



Lessons from a King

written by Gabriella Sanchez

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For El Señor

On January 8 I followed - along with perhaps most of the world's population connected to the net - the coverage of the recapture of the man dubbed the most wanted drug-lord in the world: Joaquín Guzmán-Loera, alias El Chapo. Mr. Guzman-Loera was arrested in the aftermath of an operation conducted by the Mexican military in the proximity of the city of Los Mochis (about 1400 kilometers from Mexico City) and not too far from his hometown of Badiraguato. While official reports continue to contradict each other, Mr. Guzmán-Loera was



apparently apprehended after managing to temporarily escape the troops through a sewage line. Once located he was taken to a sordid roadside motel while police back-up arrived to be then transported to Mexico's capital. A triumphant Enrique Peña-Nieto (Mexico's president) rushed to Twitter to announce the capture and promptly held a press conference surrounded by his security cabinet - a group that seemed more relieved than happy, and whose members congratulated one another over a job well done.

I will not discuss here the political implications of Mr. Guzmán-Loera's arrest, the alleged involvement of the U.S. DEA in his search or the extradition requests from the American government that according to some reports are in the process of being granted by the Mexican government. Instead, I look beyond the spectacle and focus on what the aftermath of the arrest teaches social scientists on and off the field. Here I reflect on the implications of conducting research in an already hyper-visible field such as drug trafficking, and of how as academics we have often become complicit in reinscribing images of criminalized practices as inherently dark, heinous and - my favorite - out of empirical reach, as if they occurred in some alternate universe à la Star Wars, or as if we could only dissect them by relying on their most graphic, gruesome examples.





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Moments after Mr. Guzmán-Loera's arrest, the version that his apprehension had been facilitated due to his contacts with actors and producers he had approached to make his biopic emerged in social media. I warned that the claim that the world's most wanted drug-lord could have fallen prey of his ego to the point of risking going back to prison – or even worse, being extradited – was preposterous at best. A few hours later an article by Rolling Stone Magazine seemed to confirm some of these notions. [It featured an interview of Mr. Guzmán-Loera conducted by Sean Penn](#) – an American actor best known for having been Madonna's husband – and brokered by Kate del Castillo – a Mexican actress whose pitiful portrayal of a drug empress (loosely inspired on Arturo Perez-Reverte's The Queen of the South) had recently reenergized her ebbing career as a telenovela star.

While the online publication of the article immediately raised both praise and condemnation for Penn, the piece in itself is worthy of methodological analysis. Penn (who once interviewed Hugo Chavez and is member of the crop of Hollywood's neo-humanitarian entrepreneurs trying to generate awareness from conflict diamonds to forced child labor to sad-looking dogs) narrated an experience all too known to social scientists:

the nightmarish process of identifying contacts in the field who can lead us to our unicorn: the right informant. The all-knowing, the all-merciful respondent.

As anthropologists we often experience the tension and fear that Penn did. The long waits. The wrong phone numbers. The false tips. The no-shows. And then, one day, the lucky break. The winning lottery ticket. The ultimate prize. Bingo.

And of course, the story never ends there because having obtained access to the informants, one must reach them. And so we embark on those hardly remarkable, although also sometimes unparalleled journeys on the back of commercial trucks, riding buses across borders or – as in Penn's case –traveling through “jungles”



(most likely, a remote sector of the Mexican mountains known as The Golden Triangle) to reach the almighty being who holds the knowledge we once thought unreachable – or in Penn’s case, Mr. Guzmán-Loera.



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Penn’s narrative far from constitutes a good example of anthropological inquiry – one wonders how the editor in charge of the story felt while sorting through Penn’s self-centered notes and detail lacunae. Penn’s questions, informed by the very media who has made him remotely recognizable these days demonstrate the naïveté and western-centeredness of our understanding of drug trafficking. “Do you think it is true you are responsible for drug addiction worldwide? Is it true that drugs destroy humanity and bring harm? Who do you love best, your mom or your dad? (Granted, he did not ask that but was horribly close).

What caught my attention was [the short video Mr. Guzmán-Loera himself prepared for Penn](#). I was captivated by the sight of one of the most sought-after fugitives in the world sitting down for an interview recorded using his son’s cell



phone, the sounds of roosters and birds in the background. He listened and replied to every question carefully and concisely. His responses never sounded rehearsed – he seems to find the notion of his arrest as potentially stopping the global flow of drugs sadly ludicrous. Mr. Guzmán-Loera transformed Penn's simplistic, shallow questions into reflections not just of an activity he knows well, but rather into a concise analysis of how precarity has impacted the lives of those involved in the drug trade.

What emanates from the video and the interview transcript is what so many scholars of organized crime refuse to accept: that those involved in irregular, criminalized activities like drug trafficking are ordinary human beings.

Once the over-reliance on myth and sensationalism that has corroded much scholarly analysis of transnational organized crime, drug trafficking and border crossings in the Americas and beyond is left aside, the men and women involved in irregular, underground and criminalized markets share our same concerns. Fear over the future, the lack of jobs, the price of oil and the unavailability of opportunities for women and children. They admit the role violence plays in their chosen fields, yet acknowledge it does not constitute a valid, sustainable mechanism toward stability or success, as ambiguous as those concepts may be. The responses of Mr. Guzmán-Loera reminded me of what our respondents often teach those of us researching underground or illicit economies, and that we often forget: the drive and the desire to leave poverty behind; to have access to jobs or clean water. To see the world's metropolises having crossed the border without documents on foot or by boat. Falling in love. Partying with friends. Having a job. Having a life—living their lives.

Let's therefore not fall for the stupid story of a capo who fell prey of his own ego and was captured as he escaped through a cloaca in Mexico. Instead, let's dissect the role of the precarity of contemporary life in the life of a kid from La Tuna, Badiraguato, to find a way to survive and to become – as ordinary and simple as it may sound – a man.



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