. "See, I take care of these things", he said while proudly waiving the roll of toilet paper in the air. "Ms Lopez takes care of our food, and we all take care of the only things that can really save us", he said before pausing. I then waited for his clarification. "Bullets. They are like gold to us. You have seen them right?"

I had seen them. A plastic bag filled with bullets that looked of different sizes could always be seen on top of Commander Castro's desk inside his office. As I frequently sat by that desk, I could see how detectives and policemen came in and left two, three, four and sometimes more bullets inside the bag. "We get them at the '*mercado negro*' ('black market'), one at a time if necessary. Each one can make a difference", Antonio solemnly told me. I decided not to ask him about what he had meant by 'black market' as I was interested in understanding how police officers, as state representatives "uniquely entitled to use force" (Steinberg, 2020, p. 7; Bittner, 1967) could find themselves destitute of bullets. "I can't even remember the last time the state [of Mexico, as a political jurisdiction] gave us weapons and bullets, it must have been four years ago", Antonio bitterly complained. His words made me wonder if the normative logic of the police force he represented and commanded would be different with abundant or even sufficient resources. Was the lack of resources illustrated by him symptomatic of larger problem? Was Antonio implying that they would better uphold security by having more resources and infrastructure? Even then, mid-way through my fieldwork, that seemed utopian. By that moment, we had moved from the crowded main hall to the privacy and relative comfort of Commander Castro's office.

Antonio then insisted on his point by telling me that some months before my fieldwork began, two officers from his team were sent to a house where alleged drug dealers were hiding. "Our guy came in with six bullets in his gun, six. The one behind him had eleven. Those fuckers had about twenty fully loaded '*cuernos de chivo*' (which literally means

‘goat horns’ but is colloquially used in Mexico to refer to AK-47 automatic rifles). We were sent to the *matadero* (slaughterhouse)”. He then paused, seemingly wanting me to guess how the incident had ended, but I refused to let him spare any details and merely stared at him. He carried on, presumably avoiding stating what he considered obvious by saying, “just imagine, they send my guys in, with seventeen bullets in total, chasing after fuckers with an arsenal in their hands and *they* [possibly meaning the regional prosecutor or, once again, the State of Mexico] only paid for his funeral. Now his family has nothing to eat”. As he clarified, the officer who had six bullets at his disposal entered the house first and was almost immediately shot dead by a bullet storm coming from various high-power assault rifles. The second officer coming in behind him had to retreat and abandon the scene. Antonio looked more outraged than sad as he recalled these events.

Then his tone became calm and accommodating once again as he tried to sum up the story and express his point of view. “We’re literally like David facing Goliath every day”, he said while fixating his sight on the bullet bag. Seemingly wanting to end our interaction with a takeaway moral, Antonio mentioned something that sounded cryptic, at least to me. He said, “we protect each other because no one else does, now I never leave the precinct to chase after anybody unless we have the whole *chisme* (gossip) completely clear”. The word *chisme* caught my attention, as it is typically used in Mexico in reference to personal information about people that is casually discussed, crucially involving unsubstantiated details that are not accurate or even true.

I was surprised. Before starting my fieldwork, I would have imagined that state officials operating in a context of crime such as the Nautepéc police would have only relied on precise information gathered prior to missions as a means to protect their own lives. Yet, Antonio spoke of gossip. Through him using that word as a police commander, it seemed as if an expression that typically describes inaccurate information suddenly acquired institutional reliability. “*Chisme?*”, I asked in order to understand how Antonio was using this word. Apparently attempting to divert the conversation or minimising my astonishment, Antonio grinned and said, “well, you know that’s what women and policemen have in common right? We live to gossip”. The exact translation of what he said in Spanish (“*vivimos por el chisme*”) would be “we are alive *because* of gossip”. As

I would later find, the latter translation would turn out to be a more accurate expression of what ‘gossip’ meant to him and his colleagues. It was clear from his tone and his derisive focus on gender that he was joking, but the logic behind gossip as a systematic police practice remained obscure to me. Said logic, however, would become clearer in the context of how the Nautepéc police struggled in relation to the equipment and gear at their disposal. In the absence of a more sound and objective infrastructure, gossip appeared to be driving police practices and surveillance. This further seemed to erode an expectation fostered by civil society according to which the police, being sufficiently equipped, gather information through official methods.

After this conversation with Antonio, I began noticing how most of the police equipment and instruments at the precinct – such as bullet-proof vests or walkie-talkies - were not only in visible decay but more frequently, unavailable. And even if complaints about insufficient resources were frequently heard in the context of gossip being needed – as a resource -, they somehow sounded like an excuse for resorting to this kind of information. As I would soon experience, the most notable example of insufficient resources was the lack of official patrol cars available at the Regional Prosecution Unit.

### **6.3. Hitching rides: Using gossip to patrol across Nautepéc**

At the end of that same week, I was sitting at the detectives’ basement just as the clerks and detectives from the previous shift were preparing to leave the precinct after forty-eight straight hours of work. Most of them looked exhausted. As the clerks from the new shift arrived and waved goodbye at their wearied colleagues, there was barely any response from the latter.

A couple of hours after the new shift began, a detective I had never seen before arrived at the precinct. He was wearing a leather jacket and khaki pants. This outfit made his dark skin look even darker. His demeanour was relaxed but his expression was severe. “You’re still here?”, Junior Clerk Laura - who was sitting in a desk next to where I was - asked him. As he began answering, the detective’s deeply hoarse voice hissed through the

room. It sounded as if he had been screaming for hours. Even if I was sitting close to where both him and Junior Clerk were, I had to lean closer so I could listen to what he said. “I had to go see a *muertito* (diminutive form of dead body) at three in the morning”, the detective said while touching his throat in apparent discomfort. He then continued, “without any cars available, I had to hitch a ride with the guys from the funeral parlour”. “Good thinking”, the junior clerk told him as she gave him a honey Altoid, presumably as pain-relief for his throat. “Well, you know, I had to tell them the whole *chisme* in order for them to pick me up here [at the precinct] and then bring me back”. As I overheard the hoarse-voiced detective referencing gossip once more, Antonio’s words became clearer. Apparently, they construed ‘gossip’ as information given in exchange of certain things or services.

In the absence of patrol cars, the hoarse-voiced detective had to trade information about the circumstances in which a dead body had appeared in order to arrive at the scene. Indeed, as no available car could take the detective to the crime scene, he needed to trade in something for a ride. I struggled to understand why patrol cars were not available for detectives at the precinct to undertake their tasks.

Two weeks after this, I inadvertently arrived at the precinct expecting to spend a number of hours within its walls. However, before noon, Antonio came to the bench I was sitting on at the detectives’ basement and casually asked me, “[Detectives] Carlos and Raul are going on a ‘*sentón*’ (sit-down session), do you want to ride with them?”. He then explained that a *sentón* was a police practice that involved parking outside a suspect’s known residence or place of work in order to track his whereabouts and movements.

I immediately felt nervous shivers cascading down my spine, as this would be the first time I would accompany the detectives outside the Regional Prosecution Unit. Indeed, I was silently dreading the day when I would be finally asked to go and shadow patrol duty, as by then I had observed numerous interactions between alleged criminals and police officers taking place inside the precinct. I could only imagine how the aggressive nature of such interactions would unfold outside that relatively safe place, which I already knew. I also felt ambivalent about knowing that both detectives were unarmed.

Nevertheless, I felt genuine curiousness about what I would be able to observe. Furthermore, I knew that many hours of work had been spent in order for me to finally be in the backseat of a patrol car in the middle of Nautepéc. Only it turned out that I would not be sitting in a patrol car after all.

Pondering over these thoughts while Antonio waited for my answer, I managed to nervously reply, “yes, when are we leaving?”. Always a kind ‘host’, Antonio must have noticed my badly hidden hesitation, for he reassuringly told me, “hang around for about four hours and relax. I’ll come and get you when its time”. When the time came, Antonio escorted me outside the precinct and through the paved patio outside, where we met detectives Carlos and Raul.

Neither one of these detectives was ever as warm as Antonio but, in some ways, they were easier to talk to. This was due in part to the direct, brutally honest way in which they conducted themselves around me, their colleagues and even their commanders. As it was natural in Carlos, he skipped the initial greeting. “Do you have a car?”, he bluntly asked me. I had a hard time answering him for I did not want to appear privileged to my informants in order to preserve the trust we had developed by that point. Indeed, even if there are approximately 350 vehicles for every kilometre of road in Mexico City and its outskirts – second only to Bangkok in this regard –, there are approximately 200 cars for every 1000 people (World Bank, 2020, p. 4)<sup>66</sup>. Therefore, only three out of every ten inhabitants of the city and its peripheries drive a car. After an awkward couple of seconds, I finally answered, “yes (saying it quietly and quickly) but I left it at home”. I had decided to leave my car because of the heavy traffic that almost always delayed my commute to the precinct, which I could easily avoid using the public transport. Moreover, the area where the precinct was located was infamous for the amount of cars that were stolen or vandalised.

As I attempted to divert the focus away from this topic, I briefly lost sight of why Carlos was even asking me if I had a car. “Shit, mine’s almost out of gas. We were out all

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<sup>66</sup> As reported by the World Bank in its 2020 motor vehicle usage report <https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/Benchmarking-Cairo-Urban-Transport-System.pdf>

morning and I have no money left after the lunch this one (pointing at a greening Raul) made me buy for both”, Carlos apathetically said after I clumsily explained why I did not bring my car. “Here you go you cheap fuck”, Antonio told Carlos with a playful and patient smile while taking a 100 pesos – approximately £5 - note from his wallet, folding it and placing it on the latter’s breast pocket.

As Antonio and the two detectives joked about how ugly Carlos’ car was, I stared at a black patrol car parked across the paved patio. I turned back to them and saw Raul looking right back at me. “That one (the black patrol car) is for the boss (the regional prosecutor). There is another one but we use it to drive Ms Lopez home”, Raul explained almost anticipating my question. This seemed puzzling as I had only noticed the regional prosecutor leaving the precinct in the middle of the day a few times. His absence was hard to ignore, as the atmosphere at the detectives’ basement became notoriously festive whenever he left. It seemed odd that the only available patrol cars were reserved for the use of people who, notwithstanding their higher rank and authority, conducted most of their work inside the Regional Prosecution Unit.

Having settled the expenses for our outing, we said goodbye to Antonio who headed back towards the precinct. “Take care of the doctor!”, he yelled at both detectives while turning back at us one last time. “With what?”, replied Carlos in a lower tone - as if he wanted only us to hear him but not Antonio, who was now further away - “with a slingshot?”, he sarcastically asked. Raul smiled while nodding at me, gesturing that I should pay no mind to Carlos.

I walked with both detectives to an alley near the precinct. I had passed by this alley every morning on my way there. No matter which type of public transport I used – bus, taxi, Uber –, the drivers always avoided passing through that alley in particular. I could understand why, as it was narrow, darkened by a bridge standing above it and riddled with broken pavement. Yet, I was now walking towards it. Both curves at each side of the ally were sealed by parked buses. As we walked closer, however, I realised that the buses were not parked, but that they simply had no wheels. They were also vandalised with spray paint and most of their windows were cracked or broken.

Once we were standing in the middle of the alley, Carlos whistled into the air. The sound of his whistle echoed through the alley. Not more than a minute later, a grey and old-looking Ford Chevy appeared before us. As the door on the driver side opened, a teenage boy – seemingly in his early twenties at most - got down and gave the car keys to Carlos after high-fiving him in a particular way where they both locked elbows at the end. He was breathing heavily as two drops of sweat were running down one of his sideburns. He was wearing a red Manchester United jersey. It looked as if he had just been playing football with other youngsters in a wider street I had seen being used for that purpose two blocks away from the Regional Prosecution Unit. Moreover, his hairstyle, skin colour and even his demeanour were similar to Carlos's. "Here's your car boss, will you take long?", the teenage boy asked Carlos after presenting him the car keys as he still recovered his breath. "That depends on your friend, we are going to the address he gave us", Carlos answered while giving the young man a cigarette and lighting it for him. Then he did the same thing for Raul and finally offered me one. I refused as respectfully as I could and then the four of us had a relaxed conversation about football. After both detectives and the young man finished their cigarettes, the latter told them, "don't worry, my 'bro' is *chido* [cool], he knows everything around here". The whole encounter mirrored the scene at the quesadilla stand between its vendor and Raul, as it also suggested an exchange of something wrapped up in a personal ambiguous relationship.

As Carlos, Raul and I got in the former's car, I could not wait to ask them who the teenage boy was and where we were going. However, Raul, with his usual heightened perception, seemed to have anticipated my inquiry once again and told me, "these guys know Nautepéc better than we do", and then changed the subject back to football. Similarly to the hoarse-voiced detective hitching a ride with employers from a funeral parlour in order to arrive at a crime scene, this interaction also suggested that information was traded in the absence of instruments and resources, such as patrol cars or radio reports.

Shortly afterwards, we arrived at the address presumably provided by the young man in the red football jersey. The entire *sentón* turned out to be uneventful, as Raul and Carlos decided they would return to that spot the following morning "with more daylight" on



their side. However, the seeming trade of little favours – the temporary use of Carlos’s car, the cigarette - in exchange of information between both detectives and the young man had turned out to be a revealing interaction, not only for them as a means to obtain a suspect’s address, but also for me in order to observe how police practices relied on ‘gossip’ in order to be carried out.

#### **6.4. ‘All cats look the same at night’: the coexistence of the police and their informants**

The way in which sufficient bullets as well as patrol cars appeared to be beyond the police officer’s reach at the precinct made me wonder about the way certain symbols, instruments or objects formed part of how I had always imagined the police until I began observing them. Prior to my research, I had always associated police officers with patrol cars and firearms. Yet, after only a few weeks at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepec, I had found that its entire police squad had no patrol cars at their disposal and barely enough ammunition to face common criminals. However, these were not the first items of police equipment I found to be missing at the precinct.

Since my first days at the precinct, I had a hard time identifying who was a police officer, who was a detective and who was something else. Indeed, the Nautepec police officers appeared to be assisted and oriented by people whose connection to the precinct seemed to be sporadic and opportunistic. This was evidenced by the fact the boy in the football jersey drove Carlos’s car and provided him the address he needed – presumably in exchange for the use of the car or for something else.

Furthermore, none of the Nautepec police officers was ever seen wearing any sort of uniform, badge or insignia. They almost appeared to enjoy being unidentifiable among the crowds overflowing most areas inside the precinct. I initially thought I could recognise them by noticing whether if they were armed or not. However, the scarcity of weapons and ammunition meant that only a few of them carried guns at all times.

In this context, the way most of Commander Castro's men engaged people through displays of force across the precinct somehow seemed out of place, not only for how unrestricted those displays could be, but also because the police as an institution and the state as a source of law were barely evoked throughout such displays. As detained suspects were brought to the precinct's main hall, usually by one or two policemen – presumably, those who had arrested them –, they were merely pushed towards the detectives' basement downstairs by other policemen once a detective or clerk had examined them. No badge was shown, no rights were read and no documents were signed.

