Full Length Article

"The kidnappers are the police": Criminal governance and forced migration in Central America

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ABSTRACT

For decades, citizens of Northern Central America have fled their homes and their countries to escape violence and insecurity. The pervasive fear driving such displacement is rooted in profound suspicions that the state itself may be a primary accomplice in criminal schemes. While scholars and Central American publics alike agree that such "criminal governance" is very real, no one can nail down its precise contours, much less identify how deeply embedded in the state any particular illicit network may be. This article homes in on the play of perception and il/licit power to map how collective doubt about where the state ends and its underworld begins structures criminal predation and forced migration. Drawing on more than a decade of ethnographic research in Guatemala, I map victims' struggles to distinguish between their assailants' "real" and "imagined" powers, showing how illicit networks strategically colonize and leverage this ample space of doubt. Ultimately, I argue that widespread but murky state-criminal fusion and territorial control can make a powerful feedback loop with the threat and reality of violence at criminal hands. This feedback loop in turn acts as a form of disciplinary power, molding targeted subjects and conditioning their agency in everyday life, even haunting them through time and space long after they have "escaped." Such dynamics are a provocation for scholars to rethink misleading distinctions between the state and illicit networks in places like Guatemala to comprehend the lived consequences of contemporary criminal governance.

Central Guatemala, 2018

"I sat on a rock at the edge of the field where the kidnappers had told me to go with the backpack to wait for the next call," Arturo said. About 24 hours earlier, he had received a call from an unknown number. A male voice told him they would kill his brother Cristian if he didn't pay them Q50,000 (US6500).

"It got dark. At about 9 pm, I got a call. They said, 'leave the backpack where you are sitting and leave now.' I said I wanted to speak to my brother. They said, 'leave now or we will kill you too.'" Arturo dropped the backpack and ran. "But I didn't even know where I was or where I was going." He retraced his steps, and the backpack was gone. "'Answer me, answer me,' I called. I heard groaning, and finally I found him … curled up like a drunk. … My soul was leaving my body, I was so happy. Nothing mattered anymore—the suffering and the money …," Arturo said. "I carried him to a creek and washed blood from his face. 'We need to get into town' I told him ' … to report this to the police.' He grabbed me and said, 'No! We aren't going to the hospital or the police. *The kidnappers are the police*.' I finally understood that I had been negotiating with the police all along" (Author Interview, February 2, 2020).[1]

Since the end of Latin America's longest Cold War-era conflict (1960–1996), Guatemala has suffered through the rise of extreme peacetime violence. Perennial insecurity has led to the internal displacement of more than a million people since 1990 and in 2021 alone helped push over 180,000 people to seek asylum (UNHCR, 2022a). Even as homicide rates have fallen precipitously over the last decade (Trejo & Nieto-Matiz, 2023), the collective sense of insecurity has only increased, evidenced by opinion polls (LAPOP 2019), rising investment in private security protection (Yagoub 2017), and waves of forced displacement from (fear of) violence (UNHCR, 2022b). While violent spectacles attributed to "public enemies" like the Mara

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Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang and narcotraffickers periodically draw headlines, the deep-seated sense of insecurity is rooted in a more pervasive problem: Guatemalans do not generally believe that their government can protect them, harboring profound suspicions that the state is in fact a primary accomplice in their victimization; that the kidnappers (or extortionists, gangsters, thieves, and so on) *are* the police (cf Transparency International, 2023; WOLA 2022).

Scholars analyzing such "crime-state symbiosis" (Lupsha 1996) have tended to focus on measuring and assessing how deeply organized criminal groups have infiltrated state institutions, and nailing down how diverse forms of "criminal governance" (Lessing, 2021) impose some version of territorial sovereignty. In Latin America, for example, "hybrid states" (Jaffe, 2013) enforce the interests of licit and illicit stakeholders with state sovereignty itself "fragmented" by competing illicit powers (Davis, 2011). In an effort to fine-tune understanding of how the state and organized crime interface, political geographers working in Central America have gone so far as to categorize distinct combinations of localized state-criminal sovereignty (see Blume et al., 2022). These efforts are useful for piercing the "epistemic murk" (Taussig, 1984) of such conditions and setting a baseline for understanding criminal governance. However, from the perspectives of both victims and perpetrators of illicit predation (as well as general publics) in places like Guatemala, such carefully parsed categories can obfuscate more than they reveal. For Guatemalans, the question of "Where does the state end and the underworld begin?" is too often an existential question without an answer, and one that shapes how people perceive the power of criminal networks in ways that condition the conduct of everyday life and encounters between illicit actors and their victims (Alda, 2014; Brands, 2011; Foucault, 2007). The treacherously vague specter of the criminal state provides illicit actors with astonishing capacity to project power within but also *beyond* the boundaries of particular territories. This forces their victims and potential victims to fall back on their own resources to decide who can be trusted, and how and where they might find sanctuary.

Thus, to understand the consequences of state-criminal collusion in places like Guatemala—and how it drives forced migration and defines migrant itineraries—it is essential to analyze how victims' responses to illicit predation are based in how they interpret their predators' embeddedness in the state. In this article, I map how collective doubt about where the state ends and its underworld begins feeds and shapes illicit power across personal, communal, and even national scales. Ultimately, I argue that widespread suspicions of state-criminal fusion and territorial control can make a powerful feedback loop with the threat and reality of violence at illicit actors' hands. This feedback loop in turn acts as a form of disciplinary power, molding subjects and conditioning their agency in everyday life and in their encounters with illicit predation.

