

**BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS**

# Political Regime and the Reproduction of Violence and Criminality in Latin America: An Interdisciplinary Conversation

Jenny Pearce

London School of Economics, GB

J.Pearce3@lse.ac.uk

---

This essay reviews the following works:

**Illegal Drugs, Drug Trafficking and Violence in Latin America.** By Marcelo Bergman. Buenos Aires: Springer International, 2018. Pp. v + 170. \$89.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9783319731520.

**More Money, More Crime: Prosperity and Rising Crime in Latin America.** By Marcelo Bergman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. vii + 392. \$39.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780190608774.

**Tough on Crime: The Rise of Punitive Populism in Latin America.** By Michelle D. Bonner. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019. Pp. vii + 204. \$40.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780822945826.

**Argentina's Missing Bones: Revisiting the History of the Dirty War.** By James P. Brennan. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 195. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520297937.

**Modernity at Gunpoint: Firearms, Politics, and Culture in Mexico and Central America.** By Sophie Esch. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018. Pp. vii + 284. \$28.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822965381.

**A History of Political Murder in Latin America: Killing the Messengers of Change.** By W. John Green. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015. Pp. v + 360. \$26.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781438456645.

**Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: Subnational Structures, Institutions, and Clientelistic Networks.** Edited by Tina Hilgers and Laura Macdonald. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. v + 298. \$99.99 hardcover. ISBN: 9781107193178.

**Argentina Betrayed: Memory, Mourning, and Accountability.** By Antonius C. G. M. Robben. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. Pp. vii + 294. \$65.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780812250053.

**Organized Crime, Drug Trafficking, and Violence in Mexico: The Transition from Felipe Calderón to Enrique Peña Nieto.** By Jonathan D. Rosen and Roberto Zepeda. Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2016. Pp. vii + 158. \$80.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781498535601.

---

This collection of books offers an opportunity to review what recent academic scholarship on violences and criminality in Latin America reveals about the role (or lack of role) political regime plays in their reproduction.<sup>1</sup> The books broadly cover the transitions from Southern Cone dictatorships to democracy

---

<sup>1</sup> The plural form *violences* will be used to convey the multiple expressions of violence.

and to contemporary expressions of elected authoritarian and criminally captured national, local and neighborhood political orders, particularly in Mexico and Central America. They therefore also include transitions from state developmentalist to neoliberal and later anti-neoliberal economic frameworks. The longitudinal lens made possible by this collection enables us to reflect on how evolving state-society relations within varied political economic paradigms illuminate the evolution of violences and criminality in the region, and vice versa. Rather than see political, social, and criminal violences as distinct categories associated with distinct temporalities we can see violences and criminality as phenomena which have risen and mutated under varied conditions. The condition of greatest importance that emerges from these volumes is not political regime, as such, but impunity. State formation in the region has lacked the rule of law to underpin it and deter the reproduction of violences and criminality.

### **Dictatorship Violences as Criminality?**

The chronological approach offered by reviewing books that encompass varied state and nonstate violences and criminality, begins with dictatorships and systematic state violence justified in the name of “national security” from the 1960s to 1980s. James P. Brennan and Antonius C. G. M. Robben, in their distinct studies of the specific case of Argentine dictatorship violences, blur the categorizations of political, social, and criminal for distinguishing violences. Read together, dictatorship violences reveal the interactions between individual, social, and political (and political economy) dynamics, interests, and experiences. Still today, Argentina under democratic rule has not resolved the social damage of its past. Whether state terror is criminal violence is still disputed by many, with impacts on trust between state and society, as well as on the meaning of the “rule of law.”