Monday mornings were typically the busiest moments of the week, as arrests tripled across weekends in light of intoxicated drivers getting caught or incidents taking place in social gatherings, sporting events and public spaces. On one particularly hectic Monday morning, I arrived at the regional prosecution unit and noticed two men being held by two policemen on the west corner of the main hall, next to the dark hallway leading down to the detectives' basement. All of them were dressed casually. Moreover, no guns, badges or insignias could be observed. One of the men was being held by his arm and the other one by his right shoulder. In front of all of them stood the hoarse-voiced detective. Still hoarse-voiced, he violently exclaimed, “forget about any phone calls, you'll be here until we decide what to do with you and I better not hear any crying”. Without quoting any law or explaining any specific procedure, he turned to one of the policemen holding them and said, “to the cells”. Then, to my surprise, only one of the men was pushed towards the detectives' basement, as the man held by his right shoulder turned out not to be a detained suspect but a policeman being held by his colleague as a friendly gesture. In the absence of uniforms or badges, I had assumed that one of the policemen was a suspect as I had not met him yet and no institutional symbol suggested otherwise.

In this context of absent insignias, institutional references and uniforms, people interacted without obvious symbols indicating who was entitled to police and who was subject to policing. Policemen and detectives quotidianly wore any type of clothes - from leather jackets and shirts, to shorts, t-shirts and even football jerseys - without any matching element or recognisable colour distinguishing them as a single law-enforcing unit. The

episode described in the previous paragraph illustrated how people and their roles were not *a priori* identifiable across the precinct. These episodes would not have caught my attention if they had taken place outside the Regional Prosecution Unit, as I would have understood that the use of ‘plain clothes’ was simply a means of protection in order for officers not to be identified as police in public spaces. However, the use of plain clothes seemed purposefully abided by inside the precinct.

While further reflecting upon that scene involving the hoarse-voiced detective and the casually – and thus confusingly - dressed policemen, I wondered about the people who continuously occupied the reduced space at the detectives’ basement. Between desks, benches and file drawers crammed inside that busy basement, I had only noticed - until that moment - the Nautepéc police officers interacting with alleged suspects and alleged victims. Those interactions, discussed throughout the previous chapters, seemed police-like in the sense that they involved state representatives engaging citizens *vertically*. However, the detectives’ basement, as well as the entire main hall, also featured the presence of people who interacted with the police officers as though acquaintances.

One day, almost at lunchtime, Diego, the head clerk, and detective Carlos were inside Ms Ana’s office sternly questioning a robust man who was being held as a suspect for allegedly running over another man’s foot with his motorcycle. While I sat on a bench immediately outside that office, I could hear as Diego raised his prominent voice, apparently trying to intimidate the robust man. Simultaneously, Carlos made incisive questions one after the other, as if attempting to unnerve the suspect.

Suddenly, a grey-haired man with a white silk shirt and black pants confidently entered the basement. Even if he could not have been described as *güero*, his skin was lighter than those of the detectives. I had never seen him before, yet he waived hello at all the clerks in their desks, addressing most of them by their first names. In return, he was greeted with noticeable joy from most of them. Junior Clerk Laura even stood from her desk, intercepted the man and hugged him as she affably told him, “always in a rush right?”. Then she noticed my presence and asked me, “look doc, have you met our ‘guardian angel’?”, as she introduced us. After shaking my hand and smiling, the grey-

haired man entered Ms Ana's office, where Diego and Carlos were. He went in without knocking on the door. As he did, the clerk and the detective interrupted their interrogation, lowered their voice to a more friendly tone and promptly high-fived the grey-haired man. After their warm salute, the 'guardian angel' exited the office as Diego winked at him while maintaining a solemn look.

The grey-haired man then headed towards the end of the hallway outside Ms Ana's office, where the file room was located. He entered and closed the door behind him without even switching the lights on inside. After a few minutes, the grey-haired man came out and left, this time without much fanfare. He merely went back to where Diego was sitting and told him, "it's there already" on his way out. This time Diego looked at him and pointed at his own mobile phone, to which the grey-haired man replied with a thumbs-up gesture.

This episode, as well as the incident featuring the hoarse-voiced detective and the policeman I mistook for a suspect, made me realise that I had been assuming that those people present at the basement without handcuffs or grievances to report were also police officers or detectives. Misguided by the absence of uniforms or insignias, I had presumed that the acquaintances that populated the precinct were other policemen passing by between shifts and missions. I wondered if I had been mistaking other people as I had mistaken that other policeman at the west corner of the main hall. I then began speculating about what people unrelated to law enforcement could be doing at the precinct when they were not there as suspects or victims. Apparently, there were other types of interactions taking place every day. Most of them had the appearance of being mere acquaintances, yet somehow they always looked out of place and shielded by the absence of external symbols or recognisable clothing.

Indeed, the interactions between Raul and the quesadilla vendor, Carlos and the teenage boy in the football jersey and the grey-haired man and Diego revealed an information trade being carried out as a police practice at the precinct. It had become almost frequent to observe a discrete exchange between a police officer and someone apparently unrelated to policing.

Like the absence of uniforms, badges and patrol cars, these interactions unmasked another element closely associated to the police, that is, the distinction between the state and civil society. The everyday entanglements between the police and their informants questioned the traditional notion according to which “the urgent reason for committing an activity to an agency of the government lies in the conviction that it cannot be adequately maintained if it is left to private enterprise” (Sabine, 1920, p. 313).

These entanglements, rather than violent, seemed natural and fluid, as if there were mutual interests being addressed and satisfied. When reflecting upon them, I thought of the way the hoarse-voiced detective had offered information – or ‘gossip’ - in exchange for a ride to a crime scene. Such exchange resonated with a particular feature of a story I had heard from Commander Castro.

Indeed, I found myself reminded of a story Commander Castro liked to recall about his involvement in a gunfight against members of a mid-level drug cartel who were attempting to take over the State of Mexico – in light of its proximity to Mexico City. The first time the commander told me this story we were standing outside the precinct as we both waited for detectives Raul and Carlos to finish a cigarette. Looking relaxed, as if he was enjoying a cigarette himself, Commander Castro slowly took a few steps away from us towards the street beyond the paved patio and turned to the east. Then, he excitedly waived at me so I could come closer. As I reached him, he pointed his finger directly in front and said:

“A while ago, that hill over there was run by a drug lord who was peaceful and used no violence. He cooked his drugs very well. He only kidnapped dealers from other gangs, phoned their bosses and negotiated with them so they could only sell his stuff. However, we caught him thanks to informants and now a violent drug lord called ‘*el diez*’ (‘the ten’) wants to take over. This guy is violent and kills small dealers so now we are on his trail”.

As I reflected upon this story in light of the interactions I had observed in the weeks that followed, the reference to ‘informants’ now seemed more revealing, as well as Antonio’s logic behind ‘gossip’. The next time I found myself inside Commander Castro’s office, I asked him what he had meant by ‘informants’ in his story about the peaceful drug lord

and the new dominance of ‘*el diez*’. As he frequently did, the commander initially avoided clear and straight answers. Instead, he ‘answered’ my question with a hypothetical question. “What would you do if you suddenly had 100 million pesos?”, the commander asked me before solemnly pausing. I was unsure about what to reply, as I wanted to hear his answer. Luckily, he then went ahead and answered himself by saying, “well, of course you will spend them quickly, that’s what these fuckers do. They go with girls, go to nightclubs and buy cars. But their associates notice, they hear them bragging”. He then said, “someone always catches wind of things”.

Between stories and recommendations about how to spend money, Commander Castro explained how he frequently talked with thieves and former gang members who informed on their peers. “That’s how we knew about these ATM guys”, the commander said about a gang of alleged bank robbers they had brought to the precinct earlier that same day. I asked him what these informants asked in return and Commander Castro answered, “they charge us with little favours”. At this moment, I thought that maybe that was why the teenage boy in the football jersey was driving Carlos’s car, as a ‘little favour’. I then attempted to change the subject briefly so that he would not feel questioned – and thus become evasive -, but before I did, he suddenly expanded on the last thing he said. “The problem is that those *chismosos* (people who gossip) come here [to the precinct] to collect their favours. Naturally right? I cannot go to their slums because their associates would recognise me and kill me. [Instead] They just casually come here, as if this was their house”. Recalling the interaction I had seen taking place between Diego and the grey-haired man, I asked the commander if he was able to distinguish his own informants from those who exchanged information with his men and then came to the precinct. The commander raised his eyebrows and stared at the space right above my head – as if trying to count something in his mind -. Then he sighed and laughed saying, “nah, they are too many, but who cares, all cats look the same at night”.

The commander’s words involuntarily clarified the absence of uniforms or insignias among his officers. I wondered if by avoiding to dress in a certain way and hiding badges it all favoured that police officers and informants could interact and trade information in one place without any of either ‘side’ becoming obviously identifiable. Commander

Castro's final choice of words was also noteworthy. It sounded revealing and somehow appropriate that he had spoken of the way 'cats' look 'at night'. I wondered if, by imagining the dark of night, he was subconsciously illustrating how the information trade in question was a dark deed, inadvertently admitting some kind of guilt in his use of informants. What could they be giving in exchange of the information provided by *chismosos* that made the commander think of 'the dark'? Were these informants being selected according to the racial hierarchy that was actively upheld by the officers and detectives? I also wondered about the variation in the way certain informants interacted as opposed to others. Why were some of them engaged outside the precinct while others were expected inside? Shortly after this, the commander was called to the regional prosecutor's office and left.

After this conversation, I began looking at the people I did not know at the precinct differently, at least those who were not there as alleged suspects or victims. Indeed, every time I saw interactions featuring people I had not seen conducting actual police work, I looked at their generic clothes and absent badges, wondering what role were they playing in the information trade, or which kinds of details were they providing.

Driven by these doubts, I felt it was necessary to bring up the subject with Commander Castro once more. Trying to avoid appearing inquisitorial, I decided to address the topic of informants indirectly, asking the commander about the then recently elected president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and his promise to militarise the municipal police across Mexico. Commander Castro began looking infuriated from the moment I mentioned the word "military". Presumably due to his visible anger, this time the commander avoided answering with hypothetical questions and euphemisms. Instead, he was as candid and direct as I had ever found him. "It's pure bullshit", he said, "a good policeman needs to know the thief. Soldiers don't know the streets, the people. They need to know the criminals because we use them to catch their friends".

A few weeks later, I was chatting with Second Commander Antonio inside Commander Castro's office. We were talking about the upcoming precinct's Christmas party when Commander Castro suddenly arrived. Looking calm as always, Antonio told the

commander, “I have the best *chisme* (gossip) for you: *el pato* (‘the duck’) says they have the location of *el diez*”. “Nah, do you think so?”, asked Commander Castro as he placed a couple of bullets in the plastic bag located on top of his desk. “*El pato* is usually right, the two from last week were his”, Antonio reminded him. “Probably, but he’s been a real *puto* (pussy) lately”, answered Castro. Then they were both called to the regional prosecutor’s office and I had to leave, as it began raining furiously again.

### 6.5. Reconstructing the implications of snitching for policing and violence

The evidence described across the previous paragraphs highlights specific instances in which Nautepéc police officers liaised tightly and constantly with civilians who were neither accused of committing crimes nor reporting them. As opposed to the vertically established way in which the Nautepéc police interacted with suspects or victims – even if positions of authority were inverted when they engaged white(r) people –, the interactions in question seemed horizontally established and even amicable. Moreover, they suggested a commitment to supply mutual needs (Jauregui, 2016). Until the conversation overheard between Commanders Castro and Antonio confirmed as much, those interactions pointed to the existence of a seeming information trade. This trade resulted from agreements informally and sporadically enforced by the Nautepéc police and a network of *chismosos*<sup>67</sup> or people who, as phrased by Second Commander Antonio, “live to (or because of) gossip”.

In light of the aforementioned findings, this dissertation advances that an attention to ‘gossip’, information and the personal relations fostered by the police as part of their everyday practices matters theoretically because it questions the largely assumed neutrality of police methods while also revealing how policing entails more than ‘violence work’. Moreover, such focus also matters for the purpose of specifically discussing three salient issues. The first one is the relationship between information and the absence or unavailability of other kinds of police resources. The second is how the

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<sup>67</sup> Terminologically, the word *chismosos*, used by the Nautepéc police, seems to be a colloquial translation of what Natapoff (2006; 2008; 2012) refers to as ‘snitches’ in her study about informants within the United States justice system.



secrecy that characterises this information trade, along with its corresponding practice of hiding badges and insignias, result in the *de facto* incorporation of *chismosos* into policing. Moreover, this symbiosis (Denyer Willis, 2009) between the police and their informants further questions notions according to which policing is synonymous with ‘violence work’. Finally, the third issue posed by this focus on police-motivated ‘gossip’ is its impact on the reproduction of hegemonic assumptions against racialised and genderised populations in the margins of Mexico City. Such reproduction is presumably carried out by spreading unsupported knowledge that is originated in and extracted from those margins that are later policed.

The first of the aforementioned issues was illustrated by the encounter between Carlos and the teenage boy in the football jersey, as well as the story overheard by the hoarse-voiced detective. In both of these instances, information was purchased or offered in the absence of basic instruments and equipment needed to carry out daily tasks, namely patrolling across Nautepéc. Indeed, the unavailability or decaying state of most of the police accoutrements required by the Nautepéc police officers appeared to be the immediate cause behind the need for an information trade. As Raul mentioned in Carlos’s car, without the help of radio communication or walkie-talkies, the Nautepéc police needed to liaise with people who knew that jurisdiction better than they did. Furthermore, the lack of those other instruments made informants more desperately needed, which presumably made their errors pardonable<sup>68</sup> and their ‘bargaining’ position stronger. This could explain why the grey-haired man seemed so welcomed at the precinct, on the one hand, and so unfazed when interacting with authorities, on the other, which was evidenced by the way in which he entered Ms Ana’s office without even knocking.

This resource shortage of the Nautepéc police contrasts with Natapoff’s (2012) description of the work of snitches in the U.S., where they are increasingly called upon by well-funded security agencies - including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) -,

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<sup>68</sup> Analogously to what Auyero and Sobering (2019) describe as part of the collusive relationships between security agents and drug traffickers, the work of snitches is presumably faulty. As such, “when we look closer at the interactions that unfold, we see a social universe filled with errors, unintended consequences, and spontaneous actions, as well as constant corrections and attempts to repair relationships damaged by those mistakes” (Auyero and Sobering, 2019, p. 158). Tilly (1996) refers to these errors as “invisible elbows” (1996, p. 595).

to the point that snitching has become a lucrative career there (Natapoff, 2012)<sup>69</sup>. Conversely however, the evidence gathered through observations of the Nautepc police crucially suggests that engaging snitches was not their preferred investigative resource but instead, the only operational resource at their disposal<sup>70</sup>.

However, even if resources at the precinct seemed lacking, inadequate or in a decaying state, this problem does not supersede the normative logic revealed by the Nautepc police. The quotidian absence of instruments, gear and police accoutrements in general – described by them as an everyday struggle - appeared to operate as an alibi or excuse that ‘pushed’ the Nautepc police officers and detectives towards seeking other investigative means through their information trade. Yet, the experience of shadowing the Nautepc police for eight months never suggested that more resources would have made them more efficient or objective. Indeed, describing the alleged struggle posed by decaying or absent resources should not equate to arguing in favour of a better-equipped police force, nor should it withdraw attention from the underlying problems that were indirectly referenced throughout this chapter. Principal among such problems are the hegemonic ways in which the police conceive marginalised people and the instrumental actions they impose over them to reach their own objectives.

