"VIGILAR Y LIMPIAR": IDENTIFICATION AND SELF-HELP JUSTICE-MAKING IN MICHOACÁN, MEXICO

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Abstract – Existing within a relatively short time frame (2013-2015), the Michoacán Autodefensas (self-defense groups) are a particularly fruitful case study for analyzing vigilantism. What we find here is an armed movement that was devoted to (re)creating a local order through the practices of investigation, vigilante justice, and classification of the social world. Beyond what it reveals about vigilantism as a "judicial" procedure, and as a desire to return to intimacy (in this case, that of familial and village inter-knowledge), the example of the self-defense groups suggests that vigilantes do not necessarily have as their mission the eradication of crime. Rather, they may settle for managing it, in particular by making it more legible locally. As such, they are involved in intense struggles for identification and classification. Their reordering attempts, however, often bring new disorderly possibilities and opacities, as shown by the aporia of the security model implemented by the self-defense groups.

1. "Watch over and clean up." This was one of the terms most frequently used by the Michoacán self-defense groups to describe their mobilization against the Knights Templar cartel. [Translator's note: All quotations referenced to Spanish-language sources have been back-translated from the French-language version of this article.]

Ya nos tenían hasta el cuello los Caballeros Templarios,
El pueblo ya no aguantaba, y tampoco los empresarios. (1)
Batalla tras batalla, luchando por mi raza, mi raza michoacana,
Aquí está la resistencia, los guardianes michoacanos. (2)
Hoy vamos a luchar por nuestro pueblo,
Ya me colgué el arma y me he convertido en comunitario.
Hoy vamos a pelear por los derechos que nos merecemos. . . .
Dispuestos a dar la vida, por el pueblo y la familia,
por la causa pelearemos con honor. (3)[2]

In February 2014,[3] crossing Apatzingan, the unofficial capital of the Tierra Caliente region in the state of Michoacán,[4] required passing through six consecutive checkpoints. Posted on the first and the last of these were armed young men who wore T-shirts that stated their belonging to the Grupos de Autodefensas de Michoacán (Michoacán Self-Defense Groups) as well as their home municipality. These men carried out their duty with an ostentatious seriousness. They did not hesitate in ordering passengers to get out of their vehicles, opening the vehicles' trunks, and scrutinizing the smallest nooks and crannies with their powerful flashlights. Positioned at the four sandbag-reinforced checkpoints in between were members of the Policía Federal (Federal Police) as well as heavily armed soldiers who stood on armored vehicles, their faces hidden by balaclavas. The twenty-five-kilometer route through the town took at least an hour to complete, in a landscape of war[5] that marked the entrance to Tierra Caliente, where the first self-defense groups appeared in February 2013.

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2. Excerpts from popular songs, the *corridos*, written in praise of the Michoacán self-defense groups. These could be heard on YouTube and on the radio, and they were also played at local festivities. "(1): The Knights Templar had us by the throat. The people couldn't take any more, and neither could the entrepreneurs." "(2) Battle after battle, I fight for my own, Michoacán people. The resistance is here, the guardians of Michoacán." "(3) Today we will fight for our village. I've already got my weapon and I've joined the Autodefensas. Today we're fighting for the rights that we deserve. Ready to give our lives for it, for village and family, for the cause we'll fight with *honor.*"

3. I must thank the editors of this issue and the anonymous peer reviewers, as well as Adèle Blazquez, Adam Backzo, Gilles Dorronsoro, and Jacobo Grajales for their critiques and comments on the successive versions of this article.

4. Mexico is a federal republic made up of thirty-two federated states. Governments are organized at the municipal, state, and federal levels. The local level, the *municipio*, is the level that I will examine in this article. It is the equivalent of a US county, but it has broad prerogatives, including with regard to public security. It is led by a *presidente municipal* (municipal president), who is elected by direct universal suffrage to a term of three years that cannot be immediately renewed.

5. The level of violence in Michoacán must be mentioned in order to appreciate the risks taken by members of the self-defense groups, especially those who do not have a professional background in using force. Between 1990 and 2009, the homicide rate in Michoacán was consistently higher than the national average for Mexico. In 1992, this rate reached its record level: 34.7 per 100,000 residents. Between 2007 and 2013,

Within two years, these groups managed to eliminate one of Mexico's most powerful criminal organizations. From the moment when they were created, the Michoacán self-defense groups constantly asserted in their public statements and appearances in the Mexican media that their uprising was a citizen-led initiative that aimed to restore the rule of law and to "eradicate" the Knights Templar cartel, the de facto governing power of the region. The Knights Templar cartel had achieved a level of institutionalization that was unprecedented in Mexico, especially by heavily taxing the population and strictly controlling social life (in the form, for example, of curfews, bans on assembling in village squares, restrictions on hunting rights, and control measures over young people). At the same time, control over municipal administrations and Michoacán's state level of administration had allowed the cartel to have a monopoly over and then to close the channels of political intermediation. In this way, it kept a large portion of Michoacán outside the federal authorities' reach.

This regional dominance alienated the very social groups that the cartel claimed to protect. The creation of the self-defense groups in February 2013 was the outcome of accumulated discontent—a phenomenon that can be seen in the formation of many vigilante movements.[6] Standing out within this coalition were the *rancheros*, small- and medium-sized landowners who comprise both a social group and an ethos: that of "*ranchero* society," which has historically valued individual initiative and autonomy in relation to the state.[7] The hard core of ranchers and farmers was joined by actors with a range of social statuses (industrialists, traders, liberal professionals, small-scale farmers, and so forth) who identified with the *rancheros*' self-help values to the point of explicitly claiming them as their own. They took on a more or less active role, based on their own means, in the self-defense groups. Although this adherence to common values and a shared history, just as much as their hostility to the Templars, provided this coalition with a base, it was nevertheless a heterogeneous and even contradictory one. And while the self-defense groups targeted the Knights Templar cartel, they in fact welcomed drug traffickers into their ranks, which sometimes created confusion in terms of their activities. There was another paradox within this mobilization: while it asserted a long tradition of self-help, it called upon the federal government,[8] which was invited to

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the number of "violent deaths" in the state increased by 82.35%. In 2013, the year of the uprising by the self-defense groups, Michoacán's homicide rate rose to 22 per 100,000 residents, while that for the Apatzingan municipio, which is the unofficial capital of Tierra Caliente, the region of focus for my study, reached 60 per 100,000 residents. See the statistics from the National Institute of Statistics (INEGI), consulted at the following page: http://www.uam.es/personal_pdi/economicas/cresa/TierraCaliente9013.pdf

6. See the introduction to this special issue.

7. Hubert Cochet, *Des barbelés dans la sierra* (Mexico City: CEMCA-ColMich-ORSTOM, 1991).

8. The Comisión para la Seguridad y el Desarrollo Integral en el Estado de Michoacán (The Commission for Security and Development for Michoacán State), which was created in January 2014 by Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto, aimed to ensure that the conflict was managed directly by the Interior Ministry (Secretaria de Gobernación) of the federal government, without going through the state level. This

intervene against the parts of the municipal and state hierarchies judged to be corrupt and ineffective.