While drawing on a decade of ethnographic research in Guatemala with state-criminal networks and their victims, I focus in on Arturo and Cristian's ordeal in which "the kidnappers are the police" (or might have been). Their story captures the material, social, and psychological consequences of the blurred boundaries between the state and its underworld defining the daily lives and waking nightmares of millions of Central Americans. I frame their experience with data generated through more than a decade of longitudinal ethnographic research in Guatemala with trusted informants among affiliates of Central American illicit networks and state security officials (particularly police), as well as organized crime victims and the communities they have fled. Beginning with trusted informants developed through ethnography in several Guatemalan prisons, I have engaged in hundreds of hours of semi- and unstructured interviews with several dozen imprisoned members of illicit networks. In addition, I have conducted more than 50 interviews with 26 current and former Guatemalan state security officials, and engaged in participant observation through extended visits in police stations and on police patrol ride-alongs in various Guatemalan departments (provinces). Since 2017, I have also conducted ethnographic

research and interviews with community-based legal organizations assisting Central American asylum seekers in the Washington DC area and other parts of the country, conducting more than 60 semi-structured interviews with Guatemalans (and other Central Americans) fleeing state-criminal predation, and in a dozen cases so far have followed up with fieldwork in their communities of origin. Finally, throughout the article I engage with available quantitative data on crime, police corruption, public attitudes towards the state, and so on. However, the weakness of Guatemalan government institutions tasked with measuring crime, coupled with the nature of illicit networks, means that most, if not all, of the available statistics on such phenomena are unreliable. Below, I draw upon these diverse perspectives to show how Arturo and Cristian's experiences are illustrative of wider dynamics governing life in Guatemala.

After laying out conceptual reference points for analyzing criminal governance (Part I. Experiencing the Criminal State) and showing how the Guatemalan state has produced and leveraged "the illicit" across decades of armed conflict and violent peace (Part II. Criminal Cops and Captive Subjects), my argument unfolds in 3 parts. Through the brothers' story of capture, torture, extortion, and flight, I explore how the specter of the criminal state feeds on everyday encounters with and observations of police (Part III. "A Normal Police Stop"), structures encounters between illicit actors and their victims (Part IV. "I Did Not Doubt"), and shapes victims' sense of their predators' territorial reach and authority (Part V. "The Law is Everywhere"). All of this opens a conceptual space for exploring the play of perception and il/licit power to understand how predatorial networks leverage collective doubt about the elusive "real" of criminal governance to hold some Guatemalans captive and push others into exile.

1. Experiencing the Criminal State

Scholars interrogating the entanglement of criminal organizations and state institutions in Latin America struggle to distinguish the strategies and consequences of power exercised by "illicit regimes" from that of the state itself (Lessing, 2021). The problem begins with language. "Illicit" typically means "forbidden by law, rules, or custom", with the state as the prime arbiter doing the forbidding. But in many parts of Latin America organized criminal groups compete, collude with, or even subsume state institutions in all but name (Antillano et al., 2020; Lessing, 2021; Willis, 2015). In Central America, scholarly focus on transnational gangs like the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)—the region's most infamous illicit actor—has helped identify the mechanisms by which gangs defend their territorial claims and control communities (Brands, 2011; O'Neill, 2021; Saunders-Hasting, 2016). Likewise, studies of narco-trafficking organizations have shown how essential their profits and power are in creating socio-political, economic, and even moral order (Arias and Grisaffi, 2021; Tellman & Beth, 2020).[2] In Honduras and Nicaragua, for example, Blume et al. (2022) have even identified five "key pathways"—"Coexistence, Cooperation, Corruption, Competition, and Confrontation"—characterizing how narco-trafficking organizations and state institutions interface in key drug transport corridors.

These efforts are useful for setting a baseline for understanding state-criminal power in the region. However, the focus on such spectacular "public enemies" wielding considerable territorial and even institutional control (while garnering constant media attention) fails to account for a

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[2] Gang organized protection rackets, for example, provide on the one hand a form of "private security for the poor" in urban spaces with long histories of state abandonment and abuse, while also terrorizing and squeezing wealth out of poor urban communities (Fontes, 2016). Narcotrafficking organizations gain control of local state institutions in part by winning over hearts and minds through gestures of public largesse and by providing all manner of licit and illicit job opportunities.

crucial aspect of contemporary criminal predation in the region: how collective uncertainty about the depth and breadth of the state's involvement in crime shapes communal survival strategies, collective notions of territorial security, and individual subjectivities in spaces far beyond gang- or narco-territory and other "illicit geographies" (Margulies et al., 2022). This means that even the most nuanced analyses of criminal governance in Latin America still tend to impose misleading distinctions between how rationalized, bureaucratic state institutions and their illicit counterparts project power over territory and control populations. Writing of narco-sovereignty in northern Mexico, Slack and Campbell (2016, 1384) claim, for example, that, in contrast to Foucault's model of sovereign power, which is "… exercised upon us unknowingly without the need to use overt force," illicit regimes rely upon their capacity to leverage "… direct relationships … interpersonal connections, acts of violence, and essentially, their ability to escape or negate the written law." The threat of direct physical violence is indeed essential to illicit regimes' capacity to control their subjects. But such a hard and fast distinction risks eliding an essential dynamic of contemporary criminal governance: how deeply suspicions of the criminal state have penetrated collective awareness, and how illicit actors leverage such suspicions to control their targets. This dynamic, as I explore below, can constitute an all-encompassing technology of governance dictating collective and individual agency and action in places like 21st century Guatemala.

Thus, while state-criminal collusion in Guatemala and across the region is undeniably real, the full consequences of its reality can only be grasped when understood through the perspectives of its victims. It is essential, then, to explore the subjective implications of a state "always-already" (Althusser, 2017) imagined as aiding and abetting crime, as individuals and communities struggle to identify the overlapping territorial control of state security forces, their criminal doppelgangers, and the submerged networks that conjoin them. Analyzing the mechanisms and consequences of such fragmented and blurred sovereignty requires mapping how people imagine the state as an undifferentiated and monolithic entity (Abrams, 1988), while also delving beneath this illusion to focus "… on the multiple sites in which state processes and practices are recognized through their effects" (Trouillot, 2001, p. 126). This means honing in on how subjects *experience* the state, their points of contact, how these encounters mark them as they struggle for agency (Nordstrom, 2007), and how they understand the state's capacity to help or hurt them across diverse territories.

