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Review/Reseña

Enrique Desmond Arias and Daniel M. Goldstein, eds. *Violent Democracies in Latin America*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010.

Understanding Violence in Contemporary Latin America

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Violence has plagued Latin America for centuries and, accordingly, has long been central to its academic study. *Violent Democracies in Latin America* seeks to make a significant contribution to our understanding of the region by not just analyzing the perpetuation of violence among consolidating *democracies* but more importantly by proposing theoretical explanations for its perplexing continuation—and in some countries even increase—alongside the region's democratization.

This is an edited volume with many of its chapters drawn from papers first presented at conferences in 2004 and 2006. The case

studies are uniformly good—well researched and written on important and interesting topics. For the most part, though, they have little updating, in some cases beyond 2003. The chapters cover the most important countries in terms of population size—Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina—along with a much smaller country, the Dominican Republic. For *Violent Democracies*' theoretical ambitions, however, it is unfortunate that the case studies do not include those with the highest homicide rates—the highest in the world since 2006 have been those of El Salvador, Honduras, Jamaica, Guatemala, and Venezuela (order among them varying year-to-year).¹

The volume's theoretical ambitions aim high, featuring three theoretical chapters and what appear to have been significant efforts by the editors to provide theoretical direction to their authors. I applaud these efforts but remain unconvinced by the purported significance of what they propose. The editors—political scientist Enrique Desmond Arias and anthropologist Daniel M. Goldstein—state their arguments in a co-authored introductory chapter that are reiterated by Arias in a concluding chapter.

Arias and Goldstein elaborate three main theoretical themes. First, democratic consolidation has not diminished political violence, contrary to expectations by some, yet this central contradiction, they maintain, receives insufficient scholarly attention. This volume and its core concept of *violent pluralism* is meant to redirect our attention to the “multiple violent actors [that] operate within the polity and maintain different and changing connections to state institutions and political leaders, whether those states are officially democratic, authoritarian, or otherwise” (21). (Some of the chapter authors, however, seem to confuse the term as meaning something more like “a violent polyarchy.”)

Second, rather than portraying violence as “a failure of democratic governance and institutions” (5), *violent pluralism* “inverts many of the assumptions of extant writings on politics in Latin America” (26). Instead, Arias argues in the concluding chapter, “The spreading violence in the region represents not so much a failure of

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_intentional_homicide_rate>

democratic institutions as, in many cases, the basis on which those institutions function” (243).

Third, the editors contend that contemporary violence is not “a social aberration” (5) but instead “has become so pervasive in much of Latin America in part due to the particular ways in which trade liberalization and neoliberal economic systems have interacted with the political environment of postauthoritarian Latin America” (17).

Violent Democracies offers two chapters on Colombia, the country whose experience seems to provide the closest fit for the editors’ theoretical framework—at least through the period covered by these case studies. Both chapters provide very good regional histories—Mary Roldán for Antioquia and María Clemencia Ramírez for Putumayo. Roldán focuses on a grassroots solidarity movement (Oriente No-Violence Movement), claiming that this movement “represents a microcosm of the difficulties in Colombia in the midst of violence” (66). She makes her case well but leaves the story hanging at the end of 2001.

Ramírez offers a much broader scope, as suggested by her title: “Maintaining Democracy in Colombia through Political Exclusion, States of Exception, Counterinsurgency, and Dirty War.” She does well at portraying the relationships between the multiple violent actors implicated in Colombia’s horrific violence, not just in contemporary decades but going back to *La Violencia* of mid-century. She also writes one of the two chapters that most fully embrace the editors’ framework, arguing that “political violence and illegality in the periphery is intrinsic to the maintenance of Colombia’s model of democracy” (85-86). There can be no question about the connections between the paramilitaries and the military and therefore it would be understandable to conclude at the time the original conference paper was presented that “The survival of the Colombian political system has been and remains contingent on state and nonstate armed actors that impose plural violences” (105). However, there is little in either chapter that anticipates the extensive demobilization of the paramilitaries under the recently concluded presidency of Álvaro Uribe.