Based on an investigation in progress (see Box 1), the idea here is to appreciate how the replacement of the Knights Templar by the self-defense groups was interpreted by local populations as a guarantee of a restoration of security, even though these groups were frequently infiltrated by drug traffickers. To this end, I will proceed through three stages. First of all, I will analyze the conditions for the formation and emergence of a socially heterogeneous coalition that, based as it was on an armed movement, managed to make one of Mexico's most powerful cartels disappear. Second, I will focus on the self-defense groups' vigilante-justice practices, on the local competences on which these were based, and on the way in which the exercise of these competences was part of an assertion of nativeness that entailed legitimacy. In a continuation of James Scott's work on legibility,[9] here we will see that bringing legibility (back) to the social is not limited to state institutions. This undertaking is also at the heart of vigilantism, in which actors right wrongs just as much as the operators of legibility do and are engaged in intense struggles over identification and classification. Often, their attempts at producing order lead to new disorder and confusion. This is what we will see in the final part, which is devoted to the aporias of the self-defense groups' security model.

Box 1. Field research in Michoacán

The material presented here comes from doctoral research that is currently in progress. It was collected over the course of four field visits to Michoacán between January 2014 and December 2015. These visits lasted for ten months in total. Although the violent situation in this region of Mexico makes data collection difficult, it is paradoxically easier to meet with criminal actors than it is to meet with representatives of the Mexican state, with back and forth communication between these actors being prohibited for obvious security reasons. This is the main bias of this study: state actors, including members of the Michoacán and federal governments or personnel from the regular army, hardly ever appear within it.

management focused in particular on the questions of disarming and demobilizing the self-defense groups, as well as of potentially turning them into public police forces. The commission, whose work spread over a year, caused violent confrontations—both politically and physically—in the region. For more details on the activities of this commission as well as on the negotiations with the self-defense groups and their outcome, see Enrique Guerra Manzo, "Las Autodefensas de Michoacán. Movimiento social, paramilitarismo y neocaciquismo," *Política y Cultura* 44 (2015); Romain Le Cour Grandmaison, *Understanding in Order to Address: For a State Strategy in Michoacán* (Mexico City: Centro de análisis de políticas públicas, 2014); Wil G. Pansters, "We Had to Pay to Live! Competing Sovereignties in Violent Mexico," *Conflict and Society: Advances in Research* 1 (2015).

9. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

Because the appearance of the self-defense groups contributed to freeing the speech of the region's inhabitants, it was possible to carry out around fifty interviews and to address a very wide range of subjects. Moreover—and this is no longer the case today—the self-defense groups made it easy to travel around the state, especially after January 2014. I was therefore able to visit around ten *municipios* controlled by the self-defense groups, where in addition to semidirected interviews and informal conversations with locals, I was able to observe the vigilante-justice practices of these groups directly.

After two years of clashes and political negotiations (2013–2015), the majority of the self-defense groups disappeared. Some of them were legalized and transformed by the federal government into police forces, whereas others became the foundation for new local criminal organizations. Only a minority of the self-defense groups remains active, in particular in the state's indigenous regions. However, these groups will not be considered in this study, which focuses exclusively on the self-defense groups of the Tierra Caliente region.

From "Protection" to Self-Defense

The emergence of self-defense groups in Michoacán was part of a political-criminal configuration characterized by the control exerted by the Knights Templar cartel over the region's economic and social life. The product of a schism within the Familia Michoacana (Michoacán Family) cartel, the Templars established themselves by promising to protect the local population from the extortion carried out by La Familia, which fell apart in the space of a few weeks in the winter of 2011. Over the years that followed, the cartel gained unprecedented authority within the Mexican criminal world. The Templars appointed *jefes de plaza* (plaza bosses) who were responsible for controlling a locality or a *municipio*.[10] These figures had the task of applying the cartel's law, representing the group, administering the territory, and managing public finances. The local authorities, including the *presidentes municipales* (municipal presidents) and their administrations, fell under their authority. The jefes de plaza also played the role of intermediaries between the leaders of the cartel, Michoacán's population, and its political leaders. Their position initially called to mind that of the caciques,[11] insofar as they represent a "semi-porous entity, like a sieve [that] itself administers the arrival of the state, letting certain things through and blocking the rest."[12] However, the cartel gradually came to monopolize and

10. In the contemporary lexicon associated with or originating from drug trafficking, the *plaza* is a key piece of territory for the organization. It is often located on a strategic highway.

11. Rogelio Hernández, "Challenging Caciquismo: An Analysis of the Leadership of Carlos Hank Gonzalez," in *Caciquismo in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, eds. Alan Knight and Wil Pansters (London: University of London Press, 2005).

12. Matthew Butler, "God's Caciques: Caciquismo and the Cristero Revolt in Coalcomán," in Knight and Pansters, *Caciquismo in Twentieth-century Mexico*. [Translator's note: Quotation back-translated from the French-language version of this article.]

then lock down intermediary channels, to the point where it caused these to virtually disappear.

In most of the cases that I have studied, the Templars appointed *jefes* who did not come from the administrative center (*cabecera municipal*) or even from the municipio that they controlled. This rule also applied to many *sicarios* who operated in the municipios. They formed composite local groups that brought together both operators (*operadores*) from the locality and recruits from other regions of Michoacán. Within the cartel structure, the jefes consequently enjoyed a certain freedom to maneuver in the daily management of their municipios. Ultimately, the cartel controlled a large part of Michoacán's state administration (the gubernatorial level) through threats and corruption. Video recordings released after the self-defense groups' uprising attest to the organizing of regular meetings between Templar leaders and the highest state-level authorities, in particular the state government's general secretary and the governor's son, between 2011 and 2013.

