

Representing Transnational Drug Trafficking: Narcos (2015) and the War on Drugs Narrative

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Abstract

This study analyzes Netflix's Narcos (2015-2017) as a cultural text representing transnational drug trafficking and the war on drugs narratives within International Relations frameworks. Employing qualitative interpretive analysis of selected episodes alongside International Relations and media scholarship, it reveals how the series personalizes complex structural dynamics for instance globalization-driven crime into charismatic antiheroes such as Pablo Escobar, portrays Colombian institutions as fragile and reliant on U.S. DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) agents, and reproduces securitized war on drugs discourses without challenging root causes such as Global North demand. These representations simplify transnational threats, mythologize violence as spectacle, and reinforce Global North-South asymmetries in security imaginaries.

Keywords: *Narcos; Transnational Drug Trafficking; War on Drugs; Securitization; Popular Culture*

Abstrak

Studi ini menganalisis serial Netflix *Narcos* (2015-2017) sebagai teks budaya yang merepresentasikan perdagangan narkoba transnasional dan narasi perang melawan narkoba dalam kerangka Hubungan Internasional. Menggunakan analisis interpretatif kualitatif pada episode terpilih beserta literatur hubungan internasional dan studi media, penelitian menemukan bahwa serial ini mempersonalisasikan dinamika struktural kompleks seperti kejahatan berbasis globalisasi menjadi anti hero karismatik seperti Pablo Escobar, menggambarkan institusi Kolombia sebagai rapuh dan bergantung pada agen DEA (Drug Enforcement Agent) Amerika Serikat, serta mereproduksi wacana sekuritisasi perang melawan narkoba tanpa menantang akar masalah seperti permintaan di Global Utara. Representasi ini menyederhanakan ancaman transnasional, memitologikan kekerasan sebagai spektakel, dan memperkuat asimetri Global Utara-Selatan dalam imaginasi keamanan.

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Kata Kunci: Narcos; Perdagangan Narkoba Transnasional; Perang Melawan Narkoba; Sekuritisasi; Budaya Populer.

Introduction

Television series have increasingly become influential sites for the production and circulation of knowledge about global politics and transnational phenomena. Scholars increasingly examine popular culture texts not merely as entertainment but as spaces where political meanings are produced and negotiated. Much of this work, particularly in critical and pedagogical approaches, has focused on identifying representations of international themes, problems, or actors within popular cultures such as warfare in video games, diplomacy in science fiction, or fictional narratives that mirror established concepts in international relations¹. Scholarly research has established that International Relations (IR) courses structured around popular culture texts significantly enhance student learning outcomes. Empirical studies further demonstrate the substantive pedagogical utility of employing popular culture to facilitate student comprehension of gender dynamics and globalization processes².

Among these, *Narcos* emerged as one of Netflix's most successful series, gaining significant popularity, particularly among audiences in the United States³. Netflix's series *Narcos* (2015-2017) occupies a distinctive position as a popular culture text that dramatizes the rise of transnational drug trafficking networks in Latin America, particularly Colombia. This series simultaneously engages with themes of state power, sovereignty, and international intervention. Rather than functioning merely as entertainment, *Narcos* operates as a narrative space where complex political realities such as the global war on drugs, cross-border criminal economies, and asymmetric power relations between states are simplified, personalized, and made intelligible to a global audience.⁴

Recent scholarship also highlights how narco-series do not merely depict criminal activities, but also actively construct moral and political narratives around them. Gutiérrez Delgado, Ceballos-Saavedra, & Rivera-Betancur argue that such series tend to mythologize criminal figures as anti-heroes, embedding narratives of "relative evil" that blur moral boundaries and normalize violence as part of a tragic cycle and tragic framework⁵. Similarly, Webster, Rice, & Sud, show that media representation is often dramatized as spectacles, privileging visible acts of violence over structural drivers and shaping public imaginaries of insecurity⁶. Building on these insights, Anand et al. emphasize that popular culture, particularly visual media, including television series, plays an important role in shaping public imaginaries of crime, security, and international relations⁷. Within this broader context, *Narcos* can be understood as a site where representations of drug cartels, state institutions, and foreign actors, especially

the involvement of the United States through the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), contribute to specific interpretations of transnational crime and governance. As Rossi suggests, such representations are consequential because they shape how audiences perceive responsibility, legitimacy, and the effectiveness of responses to global criminal networks.⁸

