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Review/Reseña

Cecilia Menjívar and Néstor Rodríguez, eds., *When States Kill: Latin America, the U.S., and Technologies of Terror*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005.

The United States and Latin American State Terrorism

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This edited volume brings the perspectives of sociology, political science, history, anthropology, law, and journalism to bear on the rise of state-sponsored repression and terror that characterized Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s and has continued in some areas to the present. In the introduction, sociologists Menjívar and Rodríguez assert that Latin American state terror is “a derivative of a U.S.-dominated regional system” (4). Despite inserting the caveat that they reject a single cause explanation for state violence, they focus almost exclusively on the “regional interstate system” dominated by the United States as the causal factor. The case studies that follow, they argue, “indicate a clear and persistent pattern of U.S. influence over the political violence conducted by Latin American states. In some cases, Latin American governments enthusiastically received U.S. support for their campaigns of terror, and in other cases U.S.

state agencies pressured ‘weaker’ states to undertake such campaigns” (4-5).

In addition to setting the volume’s organizing theme, the introduction examines the history and context of the U.S.-Latin American interstate regime, the crisis of the regime beginning after World War II, and the U.S. response to that crisis, particularly financial and material aid and training of security forces in counterinsurgency warfare and national security doctrine. Menjívar and Rodríguez break little new ground in their historical overview, which contains some questionable assertions. Not everyone would agree, for example, that “the use of terror and violence by political actors has increased, not lessened, in the early twenty-first century” (5). They also indicate that Latin American officials reacted to leftist threats “to preserve what were wholly oligarchical social structures” (15)—a characterization that may apply in some lesser developed countries but certainly not in the Southern Cone. A major omission is the failure to locate the Cuban Revolution as a (or the) major cause of the crisis of the interstate system.

These shortcomings aside, the introduction sets up the chapters that follow by emphasizing the theme of cooperation within the regional interstate system. Some chapters faithfully focus on the U.S. role in promoting state violence and terror, while others subordinate the theme to other considerations or place it in the context of multiple causes of the human rights crisis of the 1970s and 1980s.

While we now know much about Operation Condor through numerous revelations, including the Paraguayan “archives of terror” and court cases against General Augusto C. Pinochet, J. Patrice McSherry’s well-researched essay focuses on the nature and extent of U.S. involvement with the clandestine international state terrorist organization. A run-up to McSherry’s 2005 book on the same topic, the essay argues that Operation Condor “functioned within, or parallel to, the structures of the larger inter-American military system led by the United States” (28). Drawing on recently declassified but heavily censored materials in U.S. archives, published materials from Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, and Paraguay, and interviews, McSherry establishes that ranking U.S. officials, including

Henry Kissinger, knew about and supported the international anti-Marxist alliance officially established in Santiago in 1975.

Through Operation Condor, the participating governments shared intelligence on leftists, conducted cross-border operations to capture or kill targeted persons, and established special teams to carry out assassinations beyond the countries' borders, the best known of which was the 1976 murder of Chilean Orlando Letelier and his assistant Ronni Moffitt on Embassy Row in Washington, D.C.

Any lingering doubts about the depth of U.S. involvement are dispelled in this essay. The sophistication of Operation Condor's intelligence collection and telecommunications systems linking Condor states, she argues, could not have been achieved without U.S. collaboration. While acknowledging that much is still unknown about Operation Condor, she concludes this illuminating essay by asserting that "U.S. military and intelligence agencies worked closely with the intelligence organizations that carried out Condor operations, despite the opposition and concerns of some U.S. officials and many members of Congress" (50).

Richard Grossman offers a fresh look at a well-studied subject, the Nicaraguan Guardia Nacional. He begins with the formative years of the Guardia, created by the U.S. Marines in 1927 and inaugurated in the war against Sandino (1927-1933), and traces the role of the Guardia to its collapse with the Sandinista victory in 1979. Richard Millett and others have told the story, but Grossman supplies new details about the atrocities perpetrated by the Marine-commanded Guardia against the peasantry of Northern Nicaragua in the war against Sandino's "bandits." He argues that the "culture of indifference toward the human rights of the civilian population" (79) was inculcated by the Marines and persisted to the end.