Although the Templars initially stood up against La Familia's extortion practices, the jefes de plaza in turn became the vectors of a racketeering system of unprecedented sophistication that did not spare any social group. From 2011, the cartel took 10 percent of the total budget of the municipios that it controlled. The organization received around twenty million dollars from municipal budgets every month, excluding revenue derived from: misappropriations via public contracts; extortion of farming operations, businesses, factories, and stores; and activities directly related to drug production and trafficking. The changing value of the corn *tortilla*, a staple foodstuff and a price indicator in the Mexican "shopping basket," is emblematic of these practices. Under the cartel's dominance, the price of a kilo of tortilla rose by around 30 percent depending on the region, going from eleven or twelve pesos (around sixty cents) to fifteen, sixteen, or seventeen pesos (around one dollar). This increase was due to the Templars' taking of a general percentage of traders' monthly revenues, or of directly taking one or two pesos from the sale price. These practices could be combined with the imposition of a levy on commercial premises known as the *derecho de piso*, the equivalent of Italian mafia organizations' *pizzo*. The levy contributed to a jacking up of prices for foodstuffs. Finally, the Templars extorted from local industrial centers, a measure that alienated regional agro-industrial elites. The most affected sectors were logging and the cultivation of avocados—which are known as *oro verde* (green gold)—and of limes.[13]

13. In 2015, Mexico produced 30 percent of the world's limes and avocados. At the national level, Michoacán supplies 80 percent of the country's avocados, creating estimated revenues of one billion dollars each year (2012). The agricultural sector is the state of Michoacán's primary revenue source. According to official figures, it employs 23 percent of the declared active population. These figures are probably much higher if one adds undeclared day laborers, including minors, to them.

The rapid collapse of a structure seemingly as strong as that of the Templars can be explained by the convergence of interests opposed to the criminal system in effect. By alienating itself from the set of social groups that it claimed to "protect," the cartel caused a mobilization that began in Tierra Caliente and that rapidly spread between February 2013 and the winter of 2014. It was based on local solidarity and on the social and financial capital of economic actors that were victims of the racketeering. The big landowners, brought together in producer cooperatives, played a key role in the emergence of this new configuration. This social group was capable of mobilizing considerable economic resources—in particular for the purposes of purchasing arms—but it was also able to establish links with the federal authorities, and this allowed the self-defense groups significant autonomy in terms of their activities and organization, especially in relation to Michoacán's state government.

However, certain criminal agents that served the Templars also joined the coalition. This was in particular the case of local traffickers who were required to pay levies to the Templars. Even though these actors had been promised room for maneuver within the cartel, the jefes de plazas' rising power and the increase in levies across the drug trafficking chain called the initial agreement into question. As one lime producer from Buenavista, a member of the local council for the self-defense groups, explained, "In the end, with the Templars, the *narcos* from around here only kept about 30 percent of profits. The rest went to the cartel and the leaders. Even crystal meth production stopped being profitable!"[14]

In this context, the jefes and the sicarios embodied the image of an oppressive and allogeneous cartel that comprised men who behaved like *gente de fuera* (outsiders) within the localities in which they operated. When the self-defense groups mobilized, these outsiders were considered the first people to bring down by both the criminals who hoped to topple the Templars and locals who sought to free themselves from their clutches.

The self-defense groups, which emerged on February 24, 2013, were a rural movement by virtue of their sociology and their geographical rooting. Like the Templars a few years before, these groups resorted to a rhetoric that emphasized their nativeness and their rejection of extortion. The break from the Templars came more in terms of the efforts that they made to work within legal parameters. In their public statements and on their "uniforms" (generally T-shirts stamped with a logo accompanied by the name of their home municipio), the self-defense groups played on the ambiguity of their status, in particular by giving rise to confusion with the Policías Comunitarias (Community Police). The existence of these police forces is guaranteed by Article 2 of the Mexican

14. Interview, Buenavista, September 2015.

Constitution, which recognizes "the right of indigenous peoples and communities to self-determination and therefore their autonomy" to "apply their own regulations and solve their own conflicts."[15] Organizations of this type already existed in the neighboring state of Guerrero and to a lesser degree in Michoacán (which has a smaller indigenous population). Furthermore, in 2011, the inhabitants of the indigenous municipio of Cheran took up arms and erected barricades to expel the Templars and put an end to the plundering of forests that belonged to the community. This precedent was a source of inspiration for the set of groups in Tierra Caliente, regardless of whether they were members of an indigenous community. The ambiguity cultivated by the leaders over the course of the movement was therefore not merely semantic. It is indicative of these groups' desire to appropriate a label that had proved its value in the recent past (by allowing a popular uprising to fit within legal parameters), even though the leaders of the self-defense groups were generally of mixed heritage.

As I indicated earlier on, the hard core of the self-defense groups came from "ranchero society." This description refers not so much to a clearly delimited social group as it does to a system of values founded upon horizontal solidarities, a tradition of mastery over space (in the context of historically isolated rural lands), and competences in the organization and use of violence. To these it is necessary to add the predominance of social structures that encourage the resolution of social conflicts in a personalized, "one-on-one" manner.[16] These skills would be crucial when it came to organizing the self-defense groups and building their local legitimacy.

For Village and Family: The Local Rooting of the Self-Defense Groups

In contrast to what we have seen with regard to the Templars, the members of the self-defense groups all came from the towns and villages in which they mobilized. These groups underwent an initial phase of expansion between the end of the winter that began in 2013 and the spring of 2014. During this phase, the groups operated outside of their home municipios to conquer thirty-three out of the 113 municipios that Michoacán comprises. This was the height of the mobilization. These victories were a mark of the success of the *operativos*—that is, the operations coordinated to *liberar* (liberate) municipios, during which groups belonging to different municipios joined forces to momentarily occupy an "outside" administrative center. At the end of an operation, each group would fall back to its municipio and give up local control to the self-defense

15. Political Constitution of the Mexican United States," consulted at http://estadomayor.mx/. English-language version quoted from: Carlos Pérez Vázquez, trans., *The Political Constitution of the Mexican United States* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2005), http://historico.juridicas.unam.mx/infjur/leg/constmex/pdf/consting.pdf.
16. Esteban Barragán, *Con un pie en el estribo* (Zamora: Colegio de Michoacán, 1997).

groups that had been set up in situ. Although these groups could call upon several hundred men in certain cases, especially during the movement's first phase, and although they were highly mobile, their activity above all involved *vigilar* (watching over) and *limpiar* (cleaning up) their own areas.