Existing studies have largely examined narco-series in terms of representation, narrative construction, and media spectacle. However, limited attention has been given to how such media texts, particularly *Narcos*, contribute to shaping understandings of transnational organized crime within the framework of International Relations. Specifically, there remains a gap in analyzing how representations of crime, state authority, and international intervention are constructed and how they influence broader discourses on global governance and security. Based on this gap, this study addresses the following question of how *Narcos* constructs representations of transnational drug trafficking, and how these representations shape understandings of power, security, and global hierarchies within International Relations. This study positions *Narcos* as a cultural text that both reflects and shapes understandings of transnational drug trafficking. By examining its narratives, this paper seeks to explore how crime, authority, and international intervention are constructed, and why these representations matter for contemporary debates on global governance and security.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using an interpretive approach to examine how transnational drug trafficking and the war on drugs are represented in the Netflix television series *Narcos* (2015–2017). Within the International Relations scholarship, popular culture texts are understood as meaningful sites where political ideas, power relations, and global narratives are constructed and circulated⁹. Accordingly, *Narcos* is treated not merely as entertainment but as a cultural text that produces particular understandings of crime, security, and international intervention.

The primary data for this study consist of selected episodes from the three seasons of *Narcos*, chosen purposely based on their relevance to the portrayal of drug cartels, Colombian state institutions, and the involvement of the United States through the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). These episodes include key scenes that depict cross-border drug trafficking, law enforcement operations, and interactions between state and non-state actors. Secondary data are drawn from academic literature on International Relations, transnational organized crime, the war on drugs, and popular culture studies, which provide theoretical and contextual support for the analysis.

The unit of analysis focuses on narrative structures, character portrayals, dialogue, and visual framing within the series. Particular attention is given to

how transnational crime is narratively constructed, how the war on drugs is framed as a security issue, and how different actors from the Global South and Global North are positioned within these narratives. This allows the study to explore not only what is represented, but also how responsibility, legitimacy, and authority are distributed across the narrative.

The analytical procedure involves identifying recurring themes related to transnational crime, state power, sovereignty, and international intervention. These themes are then interpreted through existing International Relations literature to examine how *Narcos* reinforces, challenges, or complicates dominant war on drugs discourses¹⁰. By linking textual analysis with broader theoretical debates, this study seeks to illuminate the political implications of popular culture representations for understanding global governance and transnational security issues.

Results and Discussion

Representation of Transnational Drug Trafficking in *Narcos*

Netflix's series *Narcos* (2015-2017) constructs transnational drug trafficking primarily as a highly organized, violent, and expansive criminal enterprise that transcends national borders. Throughout the series, drug trafficking is depicted not merely as domestic criminality within but as a globalized security threat that transcends national boundaries and challenges state sovereignty. This portrayal aligns with scholarly understandings of transnational organized crime as a phenomenon embedded within globalization processes, where illicit economies operate across porous borders and interconnected markets¹¹. However, this representation simultaneously narrows the analytical lens by prioritizing visible networks of violence over the structural conditions that sustain them.

While the series acknowledges the global dimensions of the drug trade, its narrative focus centers heavily on individual actors, particularly Pablo Escobar and other cartel leaders. Transnational crime is thus personalized through charismatic and powerful criminal figures who appear capable of rivaling the state itself. As Jeimmy Cardozo observes, such dramatizations “turn real-life historical events, such as the rise of drug trafficking in Colombia, into a story that makes the country's violent past a commodity,” and this process “leads to romanticisation, the commodification of violence, and the heroization of drug lords”¹². This personalization simplifies complex structural dynamics and shifts attention away from broader global conditions, for example, consumption patterns in the Global North and international financial systems, that enable transnational markets. Norma Rossi's analysis complements this point by showing that criminal organisations can be “simultaneously born of, shaped by, in opposition to but in subtle ways complementing state power,” which helps

explain why charismatic leaders are often read as quasi-sovereign actors¹³. This narrative strategy shifts attention away from systemic factors such as global demand, financial infrastructures, and uneven development, and instead frames crime as the product of exceptional individuals. As a result, *Narcos* risks reinforcing individualized explanations of global political phenomena, which ultimately obscure the broader political economy underlying transnational organized crime.