This culture, he argues, was updated and reinforced by U.S. training missions during the Cold War, particularly at the School of the Americas. The culmination of the original training in the 1920s, reinforced by that of the Cold War period, came during the Somoza family's last year in power when the Guardia launched an all-out war against the civilian population of Nicaragua's cities in a last-ditch effort to save the regime—an application of terror that cost over 35,000 civilian lives.

Aldo A. Lauria-Santiago writes in rich detail on the culture and politics of state terror and repression in El Salvador, focusing on the local context: the country's history and ethnography. He locates the roots of the state terror of the 1970s and 1980s in La Matanza of 1932, which in his view was an "unnecessary display of repression" (90) since the rebels had already been defeated when the slaughter was unleashed. It was "the minting of an exemplary lesson" (91) that legitimized and consolidated the regime of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. La Matanza, he argues, is "an icon of the state's power over subordinate groups" (91).

Lauria-Santiago offers a useful review of the literature on Salvadoran state terror in the 1970s and 1980s. He rejects the notion that the peasant massacres, which became the hallmark of the period, were random acts of violence. As a result of U.S. aid in constructing intelligence and repressive capabilities beginning in the 1960s, the Salvadoran military was prepared, even before the enemy began the armed struggle, and executed violence in targeted fashion. The efficacy and memory of La Matanza predisposed the military to revert to village massacres, such as the case of El Mozote, when the perceived threat to the elites' dominance surfaced in the late 1970s. La Matanza was relived even in the names of later protagonists: the FMLN, named for communist leader Farabundo Martí, killed in 1932; and one of the most fearsome death squads, the Brigada Maximiliano Hernández Martínez. While acknowledging the central role of the United States, this provocative chapter calls on researchers to look to the local historical and cultural context to more fully understand the state terror of the 1970s and 1980s.

Kristin Norget examines the low-intensity counterinsurgency campaign against the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (ERP), which emerged as a guerrilla movement in the Zapotec region of western Oaxaca in 1996 and simultaneously in six other Mexican states. Less known and much less challenging to national stability than the Zapatista conflict in neighboring Chiapas, the Oaxaca insurgency has been met in similar fashion, with the familiar pattern of targeting noncombatants under cover of news censorship. The Oaxaca case illustrates the growing militarization and paramilitarization of Mexico.

The U.S. role in this militarization is central, the author argues. Under the guise of the war on drugs, the U.S. has supplied increasing amounts of arms and other military supplies while secretly training elements of the Mexican army. The unadvertised U.S. motive in militarizing Mexico, according to Norget, is to suppress threats to political stability that potentially jeopardize the investment climate and the effective implantation of the neoliberal economic model. In the process, Mexico's military has not only become a powerful political actor but another cog in the interstate regime of military security. This growing militarization and the use of terror against civilian, especially indigenous, populations under the guise of fighting drug traffickers and guerrillas, is the other, ugly face of recent political change that has seen the invigoration of civil society in urban areas and the end of the PRI's long monopoly of political power.

In an interesting and innovative essay, M. Gabriela Torres sets out to "disentangle the political meanings of the tortured body" (144). She argues that violence as a political tool remains engrained in Guatemala, a decade after the peace accord, to the point that it is accepted as a normal part of life. Focusing on the bloodiest period of Guatemala's state terror (1978-1984), the chapter explores the ways in which Guatemala's military and political elites "authored terror and violence in a repetitive and orchestrated display of fear-inducing images and texts" (144). Specifically, she examines cadaver reports in the press and interprets their meaning and the ways in which they supported the culture of fear that made violence by the state an expected part of quotidian life.