As advanced on the second section of Chapter 2, the work of Fondevila (2011, 2013) delves into the Mexican police’s informer management and control of information - even if it does not focus specifically on resources or on the increasingly blurred line between policing and informing. Rather than *chismosos*, his studies within the Mexican police have revealed the importance of ‘*madrinas*’ – which literally means *godmothers* -, an informer system controlled informally by the Federal Police through complex exchanges of favours, honour and coercion (Fondevila, 2013). The notion of *chismosos* and their omnipresence at the precinct could follow Fondevila’s studies of *madrinas* in particular and the ties between police organisations in Mexico and systematic snitching.

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<sup>69</sup> There is also a difference to be made between ‘snitching’ and providing information for a plea deal, which has also become a common practice in law enforcement procedures in the U.S.

<sup>70</sup> As illustrated by Natapoff (2006, p. 109), “informants must persuade the government that their lies are true. Police and prosecutors, in turn, often do not and cannot check these lies because the snitch’s information may be all the government has”.

The second salient issue posed by focusing on gossip was illustrated by the absence of police uniforms or visible insignias at the precinct, in addition to the way in which snitches casually occupied the space therein. These practices constantly blurred the distinction between the police and their informants. The tight collaboration between police officers and snitches seemed to be accentuated by the fact that it became almost impossible to visually distinguish them. This blurring of a visual distinction between snitches and policemen further suggested that policing was carried out by both parts within the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc. In this context, the faint line dividing the practice of policing and the practice of snitching was virtually erased by the absence of uniforms, badges and insignias.

Moreover, by daily observing the integration of snitches into police practices, it became apparent that the Nautepéc police officers had interiorised the ‘shared’ nature of their work. This was evidenced by the way officers and detectives at the precinct constantly hid their badges. And as badges remained out of sight inside the Regional Prosecution Unit, snitches were joyfully welcomed and seemingly trusted, which further obscured any certainty about who was policing and who was being policed.

The tight interaction between the externally indistinguishable Nautepéc police and their informants also seemed to create a paradox in relation to the power narrative inside the precinct. According to Wedeen’s (1998, p. 506) insights into authoritarian politics, “language and symbols are used both to exemplify and to produce political power”. Yet, the Nautepéc police appeared to turn away from the power that symbols like badges or uniforms could have produced. Conversely, they seemed to relinquish any claim to power provided by their insignias in order to allow their informants to blend in with them at their place of work. In this sense, police power was shared in order for the Nautepéc officers to benefit from information that allowed them to create a façade of police work through accusations and arrests based on gossip.

The interactions and mechanisms according to which the Nautepéc police operated the information trade also suggested that such practice had little to do with what Seigel (2018) coined as ‘violence work’. The integration of informants into the everyday

dynamics at the precinct and the resulting disappearance of any distinction between them and police officers revealed that, rather than exclusive ‘violence workers’, the police also acts as a “social resource” (Jauregui, 2016, p. 13) that mediates between demands and realises human needs, either for themselves or for others.

Framing the police as violence workers overlooks their capacity to locate areas and groups where unconventional channels of information may be exploited, even if that is frequently done to satisfy interests beyond policing. This view of the police also overlooks the fact that, as street-level state representatives, they are particularly perceptive of needs and desires. As this dissertation argues, the work of the police is not exclusively characterised by violence, but by a front-row awareness of various demands and sources of information, notwithstanding the fact that the subsequent management of these resources frequently creates, fuels or results in violence. This leads to the conclusion that policing may not always be about violence, but it is always about politics.

Finally, the third issue posed by a focus on gossip within the police is the need to question how the information provided by snitches further reproduced hegemonic notions of gender and race against people in the margins of Nautepéc and its neighbouring Mexico City. In light of how, according to the observations gathered across this study, most of the people who were seen being held as suspects inside the precinct appeared to represent marginalised groups, this dissertation can only presume that snitches operated according to racial and gendered assumptions. Indeed, as a human source of information by definition – subject to racial and gendered assumptions, errors, whims and unawareness –, snitches presumably target the marginalised people of Nautepéc in light of how unaccountably they can be detained, abused and held, even if the information that led to their arrest has no merit or substance. By the same token, the snitches ‘used’ by the Nautepéc police not only appeared to operate informally, but also seemed vulnerable in many ways, as shown by the age of the young teenager in the football jersey. This essentially equates to members of marginalised communities ‘ratting’ on each other for the benefit of the police. In this sense, if policing in Mexico enforces a masculine, racially-driven notion of power, then it seems relevant that, as shown by Fondevila’s

(2011; 2013) studies of snitches within Mexican policing, all the informants - or *madrinas* – he interviewed were male and self-defined as mestizos.

In this sense, snitches contribute to what Wacquant (2016, p. 1078) described as “multilevel structural processes whereby persons are selected, thrust and maintained in marginal locations”. In a context where traditional police resources are unavailable, snitches, as the only available one, focus on those who “have no control over their representation and whose very being is therefore moulded by the categorisation – in the literal sense of public accusation – of outsiders” (Wacquant, 2016, p. 1084). As a result, the integrated practices of snitching and policing, guided by uncritically accepted assumptions, continue to reproduce hegemonic notions such as the ones discussed in previous chapters.

Even if many more questions may arise from these three issues, a particular attention on the use of gossip by the police, as well as a focus on the way information is extracted and traded by municipal police officers seems useful as it was not found in previous studies. Therefore, this chapter adds volume to the literature on policing by illustrating one specific way through which the state becomes ambivalent in its relationship with civil society by trading information with them, thus incorporating them *de facto* into policing.

## Chapter 7. Justifying the police through statistics

Before getting into Detective Carlos's grey Ford Chevy, which was used as a patrol car almost every day, I had been told by Second Commander Antonio that we were going on a *cateo* (search) outside the Regional Prosecution Unit, "around the Nautepéc area". During the ride, I sat in the backseat while Carlos drove and Raul gave him directions as co-pilot. They were both complaining about their Christmas bonus as I tried to imagine what the search would be like. I thought there would be a specific building, neighbourhood, operation or group that we would visit. Instead, I eventually realised we were driving through the same streets over and over again. The area around us featured row upon row of brutalist apartment blocks built of poured concrete painted in beige and French grey colours. It looked as if it was about to rain heavily, which made the buildings' colours look darker. I then noticed that Carlos was driving increasingly slow and always on the right side of the road, right by the sidewalk.

After some time driving around in circles, Raul turned back and told me, "This is the *barrio del huarache* (the 'sandal slum'), it is where many '*rateros*' (thieves) live and where you find 'safe houses' where kidnappers hold their victims". I began feeling anxious about the search but I did not want to appear nervous to the detectives, as I already felt like a burden to them. However, after a few more minutes without the detectives referencing any clear purpose or target, Carlos told Raul, "nah, there's nothing, and with the rain, forget about it. Let's drive back as soon as it starts raining". Raul merely nodded affirmatively without taking his eyes from the car window on his right side. It became clear that there was nothing or no one specific the detectives were looking for. Meanwhile, Carlos kept on driving slowly, still right by the sidewalk.

Suddenly, Raul said, "there's one!" in a louder tone as he pointed at a teenage boy with headphones and a backpack walking down the street. "Do you think he looks like a *ratón* (mouse)?" Carlos asked Raul as he lowered the speed even more and began driving straight toward the teenage boy. Sounding certain and still pointing at the boy with the backpack, Raul told Carlos, "of course *wey* ('dude'), a big black rat, just look at him, '*a*

*huevo*’ *nos lo clavamos por algo* (we will definitely ‘nail’ him for something)”. The use of the word ‘black’ sounded odd, as the boy’s skin colour was identical to that of both detectives. The car stopped making a screeching violent sound with its brakes and wheels right next to where the teenage boy with the backpack was. Immediately, Carlos and Raul got out and walked hastily towards the boy yelling at him “hey, hey, stop, come here”. Without identifying themselves, showing any badges or explaining any purpose, the detectives began frisking him. I struggled to imagine how the boy in the backpack must have felt, walking through an area allegedly infamous as a hotspot for kidnappers and then being stopped by men who did not dress or identify themselves as the police, in a car that did not look like a patrol car.

The teenage boy with the backpack merely stood in silence and cooperated with a frisking procedure that seemed not only invasive but also unnecessary. Raul, who liked to toy with the people he interrogated or frisked, took the boy’s cap off and placed it on himself as he asked him, “do you know many boys who look like you hide drugs in their caps?”, presumably trying to make him feel nervous. However, the latter replied he had no drugs on him and complied patiently with the rest of the invasive frisk. Still sitting in the backseat of Carlos’s car, I wondered if this was what ‘searches’ meant to the Nautepéc police officers, a practice based on random hunts for people who personified specific traits, arguably related to racial markers or urban marginalisation. As I had opened the window on my side, I heard one of the detectives telling the boy in the backpack to “wait here, we’re going to the car to get our *reglamento* (code book) just to prove that we can detain you and if necessary, take you with us to the precinct”.

Then, both detectives came to the car while covering their mouths and presumably whispering something to each other as Carlos briefly laughed before he opened the door on the driver’s side. Once inside, he told Raul, “I was sure he was going to have something”. “Have you got any?”, Raul asked Carlos from his seat while covering his mouth with a seemingly fake lip scratch. “Nah, I barely took my jacket before we left”, answered Carlos as he reluctantly started his car, apparently concluding the search. Upon hearing this, I could not help but think they intended to plant something on the boy. As

they drove away from the boy with the backpack, Raul opened his window and yelled at him, “next time I see you I’ll nail you for five robberies”.

No word was uttered inside the car until a few minutes later, when Raul got out a notepad from his leather jacket at the next red light. As Carlos’s car stood still, he looked out the window, trying to read the closest street sign. “*Carajo* (damn), we grabbed the *ratón* beyond Nautepéc, the border was before the flower market right?”, Raul asked as he opened Google Maps on his mobile phone. “Who cares?”, replied Carlos, “just write down ‘search on the limits of Nautepéc, suspicious looking ‘*moreno*’ (brown skinned man) subject, blah blah, you know what to do”. Both detectives turned silent again until we reached the quesadilla stand outside the precinct, where we had dinner. As we ate, I thought of the teenage boy with the backpack, who was to become some kind of statistic produced by the Nautepéc police, even if he had been frisked somewhere outside that municipality.

This chapter argues that the way in which the Nautepéc police uses and produces crime statistics reveals that Mexican policing has incorporated new law enforcing paradigms from the Global North characterised by proactive action and a corresponding reliance on technical measurements. Moreover, these paradigms have led the police in Mexico to use statistics as a means to justify their deployment in a context where the growth and ubiquity of criminal organisations expose the police’s inability or unwillingness to deter violence. In order to elaborate on this argument, the chapter draws on participant observations of the Nautepéc police that reveal how crime statistics are exhibited as a mechanism for municipal law enforcing authorities to secure political relevance. Furthermore, said observations also detail instances where crime rates were constructed through entanglements between municipal police officers and a criminal organisation.



### **7.1. Looking at crime statistics and the politics behind them: a review of the literature**

As outlined above, this chapter focuses on the political use of statistics by the police in order to justify their deployment and expansion. For this purpose, it seems important to make a brief historical consideration of the way statistics were established as a political instrument. As such, the paradigms that led the modern state to promote proactive, statistic-oriented policing have its origins in the Enlightenment and positivism. As argued by Scott (1998), these processes caused the development of the modern state to be characterised by the rationalisation of the population in order to enact forms of social engineering. To this end, Foucault holds that the ‘governmentality’ achieved by the modern state, rather than due to violence or domination, was brought by “the regulation of conduct by the more or less rational application of the appropriate technical means” (Hindes, 1996, p. 106; Lemke, 2002).

Along these lines, Hacking (1990) argues that the enthusiasm for numerical data produced by the state followed the Napoleonic era. Before then, numbers provided by the state were almost exclusively related to either taxation or military recruitment (Hacking, 1990). According to Scott (1998), specific processes that originated between the Enlightenment and the early nineteenth century were characterised by an incipient search for standardization, codification – as illustrated by the drafting of the Napoleonic Civil Code –, simplification and a general turn to procedures deemed to be scientific (Scott, 1998; Adas, 2000). Thereafter, states began counting, calculating and classifying their subjects, carrying out notable efforts in order to print and publicize official results such as the ones gathered by the first American censuses. Indeed, Alonso and Starr (1987) explain why governments produce statistics by first focusing on censuses, not only as one of the first forms of statistical interaction between citizens and the state, but moreover, as a mechanism initially intended for the surveillance and policing of the population (Alonso and Starr, 1987).

By consequence, an unprecedented amount of statistics produced to govern nineteenth-century states made of society a statistical object, replacing ‘human nature’ as an explanation of the world (Hacking, 1990; Canguilhem, 1989; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006). Fostered by Enlightenment-like thinking, this tendency to approach society through statistics aimed to bring scientific order to the social chaos (Latour and Woolgar, 1986). As a result, most nation states began undertaking their political roles by measuring and rationalising everyday life – as evidenced by the way governments increasingly began depending on the production of population indexes, demographic measurements and economic patterns -. By doing so, modern nations, now presented themselves through a language of numbers and statistics (Urla, 1993).

Statistics reproduce the language of the “actuarial state” (Louw and Schönteich, 2001), conceived by Tocqueville through the principles of democracy and majority will (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006). This, however, does not mean that statistics are an exclusive mechanism to interpret, uphold or question the state. As Urla (1993) notes, numbers also became a means for social contestation through which women, minorities and ethnic groups claimed visibility and voiced their demand for services from the state. In this sense, statistics can be approached separately or “simultaneously as technologies of scientific knowledge, of government administration, and of symbolic representation” (Urla, 1993, p. 819).

Crucially, as Hacking (1990) argues, crime rates - as one particular type of statistic - offered nineteenth century states the opportunity to refine and watch over their citizens at the same time. Indeed, crime rates provided “the notion that one can improve – control – a deviant subpopulation by enumeration and classification” (Hacking, 1990, p. 3). As a result of the Victorian need to uphold ‘the moral’ and ‘the normal’, states began counting and calculating deviance to identify this as the antonym of desired behaviours (Hacking, 1990; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006). Thus, by quantifying ‘social pathologies’ such as criminality, madness and suicide, certain law-like regularities were identified as the opposite of those pathologies and thus defined as desirable conducts for the purpose of governance (Hacking, 1990; Canguilhem, 1989; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006). As

phrased by Urla (1993, p.818), “counting practices elevate certain behaviours...to the status of signifiers”.

