

Review / Reseña

Feinstein, Tamara. *The Fate of Peruvian Democracy: Political Violence, Human Rights, and the Legal Left*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2023. 360 pp.

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Tamara Feinstein's *The Fate of Peruvian Democracy: Political Violence, Human Rights, and the Legal Left* is a rich and thorough investigation of how Peru's experience of political violence during the 1980s and 1990s impacted left-wing parties and political activism. While much scholarship and commentary on Peruvian politics works from an assumption that the country's internal armed conflict (initiated by the Maoist Shining Path in 1980) played a significant role in weakening the Peruvian Left, relatively few studies have examined this dynamic in a rigorous and systematic way. Feinstein's careful attention to specific mechanisms and historical processes—and in some cases, pivotal events, actors, and decisions—makes the book a valuable contribution to research on contemporary Peruvian political history. Feinstein's insights also have much relevance for interdisciplinary work on memory politics and human rights activism in the region, as the fate of Peru's legal Left became entwined with struggles to promote justice and accountability for war-era abuses.

The book's early chapters document and contextualize features of the legal Left that shaped its rise and decline. Strictly speaking, the legal Left's period of influence can be bookended by the lead-up to Peru's 1980 transition from military rule and the aftermath of the Left's dismal performance in the 1990 presidential elections. Feinstein's analysis chronicles earlier developments in Peruvian leftist

politics more generally, some of them relating to ideological divisions, such as those between Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre-aligned *apristas* and José Carlos Mariátegui-inspired socialists and the Sino-Soviet schism that divided the Peruvian Communist Party in the 1960s, and some of them tied more to historical circumstances. Guerrilla movements of the 1950s and 1960s placed agrarian reform on the national agenda, a demand ultimately enacted through authoritarian means by the military government of Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968–1975). The top-down, “third way” reformist policies of Velasco’s government garnered support among some sectors of the Left, albeit often with considerable reservations and critiques. Feinstein notes the way that this initial, more progressive phase of the twelve-year military government (1968–1980) “both increased the Left’s stature and size and contributed to its further fragmentation” (p. 31). Almost all segments of the Left participated in the 1978 Constituent Assembly elections that anticipated Peru’s return to democracy, and the process served as a training ground for militants and activists.

Mirroring developments elsewhere in Latin America, Peruvian leftists’ experiences of early- and mid-twentieth-century repressive governments that banned left or left-leaning parties, along with an awareness of ways that electoral outcomes could be upended by economic elites and military force, engendered a skepticism toward democracy. What’s more, an enduring characteristic that would condition the legal Left’s responses to state and insurgent violence of the 1980s was a shared disposition toward revolutionary armed struggle: essentially, that this route could not be rejected in principle, even as many leftists quickly and firmly condemned Shining Path atrocities, and most did not view armed struggle as the *only* viable option for effecting change in Peru. Feinstein aptly describes the awkward and uneasy position of simultaneously being a “cautious champion of electoral democracy and a hesitant opponent/proponent of armed revolutionary furor” (44).

The main vehicle of the legal Left was Izquierda Unida (IU), a coalition of political parties founded in 1980 that grew to become a considerable electoral force. The 1983 municipal elections, which resulted in IU candidate Alfonso Barrantes assuming the mayorship of Lima, illustrated the power of a unified Left. Feinstein deftly examines the fragility of IU’s conglomeration of parties and interests, bringing the reader into a world of personal dramas, power plays over electoral lists, ideological disputes between Maoists and Trotskyites, and so on. Barrantes is nicely developed in the book as the magnetic yet somewhat erratic head of the coalition. The former student activist was able to persuasively articulate the need for Left unity and link

ideological convictions to concrete problems (e.g., transportation, trash removal, child nutrition), but also had an independent streak and made decisions that puzzled his fellow militants. Perhaps most consequential was Barrantes's decision to withdraw from the second round of Peru's 1985 presidential elections after finishing second to Alan García, who during that period embraced left-populist rhetoric that harkened back to the roots of his American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) party. Although the elections were in many ways a triumph for the Left as a whole (approximately two thirds of voters opted for some form of leftist government), many IU leaders and supporters were unconvinced by the official "national unity" rationale behind Barrantes's unilateral decision. Decades after the fact, several former militants interviewed by Feinstein "remember Barrantes's concession with anger or disappointment" (92). No one believed that IU could have won the presidency in 1985, but the opportunity to highlight differences between APRA and IU and to articulate an alternative vision was lost.