Territory, as a fundamental political technology (Elden, 2007) of modern states, is key here. It is both the medium and outcome of social and political-economic struggles to exercise control over a particular geographic space and the people and things within it (Ballvé, 2012). The coordinates for navigating between "safe" and "unsafe" territories, as political geographers have shown, are produced through everyday interactions and become socially embedded through embodied practice and publicly circulating narratives (Brenner & Elden, 2009; Soja, 1998). In contemporary Guatemala, for example, stories and images of violence and corruption spread through social and mass media have made the criminal state a public spectacle (Fontes, 2018; Nelson, 2009). Residents of urban "red zones" share everyday observations of police corruption and criminal collaboration (Saunders-Hastings, 2016). Such narratives are spatially projected through the collective production of "geographical imaginaries" of violence and insecurity that identify certain places and communities as dangerous and others as relatively safe (Laliberté 2016; Casas-Cortés 2019), and are essential in migrant decision-making (Thompson, 2017). Such projections are intimately entangled with people's sense of the state and its role in crime. Typically, the impunity of predatorial criminal groups—gangs, narco-trafficking organizations, kidnapping rings, and so on—is limited to certain more-or-less defined territories (cf Chouvy, 2016). The MS-13 gang rules *this* neighborhood, but not *that* one; the Sinaloa Cartel operates along *this* trafficking corridor while rivals control another. However, as I explore below, when discerning between the state and its underworld has become virtually impossible, the borders separating the "imagined territories" of (in)security become so indistinct as to disappear altogether. This makes hard and fast distinctions between "state/licit" and "non-state/illicit" violent actors virtually useless.[3] And nothing blurs the state-criminal divide more than the experience of violent victimization—like Arturo and Cristian's encounter with criminal cops—carving the already pervasive sense of peril deep into victims' bodies and psyches (cf Das, 2008).

2. Criminal Cops and Captive Subjects

Through the making and policing of laws, states are central actors in producing and preserving the divide between the legal and illegal (Brombacher et al., 2022; Tilly, 1985). What's more, it is precisely through *creating* the illicit that the state and the powerful actors it protects are able to legitimate violence against criminalized populations, regularly violating the law itself in the name of preserving societal order (Margulies et al., 2022; Van Schendel and Abraham 2005; Agamben, 2005). [4] However, even the sturdiest of state authorities—like US law enforcement—are regularly caught out engaging in criminal plunder and piracy of the most vulnerable citizens (cf Wang, 2018). And in Guatemala (among many other post-colonial societies), long histories of state abandonment and spectacular abuse have alienated citizens from their governments and sowed deep distrust of the state (Devine, 2014; Nelson, 2009; Transparency International, 2023). From dictatorial rule, through Cold War conflicts, and into the nominally democratic present, the Guatemalan state has, in particularly horrific terms, stamped its authority by playing both sides of the law: outlawing enemy Others labelled as threats to the status quo while performing spectacular violence against such enemies to (re)establish its claims to sovereign power.

Throughout the 20th century, the Guatemalan security apparatus was organized entirely around identifying and stamping out *political* enemies, who were only theoretically subject to written laws. In practice state security forces relied upon clumsily cloaked strategies of extrajudicial capture, captivity, and killing to protect the elite whom they served (Carey Jr, 2013; Goodman & Moynihan, 2012; Manz, 2005). Under General Ubico's rule (1930–1944), for example, prisoners were subject to the *ley fuga* ("flight law") that gave legal cover for their extrajudicial murder.[5] Nominally, the ley fuga was meant to protect state agents who killed prisoners in the line of duty. In practice, guards would escort an "enemy of the regime" to a pre-determined place, and then tell the prisoner that they were free to escape. As the prisoner took a few steps towards imagined freedom, the guard would shoot them in the back (Fontes, 2022).

Beginning in the 1960s, faced with grassroots movements and guerrilla groups targeting elite power and structural inequality, the militarized state dropped escape as an excuse for execution. Instead, trained and funded by the United States government, security forces engaged in the Western Hemisphere's deadliest disappearance campaign. From 1960 to 1996, Guatemalan police and military disappeared more than 45,000 suspected "subversive" (see Manz, 2005; Oglesby & Ross, 2009).[6] As a means of social control, disappearance is effective precisely because it robs those left alive of any sense of closure.

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[3] Elsewhere, Chiodelli and Gentili, (2021) identify the "many shades of gray" in urban governance, mapping how criminal organizations influence urban planning in the Italian context.

[4] As Margulies et al. (2022) write, the state must be understood as "… a bundle of practices engaged in by institutions and actors exerting power within political boundaries …" (Jessop, 2007; Mitchell, 1991), which "… are central in defining, (co)producing, shaping, and benefitting from illicit activities …"

[5] See also Pablo Piccato's (2010) treatment of flight laws in early 20th century Mexico.

[6] The Guatemalan military also massacred more than 150,000 people using scorched earth tactics.

"[Disappearance] raises the perception of danger by placing it in an imaginary world," wrote Suarez Orozco (1987) of the Cold War practice, "unsure but probable, created by the possibility that the disappeared person is alive … Nobody knows the truth. Doubt, prolonged over time, is a highly productive way of sowing fear." For the Guatemalan state, "to disappear" (*desaparecer)* became a key strategy for subjugating recalcitrant populations (Fontes, 2022; Ibarra, 2006). Without the body to mourn, to provide an anchor for popular rage and evidence of a crime, entire communities were paralyzed in a "state of fear" (Green, 1995). Manufacturing doubt through disappearance was also crucial for maintaining US political and financial support, allowing US policy-makers to deny allegations of its allies' atrocities (Doyle, 2011).[7]

