Book Review

Violence, Development, and Democracy in Latin America

The Outcomes of Transitions from Authoritarian Regimes

by
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Cynthia J. Arnson (ed.) *In the Wake of War: Democratization and Internal Armed Conflict in Latin America*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Stanford University Press, 2012.

Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (eds.) *Violence at the Urban Margins*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Leigh Binford *The El Mozote Massacre: Human Rights and Global Implications*. Revised and expanded edition. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016.

John Gledhill *The New War on the Poor: The Production of Insecurity in Latin America*. London: Zed Books, 2015.

Martin Mowforth *The Violence of Development: Resource Depletion, Environmental Crises and Human Rights Abuses in Central America*. London: Pluto Press, 2014.

In the 1980s and 1990s, sociological and anthropological studies on Latin American states and violence mainly addressed armed political conflicts, guerrilla movements, dictatorships, and state terrorism. Political science privileged debates over the so-called transitions from dictatorship or authoritarianism toward democratic governments. Since the 2000s, two issues have been central to discussions regarding post–Cold War violence—the reasons for the high levels of insecurity that have made some Latin American countries among the most dangerous in the world and what Martin Mowforth (2014) terms "the violence of development" associated with the implementation of neoliberal policies and what the U.S. geographer David Harvey has called "the capitalism of dispossession." There is some consensus in the social sciences regarding a fundamental change in the type of violence currently threatening human security: while the political violence resulting from armed conflicts prompted by state power has decreased, contemporary Latin America is nevertheless affected by bloody struggles involving the control of natural resources and legal and illegal markets. State agents, multinationals, national and international economic and political elites, criminal organizations, and territorial gangs seem to participate equally in these struggles.

The book published by the Woodrow Wilson Center and edited by Cynthia J. Arnson, *In the Wake of War*, addresses the links between pacification, democracy, and governance

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in seven Latin American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, Peru, Mexico, and Haiti. A first volume edited by Arnson in 1999 studied pacification in societies that had been through internal armed conflicts in an attempt to evaluate progress in the implementation of peace agreements and the construction of young democracies. Thirteen years later, this second volume focuses on the institutional capacities of democratic governments to process social demands, provide constituents with basic security, and ensure the provision of social services.

Some chapters of the book reflect a certain optimism regarding the opening of spaces for political competition via electoral processes and the inclusion of former guerrilla groups. In the second chapter Dinorah Azpuru stresses, for example, that with the exception of Haiti, all the countries analyzed have been able to maintain formally democratic governments and regularly conduct relatively free and competitive elections. She also characterizes these governments as "mid-range democracies" some of which "may even show some traits of liberal democracy" (40). However, all the chapters deal with the difficulties for these regional governments of maintaining legal order and with the forms of socioeconomic exclusion that are still causing social conflict. Above all, the book highlights the generalized insecurity linked to crime, high levels of corruption, and the absence of the rule of law in most countries of the region.

The book's case selection is problematic, because Haiti and Mexico can hardly be categorized as "postwar societies." In the first case, permanent political instability has not been linked to the presence of an armed opposition that directly threatens the power elite. In the second, the armed confrontation that followed the Zapatista National Liberation Army's uprising lasted less than two weeks and was limited to a few municipalities in the state of Chiapas. Furthermore, the guerrilla army itself, in a radical departure from other Latin American guerrilla groups, declared that it was not seeking state power. In this regard, the chapter on Mexico written by Benítez Manaut, Carrasco, and Rodríguez Luna is limited to a description of the negotiations between the Mexican government and the Zapatistas without reflecting on the effects of the guerrilla uprising on democratic institutions nationwide or even at the state level. The authors argue that "the national security aspects of the 1994 Chiapas crisis have diminished over time as a factor of governability" (255), but they fail to prove that the 1994 uprising posed a national-security threat. They speak of the growing isolation of the Zapatistas as if it were self-inflicted without analyzing the low-intensity warfare, the actions of regional paramilitary groups, and the Mexican government's coercive and militaristic policy.