Focusing on Cordoba, Brennan explores the varied manifestations of political violence, dating from the military government of General Juan Carlos Onganía in 1966. A generation of youth were inspired by Cuba, as is well known. Following the Cordobazo, the massive social protest against the Onganía government, the turn to armed struggle grew. In Cordoba, the university was the heart of the revolutionary ideas of the epoch. Others were radicalized by the repressive responses of the army to student and worker activism, violent or not. The military apparatus gained an institutional *raison d'être* in reacting to this armed and unarmed activism, disproportionately to the actual threat. Brennan discusses the nature of this military apparatus. Its officer corps was of urban middle-class, Italian or Spanish migrant origin, Roman Catholic, with a high degree of intermarriage and residential segregation. The social background of officers contrasted greatly with that of conscripts, who better reflected the ethnic and class diversity of the country (55). Over one hundred conscripts were among the disappeared.

The strength of Brennan's book is to enable us to reflect critically on both the dirty war—as it played out in Cordoba—and the memory and justice politics that followed after the dictatorship in Cordoba and nationally. “Assigning Blame,” as Brennan's chapter on this is bluntly called, reveals the politicized and inadequate nature of the process. Brennan is ultimately drawing our attention to the lack of analytical work on state terrorism that would have allowed a process of societal self-examination and criticism. The emphasis on family and survivors' memories of loss and grief “often seems uprooted from its political and cultural moorings, serves a useful role as therapy, of individual catharsis, but is frequently historically flat” (91). A wealth of detail on the military's crimes has emerged, but the military does not provide an explanation for them, the author argues. In 1983, President Alfonsín's first post-dictatorship government instituted the CONADEP truth commission, but with the aim of protecting the transition by drawing a line under military atrocities. The subsequent trial of members of the military junta was followed by amnesty laws and the pardon by Carlos Menem, Alfonsín's successor in 1989. The Kirchner presidencies (Nestor and then Cristina, 2003–2015) then resurrected the crimes of the military and further trials were held. However, for Brennan, all these efforts were heavily selective about what violence matters. He feels that discussion of a small sector of the left's turn to violence, while in no sense equivalent to the military's, was silenced. The Kirchners were also selective about Peronism's role. It was under the Peronist government of 1973–1976 that the Anti-Communist Alliance for Argentina or Triple A death squad emerged. A range of state and nonstate army, paramilitary, police, and union thugs were mobilized, becoming a highly organized, state-directed, force for systematic elimination of the “threat” of the left opposition to the status quo once the armed forces took over in 1976. Only gradually, and still only partially, has the role of business elites and others who supported and gained from the dictatorship begun to be acknowledged. It was one of the last acts of Cristina Kirchner before the 2015 election in which she lost power to set up a bicameral committee to investigate business accomplices of the dictatorship, although only through invoking the Kirchnerista majority at the time (Brennan, 116).

It has taken time and much protest from human rights movements to achieve some progress in understanding the dictatorship, even under democratic regimes. Ongoing “myths, misperceptions and societal amnesia” (Brennan, 110) prevail. Post-dictatorship politics stand out for the way the political violence of the epoch was in turn politicized. Even the descriptive vocabulary was contested. Was it a civil war, guerrilla insurgency, state terror, defense of sovereignty, or “genocide,” as the Kirchner epoch named it? Argentina is not alone in being unable to share a nomenclature for the violence it has lived through. Inability to agree on, let alone explain, the nature of the forms of violence of the epoch, reflects deep and ongoing polarization. The post-dictatorship failure to discuss the wider logics behind the state terror reinforces the argument that understanding violence and crime in Latin America is not about the political regime as such.