Such profound doubts about state violence would remain long after the official end of armed conflict, evolving to fit 21st century circumstances. A corrupted elite-military complex, disgraced and weakened by the 1996 Peace Accords, found new life in lucrative illicit industries that sprang up in peacetime. Fueled most of all by Guatemala's growing strategic importance in transnational cocaine trafficking, tight knit military networks with deep linkages to economic and political elite infiltrated municipal and state governments and gained considerable influence over both security institutions and politics (cf Sanz, 2023). Meanwhile, over the last 25 years, the Guatemalan state, like its neighbors in El Salvador and Honduras, has sought to legitimate a fragile democratic order by targeting *maras* (transnational gangs) like the *Mara Salvatrucha*. Gangs' localized violence and brash iconography have made them useful scapegoats and a smokescreen leveraged by politicians to distract from their own rampant corruption. In the name of cracking down on gangs, Central American governments have remilitarized state security, imposing permanent states of exception over wide swathes of poor urban territory in what Dennis Rodgers (2009) has called 21st century "slum wars". Police continue to prey on citizens beneath the cracked veneer of democracy (Carter, 2014; Cruz, 2011). Thus, the region's governments, once the main authors of Cold War violence, have transformed into essential—if inconsistent and uncertain—accomplices in peacetime violence (Cruz, 2016; Silva Ávalos, 2020). All of this links Cristian's kidnapping to a tragic lineage of Guatemalans captured, confined, tortured, and oftentimes murdered by state agents engaging in illicit predation (or illicit actors posing as state agents). Here, it is important to understand that, as Tazzioli and De Genova (2020, p. 871) write, "all forms of incarceration or detention involve some of the defining features of kidnapping". Discerning between the crime of kidnapping and state practices of hunting and capture depends entirely upon the "often dubious distinction" between what is "lawful" and what is "unlawful". Such distinctions are particularly dubious in Guatemala.

Today, deep uncertainty about the state is built into collective perceptions and survival strategies in Guatemala and across the region. For victims of criminal predation—as well as for the general public witnessing acts of state-criminal collusion both quotidian and spectacular—a sense of security hinges on questions with no clear answers. When state agents appear to be criminal and criminals counterfeit the state, where precisely does the state end and its partners in crime begin? And where can one find sanctuary?[8] As I explore in the following pages, Arturo and Cristian's ordeal with criminal cops (or criminals masquerading as cops) renders visible how this murky play of perception, territorial control, and (il)licit predation can become a dispersed form of disciplinary power—omnipresent, at turns visible and invisible,

and thoroughly integrated into Guatemalans' daily lives (Foucault, 2007).

3. "A normal police stop"

Arturo and Cristian ran a small but vigorous trade in wholesale fruits and vegetables, which seemed to promise a path into Guatemala's tiny, tenuous "middle class" (World Bank, 2020). Cristian, who had been a farmhand in central Guatemala since he was a child, bought produce from farmers across the area, and delivered it to Arturo in "La Terminal," Guatemala City's largest wholesale market. Their business grew rapidly, and Cristian had just purchased a second car—a Toyota 22R pickup truck—when his kidnappers caught him. In the 3am darkness, flashing lights of a police truck appeared in his rearview mirror. He pulled over.

"I thought it was a normal police stop," Cristian recounted. He expected the police to do what they always did when they stopped him—demand a bribe, which he would try to negotiate down before paying, and let him go. Two men wearing balaclavas and black police uniforms approached Cristian's vehicle, brandishing guns and police batons, and instructed Cristian to get out of the vehicle. The sight of masked police was hardly a surprise. As more than a dozen police officers have told me in interviews, it has become commonplace for cops, especially those operating in narcotrafficking corridors, to hide their identities from criminal organizations to protect themselves and their families from reprisal, creating a confusing reflection between the state and its criminal shadow (Fontes, 2018). Not until they grabbed him did Cristian realize something was awry. When he threw himself to the ground, they kicked him to his feet, handcuffed him, and forced him back into the front seat of his car with his head between his knees and hands behind his back. They drove for what seemed like 2 h before pulling him out of the car and into a ramshackle house in the countryside.

Cristian's sense of what would constitute a "normal police stop" illuminates how common expectations of police cast them as criminals in all but name. The powerful figure of the criminal cop, in turn, deepens the "blurred boundaries" (Gupta, 1995) implicating the state in criminal violence. Now, in democratic societies, the police are key to a state's claim to sovereignty by enforcing territorial control over the exercise of legitimate violence (Weber et al., 2004). At the same time, they mark the symbolic boundary at which the promise of democratic sovereignty ends, and the state enacts its will through raw force alone, riding roughshod over the law it pretends to uphold (Benjamin, 2021). This gives the police institution, as Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 2021) long ago observed, a "… nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive ghostly presence …" in even the most ordered and institutionalized societies. In Central America, police are the most visible representatives of state power even as they compete with and are interpenetrated by an array of illicit networks also providing some version of security (Sanchez & Cruz, 2023). As Carter (2019, p. 32) observes in neighboring Honduras, when "officers cannot act with the sovereign authority of the state alone ….what we call 'police corruption' …" is simply a "functional arrangement by which state and non-state actors co-exist". Such "co-existence" is not merely about cooperation. Criminals and police actively leverage one another's symbolic and embodied cultural capital to reify their authority (cf Puck & White 2021; Bourdieu 1986). Gangs, for example, will purchase and use police uniforms to carry out killings with impunity, while police extract bribes by threatening to transport and abandon targeted urban youth in enemy gang territory. Thus, for publics accustomed to witnessing acts of police corruption both quotidian and spectacular, deep distrust in the police is the norm, and cops have come to embody 'both the law and its transgression' (Aretxaga, 2003, 60).[9] The question is not whether police act like criminals, but *how* unabashedly criminal

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[7] Reports published at the armed conflict's end showed that government forces were responsible for at least 90% of all civilian deaths (REMHI 1998).

[8] Today, violence and corruption appear to be important drivers of out-migration from Guatemala. Recent sub-national studies have shown that victims of crime are 50% more likely to intend to immigrate than others, while victims of corruption are 83% more likely to intend to immigrate (USAID, 2023).

[9] Throughout the 21st century, more than 60% of surveyed Guatemalans have consistently viewed their police as corrupted by crime (Cruz, 2015).

they might act in any given encounter, and how completely the image of the criminal cop eclipses collective perceptions of the state.

