CHAPTER 2

Taming the Tiger

Madero has unleashed the tiger, let’s see if he can tame it.
—Porfirio Díaz

2.1 SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGIES AND MEXICO’S WAR ON CRIME

Mexico’s first Citizen Identity Card (CEDI) was issued on January 24, 2011, to Leslie García Rodríguez, an eleven-year-old student at the Miguel Hidalgo Elementary School in Tijuana, Mexico. To mark the event, an energetic crowd assembled outside the school—named for the revolutionary priest whose call for independence from Spain two hundred years earlier had given birth to the Mexican independence movement. One by one, students, teachers, civic activists, and public officials took to the microphone to extoll the virtues of the identity card. By housing young people’s biometric identifiers—iris scans, fingerprints of all ten fingers, and a photograph—in a single card, the CEDI would “guarantee the identity” of each young person in the country and serve as a vital tool against the trafficking of minors. The city mayor noted the symbolism of launching the program in Tijuana, a major migration conduit to the United States especially susceptible to such trafficking. Secretary of the Interior Francisco Blake, the highest-ranking federal official at the event, explained that with the card, “you can be assured that the right of each of you to an identity, a name, a family, and a country is fully guaranteed.”

Surveillance technologies have been growing steadily in Mexico, paralleling their spread across the world. Market dynamics here, as
elsewhere, have helped drive the expansion. Private firms specializing in security services have exploded on the national scene. In 1989, 210 companies were registered in the area of protection; by 2004, there were 2,126. These firms generally specialize in three security sectors: information security; access to shops, homes, and factories; and vehicle reinforcement. But if the private sector has been driving growth in security technologies, the public sector has laid the groundwork. Various municipalities have constructed “command centers” (centros de mando) that provide surveillance of city locations through closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras. Often installed to facilitate the flow of traffic, these technologies lend themselves to security operations because both emergency-response workers and the police find them essential to their work. Police will force their way onto traffic-monitoring systems in order to track not only criminal suspects but also street protesters, while traffic operators use the cameras to detect and report pickpockets.

As noted in the introductory chapter, surveillance technologies have featured centrally in the War on Crime launched by President Felipe Calderón. The Mérida Initiative, signed by Calderón and US president George W. Bush in October 2007 provided $1 billion for the purchase of eight Bell transport helicopters, two surveillance planes, inspection equipment such as X-ray scanners, and modernized communications and information technology. The Obama administration later extended the funding, set to expire in 2010, through 2012 at some $300 million per year. Reflecting the increasing security cooperation between the two countries, US drones now fly over Mexico to collect data on drug cartel activities, while Mexican drones fly (and crash) over the United States in similar intelligence-gathering operations. The two countries have also established at least two fusion centers in Mexico that allow for the integration and analysis of diverse types of data related to drug trafficking. It was as part of this push to combat organized crime that President Calderón launched the Citizen Identity Card (CEDI), National Registry of Mobile Telephone Users (RENAUT), and Public Registry of Vehicles (REPUVE).

These three programs serve as this work’s case studies, and this chapter connects them both to prevailing theories of surveillance and broader trends in Mexican history. First, while the RENAUT, CEDI, and REPUVE bear a clear resemblance to operations described by surveillance scholars elsewhere, these programs are most noteworthy for their focus on communication, identification, and mobility, collective activities central to the operation of society. Thus, rather than
simply targeting individuals, the programs also attempt to monitor the things—phones, bodies, and cars—through which agency is exercised in society. Second, while the technologies involved in the three programs are novel, authorities’ concern with controlling these dimensions of social life is not. Rather, such efforts date back to the Spanish conquest of Mexico and have served over the course of Mexican history to help “co-produce” the state. Third, if authorities’ efforts to administer communications, identification, and mobility have helped form the Mexican state, the appearance of the RENAUT, CEDI, and REPUBE today speaks to a crisis of governance in the country, whereby the “vibrancy” of society has outgrown the state’s ability to manage it, resulting in increased levels of insecurity. These programs featuring surveillance technologies thus represent a concerted attempt to remake the state.