The analysis of the Guatemalan situation by Torres-Rivas calls into question the fundamental thesis of the book by enquiring into the very characterization of this nation as a "postwar society." The author states that instead of a civil war Guatemala experienced the action of a counterinsurgent state: "Military power was directed not only against guerrilla subversion but also against the civilian opposition that used peaceful means in its struggle for democracy. Prolonged, senseless ethnic slaughter took place" (108). This suggestion radically alters the analytical links between "pacification" and "democratization". According to Torres-Rivas the postwar actors are neither civilians nor social movements but the military itself. It was the military that changed the rules of the game—the political regime and its sources of legitimacy—promoting elections to justify the oligarchy's permanence in power. Thus he traces the continuity across those elites linked to massacres, genocide, mass violations of human rights, and organized crime between the period of the military dictatorships and the present.

The relative decline in political conflict does not mean that the wounds caused by wars and the dictatorships that ravaged some Central and South American countries in the 1970s and 1980s have healed. In fact, one of the most sensitive issues with regard to peace and justice in the region is the impunity that prevails almost 40 years after the scorched-earth policy promoted by the Guatemalan and Salvadoran governments with

U.S. political, financial, and military support. Leigh Binford's *The El Mozote Massacre* is an in-depth exploration of the effects of the extreme violence in El Salvador during the early 1980s. It recovers a study published by the author over two decades ago addressing the community of El Mozote, north of Morazán (Binford, 1996). During the war El Mozote suffered one of El Salvador's bloodiest events of state terrorism: in December 1981 the Atlacátl Battalion, a counterinsurgent unit trained in the United States, massacred over 1,000 inhabitants in six local villages.

Based on an excellent ethnographic description of Morazán and, particularly, of the El Mozote community, Binford's book manages to give social, political, and human (personal) dimensions to its inhabitants before, during, and after the massacre. Ethnography transforms the victims of this massacre into social subjects, either negating or making amends for the destruction of their identities by state terrorism. In this regard, the author addresses criticism of reports, articles, and books that tend to "think of the world's non-Western peoples in predominantly numerical terms, as masses of humanity rather than as complex combinations of unique individuals" (161). Instead of listing the human rights violations, Binford gives an account of the multiplicity and complexity of social relations and the political contradictions that prevailed in El Mozote. He recovers the stories of flesh-and-blood individuals who suffered those violations and their beliefs, their livelihoods, and their family lives. He shows that, unlike other towns in northern Morazán, this one was relatively prosperous even though it was in an area that had undergone an agricultural crisis and shortages regularly forced some of its inhabitants to look for work in other regions of the country or in Honduras.

Although the El Mozote massacre is only one of several atrocities committed by the Salvadoran dictatorship with the support and consent of the U.S. government, it is undoubtedly one of the most reported traumatic events of the war: news of it leaked to the *New York Times* was persistently denied by the Salvadoran and U.S. governments, and the subsequent evidence was initially provided by Tutela Legal (Legal Guardianship), an organization of the Archdiocese of San Salvador. Shortly after the peace agreements of Chapultepec (in Mexico City) during 1992, Mark Danner (1993) reported the carnage in detail for the *New Yorker*. In 1994 he also published an excellent journalistic investigation entitled *The Massacre at El Mozote* that brought to light the terrorist tactics of a state that received massive support from the U.S. government.

Binford's book historically and anthropologically describes the community of El Mozote and analyzes the social relationships, personal motivations, collective identities, and social, political, and religious conflicts that underlay the massacre and other atrocities committed in the region. The 2016 edition has three new chapters. The ninth describes resettlement processes during the postwar period, tourism development, and the first investigations into the massacre. The tenth analyzes the session of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that took place in Guayaquil (Equador) in April 2012. The eleventh discusses aspects of transitional justice and the discourse and practice of human rights. The trials held for the massacre and the report of the Truth Commission, "From Madness to Hope: The 12-Year War in El Salvador," seemed important steps toward human rights accountability and symbolic reparations. However, what prevailed was the impunity guaranteed by the Amnesty Law of 1993. Those responsible for massive human rights violations were never tried and remained in power for 17 years following the war.