In Guatemala, despite dogged efforts by reformers to make the police's habitual abuses a thing of the past, the shared image of the criminal cop has remained firmly entrenched in the public eye (Cruz, 2022). Through the 2000s, the state revamped police training methods to focus on protecting human rights even as popular heavy-handed anti-gang legislation remilitarized police intrusions into poor urban communities (Cruz, 2015). Cooperation with US anti-crime and anti-drug institutions led to the creation of elite taskforces targeting transnational narco-trafficking organizations staffed with carefully vetted officers. Concomitantly, the Guatemalan government expanded the National Police (PNC) force in an effort to reach the minimum international standard of 300 personnel per 100,000 residents.[10] In the early 2010s, the United States government funded "model precincts" in some crime-ridden urban areas, in which specially trained officers engaged in intensive community outreach and dropped violent crime rates in their jurisdictions, while anonymous tip-lines provided Guatemalans with a more secure way of reporting crime (Fontes, 2018; Ungar & Arias, 2012). But prosecution of homicides have hovered at around 5%–10% for most of the 21st century. Meanwhile, most crimes—particularly extortion and domestic violence—are never even reported. They are relegated to what analysts call the "*cifra negra*" (black figure) (Guzmán Paniagua et al., 2014), a statistical blackhole that makes accurately quantifying levels of violence in Guatemala impossible. All of this feeds the collective sense that criminals enjoy total impunity, and that the security state is on their side. In opinion surveys from 2007 to 2021, 2/3s of Guatemalans viewed their local police as corrupt, while less than 1/3 felt that the state could protect them (Cruz, 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2021).

Such conditions mean that even the most well-meaning and honest police struggle to protect and serve vulnerable Guatemalans. For example, Commander Estrada, a 20-year veteran of US-funded model precincts in Guatemala City, recalled his sense of powerlessness when engaging with victims of transnational gangs. "An old man called me," Estrada said in an interview. "And he said, 'I need you to help me leave my home because tonight they are coming to kill my family.'" Estrada told him to make a report, but the man interrupted. "'The *only* thing I need,' he told me, and I will never forget the desperation in his voice, 'is to be able to take my family out alive.' So I ordered my men to get them a truck to help them move their stuff. It was the best I could do". Here, as has become far too common, police "protection" meant facilitating the exile that criminal actors had ordered.[11]

Thus, despite decades of efforts to reform police, for most Guatemalans reporting a crime appears at best useless and at worst tantamount to volunteering for one's own execution. Estimates of the proportion of security forces corrupted by crime vary wildly, but in everyday life, such numbers matter much less than the collective calculation—vague as such calculations may be—that calling the police will only increase the risk of victimization. And nothing entrenches such conclusions more powerfully than direct experiences and observations of police colluding with criminals to enact their own "shadow-state" whose territorial boundaries can never be precisely drawn (Harriss-White, 2002).

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[10] Between 2014 and 2017, the Guatemalan police force grew from 209.2 per 100,000 residents to 232.6 per 100,000 residents (The Central America Monitor, 2020).

[11] Police interlocutors emphasized the disproportionate power that police linked to organized crime can exercise. "Just one officer working with the MS-13 in a single precinct undermines every investigation taking place there," said a 12-year veteran of Guatemala City's anti-gang unit (Anonymous, 2022). They also emphasize how vulnerable *police themselves* are to the corrupt colleagues, claiming they do not share personal information with their colleagues for fear of such information being passed to organized criminal actors.

A lifetime of such observations and experiences conditioned Arturo's response when his brother's captors called him. "My cell phone rang from a number I didn't recognize," Arturo recounted. "A stranger's voice said, 'You are Arturo Ruiz and we have your brother.'" When he hung up, they called back, and told Arturo they would kill Cristian unless he paid Q50,000 (US6500). "I didn't know if they were for real or not, or who the man was, so I asked to speak to my brother," Arturo continued. "He said, 'Oh you want to play?' Then I heard a man being beaten and groaning in pain … my instinct told me that it was Cristian." Arturo claimed that going to the police never crossed his mind. "I lived where there are drug-corners (*puntos)* where they sell drugs," he explained. "The police come by, and one sees … how they receive their little bite (*mordida)*. The traffickers keep working, fucking things up, killing people. They're coordinated with their police informants, they know when a raid will happen. So, to what precinct do I even go to make a report?" With doubt about the state so deeply carved into his experience (Das, 2008), Arturo's conduct in response to such threats was determined long before the fateful call. He shrugged. "The man told me, 'You have 24 hours,' and that I should keep my phone turned on because he would call later to give me instructions about where to bring the money."

4. "I did not doubt"

Despite scholarly efforts to parse the power of illicit regimes from that of the state itself, criminal governance is oftentimes so deeply embedded in larger domains of state power that disentangling one from the other becomes conceptually and empirically impossible (Lessing, 2021). In everyday life, such conditions create a veritable "hall of mirrors" (Aretxaga, 2003) where people struggle to distinguish "real" threats from those posed by pretenders, or produced out of paranoia. Illicit groups like that which kidnapped Cristian succeed by taking on a variety of dangerous identities operating within the indefinite but undeniably real overlap between state security forces and criminal organizations. Cristian's kidnapping forced him and his family to confront and navigate this hall of mirrors—never sure who the authors of their suffering were. In turn, the kidnappers leveraged this space of doubt by "acting like a state": projecting territorial control through surveillance, behaving "above the law," and acting as both punisher and protector of their confused and terrified victims (Robbins, 2008; Scott, 1999; Wedeen, 2003).

Two weeks after paying the ransom and rescuing his brother, Arturo received another call from men claiming to be Cristian's kidnappers. This time they demanded Q75,000 (US9800), or they would kill Gabriel, Cristian's first-born son, who they explicitly named. Two days later, Cristian moved his wife and daughters to a relative's home in the countryside and fled Guatemala with Gabriel, crossing through Mexico to apply for asylum at the US-Mexico border. Arturo also attempted to go into hiding with other relatives in the countryside. But he was unable to make ends meet in farm work. He returned nine months later to Guatemala City and used seed capital (raised from remittances sent by Cristian) to open another fruit and vegetable kiosk in La Terminal. A week later, however, the kidnappers called again.