This logic was instrumental in giving the police prime knowledge and guardianship of crime statistics, as they not only had frequent street-level contact with deviance, but they were moreover charged with punishing it. Crucially, by the 1960’s, the police in those modern northern states like the United States or the United Kingdom - which by then had solidified their role as keepers and producers of statistics -, saw their ethos transformed towards a more pre-emptive and proactive role<sup>71</sup>. Explanations to these transformations vary across the literature. Indeed, Smith (2001) points towards vacuums of authority left by the collapse of the welfare state and a corresponding search for alternatives to liberal urban policies, while Beckett (1997) underscores the importance of state reactions to civil rights movements<sup>72</sup>. Garland (2000, p. 347), on the other hand, explains this transformation by describing “a new collective experience of crime and insecurity” that has led to the establishment of crime as an institution<sup>73</sup>. As held by Mitchell (2010), this transformation towards pre-emption is owed to a shift in the way security was believed to be attained by the modern state. Influenced by Cold War concerns, security had been sought through spatial containment. Slowly, however, the emphasis was placed on effective spatial administration. As a result, weak, disorderly, and ungoverned spaces were construed as insecure and dangerous, requiring harsh intervention from the state (Mitchell, 2010).

One of the consequences of this shift towards pre-emption was that order became conceptualised through the logic of ‘broken windows’, advanced by Wilson and Kelling (1982). According to their thesis, if people are allowed to engage in minor disruptions of the public order – such as breaking windows -, more serious crimes will follow and

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<sup>71</sup> Massumi (2007) uses President Bush’s pro-war narrative to argue that the modern state has shifted towards a logic of pre-emption instead of diplomacy.

<sup>72</sup> In a context where incarceration rates increase steadily notwithstanding the fluctuating behaviour of crime rates, political developments, especially the civil rights and welfare movement lead to a punishment boom. Indeed, political conservatives seized on crime to discredit those who voiced civil rights demands. Beckett (1997) thus draws away from the ‘democracy at work thesis’. Punishment as a policy of first choice slowly became unquestioned. Old-line segregationists linked civil rights to crime.

<sup>73</sup> According to Garland (2000, p. 367), late modernity is characterised by a ‘crime complex’ that is underpinned by certain beliefs and assumptions namely that “high crime rates are regarded as a normal social fact; concerns about victims and public safety dominate public policy and; the criminal justice state is viewed as inadequate or ineffective”.

furthermore, the ‘disordered’ appearance of the neighbourhood will promote criminal disorder (Wilson and Kelling, 1982; Smith, 2001). Thus, by protecting appearances in order to pre-empt serious crimes, policing in the Global North increasingly became construed as an order-maintenance practice. As a result, policing expanded and began combining a proclivity for punishment with a fixation on surveillance and spatial control (Harcourt, 1998).

Crucially, broken windows policing has not only been reproduced as a set of order-maintenance policies, but it has also become entangled with statistics and evidence-based methods (Sherman, 1998). A prime example of this is the use of Compstat, a technological and management system first used by the New York Police Department (Denyer Willis, 2020). As concluded by Willis, Mastrofski and Weisburd (2007) – who evaluated Compstat from a technical and an institutional point of view -, the use of data and statistics is of central importance for the socialisation of the police. However, while these authors admit Compstat is technically sound, they also warn that “until there are profound changes in police agencies’ technical and institutional environments, police departments will continue to be more concerned with appearances than with restructuring in response to what works most effectively” (Willis, Mastrofski and Weisburd, 2007, p. 183).

Moreover, the use of instruments such as Compstat by a proactive police turns law enforcing from reactive to data-driven, merging a pre-emptive logic with an overreliance in statistics. As a result, when low crime questions the use of law enforcing, the police use statistics to create criminals and therefore justify their deployment (Denyer Willis, 2020).

In light of their increasing relevance, crime rates have become the main standard for the measurement of peace and security across places and moments in time (Denyer Willis, 2016). As such, crime rates are not only used by policy-makers and their subjects to assess and define their actions, but also by those who study them (Denyer Willis, 2016). Among the latter, the school of criminology notably focuses on crime rates “as the

foundation for subsequent analyses that test myriad demographic, physical and social variables, from toxic substance(s) consumed, to urban space, ethnicity, race and family structure, as well as hypotheses about policy effectiveness and crime ‘booms’” (Willis, 2016, p. 31).

Due to the attribution of such importance to crime rates, several studies uncritically accept, for instance, that “the regulation of homicides remains the exclusive purview of states” (Denyer Willis, 2016, P. 36), and thus assume the validity of said rates in order to assess their trends and trajectories. For example, Eisner and Wikström (1999, p. 428) made a comparative analysis of violent crimes in Stockholm and Basel by analysing “special surveys of police files in the two cities”.

Following a similar quantitative method, Nivette (2011) undertook a meta-analysis of cross-national predictors of homicide by comparing the prevalence of this crime across various nations. For that purpose, she used homicide data as these “are generally considered to be the most reliable by comparative criminologists as a victim’s body is most likely to come to the attention of officials” (Nivette, 2011, p. 106). Analogously, by focusing on statistics such as age structure, economic stress and certainty of punishment, Roberts and LaFree (2004) conducted a two-part analysis of Japan’s post-war violent crime trends. For that purpose, the authors assessed the relationship between said statistics and homicide as well as robbery rates (Roberts and LaFree, 2004).

It is important to highlight, too, that the aforementioned studies, all of which follow a quantitative criminological approach, do recognise the lack of validity in many categories of crime data (Nivette, 2011; Neapolitan, 1997)<sup>74</sup>. However, they arguably continue to assume the prevailing efficacy of crime rates while overlooking how such rates and death

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<sup>74</sup> Crime rates represent indicators that, according to Engel Merry’s (2016) notion of ‘myth of objectivity’, fail in two ways. The first is the way in which, due to certain sources frequently producing numbers without extreme scientific or methodological rigour, statistics circulate under the appearance that they are exempt from errors and missing data (Engel Merry, 2016). The second is the way in which indicators are – many times involuntarily – determined by the aims and motivations of those who produce them (Engel Merry, 2016). By typically overlooking these shortcomings, the quantitative criminological approach views crime rates not as a representation of reality, “but as a reality in themselves” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006, p. 211; Urla 1993).

tolls in general “are commonly inflated, deflated, or simply fabricated, all in the service of political goals” (Andreas and Greenhill, 2011, p. 6).

In contrast to this generally uncritical acceptance of crime rates, other sectors of the literature have long questioned crime rates. Initially, criticism focused on how crime rates inevitably undercount crime, arguing that statistics are produced either by cases brought to the police or by cases they discover through their investigations (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2006; Louw and Schönteig, 2001). Therefore, as pointed by Dixon (2002), if the “real” crime rates remain unknown due to this fundamental indeterminacy, then those statistics that are printed and distributed serve the production of politics rather than social science, on the one hand, or security on the other. However, this increasingly stopped being the case with the advent of data-driven policing, which made this entire practice proactive.

Nevertheless, data-driven policing has also been questioned by authors such as Amoore and Raley (2017), who examined the algorithmic techniques that have been increasingly used in search for security. According to them, securing through algorithms does not imply an epistemological break from past techniques but a revival of Cold War concerns all too familiar with exploiting statistics for security purposes (Amoore and Raley, 2017). Moreover, data-driven policing reproduces a specific rhetoric in favour of utilising pre-emptive intelligence. However, as noted by Brayne (2018), this use of intelligence translates into de facto warrantless forms of surveillance. At the same time, as noted by Malinkovich and Weis (1975), the police also strives to prevent crime rates from decreasing too much, as this typically results in the reduction of their resources.

But beyond what the nature of crime rates do to the ethos of policing, it is important to highlight the arguments that point towards the political relevance of these rates. This is important, for as noted by Denyer Willis (2020), statistics are overlooked as political instruments due to the belief that they are apolitical. To this end, Dixon (2002) explains how counting crime leads to the inevitable production of politics, as crime rates are not divulged as mere information, but as an argument in favour or against the efficacy of the

state. Similarly, Simon (2007) narrates how Presidents and governors have moved from being evaluated by their social performance to being judged by their aptitudes as crime-fighters. Due to this way of conceiving successful administrations, “body counts continue to be wrapped up in politics” (Andreas and Greenhill, 2011, p. 15).

Furthermore, globalization and democratic transitions followed through ‘northern’ templates have exported the uncritical acceptance of statistics to the transnational realm, where political administrations are evaluated by the international community through the ‘universal language’ of numbers (Andreas and Greenhill, 2011). Indeed, Andreas and Greenhill (2011) also note that ‘the politics of numbers’ works by measuring the performance of governments according to the statistics they produce. Crucially, performance-associated practices by the police, such as “numbers of arrests... are built into the funding mechanism, creating powerful bureaucratic incentives to sustain them” (Andreas and Greenhill, 2011, p. 267).

However, even if these studies point to the political use of crime rates, most seem to neglect how not only political authorities mediate the production of crime rates, but also criminal organisations. In this sense, Denyer Willis (2016) explores how crime rates become defined by the way the state and criminal groups establish a regulation over life and death (Denyer Willis, 2016). Indeed, the uncritical acceptance of these rates overlooks the impact of non-state actors in their production, who therefore undermine traditional notions of security and sovereignty (Denyer Willis, 2016). As Denyer Willis (2016) warns, if the use and acceptance of homicide statistics is not accompanied by a critical look into the organisation of homicide – that is, what happens when the police find and count bodies -, then those statistics will fail to offer an accurate reference for the study of crime and violence.

Denyer Willis (2016, p. 52) notes that the scholarship is not abundant in considering how organised crime groups “are both protagonists of violence and potential regulators of it”, and moreover, how to measure security in response. This entails a need to address how the state controls the way others reflect upon it by making and controlling statistics and

what they reveal about power. The ‘northern’ assumption that only the state produces certain kinds of statistics does not hold in contexts of violence like those of Latin America, where not only sovereignty is shared, but also the power to influence numbers (Denyer Willis, 2016).

To that end, this chapter draws on observations of how the Nautepéc police produce statistics through everyday practices carried out at street-level. This street-level lens allows for an analysis of the argument raised about policing in the Global North, according to which the police legitimise their existence in a context of low crime by creating criminals through statistics. The following participant observations show that, conversely, the Mexican police use statistics to create an appearance of efficiency in a context where organised crime has grown beyond their power or willingness to deter it.

## **7.2. The crime rate pageant: how statistics matter for political recognition**

One morning, as I was sitting near the clerks by the detectives’ desk, Special Prosecutor Lopez came down and asked me, “doctor, would you mind coming up? ‘The boss’ (Regional Prosecutor Güemes) would like to talk to you about something”. It always shocked me to see her being asked to deliver messages inside the prosecution unit, especially as she outranked everyone except Prosecutor Güemes.

I went up and found the regional prosecutor standing inside his office fixing his tie against his reflection on a large window overlooking Nautepéc. “Doctor”, the prosecutor said as he turned to me, “Would you care to accompany me to a ‘high command’ meeting tomorrow morning as my guest? It’s right across the street”. As Prosecutor Güemes explained, the meeting was taking place as part of a ‘state working group’, held with the attendance of other regional prosecutors from the State of Mexico and, moreover, with the *Comando Estatal Militar* (State Military Command). The purpose of the meeting was for Prosecutor Güemes to brief his peers and the military authorities about crime patterns



in his jurisdiction. I happily accepted his invitation, as it offered me the opportunity to observe the prosecutor's counterparts from other municipalities.

The following morning, Prosecutor Güemes was waiting for me at the precinct's door, wearing a suit that looked brand new and a tie that was as neatly fixed as ever. He looked cheerful, although somewhat quieter than usual, presumably nervous. While standing at the door, commanders Castro and Antonio joined us with four other police officers, most of whom I had not met. For the first time, both commanders and their officers were wearing something resembling a uniform. They all wore a black shirt with black jeans. None of them made the usual jokes and barely talked. Instead, they adopted a sort of formation alongside the prosecutor and me and escorted us out of the precinct and through the paved patio. Prosecutor Güemes also remained silent while we walked.

We then crossed the street and found ourselves at Nautepec's *Palacio Municipal* (literally meaning 'municipal palace' but more akin to a City Hall). As the seat of Nautepec's *Presidente Municipal* (Municipal President or Mayor of Nautepec), this building was larger and grander than the regional prosecution unit across the street. The walls at both sides of its many wide halls were decorated by typical Mexican murals, all of them tumultuous and colourful, evocating those painted by the legendary Diego Rivera in Mexico City's most important state buildings. I could hardly believe that this building was meant for the issuing of drivers' licences, birth certificates and construction permits. More police officers joined us as we were being escorted towards a large, central stairway. Upwards through the stairway, colourful murals continued to decorate every wall. As we finally reached the room where the meeting would be held, I realised that the most impressive space at the building was reserved for Prosecutor Güemes and the police officers escorting us.

Inside the room, Mexican flags decorated every corner and a Victorian chandelier hung from the high ceiling. An extremely large round table with at least twenty-five leather chairs around it featured screens installed in front of every seat. Many other black plastic chairs were placed against the walls surrounding the table. Most of the decoration seemed

exaggerated to me, especially considering the decaying conditions in which the Regional Prosecution Unit's building, just across the street, found itself.

But beyond the room's lavish decoration, what caught my attention more rapidly were the people who were waiting for us inside. As soon as we entered the room, commanders Castro and Antonio as well as their officers began surrounding the room – presumably inspecting it - with solemn demeanour. Simultaneously, Prosecutor Güemes' face became bright as he held open his arms and said, “my dear friends and colleagues, thank you for being here”. He was being greeted by other men in brand new looking suits who were also escorted by teams of seeming police officers standing behind them. Moreover, numerous men in military uniform were also there, joining the queue to greet Prosecutor Güemes. These men not only stood out for their military attire, but also for the brightness and sheer number of medals adorning their shirts and sleeves. As they courteously said hello to Prosecutor Güemes, one by one, he would kindly introduce me to them.

After everyone had greeted each other and introduced themselves, most of them took a seat on the leather chairs around the table and some others, – presumably assistants or lower-ranked military men or police officers - sat on the black plastic chairs that were placed against the walls. As I attempted to sit on those chairs, I heard the voice of Prosecutor Güemes calling out for me from across the room. “Doctor please, take a seat next to me”, he told me as the rest of the people present were already quiet and expecting the high command meeting to begin. I did notice that commanders Castro and Antonio were already sitting in the chairs placed against the wall, right next to the main door. As I sat next to Prosecutor Güemes, he briefly introduced me as a student conducting research on the Nautepec police. Afterwards, he was assisted in setting up a power point presentation that was projected in the screens and walls as the lights of the room were dimmed. The power point presentation was entitled ‘*Resultados de la estrategia policial para el tercer trimestre del 2018 en Nautepec, Estado de México*’ (‘Outcomes of Police Strategy in Nautepec, State of Mexico, for the third Trimester of 2018’).

Prosecutor Güemes then began showing a number of slides with statistics detailing the number of violent crimes that had taken place in Nautepéc between July and September of 2018. The Power Point presentation was divided into specific sections that focused on three specific criminal conducts: armed robbery, motor vehicle theft and homicide. For each section, a number of slides with flowcharts, pie charts, and graphics exhibited a number of statistics that revealed the prevalence of each criminal conduct across the municipality.