2.2 Surveillance Technologies, Agency, and Materiality

Of the three programs examined, the National Registry of Mobile Telephone Users was the first to come to the public’s attention. Created in August 2008 through an omnibus security law, the National Agreement on Security, the RENAUT called for the creation of a governmental database of cell phone lines and their subscribers and required cell service providers to maintain their own databases to store subscribers’ names, addresses, fingerprints, and photographs and to provide geolocalization of individual calls, all of which would aid authorities in responding to kidnappings and extortions. As well, the program demanded that service providers cancel service for phones reported stolen, thereby denying kidnappers the tools—stolen phones—regularly used in their crimes.

The idea for a national cell phone registry emerged following a pair of high-profile kidnapping-murders. In September 2007, nineteen-year-old Silvia Vargas, daughter of Nelson Vargas, former director of the National Sports Commission, was seized and, following failed negotiations, found dead over a year later in the basement of a Mexico City home. In June 2008, fourteen-year-old Fernando Martí, son of Alejandro Martí, a sports-apparel mogul, was kidnapped while being driven to school and later found dead in the trunk of an abandoned car after two months of confused negotiations. Alejandro Martí subsequently founded the civic group Mexico SOS (Public Security Observation
System), which has played a prominent role in critiquing government security efforts and has worked to reform justice administration in Mexico. Increased vigilance over cell phones was an idea promoted by the organization from its founding.  

To implement the program, the Secretariat of the Interior (SEGOB) required cell users to register their phones with the RENAUT. Users could register either by sending a text message with their names and date of birth or Unique Population Registry Code (CURP), Mexico’s equivalent of a national identification number, or by going to a service-provider center to have their data entered. In February 2009, the government announced that cell users would have until April 10, 2010, to register their phones or have their service cut.

The Citizen Identity Card, meanwhile, was announced in July 2009. The CEDI is a 3.4-by-2.1-inch plastic card containing the following information: two photographs (one embossed using the person’s CURP or national identification number), name, birth date, bar code containing the person’s CURP, and double bar code containing the person’s iris scans.

The card, supporters argued, would hold multiple benefits for Mexicans. First, it would facilitate daily transactions by providing a single form of identification to replace the innumerable forms that Mexicans currently possess—birth certificate, driver’s license, voter card, advanced electronic signature for tax payments, military service card, and so on. Second, it would increase people’s security from identity theft and fraud by providing a more sophisticated technological basis for establishing identity.

The legal basis for the identity card derives from reforms made in 1990 and 1992 to the country’s Population Law, in which the Salinas administration, in the context of rising migration to the United States, called for the creation of a National Population Registry (RENAPO) and the distribution of Citizen Identity Cards for those registered. Similar to the RENAUT, participation in the CEDI program was obligatory. Mexicans would attend service centers where an array of technological devices provided by the Smartmatic Corporation—a computer laptop with Ethernet interface, fingerprint capture device, signature capture device, iris capture device, document scanner, bar code reader, among other things—would record biometric measures and legal identity. The cards themselves would be distributed later.

The third program—the Public Registry of Vehicles—received much less attention in the media. The REPUVE possessed three
objectives: (1) to create a centralized federal registry of all cars circulating in the country, including vehicle identification number, registration information, physical description, and the name and address of owners; (2) to attach 18,000–6C radio-frequency identification (RFID) tags to vehicles containing the unit’s registration details; and (3) to install RFID readers and license plate recognition cameras at tollbooths and other transit points to verify the status of passing vehicles. First announced on March 3, 2008, by the head of Mexico’s Secretariat of Public Security, Genaro García Luna, the technology utilized in the registry was to serve as a tool to combat crimes involving automobiles, including car thefts, kidnappings, and drug trafficking. Enrollment, as in the cases of the RENAUT and CEDI, was mandatory.

President Calderón placed the first RFID sticker on the inside windshield of a Chevrolet Suburban at the Puente de Ixtla tollbooth on the Cuernavaca-Acapulco Highway outside Mexico City in June 2009. In the following months, several states began installing tags on their public vehicle fleets. And a few states, Zacatecas and South Baja California among them, soon extended the provision to private vehicles as well.

