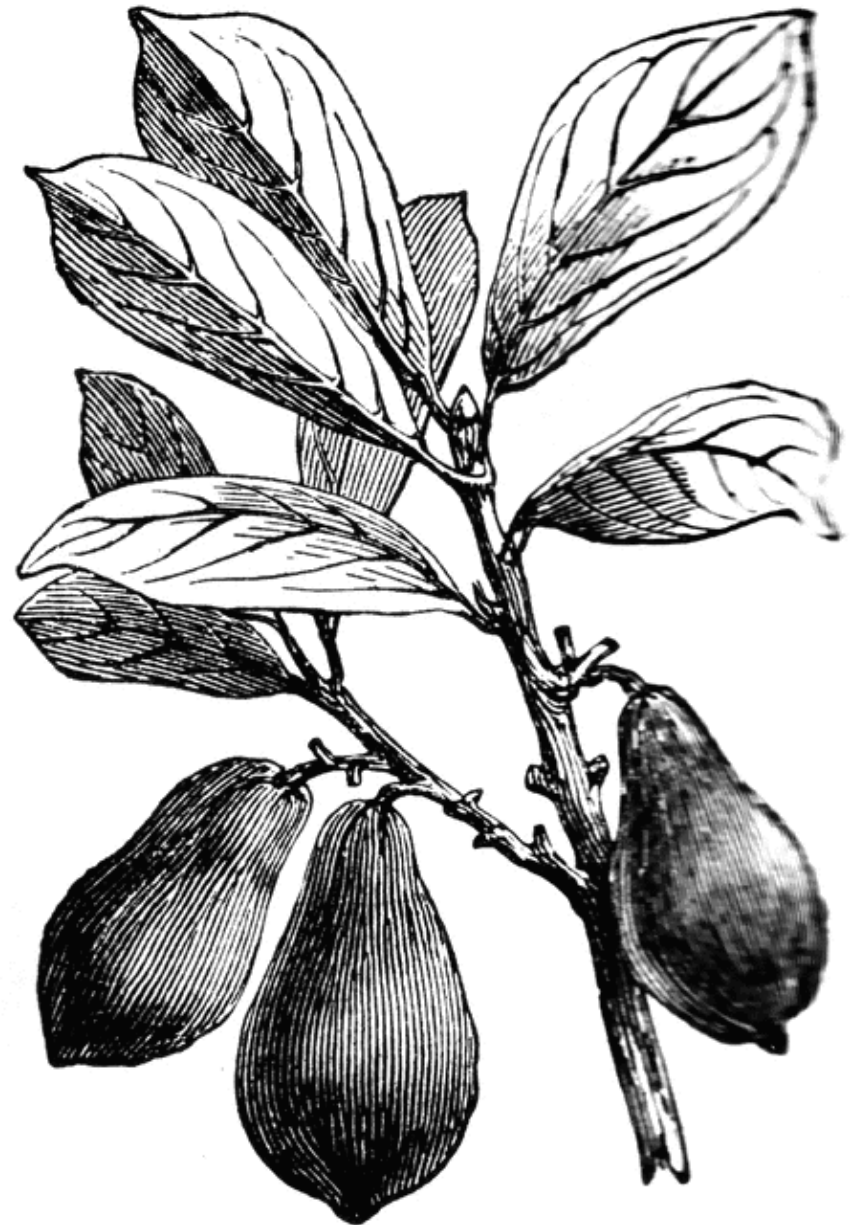


*Breaking the Curse of
Forgotten Places in Mexico*
Community Liberation in Michoacán

by Simón Sedillo



the town center and have now elected a citizens self-defense council as an alternative security force recognized and supported by the community. This is a first step in looking after not only the self-defense and security of the community but also the future of Peribán so that it never falls into the hands of another cartel or organized crime group. One comunitario elder tells me:

We need to figure out how to take community control over the avocado industry. We need to be able to develop small businesses in order to process and market avocado products on a national and international level. We can't go back to foreign corporations taking all the profits from the avocado industry and cutting us out from receiving the fruits of our labor. We don't need government assistance programs, we don't need political parties, and we don't need cartels. What we need is to be free and to be able to make a living and provide dignified employment for our youth so that they will never be tempted to engage in organized crime.