Robben argues that Argentina entered its democratic transition in 1983 a “traumatized society” (36). He suggests that repressive techniques such as keeping thousands of the disappeared in captivity and then assassinating them, while a very few entered a “rehabilitation” program, were precisely aimed at the kind of “desocialization” that undermined the trust necessary for practicing politics (47). Citizens and their families learned that those who govern not only abuse them systematically but that there is no subsequent political consensus on how to address this through legal process. The extreme nature of the violence by the state in Argentina highlights the military’s efforts to use brutality to communicate their intolerance of all resistance to the political (and social) order they claimed they were defending. This is highlighted by Brennan with respect to Cordoba. It was not a cold bureaucratic violence, Brennan suggests, in contrast to Nazi cruelty. Individual officers, it seems, gladly participated in and gained satisfaction, if not pleasure, from the cruelty. The individual psyche within its institutional and sociopolitical setting matters to the use of violence. The victims were mostly young students, workers, and neighborhood activists. The unwillingness of members of the military to acknowledge their crimes, and their engagement in denial and silence as long as they could, reflects not only their institutional identity but also the meanings they still attributed, as individuals and as part of that identity, to acts of extreme cruelty. These deeply entrenched “meanings” are apparent in the words of General Jorge Rafael Videla, who finally faced a life sentence in 2010 for the torture and execution of thirty-one political prisoners in 2010 and who, unlike in his first trial in 1985, spoke in his defense: “It was not a dirty war but a just war in which we saved the country from the ‘young idealists’ who wanted to impose an alien culture on our traditional, Western and Christian style of life” (quoted in Robben, 168).

However, Alfonsín’s idea that democracy was best protected by impunity is deeply questioned by Robben. Justice was sacrificed, he argues, to benefit democratic consolidation and social peace (213). The thread of impunity persisted, despite the Kirchners’ later efforts to reopen military trials, which were also overshadowed by “silences and omission” (Brennan, 104). In the end, Argentina never found “social peace” or societal self-reflexivity, as both books make clear, while “democracy” itself was overshadowed by the polarizations that have never been overcome.

At this point, it is worth a brief reflection, not addressed in these books, on whether the rise of violence and criminality in post-dictatorship Argentina, which are not apparently connected to this political history or discussed in these two books, should nevertheless be considered part of it. Argentina is not in the category of the highest homicide rates in Latin America. The latest UNODC report puts the average homicide rate in the region at 17.2 murders per one hundred thousand people in 2017, the highest level since at least 1990, when statistics began to be collected systematically, and 37 percent of global homicides.<sup>2</sup> There is huge variation between regions, countries, and cities. The average for South America is 24.2, with Argentina at 5.1, just above Chile at 3.5 and below Brazil at 30.5. These statistics are only one way of understanding the problems of violence, of course. Quantitative measures may help with broad comparative tasks but tell us only part of the picture. The ethnographic studies of Javier Auyero and others on post-dictatorship violence and crime in Argentina, for instance, found that in the high poverty enclave of the southern Conurbano surrounding Buenos Aires, the homicide rates are four times those of the state of Buenos Aires.<sup>3</sup> Auyero and his fellow researchers carried out thirty months of collaborative fieldwork to study the multiple forms of violence in this area. They emphasize the concatenation of the varied forms of violence, in other words the interlinkages between different expressions of violence and the way public and private violence intersect. And in the end they conclude that all these forms of violence have a deeply *political* character, even though they are not connected to subaltern struggles against the state and the powerful as such. They are, rather, a

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide: Homicide Trends, Patterns, and Criminal Justice Response* (Vienna: UNODC, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Javier Auyero, Agustín Burbano de Lara, and María Fernanda Berti, “Uses and Forms of Violence among the Urban Poor,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46, no. 3 (2014): 443–469.

useful repertoire to deal with routine problems at the urban margins and to address individual and collective grievances.<sup>4</sup> The latter include rejection of the economic priorities of the state and the powerful as well as their understandings of “security.” Guillermina Seri and Mary Rose Kubal make an interesting link between Argentina’s violent past and its present acts of violence in the way “security” under the military was used to justify state terror against definitions of citizens as “enemies of the state.”<sup>5</sup> Security then resurfaced with “renewed vigor” with the transition. However, it continued to involve repression, criminalization of protest, and the militarization of policing fueled, as Michelle Bonner argues in her book discussed below, by the neoliberal media.

