

INTL190: Violence, Gender, and Culture in Mexico's Drug War

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Virtual Office Hours: [By appointment](#)

Songs glorifying death and killing. Pink AK-47s and women drug lords. An epidemic of femicide and domestic violence. Mothers searching for missing children. Fifteen years after the start of Mexico's drug war, it is increasingly clear that the violence cannot be understood solely as a story of cops and cartels. This course will examine the cultural dimensions and gendered dynamics of the violence, in order to better explain what is happening in Mexico and how the country might find peace.

Before we dig into the material for this course, there are a few things you should know:

1. Most of the course will be asynchronous: You'll mostly be able to work at your own pace and on your own schedule on readings and reflection essays. There will, however, be five live Zoom meetings, as discussed below.
2. Even though you can work at your own pace on course content, there are **four writing assignments** that have fixed due dates. This is to help you finish the 18-20 page research paper that is the core requirement of the course.
3. There are no exams or quizzes, but there are four reaction and reflection assignments due by the end of the course.
4. This is an intensive capstone course. There's a lot to cram in, and while the readings and movies are carefully selected, you will need to plan on reading about 50 pages per week, devoting at least three to five hours per week to movies and written reflections (this is about half of what in-person classes), and another five hours per week to research and writing for your paper.

The course has, effectively, two parallel tracks:

- In the first, you will learn about what causes violence in Mexico, the ways that violence has been portrayed and its interaction with popular culture, and the strategies for responding to that violence.
- In the second, you will learn to write an 18-20 page argumentative research paper through a series of assignments that will guide your process. By researching a topic related to contemporary Mexico, you will also deepen your understanding of a particular issue.

Track 1: Course Content

The material for the course is organized into four units, not including the introduction and conclusion. You will work through them using the [module panel](#) in Canvas.

While the course material track is largely asynchronous, we will have five non-mandatory (but strongly encouraged) live Zoom meetings at 1pm PST. The first will provide an introduction to the course and an overview of violence in Mexico, the other four will address their respective units. For these meetings you should plan to complete the readings in the unit, allowing us to have discussions that will help you write better reflection assignments.

[1/10 - Introduction \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

[1/24 - Myths of Violence \(NOTE: This meeting has been moved back until 1:30\) \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

[1/31 - Narcoculture \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

[2/28 - Victims \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

[3/7 - Peacebuilding \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

Calendar and Units:

[**1/3 – Introduction**](#)

Exercise: Read and annotate introduction to Trejo and Ley, "Why Did Drug Cartels Go to War in Mexico? Subnational Party Alternation, the Breakdown of Criminal Protection, and the Onset of Large-Scale Violence"

Unit 1: Myths of Violence

1/10 – Mythology of the Drug Wars

Readings: Tuckman, "Narco Troubles"; Shirk and Wallman, "Understanding Mexico's Drug Violence"; Lettieri, "How to Tell the History of the Drug War"

1/24 – Mythmaking and the Drug War

Readings: Thornton, "El Chapo and the Narco Spectacle"; Farfán, "Forgetting El Chapo"; García, "Debunking the Narcomyth"; Le Cour, "The Narco Spectacle Can End."

Reflection Question: *What are the prevailing narratives or myths about violence in Mexico? How are these narratives, myths, or explanations perpetuated? What makes them compelling?*

Unit 2: Cultures of Violence

1/31 – Narcoculture and Cultures of Survival

Readings: Selections from Muehlmann, *When I Wear My Alligator Boots*; Miguel A. Cabañas , "Narcoculture and the Politics of Representation"; Villareal, "Pirata de Culiacan"

2/7 – Narco Cultura movie

Reflection Question: What is the significance of “narcoculture”? What do popular phenomena such as narcocorridos or television series that glamorize narcotrafficking tell us about cultural attitudes toward violence?

Unit 3: Realities of Violence

2/14 – Victims and Victimization

Readings: Valdez Cárdenas, “The Two Bodies”, “Kisses, Kisses,” “Between the Furrows”; Ernst, “The Life and Death of a Mexican Hitman”; Balderas, “Parents Search in the Cemetery of the Zetas”

2/28 – Gender and the Different Experiences of Violence

Readings: Turati, “Women, Me, and the War”; Wright “Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border”

Reflection Question: Why does it matter how we narrate different experiences of victimization? How do factors such as class or gender shape different experiences of violence in Mexico?