At first blush, the RENAUT, CEDI, and REPUVE appear to share much in common with surveillance technologies described elsewhere. The programs involve a variety of technological devices: identification technologies such as documents, numbers, RFID stickers, and biometric registers that affix identities to people, phones, and vehicles; information technologies in the form of integrated databases that store and share these identifying data along with geographic location; imaging technologies—video cameras—that read license plates and verify identities; and monitoring technologies, including RFID readers and phone logs, that track people and their things. The function of this technological assemblage is to monitor. These are surveillance systems, then, but with a high level of sophistication. They are not mere tools—such as thermal-imaging technologies or crime-analysis software—that security agents deploy to see things that otherwise would not be seen. Rather, they are examples of the “new surveillance” or “dataveillance” that, through the extraction and management of data about people and things, allows for constant, automated monitoring and identification across multiple physical, analog, and digital spaces.

The goal of this surveillance is to recognize and disable phones, cars, and people that carry suspect identities. In this respect, the programs share an affinity with surveillance projects described elsewhere, such as the NEXUS and US VISIT programs at the US border that seek to
distinguish suspicious people who would harm the country from trusted global or “neoliberal citizens” who would contribute to the country’s prosperity. The governmentality at work in the programs is thus similar as well. Matching Michel Foucault’s description of the “double system” at work in “security,” where the state deploys “great mechanisms of incentive-regulation” to ensure “the security of the natural phenomena of economic processes or processes intrinsic to population” together with “simply negative functions” to suppresses elements of disorder and illegality, these programs aim to separate out trustworthy callers from those who would use phones to extort money, trustworthy car sellers and buyers from those who would deal in stolen vehicles, and trustworthy people from those who would nab others or their identities for illicit ends. This is surveillance for the sake of security, then, which aspires to the “social sort” of citizens, phones, and cars to create a vibrant social environment secure from the specter of criminal activity. In sum, the adoption of surveillance technologies in Mexico could be read as part of a more general global shift to security governance, whereby public and private authorities adopt advanced technologies in order to sort flows of people and things and better control society.

While such an interpretation is not wrong, a simple application of the surveillance literature, which is largely based on empirical research in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, to the Mexican context risks overlooking other dimensions of the technologies central to understanding their adoption in Mexico and more generally. As a first step, for instance, we can observe that the RENAUT, CEDI, and REPUBE target fundamental aspects of social life tied to insecurity and organized crime. The national cell phone registry responds to the fact that government possesses no reliable way to track the communications of kidnappers, who use either victims’ phones or units purchased on the black market to negotiate ransoms. The national identity card addresses the considerable difficulties the Mexican state has encountered in identifying persons. In early 2013, it was reported that some fifteen thousand corpses had been encountered during the Calderón sexenio that were never identified before being buried in common graves. The car registry, meanwhile, is meant to tackle the mobility of crime, both the high number of auto thefts and the central role of automobility in the kidnappings and drug trafficking. In seeking to increase the government’s control over mobile communication, personal identification, and automobility, the programs can be read as attempts to order the collective agency of society, or those practices that make collective life possible.
The concern with monitoring communication, identifying persons, and tracking mobility is not specific to the modern Mexican state. As James Scott explains in his seminal book, *Seeing Like a State*, states have always sought to control these human capacities. Scott writes, “Nomads and pastoralists (such as Berbers and Bedouins), hunter-gatherers, gypsies, vagrants, homeless people, itinerants, run-away slaves, and serfs,” people whose mobility and means of subsistence make it difficult to tax, “have always been a thorn in the side of states.” As a result, “the precolonial state was . . . vitally interested in the sedentarization of its population—in the creation of permanent, fixed settlements.”

The ability to order populations, in turn, rests on “state simplification,” schemes for making people’s daily lives legible to the state and open to intercession. Of these schemes, the most central perhaps is “the imposition of a single, official language,” which standardizes modes of communication in a given territory. Critical, too, are the methods by which people identify themselves. “The assigning of patronyms by family,” Scott observes, “was integral to state policy promoting the status of (male) family heads, giving them legal jurisdiction over their wives, children and juniors and, not incidentally, holding them accountable for the fiscal obligations of the entire family.”