Peribán can now be added to the list of communities in Michoacán who are beginning to practice alternative forms of self-governance.

I think about the young and elder warriors from Peribán, and I realize that Peribán is teaching the rest of us a life lesson. They are teaching us that even though the world of mainstream media, academics, and activists may not be ready to understand and empathize with their situation, the people of Peribán are willing and able to turn to themselves in order to do whatever it takes to make a necessary change in their reality. There are too many forgotten places in this world that are discredited and stigmatized as hopeless, but the people of Peribán are on the front line of communities all over the world who are actively breaking the curse of forgotten places.

Breaking the Curse of Forgotten Places in Mexico

Simón Sedillo

The first successful strategy for community-based self-defense against the Knights Templar cartel in Michoacán came about on April 15, 2011, in the indigenous Purépecha community of Cherán, Michoacán. The implications of the success of this original uprising against the Knights Templar and the narco-government are immeasurable; however, what is evident today is that the strategy has spread contagiously throughout the state and has now even inspired nonindigenous mestizo communities to replicate it. Since February 2013, a variety of communities, both indigenous and mestizo, have risen up in arms, evicted municipal police from their municipalities, evicted the Knights Templar cartel from their territories, and have begun to engage in self-governing strategies founded upon a consensus-based general assembly model. Most nonindigenous mestizo communities in the state of Michoacán have been known to be racist toward indigenous peoples and communities of the state. To now see these mestizo communities exercise indigenous strategies for community liberation is truly historic and groundbreaking.

The Inescapable Imposition of Public Perception

One of the biggest obstacles faced by the comunitarios (self-defense movement) in Michoacán has been the general public's perception on a national and international level. To the misfortune of the comunitarios, public perception is primarily manufactured by the mainstream media, which attempts to standardize and simplify social movements into little palatable boxes labeled good or bad, black or white, and right or wrong. The standards used to determine the social and political validity of social movements are clearly set by

very specific financial and political interests. The problem is that as a global society we have continued to allow such media to be our primary source of collective communication despite all of the obvious hypocritical contradictions. Allowing social movements to be standardized and simplified by the mainstream media suffocates the diversity found in movements for community-based liberation around the world.

There is yet another external imposition on the public perception of the comunitarios, in that most academics, intellectuals, and even many solidarity activists seek “purity” in social movements. There is a tendency to demand a strict political line from the social movements with which they choose to stand and work in solidarity. This selective solidarity has generated a power dynamic of exclusion about who receives attention and who does not, who receives solidarity and who does not, and what is considered a social movement and what is not. Social movements deemed impure are discarded and discredited almost instantly.

Historically, entire sectors of Mexican society have been consistently excluded from consideration as social movements until these communities make themselves heard. The state of Michoacán is one of those places. Mexico and the world have excluded the people of Michoacán from attention, solidarity, support, acceptance, understanding, and from a chance at a dignified life for well over a decade. Even radical leftists have always held the so-called “narco-states” like Michoacán at arm’s length like a pair of dirty underwear and simply concluded, “These places are doomed. These people are doomed. There is nothing to be done here. There is too much corruption. It is too violent. There is no hope.” This dismissive attitude toward communities that have been surviving a very dirty war for the last eight years is partially responsible for the 100,000+ deaths and 10,000+ disappearances celebrated by a variety of cartels throughout Mexico with overwhelming collusion by all levels of the Mexican government.

