In the Name of Justice: Lynch Mobs and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico

On October 19, 2015, a mob of hundreds of people lynched José Abraham and Rey David Copado Molina in the main square of Ajalpan, a town located in the state of Puebla. The municipal police had apprehended the brothers hours earlier, after neighbors accused them of trying to kidnap a little girl. Rumors had been circulating in the town for days about cases of child theft linked to the trafficking of human organs, none of which had been substantiated by police investigations. The brothers, both in their thirties at the time of their death, had allegedly been seen talking to the girl. Questioned by the police, they denied the allegations against them and stated they were pollsters doing a survey on tortilla consumption. Their employer in Mexico City corroborated their claim when contacted by the police, and the alleged victim, joined by her parents at the police station, stated she had never seen the brothers before. Despite evidence of their innocence, a group of neighbors began ringing the church bells, announcing that a collective killing was about to take place. The twenty policemen who were protecting José Abraham and Rey David were quickly outnumbered by the mob, which broke into the police station and then the municipal offices carrying machetes, chains, and metal clubs. The mob dragged the men into the streets and proceeded to beat and torture them and finally burned their already inert bodies in a bonfire made of paper and wood. After the lynching, the mob vandalized the municipal offices and set fire to them and adjacent buildings.

Covered extensively by national and international newspapers, the lynching of José Abraham and Rey David became a symbol of the insecurity and sense of distrust of state authorities that continues to permeate neighborhoods and communities in contemporary Mexico. In a country where 98 percent of murders go
unpunished, the case was referred to as an example of the type of violence that citizens were willing to carry out and tolerate in the name of justice. Reflecting on the motivations of the perpetrators and the context that made this lynching possible, a *New York Times* article stated, “Tired of government corruption and indifference, the mob fashioned its own justice, part of a longstanding problem that Mexican officials say is on the rise.”

Notwithstanding the attention it received at the time, the lynching of the two men in Ajalpan was not very different from the hundreds of cases that have been reported in the country over the past several decades. Furthermore, the case has important similarities with several instances of mob violence that took place in the first half of the twentieth century, during Mexico’s post-revolutionary period. Characterized by an analogous sequence of events, lynchings that took place from the 1930s to the 1950s began with a rumor or accusation transmitted by neighbors or passersby. The tolling of church bells often followed, allowing neighbors to congregate and possibly participate—either as perpetrators or witnesses—in the lynching. After a mob seized the suspect, people gathered in a public space, whether a plaza, a public school, or a church, wherein dozens or even hundreds of individuals beat, hanged, stoned, or burned the victim. The police or local authorities were sometimes present but were not always able or willing to save the victims. If the wrongdoing pertained to an attack against the church or against the Catholic religion, the overt or covert presence of religious authorities during the incident was not uncommon. Although lynchings were by and large local events, journalists contributed to making them known to a wider public.

The attempt to lynch Valentín Moyetón Flores on April 11, 1957, shows how extralegal justice has endured across different periods in Mexico, according to a recognizable script. On that day thousands of people—women, men, and children—gathered in the main square of the neighborhood of Xochimilco in Mexico City with the intention of lynching Valentín. The incident unfolded after a group of neighbors saw Valentín forcing three boys—around eleven or twelve years old—into his automobile. Believing he wanted to kidnap the children, they began to toll the church bells in order to warn others of the presence of the alleged criminal. A large crowd surrounded the man, who escaped the mob and took refuge in the police station. Once there, the crowd demanded that authorities hand over the so-called criminal so they could Lynch him. Angered and frustrated, some men started to throw stones into the police station while others vandalized Valentín's automobile. A man who tried to appease the crowd was beaten and stoned. Despite the presence of more than sixty police officers, the police station was severely damaged. Like the two brothers in Ajalpan, Puebla, Valentín Moyetón Flores turned out to be innocent. In an interview with the newspaper *Excélsior*, Valentín stated he was a police officer whose intentions were not to kidnap the children but to take them to the police station after a woman named Carmen López had accused them of robbery.
Despite their sensational character, lynchings are not isolated or anomalous events. Rather, they are recognizable sociological and historical phenomena that can be studied in terms of their motivations, organization, and cultural and political significance. Over the past forty years scholars have documented an increase in the incidence of lynching, with attempted or actual cases reported with greater intensity in the states of central and southern Mexico: Puebla, Estado de México, Mexico City, Oaxaca, Morelos, and Chiapas. In the vast majority of cases, accusations brought against the victims were based on an account provided by a few witnesses, with rumors circulating before or during the event, adding to the frustration and anger that makes the collectivization of violence possible. Although there are considerable variations in these cases, with some involving as many as three hundred or four hundred perpetrators and others fewer than a dozen, all are characterized by the use of collective, brutal, and overt forms of violence.