In Guatemala, "copy-cat extortion"—where would-be extortionists dialing random numbers play-act as transnational gangsters, coercing money from anonymous strangers—has become a basic feature of everyday life (Dudley, 2012; Fontes, 2022). The vast majority of such rackets are run from inside Guatemala's prisons, and like the "counterfeit kidnappings, hijack hoaxes, and bogus burglaries" globally on the rise (J. Comaroff & Comaroff, 2007, p. 138), succeed by leveraging general fear and vulnerability. Just as police and criminal gangs borrow from one another's symbolic capital to reify their respective power and colonize their victims' doubt, copy-cat extortionists employ the slang and aliases of the *Mara Salvatrucha* and other infamous criminal groups to isolate and control their targets. Such schemes illustrate how influential collective doubt about crime and collusion can be, and undermine

efforts to measure extortion rates. Whereas officials claim that 80% of extortion demands are from toothless copycats based in prison (Lopez 2019), only about 5% of reported extortions are ever prosecuted (Clavel 2019). Meanwhile, it is believed that more than 75% of extortion threats are *never even reported* to state authorities (Cawley 2018; Mendoza, 2023).

Unlike "real" extortion threats, however, copy-cats have no networks to gather intelligence or carry out threats. Arturo's persecutors distinguished themselves from such toothless affairs in their opening overture. "When I answered, they told me, 'Yeah we've been meaning to talk to you. You know how we do things," Arturo mimed speaking on the phone. "'We have your wife on the list. Your house is on block 102 in sector two, and sector two is the nicest around there. Your wife's name is such and such. Outside your house there is a red car. So you see we know everything.'" They demanded he deposit Q15,000 (US2000) the following day. When Arturo attempted to negotiate, they invoked the memory of his brother's torture and its lingering trauma. "'We know you'll get it,'" they told him. "'Cuz if you don't we'll take your wife by the throat to the slaughter,[12] and what happened with your brother will happen again.' So I panicked."

The predators' sharp demonstration of their capacity to track and hurt Arturo wove an invisible web paralyzing him in place (see Mitchell & Heynen, 2009). Their identity, in Arturo's mind, became a disordered palimpsest of the "usual suspects" of criminal violence and victimization, a list that extends to include public enemies, public servants, and anonymous civilians with whom he may have worked. "I cannot say with any certainty (*a ciencia cierta*) if they were cops, if they were gangsters, if they were from La Terminal …" Arturo said? My brother and I are like *that,*" Arturo entwined his hands. "So when they kidnapped him I fell apart. When they called again, that memory came back to terrorize me, and I did not doubt." As if caught in a recurring nightmare, he once again spent the next 24 h scrounging for funds. As the deadline approached, he was driving a borrowed motorbike through city streets emptied by COVID-19 pandemic curfew in search of a bank to deposit the "*cuota.*" He was Q1000 (US130) short, for which, Arturo said, "They abused me, they scolded me. 'Don't play with us,' they said." The next day he sold a cellphone and his shoes to make the last payment.

The group preying on Arturo leveraged confused reflections between the law and outlaw by acting in turn as both untouchable predator and concerned protector. Were these cops playing the part of gangsters, or criminals cos-playing as cops? Or both? Or something else altogether? In conversation, Guatemalan civilians will oftentimes refer to the police as "just another gang" (Fontes, 2018). Meanwhile, the most sophisticated criminal organizations actively recruit *kaibiles* (Guatemalan military special forces); conscript police, prosecutors, judges and politicians into their ranks (Dudley, 2016); and mimic police surveillance and search and seizure techniques. Without the easy dichotomies of good and evil so often impugned upon the struggle between "law" and "outlaw" it becomes impossible to say "… who is the imitator and who is the imitated, which is the copy and which is the original" (Zilberg, 2007, p. 46).

Against the overwhelming uncertainty inspiring such questions, illicit predators impose their will by showing that they, unlike the state, are fully capable of following through on their promises. After Arturo texted an image of the final deposit receipt, his predator made a request. "'You're going to do me one last favor,'" Arturo mimed holding a phone to his ear. "'I'm going to give you four numbers. You're going to send credits of Q100 to each number … And if something happens to any of the people who have these numbers, we'll know it was you and we'll come and kill you and your whole family.'" Providing Arturo with such details meant entrusting him with considerable evidence that, in the

hands of investigators, could presumably lead to arrests. Instead, it convinced Arturo of his predator's invincibility. "They were so confident in their capacities that they could give the numbers that I could use to report them," he said. "And they could kill me without anything happening. That's why I think they were a really strong organization." Such-self-assured "transparency"—informing Arturo precisely to whom his money should be sent—is, ironically, a hallmark of "good governance" (Hood & Heald, 2006) that is sorely missing in Guatemalan state institutions (Dotson, 2014).

Putting in perspective just how confused and disordered the roles of law and outlaw have become, the police/kidnappers/extortionists' last move was to flip the script and pose as Arturo's protectors. Now, protection rackets are "organized crime at its smoothest" (Cruz, 2010, 382), but the "protection" has a double meaning, depending on one's relationship to an identified danger and the available means of shelter. Or, as Charles Tilly (1985, p. 169) aptly put it "' … protection' calls upon images of the shelter against danger provided by a powerful friend, a large insurance policy, a sturdy roof … [or] … it evokes the racket in which a local strong man forces merchants to pay tribute in order to avoid damage—damage the strong man himself threatens to deliver". "'And after you've done all that," the voice told Arturo. "'I'm going to give you a code … so if someone else bothers you, you will just tell them that you already dealt with X.[13] Keep my number so you can call me for help.'" This final offer—or was it a threat?—conjured the image of a coordinated network linking police (or criminals in police drag) with a vast web of cold-blooded extortionists and their legions of civilians with bank accounts primed for funds extracted from victims like Arturo. Arturo went from abject victim to being cast as a "client" dependent on his predators for protection. Thus, this network took on the trappings of a state(-like) entity: projecting deep territorial control, drawing the lines between legitimate and illegitimate extraction, employing violence to protect the loyal, and promising to punish those who transgress these boundaries (Tilly, 1985; Weber et al., 2004). And it did all this by mining the bloated margins of the blurred state-criminal divide.