Connected to these efforts is a concern with the materiality of collective agency. Communication in contemporary society is increasingly predicated on “mobile telephony,” which requires mobile devices linked by radio frequency to a larger technological infrastructure of cell phone towers, telephone exchanges, and fiber cables. Similarly, movement in modern society is based disproportionately on “automobility,” which requires less the capacity to move oneself than the dexterity to operate a complexly simple machine that will do so in one’s place. Finally, identification is carried out not so much by naming practices as through numbers and biometric data inscribed on “national identity cards” and documents that, like a common, national language in prior ages, can meet the “need for universally acceptable tokens of identification.”

These examples illustrate the point that people’s ability to partake in the tasks of collective life—communication, mobility, and self-identification—is mediated in nearly every instance by technology. This understanding is a point of departure for science and technology studies (STS) scholars who have produced a robust collection of work evidencing how society consists of “actor networks” involving both human and nonhuman actors. Automobile requires both the driver and car, not to mention the enormous assemblage of people and things needed to
train drivers, manufacture vehicles, and keep both in functioning order. In short, the capacity to communicate, move, or identify oneself is no longer inherent or exclusive to the individual person. Rather, agency in society is “distributed” across an architecture of material things that gives agency to those connected to it. 

In their focus on cell phones, motor vehicles, and human biology, the RENAUT, REPUVE, and CEDI, respectively, reveal the sensitivity of governmental authorities to the importance of materiality within collective agency. In order to get a grasp on communications in contemporary society needed to combat the kidnapping of people, in order to take hold of mobility to stop the transportation of illicit drugs and weapons, in order to account for the identification of people to investigate crime, the RENAUT, REPUVE, and CEDI target the materiality of these activities.

2.3 COLLECTIVE AGENCY AND THE CO-PRODUCTION OF THE STATE ACROSS MEXICAN HISTORY

While the significance of materiality to projects of social ordering has only more recently become apparent in the social sciences, political authorities have long been aware of it. Indeed, as this section emphasizes, efforts to control communication, identification, and mobility can be found throughout Mexico’s history. And these efforts to capture and control agency in society have played a key role in the “co-production” of the Mexican state.

2.3.1 The Conquest of the Mexica

It is accepted today that the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire (more accurately called the Triple Alliance of the Mexica, Texcoco, and Tlacopan peoples, or the Mexica empire, since the Mexica held the most influence in the alliance) by Hernán Cortés and his expedition of six hundred men owed primarily to the power of smallpox, which the Spanish carried with them from the European continent, and political alliances, which Cortés struck with rivals, such as the Tlaxcalteca, whom the Triple Alliance had subjugated. Without the force of disease and the vast numbers of warriors offered to the Spaniards, it is improbable that Cortés would have been able to fell the mighty Mexica empire.

But underpinning this history as well was the expedition’s ability to penetrate the Mexican system of communication and mobility.
Communication was particularly vital to the Spanish cause. The Spanish had no knowledge of the major language groups spoken in Mesoamerica—Nahuatl in the Valley of Mexico and Mayan on the Yucatán Peninsula. And this would have hampered their ability to negotiate alliances to conquer the Mexica had it not been for their chance encounter with two extraordinary historical figures—La Malinche and Gerónimo de Aguilar.

La Malinche was an indigenous woman born into a noble family but later given away to a community in Tabasco once her father died and her mother remarried. The unfortunate circumstance left her knowledgeable of both Mayan and Nahuatl dialects. When the Cortés expedition defeated the Tabascans, the Tabascan cacique, or chief, offered Cortés twenty slave women as a peace offering, a group that included La Malinche. Gerónimo de Aguilar, meanwhile, was a Spaniard who was part of an earlier expedition of the Yucatán Peninsula that had shipwrecked. Most on board were enslaved by a local indigenous group and perished either through hard labor or human sacrifice. De Aguilar escaped his captors and took refuge with another community of natives inhabiting lands near the island of Cozumel. Through his ordeal, de Aguilar learned the local Mayan dialect and thus could communicate between the Spanish and Mayans. When he learned of the arrival of the Spanish at Cozumel, de Aguilar and a group of natives raced out in canoes to meet them and the Spaniard joined Cortés’s company. Together, Doña Marina, the name under which La Malinche was baptized, and Gerónimo de Aguilar enabled Cortés to communicate and negotiate with the native groups he encountered on the way to Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Mexica empire.