The occurrence of these acts of violence is at odds with a narrative that celebrates the consolidation of Mexico's democratic institutions as well as its claim to be one of the most thriving global economies. At the same time, incidents of mob violence reflect a darker side of the country's contemporary context, one that involves a pervasively corrupt justice system, high rates of economic inequality, and homicide rates that by most accounts surpass the number of deaths associated with civil war and traditional political conflict.

Mexico is not alone in this seemingly paradoxical path. Most Latin American countries are considered fully functional electoral democracies that are well integrated into the global economy and that possess a vibrant civil society and active citizenry. Nevertheless, most countries continue to struggle with high levels of violence, weak justice systems, and, increasingly, the emergence and proliferation of various forms of vigilante justice. Lynching, in particular, has been on the rise in countries as different as Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador, Guatemala, Venezuela, and Mexico, just to mention some of the most visible and most frequently analyzed cases.

This book defines lynching as a collective, extralegal, public, and particularly cruel form of violence aimed at punishing individuals considered offensive or threatening by a given group or community. In the Latin American context, lynchings are characterized by different levels of ritualization and premeditation and do not necessarily lead to the victim's death. Nonetheless, most of them involve an unusual and excessive use of violence, such as the torture, mutilation, burning, or hanging of the victim in prominent public spaces. In spite of their illegality, lynchings are not considered criminal or unlawful by the perpetrators. Rather they regard their recourse to violence as a legitimate means to attain justice.

In Mexico and other Latin American countries, lynchings are part of broader range of extralegal and collective forms of justice perpetrated by both state and non-state actors, including self-defense forces, death squads, and vigilante groups.
or organizations. Although new technologies of communication, including the use of cell phones and social media, have transformed the ways in which lynchings are publicized, the tactics of violence used by perpetrators have not undergone any discernible change. These tactics include hanging by a noose—the most identifiable form of lynching in the United States—as well as beating, maiming, stoning, burning, and killing by gunfire.

The occurrence of lynching across different countries in the region reflects the deep-rooted challenges posed by the state’s incapacity to uphold the rule of law and citizens’ proclivity to endorse undemocratic or uncivil attitudes and values. This book originated in an interest to elucidate Mexico’s and Latin America’s present-day challenges of violence and insecurity through the lens of lynching. Despite their short-lived character, lynchings are grounded in intracommunity conflicts and historical dynamics that precede and inform their occurrence. As collective responses to an alleged wrongdoing or threat, lynchings also express people’s shared notions of deviancy and danger, as well as communities’ perceptions of the legitimacy of the state and its capacity to provide citizens with security and justice.

The analysis of lynching allows us to illuminate some of the most pressing questions regarding Latin America’s trajectory of violence and state formation: How does the state establish its authority and legitimacy over a given population? How is violence sanctioned, normalized, or contested by the state and by civil society? How are conceptions of crime and danger constructed, and through which mechanisms are they controlled, punished, or disciplined?

Scholarly literature on lynching in Latin America has by and large interpreted this practice as a recent reaction to increasing perceptions of crime, in a context characterized by unequal access to justice and by corrupt or unresponsive state institutions. This book acknowledges the contributions made by this literature but argues also that prevailing interpretations of lynching have fallen short of elucidating the political, cultural, and long-term underpinnings of the practice. By construing lynching as a recent phenomenon, this literature has explained mob violence as an expression of the region’s contemporary levels of insecurity and criminality. This has, perhaps inadvertently, precluded scholars from analyzing alternative interpretations concerning the political and cultural motivations of this practice as well as its relation to citizens’ understanding of justice.