The first section showed statistics for motor vehicle theft. As he presented the numbers, Prosecutor Güemes spoke poised and confidently. He seemed to have complete clarity and control over the statistics he showed. After going through percentages and numbers – such as the prevalence with which cars and motorcycles were stolen across the different neighbourhoods of Nautepéc –, the regional prosecutor triumphantly concluded that motor vehicle theft in his jurisdiction had decreased thirty-seven per cent in comparison to that same third trimester in 2017. As this last percentage was shown, a resounding applause was heard from every corner of the room.

The same thing happened during the section focused on armed robbery, where an eighteen per cent decrease was joyfully announced by Prosecutor Güemes, promptly after showing numerous statistics concerning the types of weapons used in robberies, as well as the areas of Nautepéc where such offense took place more frequently. As each graphic and chart was carefully explained by the regional prosecutor, the atmosphere in the room was solemn and focused. The setting and vibe felt completely contrasting with what I had experienced at the precinct across the street every day. If anything characterised the mood at the detectives' basement was its informality and seeming spontaneity in dealing with alleged crimes and suspects.

Each section also featured a number of photos of men, most of them placed right next to graphics and charts as if trying to generate an association of their faces with the statistics shown. I recognised many of those pictures from the 'wall of mirrors' found at the

precinct's glass door. A description of their physical appearance was shown next to the photos. All of them were described as '*morenos*' (brown skinned men).

For the last section focused on homicide, Prosecutor Güemes preliminarily praised then-president, Enrique Peña Nieto, for his "brave and unfailing stand against drug cartels everywhere in the country". He then became immersed in statistics and graphics detailing the apparent trends in killings across Nautepéc. Slide upon slide containing charts and pictures of men described as '*morenos*' finally concluded in a figure. "Twenty-three", the regional prosecutor proclaimed before repeating and clarifying what that number meant, "twenty-three per cent decrease in homicides as compared to this same trimester last year". In response, the men in attendance promptly delivered a loud round of applause as Prosecutor Güemes bowed and smiled.

Amidst the clapping, I wondered why statistics about other criminal conducts were not included as part of the presentation. I could remember, for instance, how the detectives and police officers repeatedly spoke about "catching a rapist" that was the subject of many reports at the precinct. Yet, the seemingly detailed presentation had no sections focused on sexual offenses. Furthermore, there was no mention of femicides, sexual abuse, sexual harassment or rape. It seemed odd that those criminal conducts that are mostly perpetrated against women in Mexico had been left out of the statistical review provided by Prosecutor Güemes.

While pondering about this, I also noticed that Special Prosecutor Lopez was not present at the high command meeting, nor was any woman for that matter. It was hard to understand why the second highest-ranking authority at the Regional Prosecution Unit was absent from this high-profile event.

Moreover, I wondered about the decrease in criminal conducts announced by Prosecutor Güemes. I thought about the 'morning visits' I had witnessed being conducted by Commander Castro at the precinct's cells. By the time the high command meeting took place, I had seen a good number of detained suspects stand in front of Commander Castro

– from inside their cell – and tell him about the crime they had allegedly committed. Yet, I could not remember a single one of those people admitting they were being held for car theft, armed robbery or homicide. Furthermore, I was sure Commander Castro would have mocked them for ‘getting caught’ for these offenses, as he bragged brashly and loudly about knowing why everyone was inside the cells. I could vividly remember many people saying there were inside those cells for having been caught with marijuana in their pockets, or for failing an alcohol test while driving. Where were these robbers and murderers being held? How were these crimes prevented or frustrated if not by apprehending those attempting to commit them? How had Prosecutor Güemes deterred these conducts if not by making at least some arrests?

As I reflected upon these questions, it seemed that other people present at the meeting did as well. Right after Prosecutor Güemes concluded his remarks to the sound of applause, one of the men dressed in military attire raised his hand, thus giving way to a round of questions. As he was given the microphone, the man introduced himself as a high admiral of the Mexican Navy, formerly a division general within the Armed Forces. He praised Prosecutor Güemes for his “priceless commitment and success”. However, he asked how he had managed to conduct “so many” arrests in the context of violence experienced throughout the State of Mexico. The regional prosecutor’s expression turned from solemn to defeated. As he looked down, he uttered his first vague and seemingly unprepared words. “We are constantly on the trail of numerous subjects, only last week we apprehended one of them. He was already in the vehicle but regrettably escaped”, explained Prosecutor Güemes as his voice became lower and shakier. The people in the room seemed to take this as the only sour note in an otherwise celebratory occasion. The following interventions by the attendees mostly focused on congratulating the regional prosecutor instead of asking any more questions. It became clear that no one wanted to risk spoiling the winning mood imposed by the regional prosecutor’s statistics.

Prosecutor Güemes’ response to the former admiral, however, made me wonder about the apprehended subject’s escape from the car. I remembered a recent anecdote mockingly told by detective Raul about detective Carlos. On more than one occasion, the former

recalled how a suspect had escaped the latter's car during a red light. As the story went, Carlos and Raul had conducted an arrest in the middle of a popular market in a western area of Nautepéc. In the absence of patrol cars, they transported the suspect to the Regional Prosecution Unit in Carlos's car. However, when they were already on the way, the suspect merely opened the backseat door during a red light and jumped out in spite of being handcuffed and chained by his feet. Raul laughed as he recollected how the suspect "jumped like a seal" towards a busy, unpaved street a few yards away and was never found again.

As Prosecutor Güemes offered the microphone for a last question or intervention to be made before concluding the high command meeting, the same former admiral that had asked about the arrests raised his hand. He then stood and asked the regional prosecutor what strategy or policy had he followed prior to his success, "so they could follow his footsteps and listen to his advice" when their time came to patrol the streets. At the time, it was widely reported that the recently elected federal administration would deploy the military to 'aid' the police in a number of tasks, including municipal law enforcement. Prosecutor Güemes' voice remained shaky but slowly regained its initial confidence as he began elaborating on his answer. "Well, that's a very good question, I'm glad you were kind enough to ask that", the regional prosecutor replied as his heavy breathing was exposed by the microphone. He then showed a slide that was not on the original presentation. The slide showed a chart with a calendar of a seven-day week with spaces for every hour of every day. "We have designed something we call a 'criminal clock'. This helps us identify the moments of the day and the days of the week in which certain crimes are more or less prevalent". The crowd seemed impressed by this 'criminal clock' for they reacted with a long, final round of applause.

I initially felt relieved to know that Nautepéc's strategy against crime did not try to emulate other controversial strategies such as those carried out during the 1990s by Mayors Rudolph Giuliani in New York City<sup>75</sup>, or Enrique Peñalosa in Bogotá<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> As mayor of New York City from 1993 to 2001, Rudolph Giuliani instituted repressive policies that greatly reduced homicide rates as well as serious crimes statistics in general. However, such policies were widely criticised by for their reliance on racial profiling by

However, the ‘criminal clock’ described by Prosecutor Güemes sounded unambitious and limited given the context of violence that characterised his jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the numbers did appear to favour the regional prosecutor as the decrease in homicide rates was there for everyone to see. At this time, the lights in the room became brighter, announcing the end of the meeting.

As the clapping roared through the dimly lit room, now regaining its original lighting, I looked for commanders Castro and Antonio, for I thought they also deserved to bow in acceptance of some of the credit. However, they were nowhere to be found. It became clear that this was Prosecutor Güemes’s moment. As a final remark, the prosecutor said, “I would finally like to thank the State Governor for his trust and support, as well as President Peña Nieto now that his tenure is almost over”. Two months prior to this high command meeting, Andrés Manuel López Obrador had already been declared winner of the 2018 presidential elections but had not taken office yet as the customary transition period would go on for three more months. His last remark did not sound surprising, as Prosecutor Güemes was sufficiently vocal about his allegiance to President Peña Nieto, who pertained to the PRI, the same political party that also ruled the State of Mexico at a local level.

While everyone stood and approached the regional prosecutor in order to congratulate him one last time, some of them then shook my hand and congratulated me as well. As I explained my purpose for being there, one of the other regional prosecutors told me, “you should write about how well we are doing, we get a lot of bad press but look at these numbers your boss (Prosecutor Güemes) just gave us, people should know about this”. The regional prosecutor took more time talking to everyone before they left than he had delivering his presentation.

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the police, which arguably resulted in acts of police brutality such as the torture of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima in 1997, or the shooting of Amadou Diallo in 1999 (Barrett, 2000).

<sup>76</sup> In 1998, Bogotá Mayor Enrique Peñalosa issued the ‘Decree 880’ according to which the streets of ‘*El Cartucho*’, an infamous neighbourhood known for its high homicide rates, were intervened and appropriated by his government through police and military action in order to build the *Tercer Milenio* public park (Góngora and Suárez, 2008). This government intervention was widely criticized for stemming from stigmatisations of marginalised neighbourhoods and those who inhabit them. Furthermore, the intervention led to the creation of another dangerous neighbourhood a few blocks away, known as ‘*el Bronx*’ (Góngora and Suárez, 2008; Moncada, 2009).

As we finally exited the building and I made my way back to the precinct across the street, Prosecutor Güemes asked me, “would you like to join us for lunch at a place nearby? It will only take a couple of hours”. I declined his invitation, as I did not want the police officers and detectives at the precinct to think of me as a friend of their boss. Before leaving the precinct that night, I went up to the regional prosecutor’s office to say farewell. However, Special Prosecutor Lopez told me that he was still at this ‘lunch’. She was waiting on a chair outside his empty office holding some documents she “needed ‘the boss’ to sign urgently”.

### **7.3. Keeping crimes out of statistics**

One morning, I arrived at the Regional Prosecution Unit and sat by the main detectives’ desk. Many of the clerks, detectives and officers from the night shift were still working, although they looked ready to leave. One detective who I had only seen talking to Commander Antonio a few times was manning the main desk. He had a large shiny chain around his neck, which stood out even more, as almost all the buttons in his white shirt were open. What was more notorious about him was his mullet-style hair, which is not commonly seen in Mexico today.

I sat closer to him as he dealt with crime reports from alleged victims for the following hour. During this time, a young man wearing a baseball cap came to the detectives’ desk. Calmly and quietly, he said, “I would like to report an armed robbery”. In return, the mullet-styled detective, who was leaning back on his chair with his feet comfortably stretched forward suddenly snapped back to a tense position and raised his eyebrows. Then, with a mocking, inquisitive tone, he asked the man in the baseball cap, “Really? Armed robbery? How come? How can you assert something like that?”. I was surprised to hear a detective questioning a victim for his allegations. The mullet-styled detective appeared to have become alert as soon as he heard the alleged victim speak about armed robbery.



In response, the young man in the baseball cap maintained his initial calm. Furthermore, he seemed to remain focused on what had happened to him, presumably unfazed by the mullet-styled detective's inquisitive tone. "Well, I was held at gunpoint by three men who stole my wallet and mobile phone, that is why I want to report an armed robbery", the young man explained. His tone remained gentle and peaceful, which seemed to contrast that of his interlocutor. Indeed, the detective became increasingly agitated. "Three guns? Around here? This sounds really weird to me", the detective said as he began angrily taking notes of the location where the incident had taken place. The young man frowned, appearing puzzled by the detective's attitude. "Well, my girlfriend was also there if you would like to speak to her, I was just leaving her house when this happened", the young man said as he pointed at a distressed-looking woman who could be seen sitting on the benches outside the detectives' area. Twisting one corner of his lips and tilting his head to the same side, the detective said, "Is she an expert in ballistics?". The young man frowned even more and stood in silence as the detective prepared to elaborate. "Because only experts can identify fully loaded weapons only by looking at them", the detective continued. The interaction between both now reminded me of the aggressive interrogations I had seen carried out by detectives against detained suspects.

Observing the scene, it had become clear that the detective had no intention of recording the crime as an armed robbery. Yet, the alleged victim calmly answered every one of his sceptical inquiries, which further fuelled the detective's annoyance. As he angrily typed away, he kept on raising issues about the details narrated by the young man in the baseball cap. "I mean, that street is usually a quiet spot, it just sounds strange that an armed robbery would be committed there", the detective said as the young man in the baseball cap now only stood in silence. "Are you sure those men were not just some drunk guys being aggressive? There is a canteen nearby". By then, the young man looked exhausted and merely insisted that he had been robbed by three men, all of them armed with guns pointed at him and at his girlfriend. Sitting in the benches outside, she had now adopted a more comfortable sitting position, presumably realising that reporting the alleged crime would take even more time.

The detective then began reviewing all of what he had hastily typed down as the victim confirmed details of the robbery. Suddenly, his eyebrows were raised again as he asked the young man in the baseball cap, “but wait, you said this happened on the 6<sup>th</sup>?”. Three weeks had passed from that date to this episode. The alleged victim nodded affirmatively but tentatively, seemingly dreading that, through that detail, the detective would raise yet another issue. “This was nearly three weeks ago, you are held at gunpoint with your *vieja* (literally ‘old woman’, but colloquially used in Mexico as a vulgar way to refer to one’s female partner, regardless of her age) and you wait three weeks to report it?”. The young man in the baseball cap scratched his forehead in contained desperation, exhaled rapidly and replied, “well, my girlfriend was afraid to even leave the house and the guys who robbed us now have our names and addresses because they took our IDs. We were unsure about reporting [the crime]”. As he spoke, the detective kept nodding negatively while looking at his computer screen, appearing to not even be listening to the alleged victim. He then looked up and said: “But three weeks? Really? My commanders are going to give priority to the things that have just happened. You should go report this at another precinct, perhaps they won’t care about the time lapse. I promise you, I’m doing you a favour not to waste any more of your time”.

The young man in the baseball cap exhaled one final time and looked down. He left without saying another word. As he left the detectives’ area, he went over to the benches outside, where his girlfriend had now fallen asleep. He woke her up kissing her forehead and then they both left in silence.

A few minutes after they left, the mullet-styled detective was preparing to finally leave after what appeared to have been an exhausting shift. However, a tall woman, possibly in her late forties, elegantly dressed and clearly someone who would be described as *güera* (blonde or, more precisely, ‘white’ in the Mexican context) came to his desk and assertively said, “I am here to report a crime”. She was wearing a white business suit and an orange scarf. The detective stood up and greeted her, seemingly hiding his exhaustion and now looking willing to listen. “Tell me ‘*seño*’ (colloquial way of addressing ladies in

markets and shops across Mexico City), what would you like to report?” the detective replied, as he sat and prepared to type away. “I was just at ‘*Plaza Estanque*’ (pseudonym for a new shopping mall built nearby)”, the tall woman narrated in an agitated – yet, somehow imperative - tone. “And when I went down to the car park, I found my Honda dented and crashed from the rear. Now I don’t know who I need to speak to but I want to see all the cc-tv recordings from the mall’s car park security”, the woman said becoming increasingly imperious.

The mullet-styled detective earnestly – and silently - typed away as she spoke. This time, he asked no questions and showed no signs of scepticism or annoyance. The entire report took a few minutes. The only thing the detective said as he printed and signed a report was, “here you go ‘*seño*’, a damaged property report has now been filed and registered, you can now proceed with your claim using this document, the people in charge at the mall should pay for your damages”. The tall woman thanked the detective and left.