Figure 1. Self-defense group introductory meeting in the village of Coire, Michoacán, in February 2014 (photo by the author).

The "self-defense" label adopted by the coalition underscored its local rooting. The self-defense groups asserted a form of nativeness that, although distinct from that of indigenous populations, allowed them to reinforce their local legitimacy. Whether they expressed themselves in the media or before a "liberated" municipio's villagers, the leaders of the self-defense groups continually projected themselves as defenders of the *pueblo* (in the word's multiple senses of "people" and "village"), the family, and local economic interests. In an interview dated June 6, 2013, with the newspaper *La Opinión*, one of the leaders of the self-defense groups, José Manuel Mireles, a surgeon, proclaimed, "The village has been taken back by its own [*el pueblo lo recuperó el pueblo mismo*], by forcing out the criminals from all of our communities. . . . It wasn't taken back because of either the army or the federal police. It was thanks to the locals' courage that we could fight the battle."[17]

17. Ricardo Ibarra, "Pueblos de Michoacán mantendrán autodefensas," *La Opinión*, June 6, 2013.

This criticism of the performance (or rather the inaction) of the federal government and its security forces, which implicitly highlighted the efficacy and the legitimacy of the "popular" mobilization, was characteristic of the self-defense groups' discourse at the beginning of the movement. However, it tended to be softened as the groups sought closer ties with Mexico City. Indeed, it never prevented the self-defense groups from appealing to the army and more generally to the federal government, which was called upon from the uprising's first hours to put the state government under its supervision—a demand that continued to be made until a special commission was created by the central government in January 2014.

Local affiliation was also the basis for competences rooted in specific know-how and perceptive skills. These attributes were essential for the purpose of the self-defense groups' restoring of order, which consisted above all in reintroducing legibility in a confused social world. According to James Scott, who developed this notion, creating legibility involves reading grids for the social and population arrangements that are intended to simplify the state's primary functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion.[18] But as Scott himself agrees, these state procedures cannot function without their being connected to informal practices that are founded on localized competences. He analyzes such know-how[19] through borrowing the concept of *metis*[20] from Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant. This is precisely the ground upon which the self-defense groups would earn their legitimacy in the eyes of both their federal partners (for whom they played the role of guide and interpreter) and local society (within which they would initially help to refound the friend/enemy distinction, and then bring new confusion to it).

Finding Bearings in a Confused World: The Self-Defense Groups' Metis

The self-defense groups' metis covered topographical and social practical knowledge that allowed them to find their bearings in rough terrain and adapt to a fluid environment. The self-defense groups were able to identify members of the cartel and their precise roles within the organization, especially in the case of local operators. At the same time, the self-defense groups became spaces with very in-depth interknowledge, in which personal and even familial direct links predominated. Moreover, within the territories controlled by the groups, interknowledge links allowed direct identification: everyone knew or knew about one another. An outsider to the municipio was immediately identified as such. When people could not be identified by their faces, family names and individuals' places of residence allowed the self-defense groups to quickly

18. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 2.
19. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 310.
20. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Les Ruses de l'intelligence. La mètis des Grecs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978).

make inquiries, a subject that I will return to later. The groups' ability to identify people extended to their personal histories, especially with regard to their possible involvement in a criminal organization and the nature of that involvement. Locals, and hence also members of the self-defense groups, effectively knew which individuals in the municipio were in the Templars, what their role was, what power they had in the organization, who their family members were, and probably where they lived. These competences were vectors for distinguishing the groups, not only relative to the public armed forces that were lacking but also between one another, since a given group's local rooting did not allow it to be an asset outside of its home municipio and the immediate area.

Alongside this social knowledge was an intimate grasp of territory such as the trails used by traffickers, their hiding places, and their zones of influence. This local geographical knowledge was an indispensable resource when it came to traveling to uncharted areas. Such trips were only feasible with the help of inhabitants from the region, and these areas were crucial for controlling the Tierra Caliente's mountainous zones. The region is rough and difficult to access, and only the main highways are paved or recorded on maps. The rest of the territory, and in particular the *sierra*, is made up of trails (*brechas*) that connect the *ranchos* and that have to be traveled on with a 4x4 or even on foot or by horse. The ability to travel around the municipio was therefore a competence exclusively possessed by locals or the Templars operating in the area. The public armed forces were eclipsed: in spite of the technical resources deployed during Operativo Michoacán (Operation Michoacán), they did not know the region and could not move around it expeditiously without help from the self-defense groups. The public forces' *technical* competences were not able to make up for gaps in their *practical* knowledge; they could only hope to overcome these through working with the self-defense groups.

The Self-Defense Groups' Investigation Practices

This knowledge provided the foundation of the self-defense groups' investigation practices. During *levantamientos* (uprisings), the groups labeled their targets as *outside* actors, in opposition to the local affiliation that they emphasized. Takeovers by these groups followed a repeated modus operandi that was inspired by both indigenous movements and the way in which criminal groups and the Mexican armed forces operate. As is the case in the rest of the country, Michoacán's urban centers are built along the main highways. Control over entries and exits is therefore fairly simple to implement, as I indicated in the Introduction. Armed men set up blockades and would then make identity checks with the goal of apprehending cartel members, collecting information, and locking down administrative centers, which would contain between ten thousand and fifteen thousand inhabitants. Once armed groups had deployed in the town, the leaders would ring church bells, a method of rallying the local population that is traditionally used during exceptional events or imminent

danger. In Tepalcatepec, Buenavista-La Ruana, and Coalcomán, the self-defense groups also assembled several hundred people in the central plaza and then made an "introduction" speech about the movement and its objectives. The first stage therefore entailed a geographical enclosure of space that centered first on the administrative center and then on the municipio.

From the first hours of the uprising, the local police forces, which answered to the municipal president's authority, were disarmed and sometimes arrested or ejected. When the municipal president was considered to be affiliated with the cartel, he would also be questioned, if he had not already fled. Across Mexico, the municipal authorities, including the police, have been accused of corruption and collusion with the cartels.[21] In the self-defense groups' view, these criticisms justified their securing of municipalities' perimeters. By halting and isolating municipal police, the self-defense groups sought to block the flow of information toward the cartel, as the seizures of cell phones systematically carried out during arrests indicates. These confiscations also allowed details for contacting different cartel members to be discovered, and they made it possible to locate or threaten these figures. The seizure of telephones could also provide evidence of an inhabitant's collaboration with the Templars, and the groups would go through received messages, saved contacts, and in some cases photos that could establish links with the criminal organization. This incriminating evidence was also used during interrogations in order to establish the apprehended individual's guilt.