In the case of Mexico, in particular, scholars have construed lynching as a novel phenomenon whose occurrence and apparent proliferation during the past four decades can be explained by looking at the increase in insecurity and crime, on the one hand, and at the state’s incapacity to respond to crime, on the other. All these factors—insecurity, crime, and lack of state response—are often examined against the backdrop of an unfinished process of democratization that, coupled with neoliberal reforms, has allegedly led to the weakening of the state’s capacity to control and govern local communities. According to these perspectives, lynching occurs
in a context in which state authority is assumed to be absent, weak, or in crisis, or where corporatist relations that belonged to the hegemonic Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI; Institutional Revolutionary Party) have been replaced by unruly social spaces and by self-help forms of justice.

By examining Mexico’s uncharted history of lynching during the post-revolutionary years (1930s–1950s), a period that laid the foundation for the dynamics of coercion and resistance that followed the establishment of the PRI, In the Vortex of Violence brings to the fore a number of alternative political and cultural factors that have shaped the history of this practice in the country and that have been largely underexamined or unexplored.

Through an examination of more than three hundred cases of lynching and attempted lynching, I trace how this practice, instead of signaling state absence, was triggered by the presence of state authorities that were nonetheless perceived by communities as insufficient or incapable of providing the type of justice people deemed appropriate or necessary to punish transgressions. I suggest that lynching reflected the dynamics of coercion, resistance, and negotiation that characterized citizens’ encounters with state authorities at the local level. In this respect, lynching constituted a means to resist the encroachment of the state in given communities, but it also echoed the use of coercive and extralegal forms of social control perpetrated with the consent and overt participation of public authorities—from mayors to police officers and military personnel. In addition, lynching reflected the dynamics of negotiation and accommodation between citizens and state authorities (in particular, police officers) in regard to the provision of security and the administration of justice.

In addition to examining the ways in which lynching was shaped and contributed to shaping citizens’ interactions with the state, this book traces the manifold behaviors, practices, and beliefs that precipitated lynching. It shows that instances of mob violence were triggered by perceptions and representations of wrongdoers as individuals who deserved to be punished by physical, swift, and extralegal means. In this sense, rather than crime levels per se, it was discourses and representations surrounding crimes and suspected wrongdoers that drove support for this practice. The book also points to the importance of religion in the collectivization of violence. Folk or popular strands of Catholicism, in particular, provided the ideological grounds to justify collective assaults against socialists, communists, Protestants, and impious individuals whose conduct was considered offensive or threatening to the spiritual and political order of communities. Mythical beliefs and accusations made against individuals associated with figures such as fat suckers and witches further contributed to the collectivization of violence in post-revolutionary Mexico. Taken together, these elements illuminate the deeper political, cultural, and sociological factors that shaped the trajectory of mob violence in Mexico.
Violence is a historical rather than static or predetermined phenomenon. As such, a central question informing this work is why lynching continued to occur with considerable frequency during a period otherwise characterized by greater political stability and lower levels of violence. The period from the 1930s through the 1950s signaled a distinct moment in Mexico's process of state formation and consolidation. By 1930, the country had formally transitioned from civil war to peace, leaving behind two armed conflicts, the 1910 Revolution and the Cristero War (1926–29), and attaining a greater level of institutionalization, centralization, and socioeconomic development. Especially after the mid-1940s, the country experienced an overall decline in levels of homicide, with state-sponsored forms of violence becoming more covert, selective, and institutionalized. In such a context, why did people resort to this form of overt violence? And in a period that witnessed the abolishment of the death penalty, why did citizens support a practice that entailed cruel, extralegal, and often deadly forms of punishment?

The answer to these questions is far from obvious. The continuity of this practice seems paradoxical when examined against Mexico's own trajectory of violence during this period, as well as when it is put into comparative perspective. Mexico's northern neighbor, the United States, had witnessed the occurrence of close to four thousand cases of lynching during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. By the 1930s, however, the number of lynchings in the United States—most of them driven by racial prejudice as well as by "rough" conceptions of justice—had significantly decreased and were counted in the dozens. Shifting public attitudes toward extralegal violence, greater state capacity and willingness to prosecute these acts, and compromise among political elites that held opposing views on lynching have all been offered as viable explanations for this decline. Why did Mexico follow such a different path, a path that translated into the persistence of this practice throughout the post-revolutionary period and beyond?