Unit 4: Recovering from Violence

3/7 – Cultures of Peace

Readings: Selections from Enciso and Nieto, *Planters of Peace*; Schedler, “The Criminal Community of Victims and Perpetrators” (32pp); López Nájera, “Accompanying the Search: The Possibility of Building Community”; Ramírez González, “Building Peace Means Scraping the Earth.”

Reflection Question: What makes for an effective peacebuilding strategy in Mexico? How does this strategy connect to the challenges victims face?

Reflection Assignments:

You must complete all four reflection assignments to pass the class. **All reflections must be complete by 3/15.**

Each reflection is 1/4 of your base class participation grade – you may earn extra class participation points for completing all four reflections and by participating in the drop-in discussions, however this is not necessary to earn full credit for class participation. Should you desire feedback on a reflection earlier in the quarter, please reach out to me, otherwise I will hold off on grading them until the end of the quarter.

A reflection response that earns full credit will:

- Demonstrate engagement with the readings, videos, and other course materials;
- Contain original thought and analysis, and not just summarize or restate ideas from the readings;

- Be approximately 250-400 words long;

Track 2: The Writing Assignment

The writing assignment has three components:

1. A [research report](#) due 1/13.
2. An [annotated bibliography and proposed research question](#) due 2/3.
3. A [prospectus](#) due 2/24.
4. A [final paper](#) due 3/18.

Specific instructions for each assignment can be found on their Canvas assignment page. I highly recommend that you read the instructions for all the assignments before beginning, particularly the '[Z](#)

[steps to a successful prospectus](#)' and the '[How to write a 20 page paper](#) [Download How to write a 20 page paper](#)' guide. Reading these will give you a sense of what you are trying to accomplish with the paper.

In its broadest strokes, the paper assignment is to research and write a capstone paper on a topic of your choosing related to contemporary Mexico. You will develop a focused research question based on scholarly research and an arguable thesis supported by secondary and primary sources. Your focus may be historical, contemporary, or theoretical (meaning you may use Mexico as a case study for an established theory) but most importantly your paper will be argumentative not descriptive. You are encouraged to use the course's central questions as guides and inspiration, but they are not specific enough to serve as research questions for this paper.

This is a research paper, and research is at its core:

- You must use the library to access scholarly sources.
- You must read and understand the arguments made by scholars about your topic
- You must develop a research question: this question will derive from your research and will not have a definitive answer, either in scholarly research or common sense.
- You must develop a thesis to answer this question, this thesis will be based on research and you will use scholarly sources to support the claims you make in your argument.
- You must present an alternative answer to the question (a counterargument) based on research: this should not be an invention, but rather based on arguments from scholars that you find in your research.

There are, unfortunately no shortcuts around the research, and you should plan to devote significant time at the start of the course to understanding the topic you choose. Jstor, Project Muse, and Google Scholar can all be helpful places to start, but remember that basic keywords will return basic results. You must read and engage with your sources: follow citations to figure out what other sources examine a topic; notice the language your sources use and try using more "expert" keywords; don't be satisfied with the first 10 results.

The best papers will have specific topics that evolve from initial research. You might, at first, be interested in what causes violence, but if you stop with the first few sources you find about the drug war, your paper will likely provide general, unconvincing answers. It's important to keep digging and figure out (and understand) how scholars have offered very specific answers to the question. You

may find the essays and research summaries available at www.mexicoviolence.org ([Links to an external site.](#)) helpful in getting a grasp on a topic.

A note on the library: There are lots of online resources available, including librarians who will help you with your research via chat or email. Take advantage of this.

- Start here: <https://ucsd.libguides.com/getstarted> ([Links to an external site.](#))
- For information about the VPN (to access JStor) and other resources you will need: <https://library.ucsd.edu/ask-us/services-during-covid-19.html> ([Links to an external site.](#))
- For a INTL190 specific guide: https://ucsd.libguides.com/INT190_Ending_Drug_War_in_Mexico ([Links to an external site.](#))

Academic Integrity:

All work for this course must be your own; plagiarism will not be tolerated and will be reported. This applies to all writing assignments. If you have any questions as to what constitutes academic misconduct, consult the UCSD Academic Integrity Office website:

<https://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu> ([Links to an external site.](#))

The final paper will be submitted via Turnitin.com.

Grading Breakdown:

Research Report: 5%

Annotated Bibliography: 10%

Prospectus: 20%

Final Paper: 40%

Participation (via reflection assignments): 25%