In this new edition, Binford also provides an account of the interpretations and political uses of the massacre during the postwar years. While the Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front—FMLN) tended to mythologize the victims, turning them into anonymous martyrs of the revolution, journalists emphasized the innocence of the El Mozote population, which "therefore did not deserve to be massacred by the army." For proof of its innocence they pointed

to its impartiality or even relative animosity toward the guerrillas, since most of the population was Evangelical Christian. Right-wing sectors, for their part, tried for years to show that the massacred were, in fact, guerrillas or that they had been sacrificed by the FMLN itself. Generally speaking, the multiple narratives of the massacre are characterized by a Manichaean tendency to view El Mozote as a local scenario for the reproduction of the confrontation of the Cold War. Binford manages to overcome this Manichaeism and construct an in-depth description of political and social processes in the region. As does Torres-Rivas in the Arnson collection, he argues that the so-called transition to democracy in El Salvador was simply a response to a change of strategy by the power elite in connivance with the U.S. government. Post–Cold War, the presence of civil governments and a seemingly less punitive attitude toward social movements became much more profitable, even with the progressive opening of political spaces for the opposition.

The book edited by Javier Auyero, Philippe Bourgois, and Nancy Scheper- Hughes, *Violence at the Urban Margins*, is also founded on an ethnographic perspective on violence. It focuses on conflicts related to insecurity, gang life, confrontations with the police, and the multiple faces of social violence in poor neighborhoods of large Latin American and U.S. cities: Philadelphia, Medellín, Monterrey, Caracas, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Managua, Guatemala City, and San Salvador. The contributors' thesis is based on a theoretical perspective previously developed by Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois in the introduction to an anthology they edited in 2004, *Violence in War and Peace*. This perspective insists on the continuity of forms of violence that feed on each other, shifting between structural violence and direct physical violence, between daily and invisible forms of violence to the cruelest and most spectacular. In contrast to the previous anthology, which collected classic texts from several sources and eras, the 2015 book addresses the results of recent ethnographic work in urban contexts.

Most chapters adopt a gendered approach. This is particularly relevant and original in the case of Hume and Wilding's "'Es que para ellos el deporte es matar': Rethinking the Scripts of Violent Men in El Salvador and Brazil," a feminist analysis of urban violence in these two nations. The authors seek to avoid stereotypes of male violence and, in general, the stereotypes of masculinities often linked to explanations of gang violence. Instead, they adopt an intersectional perspective addressing class, gender, race, and generation, which enables an explanation of the articulations between criminal, interpersonal, and state violence. They also reverse the prevalent analytical relationship between gender and violence: instead of taking gender as a factor of violence, they consider gender norms and relations as the context in which violence occurs and is reproduced. The chapter by Zubillaga, Llorens, and Souto, "*Chismosas* and *Alcahuetas*: Being the Mother of an *Empistolado* within the Everyday Armed Violence of a Caracas Barrio," seems to engage in a dialogue with Hume and Wilding. The authors address the gendered context that enables the transmission of hatred through family lines, particularly women (mothers, aunts), and the reproduction of urban violence.

In the chapter titled "Managing in the Midst of Social Disaster: Poor People's Responses to Urban Violence," Auyero and Kilanski elaborate a typology of social action in contexts of urban violence based on case studies of interpersonal and collective violence in a Buenos Aires neighborhood. As does Binford in the case of the El Mozote massacre, they seek to acknowledge the victims as social subjects rather than as mere objects of violence. In other words, they seek to show that there are forms of individualized and collective social action with which to face the violence that popular urban sectors of various Latin American cities experience.

