The Transnationalization of Policing in Mexico City

The preceding chapters addressed the ‘internal’ dimension of policing in contemporary Mexico City and demonstrated how structural features of Mexico’s negotiated state shape local public security provision and patterns of citizen-police interaction. This chapter will add an ‘external’ dimension to this picture. It will offer an analysis of the recent transnationalization of local security governance and address the question of how the previously analyzed features of Mexico’s negotiated state shape this transnationalization process. With this focus, the present chapter takes into account that throughout the last decade, ‘external’ actors, policing ideas and concepts have become an integral and increasingly important, although largely understudied, part of Mexico City’s contemporary security panorama. By addressing these issues, the following pages provide important insights for the current debates on the transnationalization of security governance in general, and transnational policing in particular, insights which are relevant beyond the case of Mexico City or Latin America.

It is widely acknowledged that in response to multiple international security challenges, ranging from cross-border criminal activities to international terrorism to the assumed threats emerging from ‘ungoverned spaces’ in ‘weak’ or ‘failing’ states, throughout the last decades security governance has become increasingly transnationalized (Aydinli 2010; Bowling 2009; Braig and Maihold 2009; Goldsmith and Sheptycki 2007b; Johnston 2006; Loader and Walker 2007; Schneckener and Zürcher 2008; Walker 2003). In this ‘world of multi-level, multi-centered security governance, in which states are joined, criss-crossed and contested by an array of transnational organizations and actors’ (Loader and Walker 2007: 235–6), ‘the export of western democratic policing ideologies and technologies has become a crucial component of the international response to global conflict’ (Linden et al. 2007:
This contributes to a growing transnationalization of policing, conceived as the growing involvement in and impact of ‘external’ concepts and (frequently non-state) actors, such as international organizations, intergovernmental organizations, donor agencies, security consultants (like Kroll, The Risk Advisory Group, Giuliani Partners or the Bratton Group) or NGOs, on ‘local’ policing agendas in many ‘receiving’ countries around the world.

A look at the related literature shows that it is widely assumed that the transnationalization of policing and the related promotion of international ‘best policing practices’ is something overly desirable. Transnational policing is expected to enhance local police capacities, to contribute to ‘good governance,’ to improve citizen-police relations and the ‘rule of law,’ and to democratize policing, ‘by creating international standards that will serve as the blueprints for each and every country that wishes to democratize its police systems or enhance the process that is already in place’ (Haberfeld et al. 2008: 341). However, a closer examination of police reform projects resulting from such transnationalization processes shows that the results rarely meet such expectations (see, for instance, the many examples addressed in Bryden and Hänggi 2005). This failure can be attributed to ‘inaccurate assessments and unrealistic policies’ (Hills 2009a: 212) that accompany the transnationalization of policing and the underlying goals, normative visions and expectations. To paraphrase Barnett and Zürcher (2009: 23), transnational police reform promoters try to achieve the impossible dream of engineering in years, and under very unfavorable conditions, what took centuries in the ‘consolidated’ democratic states of the ‘West.’ In addition to this, and closely related, their vision of policing-centered socio-political engineering is driven by highly normative assumptions and expectations which are frequently at odds with the prevailing social and political realities in the ‘target’ countries of transnational policing. As Hills observed in this regard:

Just as the emphasis on such literature on the transfer of specific forms of Western policing, so transnational policing is invariably presented in terms of liberal values, which are then universalized. These include accountability and responsiveness, and the use of ethnically representative and non-partisan officers. Yet, the term [transnational policing] says more about Western values than functional standards, and it is typically applied in societies where the prospects for democratic-style policing are negligible. (Hills 2009b: 302)