Violence, it appears, whether under dictatorship or democracy, continued to be integral to politics in Argentina, still in the name of security, even when the discourse shifted – (somewhat) toward protection of citizens rather than the state. Political regime is once again less significant than ongoing impunity and lack of trust in the state. Selectivity around which forms of violence matter through naming them political, social, or criminal does not clarify the reproduction of violence in its multiple expressions across regimes. Hughes Fournier (in Hilgers and Macdonald, 192–210) emphasizes this point in his analysis of two northwestern provinces, Tucumán and Jujuy, showing that authoritarian practices in Argentina, including clientelism and violence, have persisted with federal democratization. This ongoing potency of the phenomenon of violence under varied political regimes, lies, as previously mentioned, in the meanings it bears and generates. These are as potent in the death camp as on the urban margins. Once we recognize this potency, we have to analyze how, where, when, and why violence is used and reproduced, and what accounts for its particular forms, such as the severe cruelty in the Argentine death camps and, as discussed below, among the Mexican cartels of today, as well as its impacts on the poorest neighborhoods of Latin America. Evidence suggests it is poor young men who account for most of the violent deaths in the world and in Latin America.<sup>6</sup> They are also most likely to be the perpetrators. This is not to underestimate the significance of femicide as a form of violence that is also criminal, which has only come to be recognized in recent years and through social activism in the region. The link between these types of violence in Argentina for Auyero and colleagues are the processes of deproletarianization, informalization, and general degradation in living conditions that accompanied the neoliberal turn in the country (and the region). This ethnographic lens contrasts with the criminological and quantitative lens of Marcelo Bergman. Together they reveal important aspects of the logic of violence, but they do so by asking very different questions and using very different methods.

We have until now two potential factors of reproduction of violence and rise of criminality in Latin America. The first is that the democratic transition was accompanied by the definitive end of the state-led developmentalist models, already carried out under the Chilean military but less successfully under other military governments. However, the violence of dictatorship and post-dictatorship reflect also a sociopolitical order in Latin America, where violence remained meaningful and generated meaning at all levels of society. The capacity to use it and to “secure” oneself from it, however, was highly differentiated across class and gender. This raises the question whether the linking thread between the evolution of political, social, and criminal violence—or what I prefer, the phenomenon of violence itself—is better found among the rich and their behavior rather than the poor, and the particular meanings violence has for them.<sup>7</sup> Violence is experienced today most directly by the poor. However, alongside the radicalized middle class, it was their resistance which made them the main victims of dictatorship violence. Auyero and colleagues suggest there is still a de facto political resistance in the turn to social and criminal violence among the poor. How do we interpret the way the “poor” were once seen as political actors and then victims of the repression which ensued, while today they are seen as sources of violence and crime in the region? This is also a question of politics as well as economics, of power as well as wealth. It also reflects the failure to build the rule of law in Latin America, historically a task dependent on its acceptance by elites, incentivized to do so by their economic interests.

<sup>4</sup> Auyero, Burbano de Lara, and Berti, “Uses and Forms of Violence,” 460, 452.

<sup>5</sup> Guillermina Seri and Mary Rose Kubal, “How Policy Fields Are Born: The Rise of Democratic Security in Argentina,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 51, no. 1 (2019): 159.

<sup>6</sup> According to UNOCD (*Homicide Trends*, 11), 81 percent of homicide victims globally are male, with the Americas responsible for the highest male homicide rates (31.2 per one hundred thousand males); the overwhelming majority of these are from poor neighborhoods. Laura Chioda, *Stop the Violence in Latin America: A Look at Prevention from Cradle to Adulthood* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> I made such an argument in Jenny Pearce, “Elites and Violence in Latin America,” Violence, Security and Peace Working Paper 1, August 2018, London School of Economics Latin America and Caribbean Centre, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/lacc/publications/PDFs/VSP1-Pearce-Elites-Violence-Latin-America-web.pdf>.