The Scheper-Hughes article "Death Squads and Vigilante Politics in Democratic Northeast Brazil" exposes the limitation of the chapters focused on case studies: their lack of contextualization from a historical and global perspective. Indeed, although

several case studies presented in this book undertake in-depth descriptions of the social dynamics derived from violence in large city neighborhoods (dynamics between gangs, the local population, the police and state institutions), they generally fail to address the historical and structural factors underlying urban violence in Latin America. Scheper-Hughes reconstructs the transnational framework, particularly the role of the U.S. government and other superpowers in the production and reproduction of the dynamics of exploitation, plunder, and expulsion. This enables her to link daily violence ("small wars and invisible genocides") to economic and political contexts characterized as "amoral" for their systematic production of the precariousness and disposability of certain lives. Scheper-Hughes thus returns to a problem she has researched for several decades and developed in previous books: "everyday violence" (Scheper-Hughes, 1996). This chapter and the postface by Bourgois constitute a contextual framework that would have been better placed at the beginning of the book. Both chapters transcend the perspectives of a local analysis of power relations and daily aggression and move on to explore the historical and structural continuity of urban violence.

Bourgois's postface deconstructs the scaffolding on which the conflict, repression, and violence that plague the slums of U.S. and Latin American cities are structured. More than conclusions, Bourgois provides an analysis of the international context and the structural foundations of the local production of violence, often associated with drug trafficking and consumption. As does Scheper-Hughes, he points to the permanent and repeated economic, political, and military intervention of the United States throughout the region and analyzes the extreme socioeconomic inequality resulting from accumulation processes as well as colonial and neocolonial development models. In particular, he highlights the brutal imposition of neoliberal policies throughout the Latin American subcontinent that generally took place alongside unrestricted support for totalitarian or dictatorial regimes, bloody coups, and systematic political repression.

The role of drug markets in the acceleration of the transnational flow of goods and capital during neoliberal globalization must be understood in this context. Given the dismantling of the manufacturing industries nurtured under the developmentalist policies of the 1960s and 1970s and the permanent price deterioration of agricultural products, the production and trafficking of narcotics have become, according to Bourgois, a key sector with economic pull: "Ironically, the global narcotics trade represents one of the few dramatic southward flows of capital in exchange for a primary agricultural product that has been rendered—by U.S. and to a lesser extent European domestic policies—more valuable than oil and precious metals" (309). The extreme profitability of drug production and trafficking has led to an expanded reproduction of illegality—the rise of financial elites linked to money laundering, corrupt political elites embedded in organized crime, and even "narco-states." It is this coproduction of violence by various social and political actors that is addressed by the British anthropologist John Gledhill (2015).

Gledhill's *The New War on the Poor* analyzes "the new wars" in the context of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2004). Based on long-range ethnographic work in urban and rural areas of Brazil and Mexico, it shows how security policies allow for the expansion of capitalist markets and the violent extraction of natural resources. The reproduction of capital currently requires escalating the exploration and extraction of natural resources and expanding market logic to more and more areas of social life. Neoliberal globalization also causes the growth of what Marx called a "relative surplus population," so that security policies take over disposable social sectors. Thus, accumulation takes several interrelated courses:

1. The exploration and occupation of new territories for the accelerated extraction of natural resources, even at the cost of the destruction of the environment and future life and livelihoods.

2. The accelerated commodification of social assets (such as care or security).
3. The continuous increase in the value of housing and the gentrification of peripheral urban areas, as well as the privatization of previously communal, federal, or ejido lands.
4. The dispossession and expulsion of indigenous peoples and peasants located in regions rich in natural resources, in areas destined to the promotion of mining megaprojects, or along routes for the traffic of licit or illegal goods.
5. The criminalization (and, consequently, violent repression) of social movements, slum inhabitants in big cities, drug users, and the poor in general.

The commodification of security results in the revitalization of the traffic and use of increasingly lethal weapons, the massive sale of armament and military advice to governments of peripheral countries, often within the framework of securitization projects, plans, and programs, the so-called war on drugs, and the repression of popular and guerrilla movements. It also affects the privatization of security—the multiplication of private security forces and paramilitary groups financed by economic elites.

