



Vol. 6, No. 1, Fall 2008, 228-231
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Will Fowler and Peter Lambert, eds., *Political Violence and the Construction of National Identity in Latin America* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

Narrating Violence and the Nation in Latin America

Katherine Hite

Vassar College

States, by definition, are constructed from violence. As Charles Tilly provocatively once argued, states operate as mafias, ever coercing and even creating threats in order to extort capital and amass armies. States produce and reproduce violence. And it is invariably the task of particularly powerful states to craft national identities that mask the violence, that rewrite and euphemize violent histories as something other than violence. To cite obvious US national examples: the United States *bought* the island of

Manhattan from the Indians, *purchased* Louisiana, *settled* the West. Unsurprisingly, US national identity construction often relies on narratives of capital that project a friendly market.

Will Fowler and Peter Lambert, the co-editors of this collection on violence and national identity in Latin America, have brought together an impressive range of case studies from around the region. By and large, the chapters offer quite useful, synthetic political histories of the major periods of violence and the array of national narratives that emerge from, wrestle with, and oppose these violent, traumatic moments. The collection includes chapters on Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela. Most of the authors rely on the national discourses of leading political figures, as well as on renowned novelists and essayists of the distinct historical periods, to elaborate the national identity framings. In some cases, the authors demonstrate politicians' deliberate national identity crafting (i.e., Julia Buxton on Venezuela, Lambert on Paraguay), while in others, they assess the ways in which both citizens and elites struggle with violent legacies (Fowler on Mexico, Martin Mullins on Chile). Mo Hume's chapter on gender, nation and violence in El Salvador does not challenge dominant characterizations of links between violence and nation, but she brings ethnographic work, including telling interviews, to the fore to demonstrate how deeply entrenched violence has become in everyday Salvadoran life.

Both Francisco Domínguez's chapter on the Chilean left and Michael Goebel's chapter on nationalism and violence in Argentina are unique to the volume. Domínguez's chapter is an insightful use of left working class presses and left writings that consistently opposed the violent instances marking Chilean history from the late nineteenth century to the present. The chapter explicitly complicates dominant national narratives, particularly that of Chilean exceptionalism. Goebel emphasizes the multiplicity of Argentine nationalist claims that may or may not have instrumentalized violence, primarily during the 1960s and 1970s. Both authors challenge any neat argument that violence has been any more

intrinsic to national identity in Latin America than anywhere else. In this vein, I wish there had been a contribution on Bolivia and that several of the chapters better addressed competing narratives of nation.

It is always risky to make claims about trends in national political identity and political culture, to lament how little has been recovered or changed. This seems to be the implication of Mullins on Chile post-Pinochet and of Lambert on Paraguay post-Stroessner. Yet in both cases, we have seen important shifts in memory narratives (Chile) and national leadership (Paraguay).

The opening conceptual chapters of the volume are fairly conventional overviews. Lambert's second chapter, "Myth, Manipulation, and Violence," takes the reader through Europeanist theoretical work on the state, identity, and violence. He captures the fluidity and complexity of national identity claims. The chapter might have benefited from references to Latin American theoretical work on violence and national identity, work such as Aníbal Quijano's, Eduardo Galeano's, or Enrique Dussel's, that shake up Europeanist understandings of genealogies of violence and mappings of nations, that bring empire and global political economy to the fore in configuring national narratives.

I find it odd that the book begins with Will Fowler's "Children of the *Chingada*." The chapter is a run-through of Mexican (and scattered other Latin American) political and historical violence while assuming away ongoing violent practices across the Mexican border, or on the border, even. While I do not wish to fall into essentializing territory necessarily, there is something troublesome about beginning a book by an Englishman whose first chapter is entitled, "The Children of the *Chingada*." I may be accused of a criticism that suggests censorship or "political correctness," for I am questioning who is authorized to speak of the *Chingada*, and in such terms. I am concerned about the ways Fowler plays into the ideologies, language, assumptions, and privileging of empires old and new. Fowler places Mexican struggles for/over national identity as a Mexican inferiority complex of some sort, in relation to European and US prowess.

As the US physically devastates Iraq, we are hard-pressed to find anything comparable taking place anywhere in the Latin American region. And as Peter Andreas and others have signaled, much of Mexico's historic border troubles with/from the North began with US violations of the borders, including arms smuggling and human incursions south. The US-based arms smuggling continues to plague Mexico. Major US cities are devastated by deterioration, gang violence, and drugs, not terribly dissimilar from some of Hume's descriptions of life for Salvadorans. In this chapter there is little if any elaboration of the intense dynamics in which the US and Mexico are violently intertwined.

Nevertheless, Goebel's chapter on Argentina is a thoughtful conclusion, throwing into question assumptions about stabilizing narrative threads in history or what we even mean by nationalism or by a country's being violent in the first place. Like Lambert's chapter on Paraguay, Goebel's is attentive to discourses rather than overarching historical claims. It is an emphasis on conflict and power and on the instrumentalization of violence in specific (and for Argentina and many other countries of the region, comparatively limited) moments.