## From Dictatorship to Democracies: Violence and Murderous Elites

John Green singles out the theme of “political murder” to focus attention on one of the continuities in Latin America’s forms of violence. He is not suggesting conspiracy but rather pointing to evidence of a basic agreement among elites of the “general usefulness of political murder” (13). Green’s first chapter is a litany of historic figures who have stood for varied forms of radical political change and been assassinated in Latin America. Putting them together, from Mexico’s Emiliano Zapata to Nicaragua’s Augusto Sandino to Chile’s Salvador Allende, to Argentina’s Rodolfo Walsh to El Salvador’s Archbishop Romero and many other individuals alongside the mass killings and unnamed victims across the region, the use of political murder by elites does have a familiar repetitiveness about it. The left also uses political murder but on a distinct scale, Green argues, because it “works better for repressing popular movements than for propagating them” (39). The scale issue is real, but the use of violence has undoubtedly limited the building of politically embedded movements for the left. The FARC in Colombia failed to recognize how deeply unpopular it was, even among the poor whose interests it claimed to be defending. The left does not have much reflexivity on violence, and its vision of security while in government has tended to treat the poor as the problem as much as the right has, with *mano dura* and militarized responses being favored in Lula’s Brazil as much as in the FMLN’s El Salvador.

Yet the right’s use of extreme violence against resistance and opposition does stand out in the region as of particular significance. It is worth remembering this, as attention shifts to organized crime and social violence, as if such political violence is no longer used or likely to be used. Green argues clearly that it is still part of the repertoire of elites, his broad term for a nonhomogeneous group of the powerful, who nevertheless have something akin to a shared class consciousness when it comes to protecting their entitlements. For Green, this elite willingness to use violence has not fundamentally changed with democratic transition, despite curtailment of its use. He even suggests its practice is ‘seemingly hardwired into the operating systems of Latin American societies’ (203). Corporate involvement in the murder of environmental activists in the region today seems to confirm that political murder remains an instrument of control for some elites and the military apparatuses, private and state, which associate with their interests. And Green rightly reminds us of the role of the United States in the violence of Latin America, such as its support for dictatorial regimes and acts of violence under democracies. A contemporary example is US support for President Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras, who oversees the ongoing violence against citizens in that country and who came to government after a US-supported coup in 2009 and a highly questioned election in 2017. His brother was convicted of drug trafficking in 2019 and he has been accused of taking drug money.

It is not only direct involvement in violence, however, that makes it important to understand the wealthy, or what I prefer to call “oligarchic elites.”<sup>8</sup> It is as much the need to understand their disinterest in the classic Weberian state or the “legitimate monopoly of violence over a given territory” and the rule of law. Legitimacy and legality are not ideas that oligarchic elites have taken very seriously. Impunity over assassinations and mass murders is one outcome. Not even those who implement the “law” and offer “security”—that is, the police—are trusted in Latin America, as Latinobarómetro polling has shown repeatedly.<sup>9</sup> Another outcome is that illegality, from political to economic corruption, remains rife at all levels of society, from presidents (e.g., the Odebrecht elections for contracts scandal; or the La Línea customs corruption ring that led to the arrest of President Otto Pérez Molina of Guatemala in 2015) to clientelistic vote buying by many politicians, to the everyday extortions by local gangs in poor neighborhoods to the organized crime that has risen exponentially in Latin America under democracy.

## From Neoliberal to Anti-neoliberal to Authoritarian Democracies: Variations in the Rise of Organized Crime and Violence

Neither crime nor violence in Latin America has a clear starting point. In Guatemala, the military inserted itself into the economy long before the civil war, and during and after it kept its clandestine intelligence and illicit economic interests alive, as the arrest of the ex-military and president Oscar Pérez Molina revealed. The Mexican political accommodation to drug cartels in the 1980s and 1990s is also well known. However, what appears to have characterized more recent decades is the particular dynamics associated

<sup>8</sup> This term seems more precise than the generic term *elites* as it captures the overlap of social status and wealth. See Pearce, “Elites and Violence in Latin America.”

<sup>9</sup> The 2018 Latinobarómetro poll shows that 35 percent of those polled on average have confidence in the police, a figure that is the same as the previous year. However, this includes a range from 12 percent in Venezuela, 19 percent in Mexico, and 21 percent in Nicaragua to 48 percent in Chile, 51 percent in Costa Rica, and 59 percent in Uruguay (<http://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>).

with the expansion of the illegal drug economy and the violence associated with it. Marcelo Bergman's two volumes provide important insights into these dynamics. Bergman is precisely keen to understand why crime rose in Latin America despite economic growth in the 2000s and improvements in poverty and inequality indicators under anti-neoliberal left governments and electoral democracies. He brings us the heart of the complexity of unraveling the logic behind the interactions between crime, violence and political regimes in the region.