The importance of the translators was lost on neither the Spanish nor the peoples they came into contact with. Doña Marina formed such a vital part of the Spanish company that the Mexica actually referred to Cortés as Malinche, revealing how they saw Cortés and Marina as a single, unified being (fig. 1). Bernal Díaz del Castillo, chronicler of the campaign, held no reservations in assessing La Malinche’s contribution. “This woman was a valuable instrument to us in the conquest of New Spain. It was, through her only, under the protection of the Almighty, that many things were accomplished by us,” he wrote. “Without her we never should have understood the Mexican language, and, upon the whole, have been unable to surmount many difficulties.”

The Spaniards’ ability to overcome the mobility of the Mexica was also central to the conquest. In obvious ways, the Spanish, with
their massive sea vessels armed with cannons and horses that could be mounted for combat, enjoyed clear advantages in terms of mobility. That said, those central components of European warcraft proved of marginal utility to Spanish attempts to conquer Tenochtitlan. Constructed on an island in Lake Texcoco, the Mexica capital was adjoined to land by three major causeways. The Spanish were famously awestruck upon first seeing the city. “When we gazed upon all this splendour at once, we scarcely knew what to think,” Bernal Díaz remembered, “and we doubted whether all that we beheld was real. A series of large towns stretched themselves along the banks of the lake, out of which still larger ones rose magnificently above the waters. Innumerable crowds of canoes were plying everywhere around us; at regular distances we continually passed over new bridges, and before us lay the great city of Mexico in all its splendor.”52 The aquatic location could be defended by thousands of warriors patrolling the lake with canoes. While the Tlaxcalteca and other groups allied with the Spanish had their own canoes,
the numbers were unfavorable. The physical layout of the city thus rendered useless the Spaniards’ ostensible advantage in mobility. And during Cortés’s first advance on the city, the vast numbers of Mexica and allied warriors were able to stymie the Spanish.

In an attempt to change the balance of power, Cortés decided to lay siege to the city by destroying the aqueducts that brought fresh water, negotiating alliances with the other peoples residing near the lake and mounting a blockade aimed at depriving the city of provisions. To carry out the siege, Cortés ordered the construction of twelve brigantines, small fortified ships. The brigantines were constructed in Tlaxcala and outfitted with gear and weaponry from the Spanish fleet, which Cortés had disassembled to disabuse his company of any thought of abandoning the mission. Once launched on Lake Texcoco, the ships enabled Cortés to patrol the waters to prevent food and water from arriving and giving cover to Spanish and Tlaxcalan troops approaching on Tenochtitlan’s causeways. With the mobility of the Mexica neutralized, Cortés was able to advance on and eventually seize their capital.

2.3.2 Ordering Colonial Life in New Spain

The Spanish conquest of Mexico was thus based in large measure on the ability of the invaders to seize the communications and mobility that made the Mexica and Triple Alliance dominant in the Valley of Mexico. Generally speaking, the conquistadors did not concern themselves with modes of personal identification among the peoples they conquered. This began to change, however, with the establishment of colonial order in the land the Spanish coined New Spain.

a. The Catholic Church was in a different position, however, its function in the conquest the conversion of souls. The clergy did stand alongside conquistadors when subjugating native peoples, reading the Requirement that announced Spain’s divine right to conquest for the purposes of evangelization. But the salvation of souls, as per Christian tradition, also required baptism. And to complete and keep records of baptisms, the church assigned individual identities to the native population. Individuals were usually given two names, both first names, an accommodation to the fact that last names were not a convention in pre-Hispanic Mexico. The first name was almost exclusively Spanish, following the most popular saints. Second names were more varied: Spanish names (Juan Diego), Nahuatl names (Juana Quautzontecontzin), and other designations announcing social position (Doña María Xalatlauhco) or devotion (de la Cruz, “of the Cross”). Nahuatl men usually possessed more distinction in their second names than women, which reflected that they could hold local political office. Names thus not only served the administrative purposes of the church but also inscribed the unequal social order enforced by the Spanish (Horn, “Gender and Social Identity,” 119–22).
The political economy of the Spanish empire was based on the extraction of precious metals from its colonial holdings. Internally, the colonies required agriculture and livestock to subsist. Both activities required a sizable workforce. And in New Spain, the conquered peoples would presumably provide this labor.