Vigilantism and the Self-Defense Groups' Moral Order

As a set of "judicial" proceedings, the self-defense groups' vigilantism was not confined to the identification and investigation practices that characterized the movement in its beginnings. As the weeks went by, the self-defense groups went further, taking justice into their own hands. These vigilante-justice practices began with seizing land or real property that had been appropriated by the Templars and returning it to its owners. However, weapons, vehicles, and money seized during raids on Templar properties were not subject to any control. As one resident of Buenavista told me in February 2014, "In the first days of the movement, everyone wanted to have revenge or get back something that they'd lost. People wanted to vent their anger."[22] It was therefore not unusual to see the self-defense groups using arms with the cartel's markings on them, riding around in American 4x4s, sporting luxury watches, or even setting

21. The municipal police officers working in the municipios studied here are paid around two hundred dollars per month. They have little or no training, and they are powerless against today's cartels. Often targeted by criminal groups as they take control of an area, these police officers can be forced to become the legal and public armed wing of such groups. They are called on to use their prerogatives for the cartel's benefit—for example, by arresting particular "suspects" and handing them over to the criminal organization.
22. Interview, Buenavista, February 2014.

themselves up in the former residences of cartel members. But while some of these properties were occupied, others were sometimes ransacked.

Vigilante Justice and "Popular" Punishment

"Popular" punishment was not only directed against cartel members' property. It extended to actual manhunts. Self-defense groups would track and in some cases physically eliminate the Templars. Moreover, after meeting up, the leaders of the main groups drew up a list of seventeen priority targets to be apprehended or brought down. Included in the list, which they sent to the authorities via the press, were the fleeing jefes de plaza and founders of the cartel. These people were public figures whose first and last names, faces, and personal histories were well known to local populations. The list was a sign of the self-defense groups' initial distrust of the federal powers, and the groups' leaders brandished it as though it were an ultimatum by making their demobilization conditional upon the neutralizing of these criminal figures. Far from jolting the federal government into action, the ultimatum was a dead letter for a long time. It took more than a year before the first of the chosen targets (Nazario Moreno Gonzalez, alias *el más loco*—"the craziest") was actually eliminated. In response to the slowness of the federal reaction, the self-defense groups mobilized, first by proceeding on their own to arrest particular criminal figures. Careful to comply with the law, the leaders of these groups then turned their prisoners over to the authorities. However, when they turned to the competent state-level authorities for judicial proceedings, the self-defense groups suffered setback after setback. Most of the time, the suspects were immediately released, and this simply increased distrust of the state-level authorities, which were accused of collusion with the cartel. There were two consequences to this state of affairs. On the one hand, when the self-defense groups wanted to give a legal basis to their interrogations, they turned to the federal police. On the other, they resorted with increasing frequency to a form of swift justice, which led to a proliferation of summary executions. Far from being perceived as blundering, these acts of punishment were seen as a necessary evil by the population, which also seems to have lost confidence in the government's capacity to get rid of the Templar *lacra* (blight). According to one resident of Coalcomán, "One night, we heard bursts of fire, shootouts. The next day, you learned that *fulano* and *fulano* [such and such a person] had died. But here everyone knew *who* they were and *why* they had died. No one asked for the bodies in these cases. Life went on."[23]

These executions were but one component—surely the most dramatic one—of these groups' vigilante-justice practices. Echoing the classic practices of North American vigilantes, the self-defense groups also went on to banish certain people whom they apprehended, which also possibly meant the voluntary or

23. Interview, Coalcomán, October 2015 [author's emphasis].

forced departure of their families. These sentences were generally passed without any form of proceedings. In certain cases, the local population was invited to meet, not so much to decide the fate of the suspects as to point out new guilty parties. Denunciations were encouraged, with mixed results. The meetings of this kind that I was able to attend were characterized by an extremely serious atmosphere. It was a far cry from the collective ebullience of lynch mobs. When invited to denounce local cartel operators, locals generally preferred to keep quiet. Sometimes, however, tongues loosened, and it was enough for one person present to start making accusations for a dynamic of denunciation to take hold, even with regard to an individual present at the assembly. People could go as far as accusing their neighbors of colluding with the cartel, or even of complicity in the disappearance of loved ones. The unpredictability of proceedings was matched by the random nature of punishments, with there being no systematic handing out of penalties.

As we will see in detail a little later, the self-defense groups' "cleaning up" mission essentially involved "bad" narcos—that is, the cruelest and/or most eminent members of the cartel. Others, in particular those who were from the municipio, could be "pardoned." There were two ways back into local society: by joining the local self-defense groups and by the passing of a symbolic sentence, which would in general be delivered by the previously described popular assemblies. In the municipality of Coalcomán, for example, teenagers employed by the Templars as helpers, about whom people "knew that they didn't kill anyone, basically,"[24] were soon identified. They were pointed out by locals or even reported by their own families. Those who were caught were sentenced to sweep the city center and collect garbage in front of their families. As they did so, they wore signs around their necks that read: "This has happened to me because I'm a Templar."

Some of these vigilante-justice practices, including those based around naming and shaming, extended to online social networks. This has been a very widespread phenomenon in Michoacán that reflects certain forms of digital vigilantism (see Benjamin Loveluck's article in this issue). Following the model of a Facebook page created in 2012 in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, *Valor por Tamaulipas* (Courage for Tamaulipas), the self-defense movement in Michoacán led to the creation of hundreds of similar pages. Some, in particular Valor por Michoacán, were regional, but most were linked to a particular municipio—for example, Por un Tepalcatepec libre de Caballeros Templarios, Valor por Coalcomán, and Autodefensas de Tancitaro. Within the space of a few weeks, these publicly accessible pages attracted thousands of users. They were used for posting information in real time or for announcing important meetings. Above all, they encouraged vigilante justice to develop: people could

24. Interview, Coalcomán, October 2015.

use them to denounce a municipio resident as a Templar, testify against him, and demand that he be punished. Members of the self-defense groups could also turn to these pages as part of a crowd-sourced crime-solving approach. They would post photos of suspects and make appeals to the public to testify against them by confirming their identity and their possible role in the cartel, or even by giving the location of their hiding places when individuals had fled. Finally, the pages could serve an accountability objective by inviting Web users to denounce bad behavior by members of the self-defense groups. This practice was encouraged by several leaders, and it led the population to strongly criticize certain members of the movement. These Facebook pages, as well as WhatsApp discussion groups, contributed to the *limpieza* (cleaning up) of communities based on extremely localized, almost intimate knowledge. However, there were differences in the status of the information provided. Whereas some of it was used to adduce evidence, other information became the starting point for collective investigations.