In the Vortex of Violence does not aim to offer a comparative analysis of lynching in Mexico and the United States. It does, however, seek to underscore the manifold beliefs, ideologies, and practices that contributed to Mexico's particular path of mob violence during the formative years of the post-revolutionary period. In so doing, the book contributes to advancing an understanding of lynching as a global phenomenon rather than as an American exception at the same time that it recognizes that place and time matter as variables that shape the meanings, practices, and dynamics of power linked to lynching.

Centered on the different sources of legitimation that contributed to rendering lynching an acceptable, necessary, and even moral response to conduct considered
threatening or offensive by given communities. In the Vortex of Violence covers three decades that were instrumental in the formation and consolidation of Mexico’s post-revolutionary state. During the 1930s Mexican elites tried to provide cohesion and stability to a country that had been torn by civil war and political conflict during the 1910 Revolution and the Cristero War. Under Lázaro Cárdenas’s presidency (1934–40), in particular, central elites promoted a capitalist model of development that incorporated land redistribution programs, cultural policies, and the mobilization and integration of teachers, workers, and peasants into a network tightly controlled by the recently founded Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR; National Revolutionary Party). Despite these official efforts to modernize and unify the nation, communities’ opposition and resistance to the state’s sponsored programs undermined the regime’s stability and forced elites to reconsider their policies, particularly in regard to religion and the advancement of socialist ideas. The Second Cristiada, also known as La Segunda (ca. 1934–38), considered a sequel to the Cristero War, crystallized the opposition generated by the cultural and social transformations promoted by the post-revolutionary state. The 1940s and 1950s signaled a moment of greater political and economic stability in the country, at least at the national level and from a macroeconomic perspective. Under the presidencies of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–46) and Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946–52), the country deepened its model of capitalist development by fostering foreign investment, industrialization via import substitution, and the creation of monopolistic businesses. These policies, facilitated by the advent of World War II and the opportunities opened for Mexico in the global market, resulted in Mexico’s “economic miracle”: a steady GDP growth at low inflation rates across the two decades. Politically, the regime moved away from the more radical and social promises of the Mexican Revolution and promoted instead a message of unity, reconciliation, and discipline based on an anticommunist, nationalistic, and conservative ideology. This narrative of macroeconomic growth and social unity was, however, contradicted by the realities of economic inequality, social unrest, and political protest that affected most people during these decades. Macroeconomic growth primarily benefited a small economic elite composed of foreign investors, domestic bankers, and industrialists who enjoyed the protection and support of the government. In contrast, the real incomes of both rural and urban workers declined, the peasantry was economically and politically marginalized, and urban workers were continuously repressed. Teachers, students, electricians, railway workers, and rioters actively protested against food shortages, price increases, political repression, and corruption. In the countryside, resistance to the government gave rise to peasant movements, popular protests, and even armed rebellion. Thus, in spite of the overall decline in homicide rates at the national level that began in the 1940s, these decades were far from representing the idealized “pax priísta” that has traditionally been associated with these years.
Lynchings in post-revolutionary Mexico both reflected and contributed to the manifold transformations the country experienced during these decades. They articulated the discontent and distrust generated by the modernization policies promoted by the state, including secularization, land distribution, sanitation programs, and conscription campaigns. Lynchings also reflected the anxieties and fears provoked by the rapid process of urbanization that went hand in hand with demographic growth, the introduction of modern machinery and infrastructure, and increasing perceptions of crime in a context in which *nota rota* (crime news) stories took on a central role in shaping people's sense of security.38

The fact that the history of lynching is intimately connected to the processes of modernization and urbanization the country experienced during these years hints at the fact that mob violence was not an expression of some atavistic custom or tradition. Lynchings did not take place in communities that were isolated, backward, or freed from the interventions and changes promoted by the central state and the advent of capitalism. Even when lynching expressed a rejection of the modernization project promoted by the state, it was not “premodern” but the result of communities’ exposure to modernity. The surge in lynching in the American South at the turn of the century followed a similar logic: mob violence against African Americans during this period did not signal southern communities’ isolation from modern institutions but their “uncertain and troubled transformation into modern, urban societies.”39

In Mexico’s post-revolutionary period, lynching did not simply express a rejection of the state’s modernization project; it also called into question the character and reach of the project itself. The state’s capacity or incapacity to provide justice and security to citizens was central to the organization and legitimation of lynching. The endemic corruption that characterized the judicial system, the systematic abuse of force by the police, and the high levels of impunity that persisted across this period all contributed to citizens’ understanding of lynching as a legitimate form of justice. Although evidence suggests the weakness of the justice system emanated from budgetary limits, poor training and equipment, and problems of institutional design, lack of institutional capacity alone does not explain the state’s failure to deliver justice.40 Instead, the elites’ interest in pursuing and maintaining political power by legal and illegal means determined the high levels of impunity characterizing the country.