Like violence, criminality mutates. Bergman, in *Illegal Drugs, Drug Trafficking and Violence in Latin America* (first published in Spanish in 2015), prefers to call the latter "criminal diversification." State agents play a key role in explaining variations through the different kind of arrangements forged between police, criminal organizations, and local gangs. Bergman unpacks how much of Latin America's violence should be attributed to criminality and especially drug trafficking. He breaks down the violence associated with different phases of the illegal drug business, and in particular the most lucrative, risky, and complex (needing the tunneling skills and smuggling innovations of an "El Chapo" Guzmán), that of trafficking through closely guarded US borders. The drug trafficking organizations are specialists in the most profitable part of a process involving many other levels of transaction, from production to sales. Perversely, stricter controls enhance the profitability of smuggling. Violence is used to discipline drug trafficking organizations internally and to acquire new routes and markets, often through external confrontations with other traffickers. It is also generated in response to new rules of the game, such as the Mexican government's decision under Felipe Calderón to take on certain trafficking organizations rather than "contain" the drugs trade in return for kickbacks.

The Mexican case is iconic in illustrating these arguments and how the collapse of the authoritarian PRI containment model, or Pax Mafiosa, broke down with democratization, "enhancing the power of organized crime groups amid weak political institutions" (Rosen and Zepeda, 3). Here, political regime transition did arguably play a role in new waves of violence and criminality, although the latter were actively embedded in the previous PRI single party government. Jonathan D. Rosen and Roberto Zepeda, in *Organized Crime, Drug Trafficking, and Violence in Mexico: The Transition from Felipe Calderón to Enrique Peña Nieto*, offer a detailed, well-researched case study of what they call the "flawed" Mexican democracy, and the expansion of violence quantitatively and territorially across Mexico under President Calderón's "war on drugs" (2006–2012). The authors build on Carlos Flores's argument that "failed" democracies characterized by weak state apparatuses experience more problems of insecurity and violence.<sup>10</sup> Rosen and Zepeda do not suggest Mexico is a "failed state" as such but that it has "failed states within the country and failed zones within parts of states as the government does not govern the territory effectively" (84). For these authors, the future in terms of drug trafficking, organized crime, and violence depends on the ability of the Mexican government to consolidate democracy, decrease corruption and impunity, and increase transparency (132).

We need to explore what *kind* of democracy, however, if we are to regain some confidence that certain political regimes can tackle the problem better than others. For Bergman, it is weak deterrence rather than the political regime that makes the difference, although it needs emphasizing that deterrence is not only weak in Latin America but also selective as to whom it punishes. Bergman's earlier volume provides useful detail on the structure and dynamics of drugs and trafficking in the region, but *More Money, More Crime: Prosperity and Rising Crime in Latin America* takes us beyond the case study to a thought-provoking effort to comparatively theorize the differential rise of crime and violence across Latin America. Bergman draws on a strong empirical and statistical foundation to improve the analytical approach to crime and violence at the country and regional levels and over time. He highlights how all Latin American countries share a trend of rising crime with varying intensities; even Chile has doubled its crime rates since the early 1990s (10). To explain this, Bergman distinguishes low and high crime equilibria, where the scale of violence is the great divide between the two. This in turn grounds distinctions between Colombia, Venezuela, and the northern triangle of Central America, on the one hand, and Chile or Uruguay, on the other. Unlike the latter, where car thefts, drug consumption, and street crime certainly exist, the former are characterized by highly predatory crimes of kidnappings, extortions, large-scale robberies (e.g., in mining and oil) and much higher homicide rates. Brennan's ideal-type model of "crime equilibria" illuminates those high crime equilibrium contexts where goods in high demand generate opportunities for illegal supply, causing stress in ill-prepared law enforcement capacities and allowing crime to expand further. The extraordinarily high profits from drug trafficking are clearly a transforming variable here, and the rise of organized crime (which has complex dynamics well discussed in Bergman's book) is critical to the tipping point into high-crime equilibrium. The