Internal disputes and divisions, many of them tied to how to respond to the political violence the country was experiencing during the 1980s, plagued the IU coalition throughout its existence. Beyond initial tendencies among leftists to view reports of Shining Path atrocities as exaggerated or suggest possible infiltration of the group by rightwing elements, the Legal left became the target of accusations and threats from both Shining Path and the military. In the case of the former, a notable feature of Shining Path was the group's rejection of electoral politics and disavowal of actors that participated in that process. The military, for its part, tended to characterize the IU as the "legal arm" of terrorists (73). Tensions within IU and among leftists often revolved around the question of whether it was appropriate to critique state- or insurgent-perpetrated atrocities more forcefully. Chapter 4, which focuses on the 1986 prison massacres perpetrated during the García administration, analyzes how this event and its aftermath severed hopes for an alliance between APRA and IU while stoking conflict among IU-affiliated parties and leaders. Barrantes was perceived by most IU party leaders as being too closely aligned with García and the APRA government's messaging, which absolved the president of personal responsibility and placed blame on rioting Shining Path prisoners. Others, such as Javier Diez Canseco, distanced themselves from Shining Path and prioritized the state's betrayal of García's initial promise to not "fight barbarity with barbarity."

Such debates would contribute to the consolidation of Peru's human rights movement, but they also hardened divisions and personal animosities within IU and

the legal Left. Chapter 5, an examination of IU's 1989 congress—its first and last—sheds light on how the coalition ultimately arrived at some minimal-consensus positions on the nearly decade-long war. By this time, however, the IU coalition's fault lines were well established. Barrantes, the face of IU's moderate faction, pursued his own presidential candidacy in the 1990 elections. He would receive less support than the principled yet comparatively uncharismatic IU candidate Henry Pease, who obtained only 8.2 percent of the popular vote.

An enduring legacy of the 1980s legal Left can be found in postwar efforts to promote historical memory in the country. Numerous leftist leaders and militants transitioned to the NGO sector and academia during the 1980s and 1990s, and the work of Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2001–2003) was informed by many of the same perspectives and critiques that Feinstein registers (four of the investigative body's commissioners were former leftist militants). In some cases, old divisions between radicals and moderates played out once again in debates over the truth commission's findings and analysis. More significant and far-reaching, though, has been the weaponization of real and perceived left allegiances in right-wing attacks against the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and human rights-oriented memory initiatives like the Eye that Cries (*Ojo que llora*) and the Place of Memory, Tolerance, and Social Inclusion, both sites that Feinstein investigates in Chapter 6.

A strength of Feinstein's book is the way the author integrates interviews and personal histories with analysis of IU documents and media sources from the era. There is much value in reading the twenty-first century reflections of figures whose lives were marked by the events described in *The Fate of Peruvian Democracy*, such as: a former party leader citing examples such as Rafael Correa's rise in Ecuador while lamenting that IU did not adopt a more combative approach toward the end of Alan García's government (155); or a rank-and-file activist expressing her continued anger and confusion stemming from IU's division and disintegration (159). This is especially true given that many of the individuals Feinstein interviewed are no longer with us. The research approach also allows for some consideration of historical silences, gaps, and forms of memory-making in the present. For example, Feinstein observes that former IU leaders she interviewed had no recollection of IU participation in a 1987 event that marked the one-year anniversary of the 1986 prison massacres. The omission is understandable given the date's continued prominence among Shining Path sympathizers and former militants as an occasion for celebrating the "heroism"

of fallen comrades (legal Left-associated commemorations that characterized the deceased as “victims” of human rights abuses were far less enduring [123–124]).

No one book can fully disentangle the complex relations between Peru’s years of political violence and the trajectory of the left organizing and activism in the country. Yet Feinstein’s study effectively spotlights connections between the precarious unity of 1980s formations like IU and the frustrations of newer, twenty-first century parties and alliances. In the book’s conclusion, Feinstein enumerates ways that the armed conflict exacerbated divisions within the Left, underscoring factors such as divergent reactions to Shining Path, the stigmatization of left actors within broader Peruvian society, the undermining of possibilities for alliances (e.g., the APRA-IU rupture), and the demographic weakening of the Left (through persecution, disillusionment and in some cases, imprisonment and assassinations). The absence of Peruvian Pink Tide-generation leaders in the mold of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Pepe Mujica, or Michelle Bachelet (244) is understandable in relation to these 1980s and 1990s experiences. Although the challenges the country has faced in recent years are quite different in nature, reading Feinstein’s book in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and amid the series of political crises the country has witnessed since 2016, one wonders about the enduring impacts of such stressors on the visions, proposals, and actions of a new generation of left and progressive activists. (Part of this scenario includes the disappearance of “the Peruvian Left” as a coherent category.) Feinstein’s book serves as a model for investigating links between political action and wider historical processes in a nuanced and sophisticated way.