The cadaver reports chosen for examination are from individual killings rather than from the village massacres common in the early 1980s. Reports gave clues about the ways in which persons were killed. A nude woman's body indicated rape, exacerbating the gravity of the murder; a mutilated corpse reminded readers of the impunity with which the military operated and instilled terror and immobilized potential opposition. One of the more grotesque practices was the removal of fetuses from the bodies of pregnant women, which amounted to "the symbolic appropriation of the community's future, or symbolic obliteration of communal hope" (162). These messages, sent through reports in the press accompanied by

photographs, were central to the establishment of state violence as a routine and expected phenomenon. And since the cadavers were unidentified, the message was that the victim could have been anyone—intensifying fear and paralysis among the population.

In a well-documented chapter, Joan Kruckewitt begins with the thesis that historically, the Honduran and Costa Rican elites followed a different approach to popular pressure for reform than their counterparts in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, normally using accommodation rather than repression. This “exceptionalism” was lost in Honduras in the 1980s under U.S. pressure to militarize as part of Reagan’s anti-left crusade in Central America. In addition to other standard forms of repression, the Honduran armed forces carried out 174 documented permanent disappearances between 1980 and 1987.

In response to the Cuban Revolution, U.S. military aid had flowed into Honduras, underpinning the dominance of a series of military dictators between 1963 and 1981. With the Sandinista victory and the rise of the Salvadoran insurgency, hard-line anti-leftist officers swept aside the more moderate nationalist military faction and established their version of a national security state. The election of a civilian president in 1981 was window dressing, with real power in the hands of a National Security Council comprised of the hard-liners. Trained by U.S. and Argentine specialists in interrogation and torture, the armed forces began following the familiar pattern of targeting labor and peasant leaders, intellectuals and students, and other domestic enemies of the fatherland. Battalion 3-16, the most notorious Honduran death squad, was a primary agent of state terror.

The U.S. role in militarizing Honduras was barely disguised, as that country was the staging ground for the Contra war. Thousands of U.S. troops trained Honduran troops and Contras, built and manned airfields and other facilities, while U.S. National Guard units routinely rotated through the country. The internal repression grew apace. Reagan’s appointment of John Negroponte as ambassador to Honduras in late 1981 cemented U.S. support of state terror, and official U.S. denials and cover-ups of repression became routine. Although nationalist officers overthrew the hard-liners in 1984, state terror continued, on a declining scale, until

the 1987 Central American Peace Accords. Only thereafter, Kruckewitt argues, did Honduran governments return to the country's historic pattern of accommodating rather than repressing political opposition.

In their chapter on Costa Rica, Annamarie Oliverio and Pat Lauderdale seem to embrace two separate purposes. One of these is to use the *Tico* case as a "challenge to the cultural heritage theory" (199)—a much-contested notion used to explain "Latin America's experience with death squads and governments killing their own people" (216). One wonders how the experience of one of the few countries that escaped the carnage of the 1970s and 1980s is appropriate for testing the cultural heritage or any other explanation of the rise of repression and state terror. Nonetheless, the authors discuss theories of terrorism, democracy, and hegemony and review Costa Rican history from the colonial period forward, rejecting the "rural democracy" interpretation and concluding that the country's "less bloody" (199) history in the 1970s and 1980s resulted from "politics" and "the development of state structures" (216).

The authors' second theme is Costa Rica's largely successful resistance to U.S. attempts to militarize the country—attempts that succeeded throughout the region, as several of the book's chapters clearly demonstrate. With no army since 1948, Costa Rica in the 1980s was subjected to constant pressures to turn its police and civil guard into instruments capable of resisting the alleged menace of Sandinista expansionism as well as fighting internal subversion. At one point, the authors claim, "the U.S. State Department ... advised that if Costa Rica did not form an army, the United States would withdraw its assistance" (212). But Costa Rica's political leaders persisted, bending but not breaking, and as a result, "the country's sovereignty remained largely intact" (212). Yet while relating what happened, the chapter offers only a superficial explanation of how Costa Rica successfully resisted Reagan.