5. "The law is everywhere"

Arturo and Cristian's encounter with this illicit organization deepened and distilled their already powerful sense of fear and paranoia, and destroyed entirely their attenuated trust in Guatemalan police. Their torture and trauma transformed their perceptions of where, when, and with whom they could be safe. In this last section, I explore how their experiences and responses to trauma remapped the "imagined territory" of security and state-criminal control (Anderson, 1983; Cabañas, 2014; Lefebvre, 1991) in distinct ways. Arturo believed he could escape his predators within Guatemala's borders and joined the practically invisible army of internally displaced persons.[14] Cristian fled the country, permanently marked by the sense that he could never be safe in Guatemala. It is such distinct geographic imaginaries of threat, and their imbrication with the elusive "real" of illicit power, that hold poor Guatemalans captive or push them into exile.

Like so many Guatemalans, the brothers' vulnerability to illicit predation was conditioned by poverty and how it dictates mobility. Those who can afford to properly secure themselves need not feel so

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[12] Arturo quoted his predator saying "*traigamos tu esposa del buche.*" "Del buche" is Guatemalan slang associated with cattle herding—it literally means "by the throat" and connotes dragging an animal to slaughter.

[13] "X" was his nickname (*apodo*).

[14] Data on internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Central America is notoriously unreliable. In 2021 the UNHCR estimated that violence internally displaced 250,000 Central Americans (UNHCR, 2021), but their count drew entirely upon government statistics. The Guatemalan government does not provide any data on IDPs in Guatemala, and no monitoring agency has comprehensively tracked IDPs in Guatemala since 1997 (IDMC 2023).

exposed to shadowy threats, and those wealthy elite able to mobilize the coercive power of the state feel safer still (Silva Ávalos, 2021).[15] But such inequalities are part and parcel of the production of Arturo and Cristian's victimhood; the reliance of the relatively wealthy on private security has accelerated the breakdown of public security while insulating the elite from its worst consequences (Espino, 2023; Caldeira, 1998; O'Neill & Fogarty-Valenzuela, 2013). Most Central Americans have no means to effectively counter such predation, while the powerful and privileged have little incentive to control it. Once threatened, then, how could Arturo, Cesar, and their family find *affordable* sanctuary? To capture how structural violence and the carceral state collude, Lewis et al. (2015) conceptualize a "continuum of unfreedom" in which subjects' hyper-precarity and socio-legal status together fix vulnerable bodies in place. In Arturo's case, poverty left him and his family few viable options for escaping the reach of state-criminal power. After making his last payment, he embarked on a circuitous journey across urban spaces that provides a nuanced portrait of how state-criminal regimes operate distinctively across various territories, and how poor Guatemalans displaced by violence must navigate a confusing array of state-criminal orders.

While the network hunting Arturo drew on specific points of contact and surveillance, and he could break free of their gaze, poverty forced him to relocate to communities where, at every turn, state-criminal rule seemed to threaten his family's sanctity. First, they moved in with his wife's parents in Ciudad Peronia,[16] a suburban satellite of Guatemala City, and one of dozens of Guatemalan municipalities ruled by officials whose governance is built upon barely submerged state criminal networks (Montepeque, 2023, p. 12). Arturo found himself surveilled by local thugs allied with the government. "They would smoke marijuana on a corner, and I would tell myself, 'no it is not about me.' But sometimes they would follow me, and when I was with my wife they would stare me down. And I thought oh god help me!"

Shortly before Arturo moved into Ciudad Peronia, the "gangsters" surveilling him had virtually captured Peronia's municipal government through the election of a mayor who owed his victory to votes compelled by leaders of Ciudad Peronia's homegrown gang "Los Caballos."[17] In return, the mayor made the Caballos' leader "deputy mayor" of Ciudad Peronia. "The Caballos aren't allied with the government," a resident of Ciudad Peronia said in an interview, "they *are* the government."[18] Ciudad Peronia's illicit and licit economies merged; the gang's extortion rackets were folded into taxes collected by the deputy mayor's office. The Caballos—rebranded as the "Patrollers of Peronia"—and the police together enforced the rule of law—dropping homicides in the first half of 2019 to nearly zero (Anonymous, 2020). Despite such efficient "security", in interviews I conducted with Peronia residents they expressed deep fear of the state-criminal authorities, sentiments that Arturo shared. "I felt in Peronia that sooner or later something would happen to us," Arturo said. "I knew the gangsters were watching me each time I passed."

In Guatemala, as elsewhere, security is a real estate premium. Relatively wealthy urbanites tend to hide behind walls and armed guards or in high rises proliferating across the skyline (O'Neill & Fogarty-Valenzuela, 2013), while small and medium businesses invest as much as 30% of their income on private security (Espino, 2023). For Arturo, as for nearly all working poor, finding affordable urban housing meant braving the city's "red zones" and other "illicit geographies" where narcotraffickers and gangs are known to operate. After moving twice more to neighborhoods where he watched "… police come by, get their money [from narco-traffickers], and leave again", he and his wife finally returned to the ground floor of his parents' home, where they were living when all of this began. To scrape out a sense of security, they imprisoned themselves in an improvised "fortified enclave" (Caldeira, 1998) to conceal their very existence from the state-criminal gaze. "We sealed the windows and barred the door to make a bunker, so that the neighbors say that the people who once lived there don't anymore." The sense that he could be discovered and targeted again pervades every waking moment, and shapes how he navigates everyday life. "I never go out during the day," he said, "I have no friends. My wife goes to visit her mother before dawn in a taxi. She comes back when the streets are quiet … I just can't trust anyone anymore. Because I don't know with certainty where they get their information from." Such is the disciplining power of their doubt that they have chosen to live in isolation, virtually "disappearing" themselves in improvised captivity behind walls and subterfuges. And all of this to escape what they imagine to be the all-seeing eyes of an all but anonymous state-criminal network (cf Foucault, 2007).