Furthermore, the portrayal of the Colombian state as institutionally fragile and vulnerable to corruption constructs a narrative of weakened sovereignty that legitimizes external intervention, as shown through bribed officials and overwhelmed institutions amid cartel violence¹⁴. Law enforcement agencies, such as local police and military units, struggle to contain cartel violence, often depicted through scenes of overwhelmed raids, assassinations of officers, and futile sieges on cartel strongholds like Escobar's Hacienda Nápoles. By depicting domestic institutions as incapable of effectively addressing cartel violence, the series positions the state as reactive rather than authoritative. This framing aligns with International Relations perspectives that highlight the erosion of state-centric security frameworks, but it also reproduces a hierarchical understanding in which Global South states are seen as dependent on external support.¹⁵

The prominent role of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reinforces the idea that the problem exceeds the capacity of a single state and requires external involvement, as the series centers key operations on U.S. agents like Javier Peña and Steve Murphy partnering with fragile Colombian forces¹⁶. By narrating the story partly through the perspective of U.S. agents often positioning them as competent outsiders amid local chaos¹⁷, *Narcos* implicitly legitimizes international intervention as both necessary and effective.¹⁸ This representation contributes to a broader securitized discourse in which transnational crime is framed as an issue requiring coordinated, often externally driven, responses. Consequently, the series does not merely depict transnational drug trafficking but actively shapes audience perceptions of legitimacy, authority, and responsibility within global governance structures, as media representations play a crucial role in shaping public imaginaries of crime and legitimacy by perpetuating stigma and securitization narratives.

Taken together, these narrative elements position transnational drug trafficking not simply as criminal activity, but as a severe transnational security threat that disrupts sovereignty, destabilizes political institutions, and necessitates international intervention, aligning with ASEAN analyses of drug networks as non-traditional security challenges requiring regional cooperation.¹⁹

Narcos and the Reproduction of the War on Drugs Narrative

Beyond representing transnational drug trafficking as a cross-border criminal enterprise, reproduces and reinforces the dominant “war on drugs” narrative as a legitimate framework for addressing global security threats, (i.e., the aggressive, Nixon-initiated policy framework from the 1970s emphasizing punitive criminalization, interdiction, and eradication of illicit substances) that originated with U.S policies in the 1970s and extended globally through military aid and bilateral pacts.²⁰ The series consistently frames drug trafficking as an existential security threat, likened to insurgency or terrorism, that justifies extraordinary measures, including militarized policing (e.g., heavily armed raids on cartel labs), surveillance, and foreign intervention via DEA-led operations partnering with Colombian authorities.²¹ In doing so, it aligns with securitization logic, where complex social and economic issues are reframed as urgent security concerns requiring exceptional state responses.

This reflects the logic of securitization theory from International Relations, where issues like drug flows are discursively elevated from routine crime to urgent existential threats, enabling “speech acts” by elites that legitimize exceptional state responses beyond normal democratic oversight²². Recent scholarship reinforces this: *Narcos* perpetuates a securitized frame by centering U.S agents as saviors, sidelining structural drivers like demand in consumer countries²³, while media analyses show such portrayals amplify public support for militarized policies amid rising fentanyl crises²⁴. In the ASEAN context, similar drug narratives have spurred cross-border task forces, highlighting how popular media shapes policy beyond the Americas. Taken together, these representations do not merely reflect securitization processes but actively contribute to their normalization, reinforcing a security-oriented understanding of transnational drug trafficking that prioritizes enforcement and intervention over structural or alternative policy approaches.

Throughout the series, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents are portrayed as strategic, persistent, and morally committed to restoring order. Although their actions are not free from ethical ambiguity, the narrative structure often positions them as rational actors confronting chaos. This framing echoes what Forster describes as the politics of fear embedded in *Narcos*, where insecurity and violence are emphasized to reinforce the necessity of forceful counter-narcotics policies.²⁵ As a result, the series implicitly legitimizes enforcement-based approaches by presenting them as both rational and necessary responses to disorder, thereby narrowing the space for alternative interpretations of drug policy within International Relations.