The chapter that most explicitly aligns with the editors’ theoretical claims is the volume’s lead case study by Diane E. Davis. She provides an impressively packed account of the relationships in Mexico

between corruption, violence and both state and non-state actors to build the larger argument captured by her title: “The Political and Economic Origins of Violence and Insecurity in Contemporary Latin America.” Davis begins with the Revolution, stopping largely with the century’s end, with her particular focus the police. Along the way are numerous insights, such as how the democratization of Mexico City governance “constituted part of the problem of accelerating violence and insecurity” (51) as it disrupted the Partido Revolucionario Institucional’s (PRI) complicity with police corruption. As a result, “police turned toward citizens—and criminal gangs—for sources of income, contributing to more impunity and violence, or failing to stop it” (51). Her historical analysis of “growing levels of police and military impunity and the rise of so-called political policing against enemies of the state” (37) is embedded in a broader path-dependent set of assumptions about Mexico’s “economic development, state formation, and industrialization” (38). This part of her analysis leads her to the dreary, unrealizable and contentious conclusion that to break “the treacherous stranglehold of their developmental past” Mexico and its neighbors “require a complete break with the global economic connections and local social or spatial practices that sustain violence” (58).

Each of the remaining case studies in *Violent Democracies* exemplifies well the editors emphasis on examining *violent pluralism*, that is the relationships between a multiplicity of violent state and non-state actors. These authors, however, are less likely to attempt to support the editors’ broader theoretical claims. Indeed, some highlight factors that seem more in keeping with the more conventional emphasis on state weakness rather than “democratic” states requiring violent practices for their continuation.

Argentina is represented by two especially solid contributions. Javier Auyero operates within a more limited focus than most chapters but provides what I regard as the most useful theoretical contribution in the volume. Examining the food riots that shook Argentina in 2001, Auyero discovers in this “significant episode of disruptive collective violence...semisecret political interactions located at the root of mass insurgency” (109). Based on his interviews and journalistic accounts he shows that seemingly spontaneous riot behavior actually was driven in

part by “political entrepreneurs [active] in the promotion, inhibition, and/or channeling of physical damage to objects and persons” (109). As Auyero notes, that party leaders (in this case Peronist) “might be behind—rather than against” such collective violence “should hardly surprise students of Latin American politics” (112). Where his contribution stands out is in rigorously analyzing the mechanisms involved in these “clandestine connections among political actors” (113).²

Ruth Stanley examines state violence in democratic Argentina, primarily by interviewing family members of the victims of illegal violence by state security apparatus in the city and province of Buenos Aires. Not surprisingly the victims are overwhelmingly young men—“indeed, boys” (136) and poor. Where Stanley excels is in understanding and presenting the reactions of family members. As she shows throughout the chapter, “It is not the experience of unlawful killing at the hands of agents of the state that most undermines citizenship, but rather the response of other state agencies to such acts, which leave the victims feeling absolutely defenseless” (136-137). To this is added the all-too frequent response of the media and public opinion supportive of *mano dura* actions against purported delinquents. In contrast, some family members and political activists who support them see “arbitrary police killings as simply the most drastic expression of an inherently exclusionary and violent system,” some believing that the integration of the poor “is neither desired nor possible in the context of the neoliberal economic model relentlessly pursued during the 1990s” (155).

The remaining case studies are of Brazil and the Dominican Republic, two very different countries but as their authors show in their superbly comprehensive chapters both are challenged by many of the same sets of violent actors. Lilian Bobea begins by exploring through interviews how “Dominicans living in the poorest urban areas of Santo Domingo and Santiago experience violence and insecurity in their daily lives” (161). They are clear: contemporary violence is blamed “on an eruption of retail drug trafficking and consumption” (179). Not only do the associated gangs dominate local *barrios* but also, as she shows, they operate transnationally. Bobea’s analysis is deep but also broad:

² A fuller account can be found in his *Routine Politics and Collective Violence in Argentina: The Gray Zone of State Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

the context of deprivation, social exclusion, institutional indifference, and police repression is aggravated by the damage to community solidarity caused by turf wars among drug gangs, an influx of criminal outsiders and new criminal patterns. As a result, traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution by community organizations that restrained antisocial behavior in the past have been lost. (181)

Meanwhile for the government, “the diminished administrative capacities of the neoliberal state created vacuums that have been gradually filled by nonstate actors” (166).