The youth and elders from Peribán took informal field leadership from these three young men who were extremely humble, respectful, and dignified. Together with these young men, the elders and young men from Peribán employed a security strategy that on the early morning of February 4 proved to be extremely effective. At around 3:00 a.m., a group of well-trained enforcers from the Knights Templar came into Peribán through the avocado orchards on the edge of town and they opened fire on three out of four different barricades in town. The comunitarios returned fire and held their ground. No one on their side was injured but two Templario enforcers were killed in the firefight. The Templarios retreated and to this day have not returned to Peribán. The next day comunitarios combed the orchards on the edge of town and found evidence of the presence of a large group of well-trained Templar enforcers. Several tracks with military-style footwear were visible to the naked eye, as well as resting spots that included knocked over banana trees as well as makeshift beds. Between 2:00 and 2:20 a.m. on March 27, 2014, a second shoot-out took place in the community of Peribán. Someone in a pickup truck shot at a barricade near the city’s center. When the truck tried to make its getaway it was chased by self-defense patrol vehicles from all the other barricades. At that time an additional firefight began at two other barricades closer to the edges of town. Once again the comunitarios reported no injuries. On both occasions the comunitarios were able to defend themselves and their community from this narco-paramilitary advance. The Templar enforcers were clearly employing guerrilla warfare tactics in these two incursions into the community. The fact that the elders, grown men, and young men from the comunitarios were able to fend off these professional attacks and protect their community from what very well could have been a massacre is also historic and incredible. These particular attacks were never mentioned in any of the mainstream media, anywhere.

On February 27, 2014, one month after the uprising in Peribán, comunitarios organized a general assembly in

States, Canada, and Europe. Unbeknown to most guacamole and avocado smoothie consumers in the USA, for the last several years the primary exporter of avocados to the U.S. has basically been the Knights Templar, who, in a process of territorial domination, took control of virtually every aspect of the avocado industry. Landowners, avocado pickers, transporters, resellers, and packagers were all forced to pay protection money directly to the Templars. Not paying meant you would be tortured. Not paying again meant your family would be murdered in front of you, and not paying yet again would result in your assassination. In this way the Templars absolutely dominated profits from the avocado growers and exporters and, over time, completely appropriated several facets of the entire industry. Today comunitarios have liberated Peribán's avocado orchards and have liberated the avocado industry itself. The citizens of Peribán who depend on the avocado industry for their basic survival show their appreciation through direct solidarity and financial support for the comunitario movement.

The comunitarios in Peribán have an intergenerational element to them that has all but been lost in most Mexican mestizo communities. Elders and young men have collaborated with one another to create a self-defense team that is respected by community members. I also met three young men from an outside community who had embedded themselves in Peribán for the long haul. These three young men were no younger than eighteen and no older than twenty-five years old. They have been on the front lines of the battle for self-defense for just over a year now and have become experts in security and in hunting down and assassinating Templars. These three young men left a lasting impression on me. Despite having lost friends and family and then growing into respected and trained killers, they have not lost their humanity. How does anyone live through what they have and not lose their sense of humanity? This is a quality I expect to rarely find among young men with assault rifles anywhere in the world.



Community members take up arms to protect themselves from the drug cartels and corrupt police in Michoacán, Mexico. Credit: Simón Sedillo.

Both indigenous and nonindigenous mestizo communities in Michoacán have been confronted by the same monster. Despite a generalized shunning in public perception, Michoacán has now risen and is clearly prevailing. The ever-growing community-based armed selfdefense movement has forced the world to finally look at Michoacán in a very different way. This comunitario movement has forced the Mexican federal government to mount a highly publicized charade of finally taking the people of Michoacán into consideration. Today it has become painfully clear that Michoacán's problems are not just about drugs, corruption, and organized crime, but are much more related to the very same problems faced by the rest of Mexico: they are the consequence of an imposed military, political, and economic system that, for over twenty years, has treated entire sectors of society as disposable in order to secure territory, cheap labor, natural resources, and profits.

The Military, Political, and Economic Imposition

Through the North American Free Trade Agreement, politicians, banks, and corporations have been imposing a military, economic, and political strategy in Mexico since 1994, which has included the privatization of telecommunications, transportation, education, health care, energy, and, of course, land and natural resources. Indigenous communities throughout Mexico have organized and resisted the privatization of their communally owned lands. In response to a largely unsuccessful land privatization strategy, the Mexican government, with the help of the U.S. government, has increasingly employed a military strategy of internal defense and paramilitarism. Today, a culture of paramilitarism permeates all walks of Mexican society, not just indigenous communities. For every social group that attempts to resist and organize against the military, political, and economic impositions of neoliberalism, there is a paramilitary counterpart ready to act as a provocateur, a shock troop, or even a death squad in order to derail efforts for social change through the threat of violence and brute force.