I wondered about what might have caused such a sharp contrast between the way in which the detective interacted with the young man in the baseball cap, on the one hand, and the tall woman, on the other. At first, I thought that the variation could have been owed to the fact that the young man in the baseball cap would be described as ‘*moreno*’, while the tall woman might have accessed a certain white privilege due to her appearance and demeanour. However, what seemed to have been more annoying to the detective was not the young man’s appearance, but the crime he attempted to report. Indeed, the former seemed more focused on trying to reinterpret the latter’s grievances than on his physical traits. By the same token, the circumstances described by the tall woman seemed reasonable to the detective, who barely scrutinised her words and duly registered the offense. Indeed, both situations seemed to have focused more on the crime reported than on the people reporting them.

#### **7.4. ‘Cleansing’ a jurisdiction from crime reports**

Commander Castro always seemed more relaxed in the afternoons. At that time, his accelerated pace from every morning, when he inspected the people inside the cells as well his officers on duty, had slowed down. However, he was not as glum as he was later in the evenings. Just after he had lunch, he seemed at ease sitting in his office leaving most pressing issues waiting outside. At this moment, he particularly enjoyed sharing stories. To him, every story seemed like a good opportunity to affirm his masculinity, bravery or cunning.

One day, I came down from the Regional Prosecutor’s office just as Commander Castro had finished his lunch. This time, however, he did not seem as relaxed. As I knocked on his open door, he gestured at me to come by his side. His eyes were fixed on his mobile phone screen. As I pulled my chair next to his, he gave me the mobile phone and told me to look. On its screen, there was a paused YouTube video. As I pressed ‘play’, the video displayed cc-tv recordings of an open car park at night. The video then showed numerous pickup trucks arriving there, first three, then ten and then almost twenty. Every pickup was being occupied by casually dressed people holding large guns. Towards the end of the video, all the pickups left the car park, driving into the night.

Commander Castro did not explain anything at first. As usual, he enjoyed asking me preliminary questions, presumably trying to test me. “What do you think?”, he asked me. I was unsure about what I had just watched. The commander thus went ahead and explained it for me. “It’s a new cartel, they are now settling here in Nautepec, everyone is going crazy. Just look at how many they are”, Commander Castro elaborated. He seemed concerned at first. However, he then assured me that he had dealt with large cartels in the past, when he worked for a precinct in another municipality of the State of Mexico. As he reassumed a relaxing position, he recalled a story.

“A big drug gang operated up there in Tecoxpan (pseudonym for a different municipality within the State of Mexico). At some point, they organised a meeting at a ‘Wings’ (a popular diner franchise in Mexico) between them and me. They knew of my reputation, they knew I was special. I get there and there they were. They told me they did this and that. The only thing I told them was ‘before you tell me the names of my kids and where they go to school, I will only tell you this: I want no money or nothing, its fine by me if you do your *desmadre* (mayhem), only dump the bodies in Coacalpan (pseudonym for a neighbouring area of Mexico City located on the border with the State of Mexico), not here. Do whatever you want but leave your bodies in Coacalpan. If you decide to hit me, I will defend myself if you hit me head on. If you hit me from the back you’ll probably fuck me up’. And that was that”.

I asked him what happened then. “They did their shit”, Commander Castro nonchalantly replied. “But nothing happened?”, I insisted. “All the bodies kept appearing in Coacalpan, someone else’s problem, I had enough to deal with over there”, the commander told me as he laughed and reclined back in his chair even more.

I immediately thought of the high command meeting I had attended as Prosecutor Güemes’s guest. I recalled the fanfare with which the decrease in homicide rates across Nautepec had been announced by him, as well as the praise he had received from his counterparts and military representatives in attendance. Even then, it had seemed odd that no significant policy or strategy behind the decrease in homicides had been detailed or explained. Were these statistics the outcome of deals such as the one struck between Commander Castro and the members of the cartel whom he met with? Did an analogous deal render unnecessary any significant policy to tackle homicide in Nautepec?

Indeed, Commander Castro’s story about how he had dealt with groups capable of causing killings made me wonder about ‘the organisation of homicide’ (Denyer Willis, 2016) across Nautepec. If he had reached a deal with a cartel at another municipality according to which they could kill and leave the bodies elsewhere in order to be counted at a different jurisdiction, what would prevent him from doing the same thing in this municipality? Would he reach a similar understanding with the people in the pickup trucks he had shown me in the YouTube video?

Blending these thoughts with the mullet-styled detective's reluctance to raise a report about an armed robbery taking place within Nautepéc, it appeared as if these kinds of actions could explain the inner dynamics behind the statistics flaunted by Prosecutor Güemes at the high command meeting. As the praise and applause he received had revealed, the measure of success at the Regional Prosecution Unit was set by statistics. Yet, by registering crimes through reports and, furthermore, by dealing with the victims as well as the perpetrators of killings, those statistics appeared to be firmly in their control as number-producing police officers.

An overt reluctance to address incidents that had taken place within the Nautepéc jurisdiction had also become noticeable as a systematic practice. As the episode between the mullet-styled detective and the young man in the baseball cap suggested, the Nautepéc police appeared to minimize or even deny the existence of alleged crimes, framing them as lesser offenses, at least those where the alleged victims were *morenos*. Presumably, the aim was to prevent them from being accounted for inside their jurisdiction. This was also revealed by how detectives and police officers seemed annoyed or more inquisitive about facts whenever alleged crimes took place within the confines of Nautepéc.

### **7.5. The political use of crime statistics in Nautepéc: a brief discussion**

The events and interactions described across this chapter illustrate how the Nautepéc officers produce a reality where the police are needed through proactive and data-driven practices. Such practices were arguably incorporated into their ethos following the advent of law enforcing paradigms that transformed the police in the Global North and gave way to broken windows policing and zero-tolerance law enforcing. The way in which detectives Carlos and Raul frisked the teenage boy with the backpack without warrant or probable cause illustrates an essential quality of proactive policing, that is, to search for and find crime by the police's own initiative. By the same token, the instances in which crime statistics were tampered with by the Nautepéc police in order for crimes to be

underreported show how the data-driven nature of their practices allowed for them to produce subjects and forms of evidence. Crucially, the data produced by the police is externally assumed to be neutral, rational and apolitical.

As argued by Denyer Willis (2020), the production of criminals and seemingly increasing crime rates prompted by proactive and data-driven policing are part of a state project that seeks to legitimise the police in a context of historically low violence (Kneebone and Raphael, 2011; Hills, 2009). Indeed, the metric-based measurement of law enforcing practices, the visual display of patterns of behaviour and the general counting of crimes favour a logic according to which the police must be expanded and more widely deployed (Denyer Willis, 2020). As explained by Denyer Willis (2020, p. 19), “any way you slice it, with control of the data, a forceful case can be made for more policing”.

However, as this chapter argues, the context in which the Mexican police seeks to justify their own reproduction and expansion is not one of declining violence, but one in which the expansion and ubiquity of criminal organisations expose how law enforcing across Mexico is powerless or unwilling to deter violence. This was evidenced by Commander Castro’s request to a criminal organisation for their members to “dump their bodies elsewhere”. This request not only revealed the Mexican police’s readiness to engage in the organisation of homicide (Denyer Willis, 2016), but it moreover showed how they relinquished any claim to deter those who produced this crime. Still, the police needs to be justified, which is why ceremonious acts like Prosecutor Güemes’s high command meeting, or abusive acts like the frisking of the teenage boy with the backpack continue to produce crime and a corresponding need for policing.

As a consequence of the war on drugs, the police in Mexico do not face a context of declining violence but one in which criminal groups and *narcos* have shown more power and a higher degree of organisation. Exposed by their incapacity or unwillingness to face these groups, the police exploit what Wright (2016) calls ‘epistemological ignorance’ of the crime landscape. This ignorance is created by simply underreporting certain crimes while creating others through statistics, thus justifying the seeming value of deploying the

police. As reported by the policy group *Justice in Mexico*, even if official numbers for violence are currently declining in Mexico, such decrease is constantly questioned “because of concerns about possible government manipulation and pressure on media organizations to de-emphasize problems of crime and violence. In other words, the problems related to the availability and credibility of data” (Heinle et al, 2015, p. 40; Wright, 2016).

As a result, the epistemological ignorance of crime endures through the production of crime statistics that make the ‘real’ numbers unaccountable and therefore unknowable (Wright, 2016). In response, numerous sectors within the Mexican civil society and the media produce their own statistics as a means of resistance (Wright, 2016).

Arguably originated by a shift in paradigm likely caused by the transition from the welfare state to the penal state (Smith, 2001), a *revanchist* reaction against civil rights movements (Beckett, 1997), a new collective experience of crime (Garland, 2001) and the criminalisation of ungoverned space (Mitchell, 2010), concepts like broken windows policing and zero tolerance have created a brand of law enforcing. Reinforced by its evidence-based results, this new brand appeared easily deployable beyond the context of the United States and readily exportable to other latitudes. Indeed, the idea of a proactive, crime-seeking form of policing that privileges the use of quantifiable and technical methods was construed as the panacea for policing across ‘southern’ contexts (Smith, 2001). An example of this is the way in which the Mexican police, historically known for acting in service of the ruling hegemony and frequently accused of repressing the civil society (Aristegui, 2016), has come under criticism and scrutiny as the growing power of *narcos* and other criminal organisations exposed the limits and allegiances of police divisions across the country, fuelling calls to reform policing by expanding it.

The most notable example of how zero tolerance became viewed as the solution for policing in Mexico was the hiring of former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani as a



security consultant by a group of construction businessmen (Davis, 2013)<sup>77</sup>. This group requested the former mayor to design a security plan for Mexico City (Davis, 2013). His plan would be drafted around the zero tolerance model that had ‘successfully’ decreased crime rates across New York City. Moreover, Giuliani’s security recommendations for Mexico City included the use of mapping and statistical representations of criminal patterns similar to what Compstat achieves (Davis, 2013). Giuliani’s appointment as security consultant illustrated how the Mexican elites considered proactive and data-driven policing a sign of development imported from the Global North (Smith, 2001). However, it also evidenced how this brand of policing also serves political aims, as scholars such as Davis (2013) later argued that the main goal of implementing zero tolerance policies in Mexico City was to privatize most of the urban space of its downtown neighbourhoods – which de facto entailed cleansing the streets from vagrants – so it could be developed by the constructing firms that had hired Giuliani in the first place.

As it had previously happened in the United States, zero tolerance initiatives reconfigured categories like ‘prostitutes’, ‘rowdy teenagers’, ‘loiterers’, ‘drunks’ and ‘addicts’, which became associated with crime and therefore targeted by the police<sup>78</sup>. Once exported to the southern context of Mexico, the criminalisation of these categories created an entire population for the police to persecute, thus justifying their existence even if real criminals continue to operate undeterred across the country. The unwarranted frisk of the teenage boy by detectives Carlos and Raul shows how proactive policing in Mexico works at street level since the adoption of zero tolerance practices. On the other hand, the high command meeting presided over by Prosecutor Güemes evidences how data-driven practices have also been incorporated to policing in Mexico, permeating the way information is presented for law enforcing purposes, and most frequently in search for

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<sup>77</sup> As shown by Swanson (2013), zero-tolerance has become popular in Latin America, along with the northern trend of considering statistics rational and apolitical.

<sup>78</sup> Since its implementation across the United States, broken-window policing gave way to actions such the ‘quality-of-life’ initiative headed by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Chief William Bratton in New York (Harcourt, 1998); the gang-loitering ordinance promoted by the Chicago City Hall (Roberts, 1998); as well as numerous off-limits orders, parks exclusion laws promoted by municipal governments across the United States (Beckett and Herbert, 2008), which have all raised debates about the criminalisation of certain groups like racial minorities or the urban poor. As shown by Vitale (2017), Soss and Weaver (2017), as well as Jackson and Carroll (1981), these initiatives derive in frequent episodes of abuse against racial minorities, and furthermore, in the systematic association of disorder with such minorities.

political recognition<sup>79</sup>. Similar to what is achieved by Compstat, the prevalence of certain crimes is visually presented as decreasing – which underscores the efficiency of the police – while others are construed as widespread, which calls for a greater presence by the police. In any case, the police are legitimised by statistics.

Furthermore, the deployment of proactive and data-driven practices in a context where the police was already too familiar with other ways of ‘making policing work’ causes those practices to coexist with and depend on other mechanisms like the use of informants (Denyer Willis, 2020). As explained by Brayne (2018, p. 304), “the proliferation of pre-warrant surveillance tools creates new opportunities for parallel construction: the process of law enforcement obtaining evidence through informants or warrantless surveillance, and then creating an alternative explanation for how the evidence was found”.

By incorporating data-driven practices to their ethos, the police in Mexico have been able to endure despite criticism as criminal groups continue to operate across the country. Indeed, notwithstanding the growing presence of *narcos*, the Mexican police only needs to underreport crimes – as shown by the way the armed robbery reported by the young man in the baseball cap was minimised and disregarded by the mullet-styled detective – or statistically create them – as shown by the way detectives Carlos and Raul attempted to plant something on the boy with the backpack – in order to justify their existence. This may also explain Wright’s (2016, p. 263) claim according to which “the corpses and disappeared people are not counted because they do not count as people much less as victims”.

The observations gathered and discussed throughout this chapter support the argument according to which the police justifies its deployment and expansion through the statistical creation of crime. However, this chapter further argues that those efforts not only take place when violence is low, but also when the presence of criminal organisations is such that the effectiveness of the police comes into question.

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<sup>79</sup> Simon (2007) argues that since the 1960s, Presidents and governors have utilised widespread fear of violence in order to ‘govern through crime’, which entails using crime prevention as a means to justify the exercise of power.

## **Chapter 8. Discussion: All the dialects in the language of power**

How then, are the police political? How are tiny details, such as smashing a sandwich or conducting a stop and search three blocks shy of a jurisdictional border, political in effect? The long-standing failure of legal and political systems in defining the limits of police power result in the recurrent formation of external expectations about policing that are cyclically stimulated by new political administrations, instances of police reform and the deployment of ‘novel’ practices that are typically imported from other latitudes. However, these expectations are frequently diminished back to reality of the streets by the internal mechanisms of de facto policing in its broad and forcefully justified exercise.

Despite being regularly conceived as synonymous to aspirations about crime-fighting and order maintenance, the police are also politically addressed as a key concern by policy makers who presumably voice the needs of civil society. This leads to grand exercises of reform, professionalization, data-driven and evidence-based inclusions in police practices and, more recently in Mexico, the militarisation of police forces. Yet, most police practices typically become overlooked in time due to their mundane and seemingly uneventful nature. Slowly but surely, however, new forms of policing go back from being paraded on the streets and hailed by newly elected politicians to operating in dark corners or secluded rooms, where police practices take advantage of their broad conception and lacking limits.

Indeed, the practice of policing is successful because, in the absence of largescale instability or scrutiny, it works in unlit rooms or face-to-face interactions at street level. Nevertheless, as soon as the context becomes unstable or political criticism leads to demands for further justifications of policing, this practice can also secure its place as a seemingly indispensable exercise of power by relying on the production of visible classifications – that typically criminalise specific groups such as ‘immigrants’, ‘gangsters’, ‘vagrants’ or ‘adicts’ – that create a scenario where large reforms or the incorporation of more formidable forces and resources are required.