Robert Gay’s chapter on Brazil is quite similar in its approach and virtues, examining, as his subtitle states, the “Causes and Consequences of Violence in Rio de Janeiro.” Gay places drugs at the heart of his analysis, with Brazil of increasing importance not just for transshipment but also for its own consumption; indeed it is now thought to be the second largest consumer of cocaine after the U.S. (205). Competition among gangs—“and for market share and for the millions of dollars in drug-related spoils”—has transformed Rio “into a war zone” (206). Violence is not just between the gangs but “also because of the violent nature of the response that their presence and operations have elicited from the police,” with an average of one thousand civilians killed each year by the police in Rio (208). And, much of this police violence “is fueled by corruption” (211). Underneath this violence, Gay claims, are the “broader changes associated with neoliberalism and, in particular, the failure of neoliberal policies to generate economic growth” (202).

The final contributor is Todd Landman, who provides the third theoretical chapter, one explicitly supportive of the editors’ portrayal of *violent pluralism*. Landman then “tries to move the debate forward” (240) by offering a four-fold typology of forms of violence (illegal/legal by state actor/nonstate actor) and another of five regime types based on whether their political institutions are democratic and whether four different types of rights are protected or not. Each of these distinctions are certainly important but the chapter’s application of them to Latin American cases and the editors’ broader theoretical claims is limited.

Violent Democracies makes an important contribution in focusing our attention on the perpetuation of violence as Latin American countries continue in their democratization process. Both the editors and the individual case studies illuminate the many forms this

violence takes and the multiplicity of actors involved, including state actors acting outside of the law. However, the editors' broader theoretical claims remain largely untested by these contributions. In large part this is due to case selection. As indicated above, the five Latin American and Caribbean countries with the highest homicide rates—not just in the region but in the world—are not included. Theoretically this is critical, but their absence is mentioned only in passing. Also critically missing is a second set of countries—those like Chile, Costa Rica, and Peru—that have not less embraced neo-liberal reforms but have considerably lower homicide rates than the countries analyzed in this volume (with the exception of Argentina, which has a rate approximately that of the U.S. and of Cuba). The absence of this second set of countries and the relatively low homicide rate of Argentina do receive one paragraph but one I found unsatisfying.

Contemporary data contradicts the editors' broader arguments.³ Colombia's homicide rate fell steadily under the conservative Uribe while Venezuela's rate has steadily climbed under leftist Hugo Chávez. Estimates show that homicide rates in neoliberalism-rejecting Venezuela surpassed those of neoliberalism-embracing Colombia around 2006 with the gap continuing to widen as the decade closed. Homicide rates did climb alarmingly in Brazil through the first third of the same decade with Rio de Janeiro itself notorious for its violence. Was this the result of neoliberalism? Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva became president at the beginning of 2003, the year in which homicide rates peaked. As his leftist critics have emphasized repeatedly, Lula committed himself to maintaining neoliberalism's key fiscal constraints. Yet Brazilian homicide rates continue to fall. They also have in Rio, with 2010 rates falling to the level of 1991 and the number of deaths of civilians by the police to the level of 2001.⁴

Co-editor Arias concludes *Violent Democracies* with a well stated call for “a stronger academic focus to deepen our understanding of political process in the region” (253), certainly to include studies of the many dimensions of *violent pluralism*. I heartily agree.

³ All national rates in the following paragraph are from the *wikipedia* page listed above.

⁴ Joshua Goodman, “Rio de Janeiro recompensa a su policia por la caída de los homicidios,” *El Nuevo Herald* (Miami), February 7, 2011: 4D.