In subjugating the native groups of New Spain within the colonial order, the Spanish relied on existing structures of indigenous social hierarchy. The conquistadors, initially with the blessing of the Crown, established the *encomienda* system, a feudal structure under which vast tracts of land and the peoples living on them came into the possession of individual members of Cortés’s expedition. Indigenous villages were ruled by local chiefs, *caciques*, who were responsible for collecting tribute from their subjects, which included forced labor in the mines. In political terms then, “things did not change as much as one would have thought” for the ordinary *indio* in Mexico, as systems of tribute and hierarchies remained the same, save for compulsory military service and human sacrifices.

The boundaries between these two societies quickly broke down, however. The paucity of Spanish women in New Spain resulted in unions between Spanish men and indigenous women, resulting in *mestizo* children. Disease and hard labor also decimated the indigenous populations, which led to a labor shortage and the introduction of African slaves to the colony. The eventual and ongoing mixing of people “produced a tertiary, intermediate people identified as castas” in Mexico. Already in the 1540s, the ruling elite in New Spain identified castas as a threat to the social order, “the colony’s foremost partisans of insurrection.”

In response to the perceived menace of mixed races, colonial authorities developed a caste system by which they could identify and order the evolving society. At the core of the *casta* system were five basic races: *españoles, indios, mestizos, negros,* and *mulatos.* From this emerged different combinations—*zambo,* for instance, which designated people who were half Indian and half African. Over time, more than forty categories were created, even if most lacked practical significance. Castas varied in terms of rights and responsibilities. Castas in the 1500s were forbidden from living in indigenous villages or neighborhoods in town: “The crown in effect assigned the castas to the Spanish community.” *Negros* and *mulatos,* like *indios,* had to pay tribute. However, they could not dress like *indios* or in gold jewelry, indicative of European ancestry. Nor could they hold office or bear arms. *Mestizos,*
meanwhile, did not have to pay tribute. And unlike indios, who were considered gente sin razón (people without reason), essentially children who needed to be cultivated into Christian civilization, mestizos were gente de razón (people with reason).64

With such measures, colonial authorities sought to identify and order people in New Spain through an examination of the body. This anchoring of personal identity to the body was reinforced through technological means as well. Separate marriage registers existed for different castas.65 And pinturas de castas become a popular form of cultural expression during the eighteenth century (fig. 2).66 The paintings, which depict the different race combinations, possess a clear pedagogical function in explaining the castas and their hierarchy to the viewer. And in doing so they served to reify the largely arbitrary racial classifications that authorities sought to impose upon the people of New Spain in order to expand their political control.

While the entrenchment of Spanish rule in Mesoamerica involved controlling the material aspects of communication, such as destroying indigenous religious artifactsc and establishing schoolsd to train children of the indigenous noble class, the Spanish Crown’s management of mobility is more relevant to the current discussion. Gold most appealed to the Spanish, but lands to the north in and around the city of Zacatecas proved richer in silver deposits. And mines were established throughout the region. The transfer of wealth back to Spain, meanwhile, required a system of roadways that joined the mines to the colonial capital and the main seaport of Veracruz. Thus was born the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, the Royal Road of the Interior Lands, which eventually

b. Race thus functioned differently in New Spain than in North America. If in North America “a single drop of black blood sufficed in staining people, in the Indies, a single drop of white blood precipitated a ‘whitening’ of people.” For this reason, indios might try to escape the obligations of tribute and the political and resource limitations of village life by entering the labor markets and racial castes of the mestizaje (García Martínez, “Los años de expansión,” 220).

c. Interestingly, Juan de Zumarrago, the first bishop of New Spain who was also given the political post of protector de indios, vigorously set about the destruction of Nahuatl cultural and religious materials, a goal not incongruous with his charge of protecting indios from Spanish excesses as well as their own blasphemous spiritual traditions.

d. The first school, opened in in Nezalhulpilli in 1523, instructed one thousand sons of noble Mexican and Texcocan families in the Latin alphabet, songs, arts and crafts, agriculture, and Christianity. Other schools were subsequently founded throughout Mexico, primarily driven by Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit religious orders.