Paramilitarism entails several specific criteria:

1. That the paramilitary organization be formed of civilians with an opposing point of view to a given civilian social movement, be it social, cultural, labor, religious, geographic, economic, or political.
2. That the paramilitary organization be financed and trained by an official entity such as the military, police, or other official government entities, corporations, banks, or local land barons.
3. That the paramilitary organization carry out acts of violence and brutality as a primary strategy in order to take control of territory and natural resources.
4. That the paramilitary organization functions with complete impunity from prosecution by official government entities.

previously left the community in exile from narco-violence and joined self-defense groups in their advance throughout the Tierra Caliente region of Michoacán. Several comunitarios from Peribán told me that they joined up in the hopes of one day liberating their own community, and on Monday, January 27, 2014, that day came.

After Peribán was liberated, the majority of self-defense groups from other communities continued their advance into Los Reyes, yet some members from outside Peribán remained in the community with members from Peribán to assist in the follow-up strategies of liberating property, identifying lookouts and enforcers still in the community, and engaging in a long-term self-defense strategy for the community. This is the face of the local community base that is the actual backbone of the comunitario movement.

In addition to setting up sandbag barricades as checkpoints throughout the city of Peribán, the comunitarios carried out several guerrilla-style operations to liberate homes, businesses, and property under Templar territory. Any pieces of property with an original owner were returned to the rightful owner. Any property under Templar control without a rightful owner was expropriated by the self-defense groups and is entering a process of collective redistribution. Several vehicles and the vast majority of the weapons used by the comunitarios have been expropriated from the Templars. The final “cleaning” strategy employed by comunitarios was to liberate the avocado orchards surrounding Peribán from Templar control. The day-to-day trips into the surrounding mountains and orchards to hunt down any leftover Templar lookouts and enforcers that I witnessed were very thorough, intense, and also very effective. The people of Peribán agree that their community is safer today than it has been in a very long time.

Peribán’s primary natural resource is the avocado orchards. The “green gold,” as Michoacáños refer to the avocados, is a multi-million-dollar industry, which primarily entails exportation to the rest of Mexico and to the United

public security force known as rural police. The state and federal government asked that the comunitarios cease their advance into new territory while they hashed out the details of the legalization agreement. On January 27, 2014, several representatives of self-defense groups from throughout the state of Michoacán signed an accord with the federal and state government to proceed with a legalization process for the comunitarios, which would include the official registration of members and their weapons with the Mexican Army through the Secretariat of National Defense.

As of the beginning of February 2014, only five hundred of the comunitarios had actually registered with the Secretariat of Defense, while there is evidence of the presence of upward of fifteen thousand of them throughout the state of Michoacán. Despite a now-transparent government attempt to co-opt their movement, the strategy has been largely unsuccessful due to a general distrust of the government and in particular of the army, which has been commissioned to supervise the registration process. Many of the comunitarios I spoke to fear they will be criminalized by the state and federal government. In response to the arrest of a comunitario leader by the name of Hipólito Mora from the community of La Ruana and ongoing conflicts with government officials, on Sunday March 16, the official spokesperson of the comunitario movement, Dr. José Manuel Mireles, announced an official break in relations with the government.

Breaking the Curse of Forgotten Places

Though a ceasefire was technically in effect, the comunitarios on the front line did not stop their advance into new territories and on January 27, 2014, the same day as the signing of the peace accord with the government, they advanced into the community of Peribán, Michoacán. The liberation of Peribán on that day was peaceful and even seemed festive. Peribán was liberated by self-defense groups from the communities of Buenavista, Tepalcatepec, Nueva Italia, Los Reyes, among others, as well as community members from Peribán who had

5. That the acts of violence carried out by the paramilitary organization function as “deniable atrocities” from which state, corporate, banking, or government officials can deny involvement or responsibility, claim internal civilian disputes, and therefore justify further military or police intervention in a given region.