Political elites actively promoted and benefited from politicized forms of policing, selective law enforcement, and the use of repression and torture against suspected criminals and political dissidents. Furthermore, even if they originated in economic or institutional limitations, the practices of judges and police officers became over time an integral part of how these bureaucracies functioned and of how citizens expected them to work.41 In other words, corruption and abuse of force became structural and systemic rather than exceptional or abnormal.
Citizens’ perception of the police as corrupt, abusive, and prone to bend the law translated into people's understanding of swift and extralegal forms of violence as an acceptable and preferable means to attain justice. This belief materialized in citizens’ support of lynching but also in people's approval of the so-called ley fuga, or law of flight. Defined as the killing of suspected criminals upon their alleged attempt to escape the law, the ley fuga was neither a law nor a legal practice despite its name. It was an extrajudicial form of violence perpetrated by state actors. That people's support of lynching intersected with citizens' approval of the ley fuga suggests these two practices were perceived by citizens as part of a continuum of methods to punish criminals outside the law. Moreover, that some attempted lynchings ended up in the ley fuga and vice versa points to the fact that authorities and citizens could be complicit in their support of extralegal forms of punishment.

MAIN ARGUMENTS

My main arguments center on the sources of legitimation, the logics of power, and the patterns of continuity and change that characterized lynching during the 1930s through 1950s. The term “sources of legitimation” refers to the set of beliefs that rendered lynching an acceptable or even preferable form of punishment in the eyes of perpetrators, witnesses, and citizens at large. “Logics of power” refers to the ways in which lynching intersected with ideologies and practices that served to exclude and control people who were at the margins of society or who were considered external or threatening to the dominant values observed by given communities. Rather than situate lynching unequivocally on the spectrum of bottom-up or top-down expressions of violence, the notion of logics of power allows us to illuminate the different and at times contradictory dynamics of exclusion and domination that gave rise to and were produced by lynching.

Regarding its sources of legitimation, I argue that lynching was grounded on people's view of state authorities as abusive, intrusive, and ultimately incapable of providing the type of punishment they deemed appropriate to attain justice. It was furthermore driven by religious beliefs and practices, perceptions of crime and criminals, and the fear and scapegoating generated by accusations of witchcraft and mythical beliefs.

Theoretically, the book advances the notion that public attitudes and publicly articulated sentiments in support of collective forms of violence ought to be taken seriously if we aim to understand the persistence of this practice. Even if such public attitudes cannot be equated, in any linear or simple way, with the occurrence of lynching, they provided the conditions of possibility of lynching. Inasmuch as these beliefs and ideologies were held to be true or valid by perpetrators and by
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the public at large, they provided the grounds to distinguish lynching from plain murder, thus adding to its tenacity and overall impunity.44

In addition to examining the sources of legitimation of lynching, the book offers an analysis of the contentious politics and power dynamics that surrounded the organization of lynching. In spite of their ephemeral character, lynchings were informed by and contributed to political vendettas and intracommunity conflicts that existed in the towns or localities where these events took place.

In contrast to the literature on lynching in contemporary Latin America that has described lynching as a “weapon of the weak,”45 the historical evidence presented by this book shows that most lynch mobs targeted people considered at the fringes of society, individuals whose beliefs and practices placed them outside the boundaries of what communities deemed acceptable or tolerable.46 Moreover, among those who supported lynching we can identify figures of authority—from local priests to mayors and police officers.47 Still, lynchings were also perpetrated against some of these very same figures of authority. Police officers, mayors, caciques, and even a few military men were, at different points in time and with different degrees of intensity, targeted by lynch mobs.