Good and Bad Narcos

Although the reintegration of the cartel's operators into society, or even their joining of the self-defense groups, did not at least initially raise questions among the local population, it was a different story for its most senior ranks. When the first uprisings took place, the jefes de plaza fled with their closest lieutenants. This scene, which was replayed in most municipios, became retrospective evidence of their outsider status. As one member of the Buenavista self-defense groups explained,

> At that moment, we realized that the jefes were finally fairly alone. They weren't from the area and they didn't have any family or ties in the municipio. So they left in a hurry. And once you've left, it's impossible to come back if you're not from around here.[25]

These departures deprived the cartel of its main local representatives, which then made it possible for the self-defense groups to make a breakthrough. Yet the flight of the jefes and the sicario groups did not result in the disappearance of narcos in the places occupied by the self-defense groups. In fact, many notorious drug traffickers joined or even led the self-defense groups from the first uprisings. This fed fears that a new cartel was emerging. As one Buenavista resident explained to me in February 2014, "You see them in the village. They're the same as before. The same guys, the same cars, the same ways of dressing. Some of them get up to trouble as well. They feel like they have all the power now that the Templars have disappeared."[26]

25. Interview, Buenavista, September 2015.
26. Interview, Buenavista, February 2014.

This fluidity between narcos and self-defense groups led to distinctions that gave shape to the normative world of the uprising. Although it is possible to observe fluctuations according to the contexts in which people spoke out, the self-defense groups based their arguments on opposition to the cartel rather than on opposition to drug trafficking or production per se. This position could be seen in the daily activities of mobilizations and discussions. In one municipality at the entrance to Tierra Caliente, when one leader of the self-defense groups was addressing the people of a village after taking control of it, he declared, "We're not here to go and look for narcos in the sierra, destroy their labs, or put them in prison. That's the authorities' job. We're here to guarantee security and make sure that we can live normally again."[27] This reference to "normal life" included the presence of drug trafficking in the region and aimed above all to denounce certain recent practices of criminal organizations. As a leader of the Aguililla self-defense groups explained, "There has always been trafficking here.[28] But before, the narcos didn't pick on the population [*no se metían con la gente*]. If you didn't bother them, they didn't bother you."[29]

Among the activities associated with *bad* narcos, locals mentioned in particular widespread extortion, disappearances, public displays of violence, and above all violence against women in the form of rapes and abductions. The "new generations of narcos" did not respect any rules, unlike their predecessors, to whom inhabitants a posteriori attributed a code of honor. Belonging to a particular organization—the cartel—and the practices that were directly associated with it were therefore what was punished, rather than participation in a criminal activity itself. The distinction made by the residents should also be linked to the criminal groups' process of undergoing *cartelization*, which gained momentum from the 1990s.[30] This process entailed a professionalization of drug trafficking activities, the creation of a strict hierarchy and labeling in relation to groups, and a militarization of them as well, within a context in which Michoacán went from being a region that only produced drugs to being one involved in both their production and transportation, especially in the case of cocaine from South America. This regional- and international-level evolution shook up the drug economy's forms of integration and participation.[31] Marijuana growing did not necessarily involve membership of an established criminal group. Above all, it was not always a full-time activity for producers,

27. Source: recording of a speech given in Paracuaro, January 4, 2014.
28. Michoacán has produced drugs since around 1940, in particular marijuana.
29. Interview, Aguililla, January 2015.
30. On *cartelization* and the professionalization dynamics of Mexico's criminal organizations, see Natalia Mendoza Rockwell, "Microhistoria de la violencia en Altar, Sonora," in *Las Bases sociales del crimen organizado y la violencia en México*, ed. José Antonio Aguilar (Mexico City: Centro de Investigación y Estudios en Seguridad, 2012).
31. See Salvador Maldonado, *Los Margenes del Estado mexicano. Territorios ilegales, desarrollo y violencia en Michoacán* (Zamora: ColMich, 2010).

who combined it with other farming or commercial activities. The introduction of cocaine and then synthetic drugs changed matters and encouraged the cartelization process. In particular, it required an international network and coercive means, as these are indispensable for securing routes and shipments. The development of these drugs, which are infinitely more profitable than marijuana is, accelerated the professionalization of local traffickers, who began to serve a structured criminal organization. This evolution was accompanied by a transformation in traffickers' social representations. These individuals were now identified exclusively based on the cartel that they belonged to.

The invocation of a moral economy in relation to drug trafficking, as fantastical as it may be, was related to a desire to restore a pre-cartels era when this activity was not directly controlled by structured criminal organizations and when the "employees" were above all acquaintances, friends, and family members who were not defined as narcos. For populations that had been left exasperated by the cartel's predatory practices and abuses, the self-defense movement indicated a return to this "order," including in its apparent excesses. To put it another way, it was not so much that local populations were opposed to drug trafficking as a local economic and social activity. Rather, they rejected one particular *organization* and one particular *situation* in relation to drug trafficking.

"Small Town, Big Hell": The Straitjacket of Interknowledge

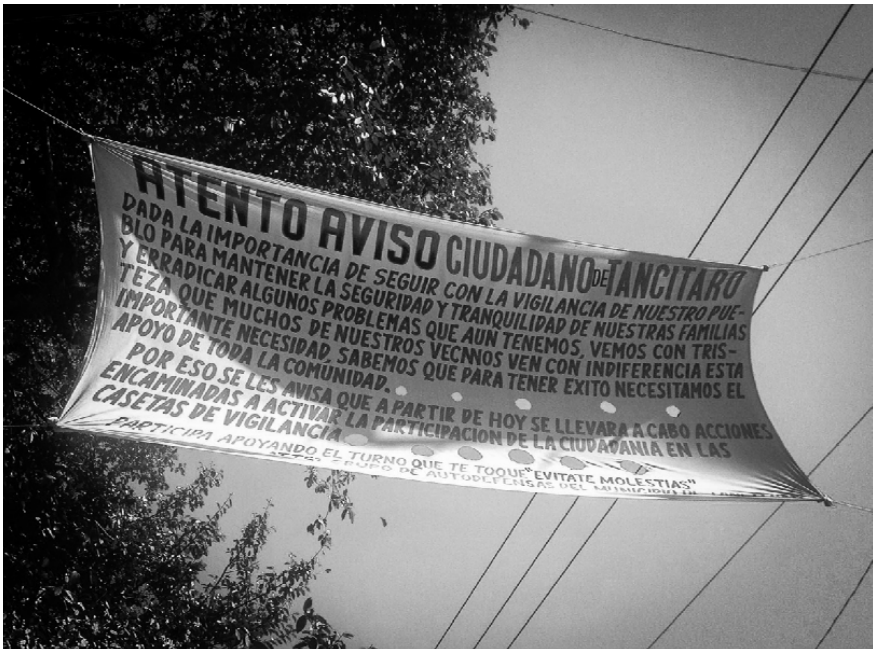
Knowing (about) Each Other to Watch One Another Better

