



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: M.M. Müller (2016) The Punitive City : Privatized Policing and Protection in Mexico City]

Müller, F.

DOI

[10.18352/erlacs.10225](https://doi.org/10.18352/erlacs.10225)

Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe

License

CC BY

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Müller, F. (2017). [Review of: M.M. Müller (2016) The Punitive City : Privatized Policing and Protection in Mexico City]. *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, 103, [book review 3]. <https://doi.org/10.18352/erlacs.10225>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)

Book Review

- *The Punitive City: Privatized Policing and Protection in Mexico City*, by Markus-Michael Müller. Zed Books, 2016.

In this reiteration of Stanley Cohen's 1979¹ vision, urban (in)security in *The Punitive City* violently dominates politics and society in downtown Mexico City, creating a hotspot for – privatized – securitization. It has become a vehicle for multiple interests and capitals to be enacted at the expense of the marginalized, thus forming a bridgehead to what Neil Smith has termed revanchist urbanism. Brokered claims to adequate housing and to exercise street commerce are clashing with the retail and tourism industry, national and international real estate investors, and the security experts.

Markus-Michael Müller, Assistant Professor in Political Science at the Freie Universität Berlin, argues that despite the country's, and in particular its capital's, democratic transition in the 1990s, violence and insecurity have not decreased. On the contrary, as commodification of the city's environment becomes imperative, local politicians are adopting increasingly repressive measures to drive the so-called culprits of urban decay – the poor – out of the city to its peripheries. Security is coproduced by 'top-down efforts of reordering of social relations' and 'bottom-up' everyday measures of protection (p. 148). After five chapters of dense analysis the reader is left with a disillusioned 'what now?' (p. 148), and a surprising suggestion: to de-securitize urban politics in order to get out of this 'punitive one-way street' (p. 151).

Müller's ten years of researching urban security and policing in Mexico City draws on qualitative interviews, NGO reports and newspaper coverage. He questions the politization of security issues in Mexico City and relates repressive policing and criminalizing law-making to democratization. He approaches the security field as constructed by political speech acts and practices, embodied and enacted by a set of diverse actors such as police, private security guards, residents, NGOs, brokers and politicians. These constantly bargain the material and symbolic conditions of urban repression, resistance, and marginality. Security has trumped the democratization of local politics since 1997, when the political landscape became pluralized and the mayor was elected for the first time in 70 years. Formal democratization is not leading to less repres-

sion and violence, but has sustained the transformation of Pablo Piccato's 'city of suspects' (p. 10) into a punitive city.

The first chapter addresses Mexico City's punitive turn in the downtown area. It discusses the implementation of Zero Tolerance and Broken Windows policies that led to the removal of street vendors, increased surveillance and a growing inmate population. In his account of the downtown transformation into a safe area for (international) investment, Müller highlights the related 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' structure through which urban security, in its neoliberal guise, unfolds as a field of capital accumulation. The punitive turn, as every following chapter concludes, further marginalizes those with little or no capital.

The next chapter details the accumulation of political capital through clientelism. Müller demonstrates how clientelism has persisted and changed throughout the democratic transition as urban residents increasingly demand personal measures of protection. Security provision serves both as a promise and as a material resource for patrons with personal contacts to politicians and bureaucrats. At the same time, the political elite divert public resources to cater to that demand. Privatization of security risks has, in the case of lower-income groups, increased the dependencies on personal access to political party brokers.

This also counts for those parts of Mexico City's downtown area that have become sites for 'multiple forms of resistance' (p. 95) against gentrification and displacement, and the public security apparatus (Chapter 3). Counter-publics and self-organized recovering of public spaces by residents have not been able to effectively challenge the hegemonic unfolding of punitive neoliberal urban reordering.

Chapter 4 examines the pecuniary logic that drives the punitive turn: As NGOs gain symbolic capital by translating internationally circulating securitization technologies into sellable solutions for on-the-ground problems, security becomes a fetishized, competitive good. The security field turns into an academic-political laboratory for externally developed solutions, such as Zero Tolerance and Broken Windows. As a result, the imported security-as-a-right splits up society into those who can effectively claim (brokered) protection and those 'punishment deserving' (p. 109) subjects without proper ties to the security field.

The final chapter turns to everyday security routines across classes. Refraining from repeating the oft-told story of self-confinement of the rich, Müller frames security practices in the neoliberal democracy more broadly as an individualized, and largely privatized, responsibility. Public security (if existent) is avoided, and is, at best, a complimentary force to an individual's own protection measures. Drawing from examples of self-protection, from lynching to the gating of public streets, Müller demonstrates how the marginalized become actively complicit in the fragmented reordering of the city and its privatized security apparatus.

This book's contribution to the practice turn in security studies could be ethnographically enriched and geographically expanded towards the inhospitable, fractured and highly conflictive eastern and western peripheries of Mexico City. Moreover, resistances in their multiple forms and a more graded picture of the marginalized subjects would have allowed the panoptic view of Müller's punitive trope to decenter. If even resistance and negotiation reproduce and strengthen the punitive unfolding of neoliberalism, in effect marginalizing the ever-marginalized, why contest those overarching hierarchies in the first place?

Avoiding a simplistic picture of the economic/political elite, the state versus 'the' population as well as its encompassing incorporation of diverse actors make this book an outstanding contribution to critical urban security studies. Perhaps the strongest point of this book is that, although insecurity seems to be everyone's shared concern, the intentions of (self-styled) security providers should not be trusted. Instead, security should be conceived of as a governing tool of reordering urban capitalism at the expense of the urban poor. Müller elegantly channels this argument towards the need to de-securitize local (security) politics. This will rest on political struggles to defy stereotypes of the criminal other against a violent, repressive and technologically mediated security spectacle. Müller's *Punitive City* rhetorically drags its readers onto the stage of this Foucauldian security theatre and urges them to adopt a clear position towards their own role. This is where de-securitization could in fact engender political emancipation from the seemingly imperative punitiveness in Mexico City, urban Latin America, and beyond.

Frank Müller, SECURCIT and Centre for Urban Studies,
University of Amsterdam
F.I.Mueller@uva.nl

Note:

Cohen, S. (1979). The Punitive City: Notes on the Dispersal of Social Control, *Contemporary Crises* 3(4): 341-363.