The whole purpose of paramilitarism is to divide and conquer without appearing to do so on an official level, to then justify official militarism and accomplish the ultimate goal of controlling territories and natural resources. The most prevalent cases of paramilitarism in Mexico can be found in land dispute issues within indigenous communities, in particular in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Guerrero. Extensive analysis, research, and investigations have unveiled the extent to which the strategy of paramilitarism has been used to undermine indigenous struggles for land autonomy and self-determination in these states. There is no longer a single doubt about the existence of this low-intensity warfare strategy in these regions.

The Deafening Silence of Narco-Paramilitarism

When it comes to states such as Michoacán, however, somehow the mainstream media, academia, and many solidarity activists have ignored the paramilitary tendencies of organized crime cartels. The people of Michoacán have struggled to survive and persevere in the face of a violent onslaught by three different cartels: the Familia Michoacana, the Zetas, and now the Knights Templar. Michoacán is known worldwide for marijuana cultivation and trafficking, but with a growing U.S. trend toward marijuana decriminalization and legalization, the Knights Templar cartel has now diversified into the production and trafficking of methamphetamine. In a globalized marketplace for cheap labor, land, and natural resources, cartels throughout Mexico have also diversified into a much more profitable industry, which is the use of coercion through violence in order to gain territorial control.

Today the Knights Templar cartel continues to harvest terror with the precision of a military death squad and engages in an international drug smuggling operation. The cartel, however, has also quietly been engaging in private security roles in the interest of illegal natural resource extraction strategies employed by corporations, banks, and political oligarchies.

If we apply the five aforementioned criteria that constitute a paramilitary organization to the cartels, what we see is a level of professional paramilitarism that has now surpassed classic forms of paramilitarism, in that the territorial control exercised is absolute. In addition to trafficking narcotics, kidnappings, torture, coercion, the charging of protection money, rapes, assassinations, organ trafficking, cannibalism, and public displays of mutilations, in Michoacán, the Knights Templar cartel has taken control of entire legitimate industries, such as avocado and lime agribusinesses and mining operations. In other cases, such as in Cherán and Ostula, the cartel has provided armed security for illegal logging endeavors. This is the true face of narco-paramilitarism in Mexico today.

From Smear Campaign to “Legalization”

Despite all the evidence showing that the Knights Templar cartel is the real problem in Michoacán, the mainstream media have continued to vilify the comunitarios by trying to attribute their support networks to other organized crime cartels, in particular to the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación. A serious concern of intellectuals and activists alike is that the federal government is co-opting the comunitarios. Several activists and academics have discredited them as opportunists, mercenaries, and even as state-sponsored paramilitaries modeled after the U.S. military intervention in Colombia. The claim is that they are functioning without community support or involvement and that they do not answer to the communities they liberate.

There may very well be instances of opportunism behind part of the comunitario movement. There may even

be evidence of some of their supposed groups receiving financial support from other cartels in isolated cases, or even cartel members fronting as comunitarios. There is even some evidence of the isolated presence of mercenaries on the front line of some of their advances. There is also clear evidence of the federal government attempting to co-opt the comunitario movement by registering them and their weapons through the Secretariat of National Defense. Yet there is much more evidence of growing community support for the diverse expressions of the self-defense movement on a local level. The movement on the ground is beginning to foment community-based forms of alternative self-governance and self-determination, which are not only directly challenging the cartel but also the government itself and the military, political, economic system that has led to this situation.

As the community liberation strategy spread through Michoacán over the course of several months this last year into the communities of Tepalcatepec, La Ruana, Buenavista, Coalcomán, Aguililla, Nueva Italia, and Antúnez, among many others, the federal and state governments began to convulse. As comunitarios began to surround the Knights Templar urban stronghold in Apatzingán, the federal government responded with a strategy to discredit, criminalize, and disarm the self-defense groups. On January 13, 2014, shortly after liberating the town of Antúnez, the Mexican Army rolled into town and began to aggressively disarm the comunitarios. This was not the first or the last attempt at disarmament of self-defense groups by the military, but on this day things went terribly wrong. Community members from Antúnez came out in support of the comunitarios who were being disarmed, and members of the Mexican Army opened fired into a crowd of unarmed civilians, killing four people, including an eleven-year-old girl.

After months of a mainstream media campaign to criminalize the comunitarios, the federal government suddenly began to speak about the legalization of the self-defense groups by registering them into a little-known