Lynchings also defied traditional gendered notions of victimization centered on representations of women as passive victims. With the exception of lynchings driven by accusations of witchcraft, mob violence involved by and large the victimization of men.48 Women who were accused of witchcraft and attacked by lynch mobs did not embody an ideal of female docility but rather defied notions of submissiveness, domesticity, and motherly care. Perpetrators, in turn, involved both men and women, with a few cases actually being organized either exclusively or primarily by women.49 In light of these examples, it can be argued that lynchings were as much a weapon of the oppressed as they were of the powerful.

To make sense of the paradoxes of lynching, I focus on the politics and logics of power that shaped and were shaped by lynching within communities themselves. In this sense, I argue that lynchings were, overall, defensive in character and aimed at preserving communities’ dominant values, beliefs, and practices.50 Whether in the form of communities’ resistance to the encroachment of the state into local affairs, people’s rejection of communist ideologies and practices, or citizens’ violent responses to crimes, lynchings reflected people’s attempts to safeguard the political, economic, and religious status quo of their communities. As such, despite lacking the strong racial connotations of lynching in the United States, mob violence in Mexico, as in the United States, was a tool of social control.51

In terms of the historical trajectory of lynching, I identify patterns of both continuity and change during the period under study. The most significant pattern of change has to do with the decline during the last years of the 1940s in the occurrence of lynchings perpetrated against those state actors that represented the so-called modernizing forces of the state. Such state actors included socialist teachers
but also alcohol inspectors, tax collectors, health officials, and engineers in charge of developing public works or promoting agrarian reform. This shift was the result of a process of resistance and accommodation that contributed to both modulating the state's encroachment into local affairs and rendering that presence more acceptable or desirable in the eyes of the governed.

In terms of continuities, I document the persistence of lynchings motivated by religious beliefs, perceptions of crime, and mythlike fears, as well as feelings of animosity and distrust toward individuals who were, either de jure or de facto, responsible for enforcing social control at the local level. In other words, I show how, despite the changes experienced by the country throughout these years, lynchings continued to be seen as a legitimate means to punish individuals considered threatening or offensive by neighbors and townsfolk.

By going beyond a “state-centered” and “center-centered” understanding of power and state making, the history of lynching in post-revolutionary Mexico reveals how changes observed at the national level followed a different path and pace at the local level and “in arenas outside of formal politics.” The persistence of lynchings of mayors, police officers, and caciques beyond the 1940s and well into the 1950s shows that violence was far from being centralized, institutionalized, or subdued in any stable way. Along the same lines, the continuation of lynchings motivated by perceptions of crime reveals that, despite the formal abolition of the death penalty, communities continued to support the use of extralegal violence in order to punish individuals perceived as dangerous or immoral.

The tenacity of lynchings driven by Catholic beliefs during the 1940s and 1950s further illuminates how, despite the so-called détente that emerged between the state and the Catholic Church during these years, people on the ground continued to view mob violence as a necessary means to defend the spiritual and moral integrity of their communities. The lynching of witches and other so-called mythical beings throughout the period under study suggests that despite, or rather because of, the rapid economic and technological changes brought about by the federal state, communities found in mythical narratives a means to resolve communal anxieties and ward off large-scale social transformations.

Geographically, the book provides evidence of lynching as a national phenomenon rather than a regional rarity. Despite the press's tendency to represent lynching as a practice carried out by backward, ignorant, and geographically isolated communities, evidence suggests that lynching occurred both in rural and remote communities and in politically and economically integrated urban neighborhoods and localities. Contrary to some newspaper journalists and public officials who suggested an implicit relation between lynching and indigenous communities, lynching was not an expression of indigenous “traditions” but a reaction to conduct that was considered offensive by indigenous and nonindigenous populations alike.
Historical sources do suggest a specific regional pattern, however, with states located in central Mexico occupying a prominent place in the history of this practice. According to this “geography of lynching,” most cases of lynching and attempts at lynching in post-revolutionary Mexico are concentrated in Mexico City, Puebla, and Estado de México.55 As these localities were among the most populated in the country at the time, it is not necessarily surprising that the occurrence of lynching was concentrated in them.56