At the same time, the Colombian state is frequently depicted as overwhelmed by corruption, such as bribed officials and infiltrated judicial systems, cartel influence through assassinations and coercion of politicians, and

institutional weaknesses like underfunded police forces unable to match cartel firepower²⁶. Specific *Narcos* scenes, including the murder of the Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla or ministers accepting suitcases of cash, amplify this image of a state teetering on collapse. While this portrayal exposes the limitations of domestic governance, in confronting non-state actors, it also reinforces an asymmetrical dynamic in which external intervention, primarily U.S. DEA agents providing intelligence, training, and resources, appears both legitimate and necessary, echoing real-world Plan Colombia aid packages. Consequently, the series reinforces an asymmetrical understanding of global security in which Global South states are positioned as incapable of managing transnational threats independently, thereby legitimizing interventionist practices within International Relations.

As Cardozo argues, popular cultural representations of Colombia in productions such as *Narcos* often shape global perceptions by foregrounding violence and instability, potentially reproducing dominant narratives about the Global South as inherently chaotic and dependent on Northern expertise.²⁷ This aligns with broader International Relations scholarship on how media “othering” constructs peripheral states as security risks requiring intervention, sidelining local agency, and structural factors such as U.S. drug. Recent analyses further note that such framing sustains prohibitionist policies, as audiences internalize cartels as existential threats justifying militarized responses over alternatives like harm reduction. Consequently, *Narcos* does not merely reflect existing stereotypes but actively reinforces a hierarchical global order in which interventionist policies appear both necessary and legitimate.

Although the series occasionally critiques the human costs of prohibitionist policies such as civilian casualties from heavy-handed raids, the displacement of rural communities, the cement actors who blur ethical lines by collaborating with vigilantes or turning a blind eye to allies’ corruption, it ultimately maintains enforcement rough fumigation campaigns, and the moral compromises of law enforcement as the central solution to transnational drug trafficking²⁸. These critical moments, such as Agent Murphy’s growing disillusionment or depictions of Escobar’s family suffering, humanize the fallout but rarely challenge the underlying framework, instead framing them as tragic necessities in an unwinnable yet essential battle. In doing so, *Narcos* aligns with longstanding war on drugs discourses that prioritized militarized suppression through DEA-led operations, Search Bloc assaults, and extradition pressures, over structural reform addressing root causes like U.S. consumer demand, poverty, driven coca cultivation, or alternative development programs. As a result, the series limits the scope of critique by acknowledging the failures of enforcement while simultaneously reaffirming its indispensability, thereby reinforcing the dominance of prohibitionist logic.

This narrative choice reinforces a cycle where intensified policing begets cartel evolution (e.g., fragmentation into smaller networks), perpetuating the perceived need for ever-escalating responses rather than decriminalization or harm reduction models gaining traction elsewhere. As popular culture functions as a site where political meanings are constructed and circulated, shaping public imaginaries of security, legitimacy, and Global North-South power asymmetries²⁹. The series contributes to normalizing a securitized understanding of transnational crime, where cartels are cast as existential foes demanding extraordinary measures over diplomatic or socioeconomic interventions. In this sense, the series not only reflects policy discourse but actively sustains a cycle of securitization that prioritizes enforcement while marginalizing structural and policy alternatives.

Thus, while *Narcos* presents moments of ambiguity and critique, such as the personal toll on DEA agents or the futility of endless raids, it simultaneously reinforces a hegemonic security framework in which drug trafficking is addressed primarily through state-centric and interventionist strategies, sidelining alternatives like regulated markets or poverty alleviation³⁰. For instance, the series glorifies the eventual takedown of Escobar via U.S-backed Search Bloc operations, framing it as a hard-won victory that validates militarized escalation despite recurring cartel resurgence. The war on drugs is not merely depicted; it is narratively legitimized, embedding viewers' acceptance of suppression tactics as the default response to transnational threats³¹. This narrative resolution legitimizes enforcement-based success stories while obscuring the cyclical and unresolved nature of the drug trade, thereby embedding the war on drugs as the default paradigm for addressing transnational threats.