Ultimately the chapter's two themes do not intersect, leaving the reader wondering what the authors hoped to achieve. One is further confused by statements such as the following: "The U.S. military, fearful of repeating in Costa Rica its mistakes leading to the Cuban Revolution of nearly three decades before, kept its distance from the Costa Rican

situation.” (212) This is not only an unusual take on the cause of the Cuban Revolution, but is inconsistent with the discussion on the following page of Green Berets training Costa Rican personnel. The chapter uses relatively few sources on Costa Rica, most of them secondary, relying instead on theoretical works and studies of topics ranging from ancient Athens to al-Qaeda. If the authors had researched in depth the question of Costa Rica’s success in resisting the U.S. pressure to militarize, in contrast to the cases of Honduras and Uruguay discussed in other essays, their chapter would have been both more useful and more consistent with the book’s organizing theme.

Repression and human rights violations in Colombia in the 1997-2001 period, when the situation deteriorated sharply, are the subjects of a chapter by John C. Dugas. Dugas argues that “the ongoing human rights situation in Colombia is atrocious, surpassing even the horrible records of the Southern Cone military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s” (227-228). While he may be comparing apples and oranges, the tables of statistics on killings, disappearances, massacres, and kidnappings between 1997 and 2001, based on UNICEF reports, make a strong case for the degeneration of conditions in Colombia. Among the most striking figures are the 800 massacres (defined as the killing of four or more persons in the same place during the same period of time) (231); the attribution of 74.4 percent of the non-combat political homicides to the paramilitaries; and the 14,829 kidnappings, 60.9 percent of which are attributed to the guerrillas, that make Colombia the site of over half the world’s reported kidnappings.

The protagonists in the generalized practice of human rights abuses are the Colombian state, the paramilitaries, the guerrillas, and the United States. The Colombian government’s failure to curb the military, and the military’s coziness with the paramilitaries, are primary factors in the violations. Dugas’s description of a 2001 village massacre perpetrated by paramilitaries and supported by the army tells the story of that collaboration, in which the military “subcontracts” (238) with the paramilitaries. The United States’ promotion and financing of antinarcotics and counterinsurgency operations, he argues, reinforce the prevailing climate of impunity. USAID and the State Department have engaged in

“both rhetorical and substantive measures to promote respect for human rights” (244), but the effects of these measures are offset by the greater emphasis on military operations, which involve repression of noncombatants. In sum, this is a good overview of the recent past in Colombia. The guerrillas, although listed among the culpable in human rights violations, receive scant attention.

Abderrahman Beggar examines Peru in the 1990s when, after his 1992 *autogolpe*, Alberto Fujimori ruled in his erratic way with few restraints. The author focuses on the role of the United States in promoting the militarization of Peruvian society by financing and training Peru’s armed forces, ending the ascendancy of the USSR as primary provider of military aid and hardware in the 1970s and 1980s. U.S. military support was based on concerns about drug trafficking and rooting the free market economic model as well as the insurgencies Peru was experiencing in the early 1990s: “Under the alibis of the antinarcotics war and the campaign against sociopolitical violence, the United States brought the necessary technology, funds, and know-how to foster the creation of a terror state in a country considered geopolitically a key element in the project of a global Pax Americana in the Andes” (272). The U.S. responsibility for human rights violations, the author argues, stemmed largely from training at the School of the Americas, whose curriculum featured a “pedagogy of terror” (268). He also details CIA training of Peruvian police and military in the hunt for Sendero Luminoso leader Abimael Guzmán and in the storming of the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA)-occupied residence of the Japanese ambassador in Lima, incidents that seem only indirectly related to the commission of human rights violations.

The focus on the U.S. role in the 1990s and on terror exercised by state forces skews the history of Peru’s human rights crisis. The bulk of the human rights violations occurred during the 1980s, with a marked decline following the capture of Abimael Guzmán in 1992. Although the Truth and Reconciliation Commission attributed several thousand more deaths to Sendero Luminoso than to the state, the author pays little attention to the role of the rebel group in the creation of a climate of terror. He even writes that “Sendero Luminoso became *one of the most notorious of Peru’s armed*

opposition movements” (264) [emphasis added]. This is a clear case of ignoring the elephant in the room.