On the other hand, the geographic distribution of lynching and its concentration in these places might reflect the dynamics of representation that characterized some of the historical sources used by this study.57 National newspapers were a key source for tracing the historical trajectory of lynching in post-revolutionary Mexico. Printed for the most part in Mexico City, these newspapers tended to report on cases taking place in the capital, either because of the greater availability of reporters or correspondents there or because of the greater attention given to violent crimes taking place in the "core" areas of the country rather than in the periphery.58 Lynchings chronicled in security reports, letters, and telegrams produced or received by government agencies were also characterized by these dynamics of representation. That is to say, lynchings presented by these sources were also, for the most part, connected to political conflicts or disputes that had to do with federal policies or programs. The geography of lynching identified in this book is thus inevitably framed, and limited, by the sources consulted, in very much the same way that past and present studies on crime and violence in Latin America have been.59

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

The book is organized thematically, drawing on the different sources of legitimation—politics, religion, crime constructs, and mythical beliefs—that made lynching an acceptable and legitimate form of violence. Each chapter covers cases that took place from the 1930s through the 1950s. Chapters 1 and 2 follow a more traditional chronological order, and chapters 3 and 4 privilege a more thematic narrative or structure.

Chapter 1 examines the impact of Mexico’s post-revolutionary process of state formation on the persistence and legitimacy of lynching. It analyzes lynching as an expression of the discontent and divisions produced by the modernization and centralization projects promoted by central elites. In addition, it situates lynching against the backdrop of the multiple forms of illegal, public, and overt violence that were either tolerated or promoted by public officials at the local level. The chapter demonstrates that the encroachment of the post-revolutionary state into communal life, together with the abusive behavior of public officials, contributed to the occurrence of lynching. It further calls into question a narrative that por-
trayed the Mexican state as a “civilizing force” that was meant to incorporate “barbaric” or “uncivilized” communities.

Chapter 2 analyzes the impact that religion had on the organization and legitimacy of lynching. It looks at the importance of religious images, artifacts, and spaces for Catholics’ spiritual and ritualistic experience of religion. The defense of these religious symbols by laypeople and clergy alike acquired a particularly bellicose character during the second half of the 1930s, particularly in the face of state-sponsored anticlerical and iconoclast campaigns. The chapter also examines the Catholic Church’s promotion of a conservative and reactionary worldview that rejected the influence of other religious creeds as well as progressive ideologies. This worldview, which became particularly dominant during the 1940s and 1950s, provided the basis for rationalizing the lynching of communists, socialists, and Protestants in the name of the community and the motherland. The chapter furthermore shows that antigovernment parish priests were central in shaping Catholics’ predisposition to violence.

Chapter 3 analyzes how public understandings of crime and justice contributed to shaping the acceptability of lynching so-called criminals. Based primarily on the examination of crime news, the chapter shows how the use of swift and extralegal forms of justice, such as lynching, was justified based on the purported gravity of the crime and the perceived ineffectiveness of the country’s justice system. In this sense, even when public opinion acknowledged the brutal and uncivil character of lynching, it nevertheless portrayed this practice as a reasonable means to deal with crimes and criminals considered immoral, barbaric, and inhumane. Crimes that prompted lynchings were not limited to murder or to offenses that threatened a person’s physical well-being such as rape, battery, and assault. Rather, they included more inconsequential crimes such as robberies of small items. Despite this, the press for the most part presented lynching as a justifiable way to deal with criminals.

Chapter 4 explores the role that mythical beliefs played in the collectivization of violence. In particular, it looks at how lynching was justified as a means to get rid of otherworldly powers and danger posed by witches and other wicked beings. Although victims of these lynchings were linked to supernatural doings and events, accusations made against them reflected rather earthly preoccupations. The lynching of so-called bloodsuckers and fat stealers, for instance, revealed anxieties regarding modernization processes that often entailed the presence of people who were external to the community and who were perceived as exploitative and deceitful. The collective killing of witches, on the other hand, was informed by envy, personal vendettas, and intracommunal conflicts, including political differences. Women who occupied positions of power were particularly susceptible to witchcraft accusations, reflecting the importance of gender in the dynamics of social control characterizing these cases.
The conclusion brings to the fore the ways in which the history of lynching in post-revolutionary Mexico contributes to our understanding of the political, cultural, and social motivations behind this practice. It furthermore situates this work within Mexico’s growing historiography on violence and state formation as well as within a broader literature dealing with Latin America’s history of violence and crime.