While the war on drugs narrative situates drug trafficking as an existential security threat requiring militarized responses, its cultural resonance is amplified through popular media. *Narcos* does not merely reproduce policy discourses; it mythologizes them by transforming figures like Pablo Escobar into anti-heroes whose actions blur the boundaries between good and evil. As Gutiérrez Delgado, Ceballos-Saavedra, and Rivera-Betancur argue, the series participates in a process of mythification that normalizes “relative evil,” presenting brutality and corruption as part of a tragic cycle rather than isolated aberrations. This mythic framing connects directly to the securitized logic of the war on drugs, but it also reveals how popular culture dramatizes insecurity as spectacle, embedding political narratives within emotionally charged stories of violence, pursuit, and control³². By doing so, *Narcos* transforms policy discourse into moral drama, making securitized interpretations of transnational crime more accessible, emotionally resonant, and ultimately more difficult to challenge within public and academic imaginaries.

Global North and Global South Representation in *Narcos*

Another significant dimension in the narrative of *Narcos* is the contrasting representation of actors from the Global South and the Global North, where U.S. DEA agents emerge as competent, morally upright protagonists amid chaotic Latin American settings³³. The series largely situates Colombia as the primary geographical and political setting of the drug trade, portraying it as a space characterized by violence (e.g., car bombs, massacres), corruption (bribing judges, infiltrated police), and institutional fragility³⁴. Political elites, law enforcement agencies, and local institutions are frequently depicted as struggling to maintain authority in the face of powerful drug cartels. This aligns with analyses of narcoculture commodifying Colombia's trauma for Northern audiences, reinforcing stereotypes of Latin instability³⁵. This representation constructs a hierarchical geopolitical narrative in which the Global South is framed as inherently unstable, thereby legitimizing the need for external intervention from more "capable" Northern actors.

Representations in narco-shows such as *Narcos* not only position U.S. DEA agents as competent, morally upright protagonists amid fragile Latin American institutions, but also commodify Medellin trauma for Northern audiences. Colombia is depicted as a space of violence³⁶. This aligns with Stoneman and Packer's analysis of true-crime documentaries, which demonstrate how audiences derive voyeuristic pleasure from extra-judicial punishment, whether through interrogations, surveillance, or torture³⁷. As a result, the series participates in a broader "trauma economy" in which violence in the Global South (Latin America) is repackaged as entertainment, reinforcing stereotypes while simultaneously normalizing external observation and intervention.

Such portrayals reflect broader patterns in popular culture where countries in the Global South are often framed as sites of instability and disorder. As Cardozo notes, media productions centered on Pablo Escobar have played a major role in shaping global perceptions of Colombia, frequently emphasizing violence and criminality as defining characteristics of the country. In *Narcos*, these narrative choices reinforce an image of Colombia as the epicenter of the global cocaine trade, while the structural conditions that sustain this economy, such as global demand and the international financial networks, receive comparatively limited attention³⁸. This selective framing narrows the analytical lens, encouraging audiences to attribute transnational crime to localized instability rather than to interconnected global structures.

In contrast, actors from across the Global North, particularly agents of the U.S. DEA, are presented as key figures in the effort to combat transnational drug trafficking. Although the series acknowledges the complexity and limitations of its operations, the narrative frequently positions U.S. agents as strategic observers and coordinators of the broader anti-drug campaign. This perspective

is reinforced through the use of voice-over narration and storytelling devices that privilege the viewpoint of American agents, thereby situating them as authoritative interpreters of the unfolding events³⁹. By privileging the viewpoint of Northern actors, the series implicitly constructs them as legitimate authorities in defining and managing transnational crime, thereby reinforcing asymmetrical power relations within International Relations.

The framing resonates with Rodriguez Goyes and Franko's analysis of how global entertainment commodifies Maddelin's trauma, displacing victims' voices, and reinforcing stereotypes of Latin American instability, as well as with observations that audiences are drawn to dramatized punishment outside formal legal structures. Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that *Narcos* not only represents violence but also embeds it within a narrative framework that legitimizes interventionist discourses while marginalizing local agency and structural explanations.

These representations suggest that *Narcos* participates in a broader representational economy in which violence and suffering in the Global South are made intelligible and consumable for global audiences. This dynamic is important and significant because it shapes how geopolitical differences are understood and reinforcing a global narrative in which intervention and enforcement appear as natural responses to instability.