The checkpoints—which survived the initial uprisings—illustrate the self-defense groups' territorialization, which was founded upon closing off the territory and producing or restoring local order. The requirement to pass through the checkpoints to enter or leave the territory each day in front of armed residents facilitated mutual surveillance of individuals and their conduct (see Figure 2). This surveillance was also provided by the self-defense patrols that operated inside their municipios. These dynamics reconstructed the local as a space within which individuals *knew* and *knew about* each other, for better (a more legible social world) and for worse (widespread surveillance).

Although distinctions were drawn between traffickers according to their geographical origins, the idea was not to completely absolve "their" narcos or to give them free rein. While the self-defense groups' local rooting was the basis of their competences, it also produced constraints. This was in any case what the local populations hoped for. They considered armed men (including traffickers) to be easier to control if they were placed within concrete interknowledge networks. In September 2015, a former member of the Buenavista self-defense groups council explained to me that "if 'everyone knows each other' and 'all know about each other,' we believe that it'll prevent certain practices. If I know

your family and vice versa, and that you're not protected by a cartel, you'll think twice before you do anything. Everyone watches each other here, for better and for worse. You know the saying, *Pueblo chico, infierno grande* [Small town, big hell]."[32]

Figure 2. Banner unfurled by a self-defense group above a checkpoint in the town of Tancitaro, Michoacán, February 2015. The group in question called for a mobilization surge in order to "preserve our families' security and peace." The message ends with a warning: "Get involved by fulfilling the guard duty assigned to you. 'Save yourself any troubles'" (photo by the author).



We can clearly see here how the return to relations of interknowledge was perceived by the population as a security guarantee, as it reduced the uncertainty linked with an allogeneous criminal power. Based on this observation, in several municipios, it was decided from the first public meetings that the self-defense groups would be funded by the population, in particular traders and industrialists. It accepted shouldering the vigilantes' protection costs, which were judged to be lower than the benefits derived from the security brought to supplies and journeys on the highways. Group members were initially viewed as taking part in a mission of general interest, and this meant that it was worth

32. Interview, Buenavista, September 2015.

their being repaid by the public. The salary paid to individual recruits had the purpose of compensating for losses of earnings (linked to their commercial or farming activities) caused by their participation in the movement. Although individual contributions to financing the groups were a priori voluntary, they also entailed public pressure, which was heightened by the publication of contributions. During the phase of fighting the cartel, a dim view was taken of failure to contribute to the funding of the self-defense groups. However, when self-defense groups were clearly identified as transformed criminal groups, attempts at supervision did not come to much, and residents publicly expressed their opposition to the installation of "new" narcos. In Buenavista, for example, organized collecting of funds only lasted a few weeks and was halted after the population denounced a new form of racketeering.

In other municipios, however, some groups became institutionalized via the formation of self-defense councils, to which the responsibility for funding the movement was transferred. In Coalcomán, the decision was taken by the municipal council—which, somewhat unusually, had not been disbanded by the self-defense groups—to allocate part of its budget to the movement's urgent needs. In a second stage, a self-defense council headquartered in and associated with the town hall emerged. This council was made up of the leaders of the self-defense groups and certain local dignitaries. Its objective was to organize the collection of funds for protecting the territory. Moreover, the council made a commitment to financial transparency by publishing monthly reports. At the movement's height, the council collected 1.4 million pesos per month (around $80,000) for the self-defense groups' operations.

Becoming Illegible?

The self-defense movement contained within itself a return to the local, even if this took on an enlarged form. It operated via new practices and intermediary figures with the federal state. This local rooting was a guarantee of competences and legitimacy (for the self-defense groups) and of security (for local populations). But it could also prove to be restrictive for both the self-defense groups and these populations themselves. While in the case of the former it placed limits on the dynamics of institutionalization, for the latter it was not exclusively synonymous with a rediscovered security. Local society's (re)turn to legibility brought about by the self-defense groups could sometimes have a suffocating side through its reassigning of local populations to clearly defined social identities. The confusing of the social that characterized the Templar period sometimes had its advantages for local populations, especially in terms of their interactions with the forces of order. Individuals' social and geographical details may be a source of prestige, fear, or respect through their associations with cartel activities. This was particularly so in the case of the Templars, whose position was dominant, even hegemonic. With the development of the cartels, certain regions have become power centers. This is

particularly the case of *capos*' home regions and fiefdoms. The public identification of cartels with their region of origin—for example, the Sinaloa cartel, the Golfo cartel, and the Familia Michoacana—is central to their territorialization activities and their creation and imposition of an identity. Criminal groups are about establishing an exclusive identity that stands in opposition to a rival group or territory.

"A," a small town in Michoacán's sierra and the birthplace of one of the founders of the Knights Templar, provides a good illustration of these dynamics. The rise of that leader at the start of the twenty-first century turned "A" into a power center. From 2007, and then more significantly so from 2010 and 2011, the Templars' control over Michoacán and the leader's reputation had practical implications for the town's inhabitants. As one of them explained,

> [When the Templars were dominant] we only had to show our ID when we were stopped by the police, wherever we were in Michoacán. The police or the army would read our [identity] document, see that we were from "A," and let us continue. They couldn't verify if we were linked to the capo or someone who was high up in the cartel. To avoid problems, they would never stop us. So the cartel put us on the map, you see! Everyone here, and even elsewhere in Mexico, knew where "A" was and respected us because of that.[33]