<sup>10</sup> Carlos Flores, *El Estado en crisis: Crimen organizado y política; Desafíos para la consolidación democrática* (Mexico City: Publicaciones de la Casa Chata, 2009).

idea of low and high equilibria captures the significance of the balance between the opportunities for crime and the state's deterrence capacity.

Bergman's proposition helps us understand the dynamics of the widening gap between crime and law enforcement capacities, and how in high crime environments the ability of law enforcement to gain control diminishes to the point that criminality gains its own almost unstoppable dynamic. We begin to penetrate the detail of what "state failure" precisely means to the spread of violence and criminality in varied spaces within countries as well as between them. The permissiveness of states to the illegal trade in goods emerges as more accurate than "failure," in other words, actions as much as inactions. This permissiveness was actually enhanced by the increased prosperity under the anti-neoliberal regimes of the 2000s, argues Bergman, without the corresponding deterrence factor as criminality expanded. "Illegal markets develop under the watchful eyes of authorities" (29). Where crime has reached a certain level of organization and capacity, politicians adapt, for example, to the political benefits of accepting shadow markets for consumption (e.g., cheap and fake smuggled brands) and the direct financial support for their campaigns. Crime develops social roots and political protection mechanisms, and embeds itself just as the capacity of states to deter it weakens. The weakening of state deterrence, suggests Bergman (105), was one of the indirect outcomes of democratic transition, which coincided with evidence of a sharp upsurge of criminality in the 1980s and the further erosion of fragile criminal equilibria in the region, tipping some (e.g., Mexico) from a low to a high crime equilibrium.

### Political Sociology, Political Discourses, and the Cultural Symbolism of Violence and Criminality

Bergman affirms that it is not the political regime (more controversially he also rejects structural socioeconomic factors) but political/state permissiveness to illegal trade and "staggering impunity" (305) that lies behind Latin America's ongoing problem with violence and criminality. He is well aware of the subnational as well as national differences across Latin America. *Violence in Latin America and the Caribbean: Subnational Structures, Institutions, and Clientelistic Networks*, edited by Tina Hilgers and Laura Macdonald, focuses precisely in detail on those subnational logics and enhances our understanding from a more qualitative political sociology perspective. Just as Rosen and Zepeda turned to the states of Michoacán, Guerrero, Tamaulipas, and Jalisco to better understand the subnational logic of violence and crime, so this edited volume digs down beneath and beyond the national state. It raises questions about our assumptions that the classic Weberian route to violence containment via monopolization, or what I prefer to call "violence ordering,"<sup>11</sup> was ever taken up by Latin American elites. Dictatorship was about centralizing violence through state terror against the perceived dangers to the state from left insurgency. It was not about building legitimacy, legality, or anything more than despotic state power over territory. The state was activated only where it most saw threat—that is, against political insurgencies—with the support of business elites.

Violence and crime grew under elected democracies through the interstices of state interactions and actions/inactions with local political elites and criminal, noncriminal, and parastate actors. Militarized policing has persisted in many contexts despite many experiments in other forms of policing. Illegal economies expand through the permissive corridors of some of the most violent countries, and on borderlands. The selectivity around the violences that matter, transactional arrangements with subnational political actors, and impunity are the dynamics at play. Hilgers and Macdonald argue in their introduction that their collection of essays shows "that there is no easy distinction between violence under authoritarian and democratic regimes, as authoritarian practices—especially within the police—have carried into the contemporary era" (10). Once again, the political regime is under question as the key variable in the dynamics of violence and criminality.