Furthermore, policing works through words and actions. It can be performed openly, when it is protected by law and procedure, or out of sight, when it is cloaked by the broadness and arbitrariness that characterise police power. By virtue of working within the law and also beyond it, the police operate successfully by fluently knowing all the dialects in the language of power. The evidence presented across the previous four chapters shows that that policing brings the state to the streets in many ways. Indeed, the police channel ancient modes of governance - such as patriarchal power - or anachronistic assumptions about skin colour, but they also bring 'novel' techniques of policing that are data-driven and seemingly based on science, thus intrinsically validating the modern state.

Indeed, all the police practices that were ethnographically unearthed across the last four chapters are tied by a common quality: all of them are exercises of power. Either by patriarchy, sorting followed by segregation, delegating control to snitches or justifying the deployment of police through statistics, the police manipulate and impose power. This changes a view of the police as policy followers and reveals them as policy makers. In this sense, the power of other street level bureaucrats appears limited in comparison to the police. As shown, the police have an array of mechanisms to enforce the status quo and reproduce dominant exercises of power unlike anything available to other street level bureaucrats.

The variation of these practices crucially shows how the police aid the political order in achieving what other spheres of power cannot. Where political leaders must use an inclusive language and officially correct terms, the police typically use racial slurs and gendered insults; where public officials must be transparent, the police can operate in secret; where states must advocate for peace, the police may use violence. This is how the police become a flexible and ad hoc channel for certain exercises of power that the state cannot manifest through other means.

But looking at these police practices as specific ways to reproduce the status quo, why do mundane acts, such as pampering white(r) guests with Coca Cola or giving more credibility to the grievances of male alleged suspects than those expressed by female alleged suspects, lead to the perpetuation of the political order? As shown by slavery or segregation, the most firmly established exercises of power are those enforced against people for what they *are* rather than for what they *do*. Crime is about what people do but gender and race are about what people are, at least as plainly conceived by the police and the political order. As criminals are elusive targets, the police can more easily solidify their power by directing it at traits that cannot be changed and are always on plain sight.

Paradoxically, however, even if the police benefit from the stability of a system and the established and recurrent criminalisation of certain groups, they are deployed in order to root out crime and counter disorder, thus tracking those who make the system unstable. This is why the police react violently to forms of disorder, aggressively normalising them with the decisive help of widely accepted definitions of race and gender that also evoke a form of order.

Crucially, political authorities harbour their own expectations about the police, on which much of their position depends. As posed by Simon (2007), politicians govern through crime. However, the police govern through securing the status quo, that is, from people personifying the roles and occupying the spaces they always have. This further shows that policing is about establishing or solidifying power, for power is not useful if it cannot be asserted or imposed over someone.

Policing, then, is political because it flexibly responds to all kinds of needs by the political order, those that are overtly established, such as fighting crime, and those that are unspoken but necessary, such as exerting power against specific groups and traits. For these different purposes, police power has a vast arsenal of practices and techniques at its disposal, many of which are well known or publicly announced; others operate uneventfully while externally imagined according to expectations rooted in policing from the Global North; other practices, however, remain practiced in the dark and only their

product or outcome becomes known to the world, mostly in the form of a ‘criminal’, a crime, a ‘hot-spot’ or a security-related argument in favour of more policing.

In what follows, two episodes of policing show moments in which the various dialects in the language of power can be spoken and how the techniques displayed in both exercises, notwithstanding how different, all amount to forms of policing and, therefore, exercises of power. The first moment reveals how the police operate ‘in the dark’, while the second one shows how the police is publicly addressed as a national program worthy of large-scale reform. Both, however, achieve the reproduction of the status quo, albeit in very different ways.

### **8.1. Entering the file room**

One winter morning, I arrived at the precinct thinking that it would be an unusually calm day, for none of the police officers and detectives would be there. As I had been told, they were due to attend a one-day course on crime-scene ballistics at some other precinct. That day, however, turned out to be the hardest day of my fieldwork and the last one for some time. “Today they are questioning them in the file room if you want to go in”, Diego told me. Even if I had seen people suspiciously enter that room before, I had never gone in myself. I also did not know whom Diego meant by *them* and what he intended by inviting me to go and see. However, I did recall how the file room had been construed as a threatening place by the man in the hunter vest who, alongside Commander Castro, had verbally abused an alleged sexual harasser in ‘the cave’ months before.

I decided to go in. Diego did not seem to care. As I entered the room, I saw five men dressed entirely as civilians, most of them wearing jeans and t-shirts. All of them stood in a half circle facing a younger looking man against the wall. He was handcuffed and pinned at both of his sides by large metal drawers almost as tall as him. The room was dark and filled with piles of mouldy documents and dusty, tall metal drawers like the ones pinning the younger looking man. There was only one light bulb hanging shade less from the ceiling. Furthermore, one of the older men was pulling the light bulb’s cable and

pointing the light coming from it directly at the younger man's face. Evidently, there was some sort of 'conversation' going on but the room became quiet as I walked in. Three of the men dressed at civilians stared at me almost looking outraged. As they focused on me for a few tense seconds, however, they instantly appeared to lose interest and turned their attention back to the younger-looking man. Even if no one had introduced me to these unknown men, I felt as if my gender, skin colour and even height (I was the tallest and whitest man in that file room) had instantly validated my presence. No clarifying words were needed. I decided to stand silently at the back of the room.

"You have a nice Greek chin, don't make me wreck it", one of the men in a black Homer Simpson t-shirt told the young man, who looked scared and confused. "When did you enter?", another man in a jean jacket asked while the man in the black t-shirt suddenly kned the young man in his right thigh. "Do you want more *putazos* (blows)?", that man continued while he slapped the back of the younger man's neck. As one blow followed the previous one, I noticed that my fists were clenched from anguish. Suddenly, another man wearing a Hawaiian shirt came into the file room and stopped the beating, which made me sigh briefly in relief. However, the man in the Hawaiian shirt then grabbed the young man by the scruff of his neck and asked the rest of the older-looking men "hasn't he talked? Hit him harder! Are you going soft on me? If he dies, we'll only dump the body in a cement bucket somewhere". My fists clenched again. This time I noticed it. They kept on interrogating and beating the young man until he began crying and fell to his knees. At the sight of his tears, all the detectives in the room began laughing before one of them asked him, "are you a *pinche puto* (worthless faggot)? The younger-looking man gasped for air and slowly stood up.

I could not help but think about the literature on the ethical implications of research I had reviewed before witnessing that scene. Nothing could have prepared me for something like this. Even so, I tried to remember what Bourgois (1995) or Jauregui (2016) had written on witnessing violence as a researcher but I could not recall a single word amidst the trepidation I was going through. I began thinking of stopping the acts of torture, calling them out on their crime somehow but I was paralysed by fear. I felt outnumbered

and outmanoeuvred. After everything that I had already watched, would they try to ‘silence’ me? How could they let me see that and then allow me to leave?

After a few seconds, however, I realised two crucial things that made me breathe and control myself. First, they presumably did not think of themselves as committing a crime. Indeed, they looked as if they were just ‘doing their jobs’. This meant they did not feel caught red-handed. They were just carrying out an everyday practice. Second, I also realised that I was under no threat from them merely for being a white man. My very presence inside that room had to reveal some kind of privilege to them, even if it was unclear. I therefore decided to use my privileged position in order to leave that room as soon as they did and then think about how to expose and denounce their acts. To my concern, the interrogation inside that file room was still not over.

As the young man was helplessly carried outside the room, the man in the Hawaiian shirt approached him closely one last time and asked him, “Have you thought of what I told you? Think it over, ask these guys what I’m capable of doing to you. Just sign for an accidental *allanamiento de morada* (unlawful entrance) and you’ll be out in a week, *de cuates* (which translates as ‘I’m telling you this as a friend’)”. The younger man was then finally carried out of the file room, almost being lifted from his feet.

The scene had been brutal and extremely hard to witness. It became clear that the men dressed as civilians were acting as police officers and detectives, although I had never seen any of them. Presumably, they were police officers from a different precinct, as some of their actions revealed that they did not know their way around the building. For instance, one of the men asked one of the clerks outside the file room where the bathroom was.

As I tried to recover from the scene, the acts of torture suddenly resumed against a different victim. After a few seconds, another young-looking man who was wearing a necklace with shapes of little skulls made of copper around it was brought in. One of the detectives, while sucking on a lollipop, calmly told him, “you look like a *chapulín chamuscado* (which literally means ‘burnt grasshopper’ but in that context sounded like a



reference to the man's dark brown skin), and I only want to see those in a taco with red salsa (fried grasshoppers are commonly served as food in Mexico, mostly placed in tortillas to fill tacos), but if you tell me the truth I will not lay a hand on you".

He asked him if he knew 'the Chuckie'. The young man with the necklace replied he did not and was immediately punched in the thorax with the detective's back fist. The former could barely stand. "Are you a *pinche vieja* (worthless old woman) as well? You must be a woman with that necklace", the aggressor told his victim with a far louder tone. Another detective asked the man with the necklace if this had been his first breaking and entering. "Yes", he said, "my first one", he continued as he groaned in pain. They started pressing him harder. He revealed he was from Juchitán - a poor town in the state of Oaxaca - where he sold tamales at a street stand. He revealed that he had come to Mexico City looking for better job opportunities. "You should have stayed selling tamales you dumb *zapoteca* (one of the most notable pre-Hispanic cultures of Oaxaca)", one policeman said before kicking him. He was also being plucked facial hair, one by one, by the detective who had threatened him initially. Barely being able to answer one question before being asked another one by a different detective, the young man was grabbed his hair by the man in the Homer Simpson t-shirt, who started pulling it back and forth for what felt like an entire minute.

Suddenly, the man in the Hawaiian shirt came into the room again. "So he hasn't talked? Bag him". The detectives then placed a blue plastic bag in the young man's head and, through several punches to his arms and stomach, made him continue to talk. He kept saying he had only met 'the Chuckie' once and only knew he lived in a northern district of Mexico City, though not exactly where. However, his voice started dwindling from lack of air. He began stomping his feet in desperation while the policemen mocked him. "I can't talk", he breathlessly whimpered. Then they took the bag off. "You are no man, you are a *chapulín chamuscado* who should not even be roaming this city", one detective told him before bagging him once again. The man in the Hawaiian shirt finally said, "he is a *maricón* ('pussy'), bring another one". After they carried the young man out of the room, I decided to leave as well. It had become too much. Most of the casually dressed detectives were chatting and laughing as I left the room, and two of them began sharing a

bag of *chicharrones* (a traditional type of crisps in Mexico made out of pork skin). They seemed relaxed and at ease.

Once outside the file room, I began taking notes. I did this by typing in my mobile phone so that the police officers and detectives around me assumed I was texting and therefore did not feel scrutinised. I could tell I was agitated for my fingers were icy and I could barely type. I began pondering about the whereabouts of my informants, almost missing them. However, then I thought that maybe they had carried out similar acts of torture at another time or that same day. Could they have really been at a “one-day ballistics course” that same day or was this a practice according to which facilities were shared among police squads in order to torture with impunity?

In any case, I thought I had to take advantage of my privileged position in order to expose and analyse what I had just seen somehow. However, I soon arrived to the realisation that, due to the jurisdiction where these crimes had taken place, I would have had to report them inside that very building, moreover to the clerks and detectives I already knew all too well. I could see myself having this conversation with Diego and then, naturally, with Commander Castro. The commander, in turn, would have probably justified the act by criminalising the victims of torture through attacks to their masculinity or skin colour. Besides, was I really expecting my informants to investigate their apparent colleagues for acts that had taken place – or were still taking place - inside their own precinct?

I also thought of resorting to the power-holding gatekeepers that granted me access into the precinct in the first place. However, I then thought that they would also be ultimately responsible for the acts of torture conducted within their own ranks and, therefore, likely threatened by what I could expose. Due to this and to the reach of their exceeding powers within the Mexican criminal justice system, my research could have plausibly been ‘blocked’ somehow and all this would have been for nothing. In that case, I decided that the best option was to write about what transpired inside that file room.

But if writing was the appropriate path to follow, would I be somehow benefitting from writing about the acts of torture? Would I be exploiting a crime in order to present more evidence to illustrate my arguments?

While I pondered about these questions and my hands recovered some warmth, the man in the Hawaiian shirt came out of the file room to text on his mobile phone as well. Diego asked him if he wanted anything to drink. “Coffee with cognac please”, the man in the Hawaiian shirt said before letting out a mischievous grin. “Nah, I am only kidding ‘*mijo*’ (‘son’), who did you think I was?”, he clarified as they both laughed with a sort of complicity.

As I watched the entire scene unfold, I was almost certain about what could explain that complicit laughter. It is fairly known across Mexico that coffee with cognac was the favourite drink of Arturo Durazo Moreno, the infamous chief police officer – perennially referenced inside the precinct as also shown by the introductory vignette - who silenced protests against the PRI through well-known methods of torture such as those witnessed inside that file room. After overhearing this conversation and, moreover, after feeling useless observing the acts of police torture that took place in front of me, I decided to interrupt my fieldwork for a few months while I tried to make sense of what that day had taught me through the unwarranted suffering of others.

The content of this vignette tragically concurs with Bierschenk (2016) in suggesting that policing is *any* defense of the established order, even one as violent as this. It also shows how the police fluidly use several dialects that speak the language of power. Not only did the detectives quickly identified and enforced categories of race and gender – through the use of insults like “worthless woman” or “dumb indian” -, but they also associated those traits to the alleged criminal act. In this sense, the criminalisation of race and gender is exposed as one salient mechanism through which the police exercise power.

However, the scene inside the file room also revealed how one of the torture victims was also offered to ‘sign’ on the commission of a specific crime and not another one – accidental unlawful entrance instead of, presumably, breaking and entering. Beyond what

the offer itself might have suggested about the ultimate innocence of the torture victim, it also shows that the police count crime in a way that suits them. Moreover, the entire interrogation episode also revealed that one of the aims pursued by the detectives was extracting information out of the torture victims. The fact that an offer to self-incriminate for a lesser offense was extended to one of the victims suggests that the police not only rely on the way they count crime and produce crime rates. They are also especially equipped to force information out of people or incorporating them into policing as snitches. In comparison, no other representative of the state has a more direct capability to affect someone's life or liberty. All this shows how the means for exerting power at the police's disposal seem endless.

Crucially, by being uniquely versatile – *de facto* and *de jure* - in the exercise of power, the police become distinctively useful to the political order. Indeed, as police power confers broad agency to 'manage the household' (Dubber, 2005; Foucault, 1978), policing is provided with a heavy toolkit of enforceable power. This is where the political importance of the police lies, on its fluent command of several resources that, in one way or another, are about the exercise of power. This is what makes policing key for power holders: their resourcefulness in securing order over time. In this sense, the status quo cannot be reproduced without the police, as only they can draw upon the necessary – and vast - mechanisms to enforce it.

However, as the use of these tools may easily appear arbitrary or controversial, there is a marked tendency by the police to practice them 'in the dark', aided by a political system that is more interested in the results produced by police work than in the techniques that lead to them. Furthermore, with 'crime fighting' construed as the ultimate goal for the political order -as argued by Simon (2007) -, almost any mechanism is tolerated in order to produce and imprison criminals, as long as few people find out – or care - about how this happens. It is almost as if there is a considerable degree of tolerance when it comes to what the police do out of sight, as long as it results in 'effective' crime fighting.