Traversing the neighborhoods of cities such as Rio or Bahia in Brazil and rural and semiurban areas of Michoacán in Mexico, Gledhill shows the overlap between the police and the military, criminals, and paramilitaries. For example, paramilitary groups and criminal organizations often include former police or soldiers; police officers may have second jobs as security guards. There are extensive chains of complicity between the state and private legal or illegal entities, with the result that many state agents benefit economically and politically from criminal activities. In addition, criminal organizations, gangs, and police forces act in a similar manner: their dominance is equally based on a combination of protection rackets, repression, and constant threats against poor sectors of the population. However, while traffickers generally build their legitimacy by trying to establish a social base within communities, the military and the police are usually completely external. Police practices, particularly the stigmatization and repression of young people, lead to communal resentment "and alienate[s] residents from the state" (89).

Mowforth's *The Violence of Development* focuses on the privatization and exploitation of natural resources, the devastating effect of development projects, and the extraordinary profits that transnational corporations make at the expense of the environment. It also addresses the criminalization of defenders of territorial rights and the environment, the selective murder of social leaders who dare to denounce the plunder, and the violent coercion of popular environmental organizations by state agents, paramilitary groups, and criminal organizations. It seeks to reveal the ties between the oligarchies of Central American countries, criminal organizations, transnational corporations, Western countries (mainly in North America and Europe), and international financial institutions. It provides proof of the enormous socioeconomic inequality and inequality of access to vital resources such as water and food, as well as the privatization of public services and goods such as energy, that result in the marginalization and impoverishment of the majority of the local population. Many of the cases also demonstrate the corruption and complicity of multinational corporations in the flourishing criminality, including the murder, dispossession, and expulsion from their lands of native peoples and peasants to incorporate them into the rationale of capitalist accumulation.

The book's first six chapters discuss development problems linked to resources such as food, water, energy, mining, forests, industrialization, and free-trade agreements. Two subsequent chapters describe the violent expulsion and repression of indigenous peoples and human rights defenders in Central America, and a final one systematizes some of the findings of previous chapters. Each chapter provides general data on the

problems of environmental deterioration, resource depletion, and unequal distribution and is supported by statistics and maps of the Central American region.

For two decades, Mowforth has been an editor for the *Environmental Network of Central America Newsletter*. Here he has written an extraordinary volume full of information and examples gleaned from critical journalism. In fact, the research material that gave rise to the book greatly exceeds the content of this work, and therefore the author has created a website where the reader can find other case studies and even more information. Both the book and the website constitute something of a compilation of denunciations, though these are contextualized by some general data on the countries of the region.

Mowforth's book lacks a more structural analysis and a spatial-geographical reflection that explains the role of Central America in the processes of contemporary accumulation. The introduction very succinctly states some theoretical reflections on development, mainly starting with the views of the Latin American sociologists and economists who promoted so-called dependency theory in the 1960s and 1970s. It does not analyze the great transformations of capitalism since the end of the twentieth century or what David Harvey (2004) has termed the "new imperialism"—the renewal of original accumulation through simple looting. Although Mowforth mentions the notion of "capitalism by dispossession" (98) in passing, he overlooks Harvey's theories on the geographical expansion of capitalism via, among other things, the exploration and exploitation of new and cheaper natural resources in some regions of the planet. Lacking such an analytical framework, this book is primarily a detailed report on environmental and human rights violations in Central America.

The five books reviewed here seek to map the complexity of economic, political, and social actors involved in daily and normalized forms of violence, widespread insecurity, and armed conflict. They all show that lethal violence in Latin America often involves territorial struggles for legal or illegal markets, natural resource extraction, and the repression of environmental leaders and human rights defenders. While the book edited by Arnson is a reflection on the achievements and limits of democratic governments in what the editor terms "postwar societies," the other titles detail the permanent wars being fought across Latin America in the broader framework of capitalism by dispossession.

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