Through overthrowing the Templars, the self-defense groups imposed a new framework for the social world. These groups occupied positions as actors in *classification.* According to Pierre Bourdieu, such actors are devoted to making and unmaking groups and separating the internal from the external. It is important to note that for Bourdieu, mastery of classification competencies confers upon actors who are capable of mobilizing them the possibility of redrafting these criteria autonomously and of defining in accordance with [their] own interests the definitional principles of the social world.[34] This is precisely what led to the overthrow of the identity assignations discussed earlier. Through the power of classification, the self-defense groups redefined the social and political signification of certain geographical affiliations, and in so doing a change in the attitudes of the forces of order was brought about. Being from a locality known as a Templar bastion, as "A" was, brought about exposure to punishment from both the self-defense groups and the regular army. In order to be prepared for any eventuality, inhabitants of these localities were tempted to hide their identities, either by changing their place of residence or acquiring new papers. (An individual's place of residence rather than his or her place of birth is what is indicated on such documents.) As the same resident of "A," who was careful

33. Interview with a resident of "A," August 2013.

34. Pierre Bourdieu, "L'Identité et la représentation. Éléments pour une réflexion critique sur l'idée de région," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 35 (1980): 65 and 69.

to choose a town not associated with a narco identity,[35] explains, "Once the Templars disappeared, and especially once [the Templar leader] fell, I decided to change my place of residence to elsewhere [away from 'A'], to my workplace." Inhabitants who mastered these codes could thus play upon them and attempt to make themselves illegible.[36]

Locking Down the Territory

In contrast to the Templars, who aimed to control the state of Michoacán, the self-defense groups never got as far as acting in a unified way at the regional level. The search for security in intimacy (that of the family, the village, and the municipio) set geographical and institutional limits on the uprising. Territories increasingly functioned like locks. The control practices (checkpoints, patrols, and public meetings) that embodied the securing of the territory simultaneously contributed to transforming municipios into fiefdom-sanctuaries. Over the winter that began in 2014, while Templar power was faltering, a certain number of leaders attempted to create a regional council for the self-defense groups in order to federate the municipal groups and create a regional force. They also called on other regions of Mexico to mobilize and to reproduce Michoacán's model. This initiative came up first of all against the leaders of the self-defense groups who were involved in drug production and trafficking. These individuals sought more to consolidate their local interests, which were founded in particular upon controlling territories that had been conquered or retaken through the self-defense groups. The federal authorities, meanwhile, took a disapproving view of this expansion strategy, fearing that it might lead to a broader social movement. This convergence of interests between the federal government and the emerging drug trafficking actors brought about the elimination of those in favor of regional expansion (who were also the leaders who were the least involved in drug trafficking).

With the failure of the strategy of territorial expansion put forward by the "cleanest" leaders, the local community closed in around the movement's new strongmen, who were none other than the traffickers who had (re)emerged because of the self-defense groups. Interknowledge ceased to be a guarantee of legibility. Alliances between the self-defense groups and criminal organizations became increasingly murky, while the federal government's maneuvers intensified local populations' feelings of confusion and distrust, especially in relation to the regular armed forces. Meanwhile, assertions of nativeness, which had played a central role in the emergence of the movement, ran out of steam. By late 2015, the self-defense movement had had its day in Tierra Caliente, making way for armed groups that no longer bothered to assert their difference—for

35. Interview with a resident of "A," September 2015.
36. See A, Blazquez, "Lecture d'un ordinaire en contexte de violence dans le Nord du Mexique. Déguisements du quotidien et détournement de la tension" (Master's thesis, EHESS, 2013).

example, through wearing a uniform—from criminal organizations. Local populations took note of this new disorder and changed their daily routines. For example, people once again started to avoid particular highways, especially at night, and to watch their words in public.

Conclusion

Existing within a relatively short time frame, the Michoacán self-defense groups are a particularly fruitful case study for analyzing vigilantism. What we find here is an armed movement that was devoted to (re)creating a local order through the practices of investigation, vigilante justice, and classification of the social world. These practices mobilized resources that were themselves strongly localized. Like Schmitt's partisans, the self-defense groups were characterized by their telluric nature. Anchored in the territory that they defended, they drew their legitimacy and efficacy from "the link to the land, to the native population, and to the country's geographical configuration."[37] By drawing on this local knowledge, the self-defense groups developed the ability to read the social, and this allowed them—at least at first—to bring order back to their society. Putting their metis at the service of the federal government, they allowed its agents to get their bearings at this local level. In parallel, these groups offered their society a protection contract that rested on restoring the space for interknowledge, which could be simultaneously reassuring and constraining. Beyond what the example of the self-defense groups reveals about vigilantism as a "judicial" procedure and as a desire to return to intimacy (in this case, that of familial and village interknowledge), it suggests that vigilantes do not necessarily have as their mission the eradication of crime. Rather, they may settle for managing it, in particular by making it more legible locally. Likewise, the security offered by the self-defense groups was not synonymous with the *absence* of violence: it was more a *regulation* of it. And as is the case with other vigilante movements, the mobilization of these private, armed security actors was not at all a revolt against the federal level but was rather a chance to reopen intermediary channels with it. Through doing so, it contributed to the continual process of state formation in and through violence.[38]

The self-defense movement additionally allows for a focus on the concept of legibility in a context of violence and uncertainty, and it also highlights the concept's contribution to the study of vigilantism. The self-defense groups' local knowledge, which they initially mobilized in an extremely fluid situation—that is, the dislodging of the Templars—allowed them to reintroduce legibility, and therefore predictability, to social life. These competences were crucial at the

37. Carl Schmitt, *Théorie du partisan* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009 [1962]), 223. [Translator's note: Quotation back-translated from the French-language version of this article.]
38. Jacobo Grajales, *Gouverner dans la violence. Le paramilitarisme en Colombie* (Paris: Karthala, 2016).

beginning of the movement, including the groups' ability to position themselves as the federal government's interlocutors on the ground. However, once the Templars had disappeared, the leaders of the self-defense groups introduced new confusion. The criminal leaders thereafter accumulated several identities: drug trafficker, leader of a self-defense group, ally of the federal government, dignitary, and in certain cases politician. While Scott mainly considers the question of legibility from the perspective of the construction of the state, the example of the self-defense groups is an invitation to broaden our focus. In this case, the legibility of the social is a terrain of struggle and disputes that seems not so much to have led to making the world transparent[39] and to strengthening the state's authority, but rather to have caused the appearance of new forms of social opacity and to have dispersed public authority.

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39. According to Scott, this transparency is inseparable from the notion of *legibility*: whereas the classical state was "partially blind," the modern state is characterized by its synoptic view of the social. See Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, 2.