Jeffrey J. Ryan contributes a well argued and documented chapter on the external influences that transformed the Uruguayan police and military, traditionally fairly apolitical and subordinate to civilian authority, into a sophisticated terror machine. Recognizing that internal factors were central to the establishment of state terrorism, he argues that “at the outset of the crisis period, the Uruguayan security forces were simply incapable of the sort of systematized modern repression” (299) that was already institutionalized in neighboring Brazil and under construction in Argentina. The three enabling external factors were: U.S. funding and training of the Uruguayan police and military; U.S. and French national security doctrine; and the cooperation of neighboring countries prior to and during Operation Condor.

Most of the chapter is devoted to the U.S. role in preparing the Uruguayan government for terrorism. Although financial aid to the security forces rose as the Tupamaro threat made Uruguay a strategic U.S. concern, Ryan considers U.S.-administered or sponsored training more important in creating the terror apparatus. In sharp contrast to several other terror states, the Uruguayan regime was “somewhat squeamish when it came to outright liquidation of its opponents” (298) and conducted only thirty-two of 164 documented disappearances on home soil; the rest were carried out with the collaboration of Condor allies. Rather than eliminating its enemies, the Uruguayan state tortured them. According to the Servicio Paz y Justicia report on the military regime, “torture was a policy deliberately planned by the Uruguayan military and police; it was not the aberrant behavior of crazed jailers” (295). Roughly one in fifty Uruguayans was detained during the period, and torture normally followed. Ryan cites a growing body of data implicating U.S. personnel, including the slain police trainer Dan Mitrione, in teaching advanced torture techniques. As declassified documents reveal, the U.S. also coordinated such instruction at the hands of Brazilian and Argentine experts.

Ariel C. Armony offers an analytical and balanced chapter on state terror in Argentina and its exportation to Bolivia and particularly to Central

America. He first discusses the construction of state terror in Argentina by examining the components that came together to produce the regime that made “to disappear” a transitive verb: organization and resources; institutional culture of the security forces; international influences; domestic social forces; and the military’s construction of reality. Key elements found within this framework are U.S. military training; the unchecked growth of intelligence units within the security forces; the impact of French counterinsurgency doctrine and national security doctrine; the rise of powerful guerrilla forces in the early 1970s and the associated spread of “subversion;” and the military’s “perception of the power capacities of ‘subversion’” (317). Thus constructed, state terror became the security forces’ weapon in the battle against the enemies of the fatherland even after the real threat, the guerrillas, had been decimated.

The chapter then details the extension of the Argentine model of state terror in Latin America. The Argentine armed forces were central players in the 1980 coup that brought General Luis García Meza to power in Bolivia. Following the Sandinista victory, they became heavily engaged in Central America—a theme that Armony explored in his 1997 book on the topic. The rationale for such involvement was the “doctrine of ideological frontiers, for which national boundaries were irrelevant in the confrontation against communism” (321). After initially organizing the Contras, Argentina became the United States’ surrogate in Central America following Reagan’s election, supplying the ideology and technology that fueled the anti-left crusade.

In their conclusion, the editors examine some of the sequels to the regimes that practiced repression and terror, particularly truth commissions, international tribunals, and the rapidly evolving international human rights jurisprudence. This useful discussion is flawed, however, by its failure to note that impunity, by the turn of the millennium, was no longer uncontested. Even if the writing of this 2005 book ended two years earlier, the editors should have noticed that impunity was eroding quickly in Argentina and Chile by that time, and that formerly proud and confident practitioners of state terror in other countries were beginning to worry about their futures.

This book joins a large body of published work on the Latin American state's use of violence against its own citizens. What does it contribute? Neither its focus nor its thesis is new. The book has several excellent chapters, but as with most edited volumes, it is uneven. A few chapters, particularly those on El Salvador and Argentina, implicitly challenge the thesis of primary U.S. responsibility for the rise of repression and state terror. Any book on this topic that pretends to be comprehensive should include essays on Chile and Brazil, glaringly absent here. But most of the chapters add detail, documentation, and nuance to the literature on the state as repressor, and this makes the book a worthwhile addition to the Latin Americanist's bookshelf.