Cristian, for his part, chose exile. Four years after fleeing to the United States with his son, he resides in a Washington DC suburb, and his trauma is carved into his body and his mind (Das, 2008; Green, 1995). A permanent limp reminds him daily of his torture, he has fits of trembling and trouble sleeping, and he no longer distinguishes the Guatemalan state from its underworld. He is absolutely unwilling to take the everyday risks with which his brother lives. Like Arturo, he has embraced over-weening secrecy to protect his loved ones. Even after years of separation from his wife and daughters, he has not told them why he fled the country. "So that they would not worry," he said, "or ask the wrong questions." He does not want his family to share his fear. Each passing police car, he said, was no longer merely the threat of venal, everyday corruption –"where they get their bite and move on"—but rather a presentiment of inescapable terror. For Cristian, his predators *are* the state, with all the amorphous, subjugating, and fluid forces, actors and practices that the "state idea" entails (Abrams, 1988; Ballvé, 2012; Gramsci, 1977). Their reach is not limited to particular, isolated places. It encompasses the country itself, making all of Guatemala a single contiguous "illicit geography" (Margulies et al., 2022) saturated with his predators' power. I asked him why he could not go back to Guatemala. "The law!" he exclaimed. "The law is everywhere, their hands in everything." Thus, for Cristian, the specter of the criminal state eclipsed and nullified any residual belief in legitimate state security. He imagines the police's capacity to surveil, to follow, to trap to be firmly in criminal hands. Such fusing of visceral experience and subjective projection— in divers and complex combinations— is essential for understanding how fear of the criminal state shapes victims' responses to violence, and how and where they search for safety.

6. Conclusion

Arturo and Cristian's ordeal reveals a powerful feedback loop linking widespread suspicions of the criminal state with the threat and reality of illicit predation holding people captive, squeezing them for all they're worth, and forcing them to flee. Their story is a real life version of collective nightmares that haunt Guatemala's body politic—and much of Central America— nightmares that increasingly mirror reality in what is becoming a deepening spiral of criminal capture of state institutions driving people out of their homes and out of their countries (Call &

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[15] Case in point: in the 1990s, when kidnapping crews targeted Guatemala's elite families, the Guatemalan security state effectively mobilized to capture perpetrators and effectively stamped out the targeting of rich families. However, in the last decade, various anti-extortion laws and policies have failed to reign in proliferating rackets (cf Fontes, 2022).

[16] As studies of internal displacement show, kin networks are crucial for poor Central Americans forced out of their homes, whether by violence, natural disaster, or otherwise (Menjívar, 1997).

[17] I have conducted ethnographic research in Ciudad Peronia with residents, security officials, and a variety of civil society organizations since 2010.

[18] In a 2022 interview, a former member of the Caballos imprisoned for murder lamented, "The way things are now, I never would have gotten caught. We run that town now." (May 25, 2022).

Hallock, 2020).[19] As I have shown, the power of predators to control their targets is lodged in the blurred boundaries linking the state to its underworld. By capitalizing on deep histories of abusive state practices, illicit organizations do not necessarily need the riches and influence flaunted by powerful narco-traffickers, or the territorial control and spectacular public image of transnational gangs. They merely need to tap into their victims' sense of vulnerability lodged in the shared understanding that the state may well be on the predators' side, and in any case, no one is coming to the rescue. This enables a stunning diversity of (dis)organized networks to colonize the dissolving border between state and criminal enterprises, project a sense of far-reaching authority, and exploit their victims as they see fit. These dynamics are a provocation for geographers to expand analysis of criminal governance to explore how inextricably linked the "real" of criminal governance is with the ways its subjects perceive their predators' power.

Such attention is sorely needed, because victims of such predation continue to be disciplined and constrained long after they have "escaped". IDPs like Arturo struggle to find refuge from criminal governance within national borders, compelled by poverty and fear into a form of "self-imprisonment" (*auto-contencion)* to gain a sense of safety. In all likelihood, this self-imposed isolation feeds into IDPs' profound invisibility (Polzer & Hammond, 2008), and in Guatemala, no systematic or accurate count of IDPs has been taken since 1998 (IDMC, 2019). Meanwhile, for those who flee to the United States, the murky conditions they seek to escape haunt the journey north and undermine their efforts to find sanctuary. In Mexico, Central Americans must travel through distinct territories of state-criminal collusion. Failure to recognize the appropriate il/licit power can mean deportation, kidnapping, extortion, and even death (Slack, 2019). These dynamics have intensified "migrant disappearability" along the Central America-Mexico-United States migration corridor in ways that govern Central American migrants' daily life (Laakkonen, 2022). Finally, lacking police reports and other "evidence" to corroborate their testimonies, and oftentimes ignorant of precisely *who* they are running from, many Central Americans struggle to prove their claims "credible" in US asylum court. They continue to face the highest rates of rejection among all those applying for asylum in the United States (TRAC, 2020).

Whilst violent spectacles of illicit power shape everyday life south of the US-Mexico border, it is a mistake to pretend that criminal governance somehow ceases to discipline migrants just because they cross into US territory. Today, kidnapping migrants has become an essential US border enforcement tactic (Tazzioli & De Genova, 2020). Cristian experienced this firsthand. After traveling through Mexico, he and his son Gabriel crossed the Rio Grande and turned themselves in to US Border Patrol, requesting asylum. Border officials took them into custody and sent them to separate facilities. For more than a month in captivity, Cristian's guards tried to leverage his desperation to be with Gabriel to make him give up on asylum. Each time he asked to see his son, his captors told him that, unless he signed papers for voluntary departure back to Guatemala, he would never see Gabriel again. The kidnappers are the police indeed.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Acknowledgements

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