As a popular culture text, *Narcos* does more than dramatize the history of drug trafficking in Colombia; it actively participates in constructing public understandings of transnational crime, turning abstract IR concepts like sovereignty disintegration and non-state threats into visceral, bingeable drama. Popular culture plays a significant role in shaping how global political issues are imagined, interpreted, and emotionally consumed by audiences to facilitating affective engagement with the themes of violence, power, and morality⁴⁰. Through this process, the series simplifies complex global dynamics into personalized and morally charged narratives, making particular interpretations of transnational crime more persuasive and widely accepted.

This process aligns with recent media studies showing how *Narcos*' style narcoculture commodifies Latin violence for Northern viewers, embedding hegemonic views of the Global South as a security threat⁴¹. By prioritizing U.S perspectives and personalizing cartel actors, *Narcos* reduces structural inequalities such as global demand and economic disparities into a simplified moral binary of good versus evil. Such simplification reinforces enforcement-oriented paradigms by obscuring the structural drivers of transnational crime and limiting the visibility of alternative policy responses.

One of the most significant effects of this representation is the simplification of transnational crime into a legible security narrative. Rather than foregrounding structural drivers such as global cocaine demand,

international financial systems, uneven development, or the political economy of prohibition, the series primarily frames the drug trade through violence, criminal personalities, and state confrontation. As a result, audiences are encouraged to interpret transnational crime as an immediate security threat requiring containment, rather than as a complex phenomenon shaped by global political and economic processes.

This framing is consistent with recent scholarship showing that cocaine markets operate through increasingly interconnected trafficking networks across regions and the supply chain, rather than through isolated local criminal activity⁴². Media representations, however, often compress these complexities into simplified and stigmatizing narratives. Within International Relations, such narration reflects securitization logic, in which a multidimensional issue is transformed into an urgent security threat that legitimizes exceptional and interventionist responses⁴³. In this way, *Narcos* contributes to the normalization of securitized interpretations of transnational crime, reinforcing interventionist approaches as the dominant response.

The narrative construction is further intensified through the use of spectacle. Violence, surveillance, and punishment are repeatedly dramatized to create emotionally engaging and visually compelling scenes. Rather than presenting crime as a distant or abstract social problem, the series transforms it into a sequence of dramatic scenes that heighten tension, suspense, and moral conflict. This emphasis on spectacle prioritizes visible acts of violence over underlying causes, reinforcing a perception that political order is maintained primarily through force and coercion.

Taken together, these representational strategies produce a commonsense understanding of transnational crime that favors intervention, enforcement, and security-oriented responses, while marginalizing the structural and historical conditions that sustain the drug trade. In this sense, *Narcos* should be understood not simply as a reflection of the war on drugs, but as a cultural text that actively reproduces and normalizes its dominant assumptions. Through popular culture, transnational crime is not only represented but also narratively constructed in ways that shape how audiences perceive responsibility, legitimacy, and possible solutions in global politics.

Concluding Remarks

Narcos ultimately reinforces a hegemonic understanding of transnational drug trafficking as an existential security threat demanding militarized, interventionist responses, aligning with securitization theory by elevating crime to a domain justifying extraordinary measures like DEA-led operations and extraditions. By personalizing cartels through figures like Escobar, marginalizing structural drivers (e.g., U.S. consumption and financial flows), and positioning American agents as competent protagonists amid Colombian chaos, the series

normalizes prohibitionist policies while commodifying Global South violence for Northern audiences, perpetuating stereotypes of instability and legitimizing external governance over local agency.

Despite occasional critiques of prohibition's human costs, such as civilian casualties, corruption, and agent moral dilemma, *Narcos* resolves ambiguities by glorifying enforcement victories, sidelining alternatives like harm reduction or socioeconomic reforms, and embedding war-on-drugs logics into bingeable drama that shapes public imaginaries of crime and power. This cultural reproduction sustains cycles of cartel fragmentation and escalation, influencing perceptions in regions, for example, ASEAN, where similar securitized frames drive regional cooperation, underscoring popular media's role in IR discourse construction. Ultimately, *Narcos* illustrates how popular culture and media framing converge to produce a way of seeing crime in which violence becomes the central language of political order, criminal authority, and state response.

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