Nevertheless, whenever what the police do in the dark comes to light or whenever specific political moments require it, policing may also be presented as an open exercise of power in the form of a large-scale reform or structural transformation. Indeed, policing also works politically as a visible exercise of change and improvement. As held by Sherman (1980), there is great political interest in finding ‘what works for policing’. And when that is found, then policing must not be practiced in dark rooms but, conversely, as part of nationwide efforts to openly combat crime. It is in this context that a second moment of policing is now discussed.

## **8.2. The incipient militarisation of municipal policing**

The last six weeks of my fieldwork took place once the National Guard became operational across Mexico. This was a security body composed by the military and navy forces, now charged with undertaking law enforcement practices. As announced during his campaign before winning the 2018 presidential elections, Andrés Manuel López Obrador prompted the creation of the National Guard under the guidance of his security cabinet due to the increasing criticism faced by federal and municipal policing throughout the country. Even if the proposal sounded new-fangled, many legal scholars pointed at the fact that the concept of a National Guard had been included since the first constitutions were drafted in Mexico, almost two hundred years ago (Uvalle Aguilera, 2019; *Forbes*, 2019). Other sectors, such as the media and particularly human rights activists, pointed at the fact that a militarised police would lead to even more episodes of abuse (Morera, 2020). A number of political consultants pointed at the fact the creation of the National Guard would generate a security and employment crisis, as its mechanisms for enlisting led to many municipal police officers being fired from dissolving police forces (*Proceso*, 2020).

One Sunday morning, I received a WhatsApp text by Regional Prosecutor Güemes inviting me to see “his new office” for “they had relocated part of the Regional

Prosecution Unit a few minutes to the south”. He then texted me the address of the building where his new office was now located. I headed over there the next day.

As soon as I arrived to that address, the impact of the National Guard began revealing itself. The new building where the political authorities of the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc now operated was located right next to the main headquarters of the *Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional* (Secretariat of National Defense or SEDENA by its acronym in Spanish). It was even hard to distinguish one building from the other as the new venue where the prosecution unit now sat was painted in the same mix of foliage green and khaki tones that characterise military buildings in Mexico, many of which are located in that area, right in the border between Nautepéc and Mexico City.

However, something about the surrounding setting made this new building look similar to the old precinct. Indeed, just as the broad sidewalk outside the old Regional Prosecution Unit had been turned into a food market, so did shops and street stands encircle this new building. However, instead of food, the street stands sold military paraphernalia of all kinds, from helmets and boots to fake weapons. Between the colour of the new building and the merchandise sold at the street stands right outside of it, the entire atmosphere was charged with military motives and symbols.

I went up a grand staircase adorned with pictures of tanks and air bombers and reached the first floor. Immediately after, I ran into Special Prosecutor Lopez, who was carrying a box with her office supplies. I carried her box as she walked me to her new office down the hall. The room featured an imposing wooden desk. She kindly invited me to sit on a comfortable new chair, still wrapped in plastic. I immediately congratulated her on their new offices. “Well, you know, part of the new changes. We are far more comfortable here, that’s for sure”, she assertively replied. I then asked her directly about the National Guard, to which she replied:

“At the moment they have only assigned us thirty ‘elements’ (soldiers) but we haven’t really met them. We have had meetings with them and they seem nice. They want to know everything about us. They are supposed to assist us on the ground but so far have only requested some reports I am finishing right

now. It seems strange. Look [as she showed me a Whatsapp text on her mobile phone], right now my guys are heading to a car crash scene nearby. Many bodies to ‘pick up’. It’s hard to imagine soldiers in that kind of scene, but I guess we’ll find out, it’s what the government wants”.

As she spoke, I could not help but wonder where the detectives’ area would be placed. At this moment, she made a crucial clarification. “Our colleagues from the detectives’ area won’t be moving to this building, they shall remain based at the old building”, the Special Prosecutor told me. I was confused. As she then explained, only the ‘prosecutorial’ part of the precinct would be relocated to the new building while the police officers and detectives would stay at the old precinct.

I was struck by this news, as it meant that even in spite of the large-scale reform that had been widely advertised and even promoted as part of a successful political promise, the core of municipal policing would remain the same. What was the use of incorporating the military forces into the police if places like the detectives’ area at the Regional Prosecution Unit of Nautepéc would remain operational? This meant that no matter how many military headquarters became occupied by regional prosecutors, alleged suspects would still be questioned inside the ‘cave’ or tortured inside the file room.

I thought of the public debates, editorial articles and the general clamour that the deployment of the National Guard had caused among various sectors across civil society, Human Rights activists and numerous academic and political spheres. Most of these groups voiced concerns over the militarisation of the police. Many spoke of the violence and abuse that would be generated by the military absorbing policing functions as part of a political move by a newly elected party. However, Special Prosecutor Lopez’s words made me realise that perhaps there was a general unawareness of the fact that places like the detectives’ area at the Regional Prosecution Unit would remain operational. As a result, all those practices that worked in favour of perpetuating the status quo would presumably remain unaltered and as a result, all those dialects of the language of power would continue to be spoken. Moreover, instead of the police becoming militarised, it

seemed just as likely that the military personnel, now charged with undertaking street level tasks formerly unfamiliar to them, would now have to learn those dialects.

As I was talking to the Special Prosecutor, I got a Whatsapp text from Prosecutor Güemes. He was writing to apologise, for he was “caught” at a dinner in a restaurant nearby and would not be able to meet with me. I would never see him again. I decided to spend my last weeks of fieldwork with my true informants and inside the building where ‘real’ policing took place, which is why I continued to observe police practices at the - now old - precinct.

Throughout my fieldwork, I had grown used to enter the precinct’s building freely, as the people working at the main lobby knew me. For almost seven months, everytime I walked in I typically banged fists with them and walked right in. For the last six weeks, however, I had to leave an ID and sign on an entry log every time I accessed the building. “Sorry doc, new regulations”, the people at the main lobby told me. They seemed demotivated and almost embarrassed every time they said this, although I assured them it was fine. I was happy to have a record of my visits to the precinct.

Aside from new regulations such as the new access protocol, my last six weeks at the Nautepéc precinct were largely uneventful. Within the detectives’ area, everything carried on as usual, and even more festively. Indeed, without the regional prosecutor and “Ms Lopez” inside the building, the mood among the police officers, clerks and detectives felt more calm and relaxed. No one even mentioned the National Guard and when the topic did come up due to my questions, everyone seemed annoyed but largely evasive. Even so, I decided that I would end my fieldwork as soon as more regulations were issued or the military presence at the precinct became felt. The advent of the ‘new regime’ strongly suggested that my time there had ended, although it seemed important to capture at least a glimpse of its impact at the precinct.

On my last afternoon at the precinct, I crossed its main hall and ran into Commander Antonio, who was watching as two of his officers frisked a detained suspect right in the



middle of the hall. I asked him what the man had done. As he began answering, Commander Antonio's demeanour turned mysterious. Just as he seemed to begin answering, he stopped. Then he said "sorry, they are watching us, they wouldn't allow this". The entire conversation turned bizarre. The man that had always behaved as my 'host' inside the precinct now refused to even talk to me. As he stopped talking, Commander Antonio did point upwards with his eyes. As I turned towards where he had pointed, I saw two men dressed as soldiers looking down from the staircase that led to the upper floor. They were staring back at us. That was the last thing Antonio did before saying goodbye and leaving me in the main hall. I decided to end my fieldwork there, as I felt reluctant to carry on under surveillance.

As shown by this street-level look into how the deployment of the National Guard is currently being enforced, policing as a cluster of varied mechanisms to exercise power not only works in dark rooms, operating out of sight and hidden from most of the population. The exercise of these varied mechanisms can also be masked by widely advertised and large-scale transformations that signify reform even at a constitutional level. Just as 'dark room policing' is largely tolerated as a set of regrettable yet anecdotal episodes of police over-reach in the name of crime fighting – and under the protection of broad definitions of police power -, 'public reform policing' is typically presented as going even further in the fight against crime, as it appears to be an attempt – either by the police or by political authorities - to change in order to progress or achieve more effectiveness. In both scenarios however, the police continues to impose power in versatile ways while the status quo continues to be reproduced.

Indeed, the police's political strength comes not only from their vast amount of tools that work in favour of power, but also from the fact that these tools can be used in secluded and sealed settings as well as very publicly under the guise of grand exercises of policing. Both moments discussed throughout this chapter show that policing, as a collection of varied practices that impose power, reproduces the status quo. Throughout the first episode, gendered and racial categories were perpetuated alongside techniques of undercounting crimes and extracting information in order to produce a crime and a

criminal, just as Piccato (2013) identifies as a common police practice since the beginning of the PRI hegemony in the 1920s. The second episode shows how a nationwide policing reform was hailed politically in spite of crucially maintaining the existence of places like the old Nautepéc precinct, where the status quo is reproduced everyday through the use of the aforementioned power-related techniques. In this sense, the first episode *hides* the police practices that reproduce the status quo in a dark file room while the second episode *masks* the reproduction of the status quo under the appearance of police militarisation.

The fact that this collection of practices can remain in place either in the context of change or, conversely, during quotidian everyday police normality make policing invaluable to the political order. Indeed, the ubiquity, versatility and seeming uneventfulness of police practices provides the political order with a set of instruments that allows it to pursue its overtly established goals, as well as those that can only be achieved in dark file rooms.

## **Conclusions:**

Why does focusing on race and gender matter when approaching the police as a political actor? What makes racism, on the one hand, and machismo, on the other, real? This thesis showed that the police are ideal political instruments because they speak all the dialects in the language of power. Their capacity to obtain ad hoc information from biased informants and control the perception of their work through a unilateral production of lies concerning crime statistics while operating indistinctly inside dark rooms or across crowded streets showed as much. Notwithstanding the problems that this versatile capacity entails, we must also bear in mind that the police carry with them a specific idea of gender and race. Thus, by enforcing not only – and not really – the law but the ruling ideas of a group in power, the police preserve the vision of that group, which in the case of post-revolutionary Mexico is a white(r) and hegemonically masculine form of uncontested power.

This thesis showed that the police imposes that white(r) and hegemonically masculine vision of the world by enforcing it at street level through face-to-face interactions and widespread practices, through systematic actions or through reflexive gestures and seemingly spontaneous words. Crucially, the police can do this because only they can make use of diverse mechanisms of power in many different settings. As Denyer Willis once heard someone say during his fieldwork in Brazil: “if you want to know what race is, go and ask the police”.

It is the police that makes machismo and racism exceedingly felt at street level because only the police can criminalise race and gender – under the veil provided by politically laudable aims such as order maintenance and security – while other state officials and politicians are bound by duty to repudiate such practices. In this sense, the police points to the ‘right’ gender and skin colour while the rest of the state apparatus appears to be neutral.

As shown by this thesis, the Nautepéc police creates a ‘façade’ of policing by producing arrests out of investigations underpinned by biased information – or ‘gossip’ - and fabricated data, on the one hand, while also targeting suspects on gendered and racial terms, on the other. In this sense, the façade is created by those everyday police practices that equate arrests to effectiveness. This effectiveness, however, is defined mainly by a hegemonic form of white(r) masculine power and despite seemingly changing political and policy contexts. Across all of them, hegemonic notions about masculinity as well as racist logics have provided the subjects fit to be criminalised while everyday resources such as a network of snitches – or *chismosos* - and statistically-driven perceptions of criminal activity have provided the information channels that allow for an appearance of effectiveness to be created. Arguably, the result of this façade is the everyday, unchallenged reinforcement of what Ahmed (2004) – in relation to institutional racism – refers to as a positive commitment to not act rather than a failure to act.

By unearthing these problems from the field and suggesting a turn towards the police in order to understand why race and gender are criminalised at street level, this thesis contributes to discussions on ethnographies of the state and perhaps even to some discussions about race and gender studies. For this reason, ethnography as a research method must continue to stand as one of the most adequate ways to penetrate and explore the world of policing. In that sense, it is important for a wider tradition of police ethnographies to grow in Latin America beyond those studies already conducted in Brazil and Argentina. The current state of affairs in Mexico offers an opportunity to carry out ethnographic studies of policing in a moment of apparent transformation and political transition. Furthermore, the federal handling of policing in Mexico means that many studies could be conducted across several states in the country and then even compared. Will the post-racial veil provided by the ‘myth of mestizaje’ be torn by episodes of police abuse in the future? And besides racism, are issues like misogyny or homophobia defining police practices in Mexico? Will police accountability with the relentless growth of technology and will that withdraw the unilateral grip that the police hold over crime statistics?

As other studies based on participant observations of the police have shown, ethnography favours in-depth looks into the way the state presents itself at street level every day. The possibility of observing interactions where gestures, symbols and voice tones reveal the existence of quotidian state-sanctioned mechanisms for the enforcement of political power continues to uphold ethnography as a pertinent method to study the police as a political actor.

Against the use of ethnography for the study of the Mexican police, criticism will no doubt focus on how results cannot be ‘generalizable’ and on how findings come in great part from intuition. The point might also be raised that ethnographic studies of the police, such as this one, focus on one specific place or a small number of individuals. However, as noted by Fassin (2017), ethnographic findings may well be generalizable, only in a different way than those gathered by quantitative studies. Indeed, ethnography may not find results that will be valid everywhere, but it may observe logics and assumptions that may operate anywhere (Fassin, 2017).

Furthermore, the current context of policing reveals a need to resort to varied methods of study and analysis that may arguably lead us to deeper answers to recurrent problems. The magnitude of recent events such as the 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the kidnap and murder of Giovanni Lopez in Guadalajara by municipal police officers only a few days before and the episodes of police brutality recorded in Nigeria later that same year is hard to ignore. So is the political impact of subsequent episodes of social unrest that followed those events. This all suggests that attention should be paid to the current paradigms according to which policing is carried out.

Events like those generate a considerable - yet inconstant - commotion that draws attention to urgent needs that policing needs to address. Chief among those needs are the establishment of proper accountability and de facto colourblindness. The countless and tragic examples of what the police can do in the use of their ill-defined and broad power demand for a conscious generational change in the way we conceive the police. Rare

glimpses of how this is beginning to happen provide a faint opportunity to finish on a positive note.

On one of the last days we spoke, Commander Castro was expressing his obsessive argument about how we Mexicans are uncultivated. He told me, “I was raised in a very humble home. My ‘mommy’ is a saint but she only taught me religion and that work is important. Now, I have two teenage kids and I have to teach them to study, not only to work and obey God, but also to study. I also have to teach them to respect all religions and races, as I am sure God would want”. Perhaps this is enough to at least daydream that the next generations will take issues like race and gender equality more seriously. Maybe there is hope for the future due to the resonance of current events or the impact of upcoming studies. I choose to believe that Commander Castro’s teachings will have the effect he briefly outlined, and hopefully not only on his children, but also on his officers and young recruits.

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<sup>81</sup> Bibliographical reference reserved in part on page 67 in order to protect the fieldsite’s anonymity



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