

Book Review

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Trafficking: Narcoculture in Mexico and the United States. Héctor Amaya. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2020. 280 pp. \$99.95 hbk. \$26.95 pbk.

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Héctor Amaya's *Trafficking* illustrates the new forms of publicness in popular music, traditional U.S. newspapers, and digital bloggers resulting from the spike of criminal violence in Mexico since 2006. This wave of violence began when former president Felipe Calderon (2006–2012) intensified the war on drugs. A native of Sinaloa, one of the worst affected Mexican states for cartel actions, Amaya provides a theoretical contribution to understanding the phenomenon of criminal violence without presenting law-and-order normative solutions as First World social scientists typically do. He explains this avoidance as a political response to the historical role of normative “solutions” that tend to validate colonialist and neoimperialist agendas and, rather than resolve anything, foster dispossession and dislocation in the Third World.

Amaya, a professor of communication at the USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism, defines publicness as the “communicative processes of criticism that bring together different social groups to attend to, influence, and/or shape the social collective” (p. 3). To critically engage with the accounts of Habermas, Arendt, and Benhabib on modern deliberation, Amaya places under the same definition other related terms such as “public sphere,” “public culture,” “public opinion,” and “public.”

Amaya enriches the discussion on publicness by highlighting the different ways in which digital media have delocalized public conversation on criminal violence. For instance, digital circulation enables superstar singers of narcocorridos (popular music that glorifies narco culture) who live in California to become promoters of narcoculture far away from areas affected by cartel violence in Mexico (Chapter 4). Narcocorridos have become a lifestyle model and inspiration for many Latino immigrants trapped between limited access to legitimate channels for upright mobility in Latin America and the United States, the promises of wealth and power embedded in the myth of the American Dream, and the structural exclusions of mainstream American society. Ironically, narcocorrido lyrics glorify the same criminal actors responsible for pushing many people from its audiences out of their native territories.

Amaya also engages with the case of digital citizen journalism in Mexico to illustrate how publicness is shaped by violence in the digital era (Chapter 5). Anonymous blogger administrators, such as “Lucy” of the polemical *El Blog del Narco*, have attempted to fill the information gap left by many traditional media that opted for self-censorship because of violence against media reporting. Even though *El Blog del Narco* and other blogs are praised for reporting narco’s criminal activities, they are also criticized for displaying images of assassinations and torture without any censorship, which many people view as amplifying the message of terror that criminal organizations strive for.

Despite their anonymity, narco organizations, in collaboration with some Mexican authorities, have killed and harassed several bloggers, forcing many into exile with little or no support from any state or private entity (Chapter 6). As Amaya explains, this outright neglect results from their anonymity, which inhibited them from acquiring the popular stardom of other digital whistleblowers such as Yoani Sánchez and Edward Snowden. According to Amaya, this shows that publicness feeds on trust, and trust can only grow through identity disclosing. Identity disclosing as an essential point of publicness, in turn, raises various questions about idealized views on contemporary public discussion. For instance, how can citizens engage effectively and safely in critical political deliberation when criminal organizations continue to gain more control over state institutions in Mexico, the United States, and other areas of Latin America, like Colombia? How can citizens act against narco power, which feeds not only from the highly profitable business and cultural promotion of transnational cultural industries, but also from neoliberal values such as private entrepreneurship, unlimited accumulation of wealth, and free enterprise? Is it worth risking people’s lives to openly denounce drug cartel crime while international banks and other primary economic beneficiaries of drug business act with impunity?

Trafficking also contextualizes the political and mediatic history of the local and transnational conflicts derived from drug trafficking (Chapter 1). Likewise, it explains how traditional U.S. newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*, uncritically replicated the narrative that depicts Mexico as a “failed state” and provided a genealogical account that unveils the coloniality of the order-disorder dichotomy behind this concept (Chapter 2). The book also highlights the “censorial and authorial” function of the public sphere by discussing state censorship of narcocorridos, narco-cinema, and narco television in Mexico. This shows how the public sphere is a space of public deliberation through which the nation-state “cultivates” orderly citizenship (Chapter 3).

I found especially significant Amaya’s contribution in highlighting from a transnational perspective the role of publicness over power dynamics at places affected by drug violence. For instance, his focus helps understand the intense media battle over the house arrest of the powerful former Colombian president (2002–2010) and leader of the current government, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who was accused of procedural fraud and bribing witnesses over his connections with narco-paramilitarism. Knowing that the support of the current right-wing anti-drug agenda depended on his good image in Washington, DC, Vélez pays US\$40,000 a month to a U.S. strategic communication

firm specializing in public relations in the digital and presential realms. This example shows that even legal justice responds to the communication processes that take place in the highly coerced and unevenly controlled space of digital public deliberation.

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