And here, recognizing the plurality of violence, emerges as a way of overcoming the selectivity toward which violences matter alluded to previously. Jean Daudelin's chapter launches the volume by questioning the kind of generalizations that can be made from homicide statistics. His juxtaposition of Nancy Scheper-Hughes's seminal study of the violence of daily life in Northeast Brazil with Pablo Fajnzylber, Daniel Lederman, and Norman Loayza's significant study of drivers of violence from a data set of national homicide figures illustrates the importance of encouraging a range of methodologies for understanding violence.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Pearce, "Elites and Violence in Latin America."

<sup>12</sup> Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Pablo Fajnzylber, Daniel Lederman, and Norman Loayza, *Determinants of Crime Rates in Latin America and the World: An Empirical Assessment* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 1998).

He argues that a low homicide rate is not a proxy for low levels of violence, or at least these correlations should be seriously scrutinized. The ebbs and flows of violence in different spaces and over time and in varied expressions and mutations, with gender differences clearly in focus, need a much more nuanced measurement than national-level homicide rates. Daudelin points to statistical variability of male homicides over time compared to the stability of female “homicides,” suggesting that the two should be studied as distinct phenomenon, particularly in high homicide contexts (54). Nor do homicide rates correlate with or explain crime. Daudelin points out that homicides can be seen as a *cost* of engaging in criminal activities. Murders can be a signal of power or collateral damage in attempts to control territory and assert discipline (46). Thus a feature of criminality and violence in Latin America that is being increasingly recognized is the way gangs and organized criminal groups contain or reduce homicides. They order violences selectively and without the rule of law.

Decentered, criminally dispersed violences have also generated their own neighborhood micropolitical economy of social protection at times, of taxation/extortion, and of punishment as “justice.” The discussion in these books highlights, nevertheless, that while this takes many local forms it cannot be totally separated from the logic of national politics. Two chapters on Brazil in Hilgers and Macdonald’s collection illustrate this. Robert Gay’s three decades of ethnographic research in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas point to several “intertwinement processes: the legacies of repressive military regimes, medieval prison conditions, the increase in the circulation and consumption of illicit drugs, widespread corruption, the privatization of public security, and the failure of newly democratic states to extend human rights protections to all citizens within their jurisdictions” (77). The various ill-conceived efforts to militarize the problem reinforce, paradoxically, the weakening, as Bergman suggests, of state deterrence alongside the failure of policing in Latin America to build trust in nonmilitary responses. The emergence of militias is an expression of this failure in Rio. Public sector employees, including policemen and firemen, bring their own informal and illegal “criminal protection” to poor neighborhoods, from which they also line their pockets. Several chapters in Hilgers and Macdonald’s volume focus on repressive policing as in continuity with a repressive military. The arrival of an ex-military man to the presidency of Brazil points to the ongoing dangers of authoritarianism, albeit elected. And if one visits the Northeast of Brazil, as Julián Durazo Herrmann does in the same volume, the expansion of these problems throughout the country are apparent, although not always recognized, given the focus on São Paulo and Rio. And Herrmann makes clear his own conclusion that “continuity in subnational authoritarian practices and institutions originates in social structures untouched, at least to a certain degree, by regime change” (213).

Seen from the lens of the varied mutations of violences and criminality, the overarching measure of change from unelected to elected regimes did not do away with authoritarianisms built into state institutions and urban and subnational political practices, such as top-down clientelistic exchanges. Michelle Bonner, *Tough on Crime: The Rise of Punitive Populism in Latin America*, brings an often overlooked component into how social attitudes have been shaped to support ongoing violent and repressive practices and policies toward criminality. Bonner is addressing an issue that does not fit into Bergman’s conceptual model: namely, why it is that populations come to support what she calls “punitive populism.” It is this ongoing societal authoritarianism which arguably makes the struggle against impunity that Bergman highlights, alongside social interventions for youth at risk, politically impossible. For Bonner, the mass media play a crucial role here, particularly through the neoliberal media reforms of the 1980s and 1990s: “the resulting everyday communicational practices ... favor some state and civil society conceptions of insecurity and its solutions over others to the advantage of punitive voices” (17). Bonner compares Chile, where neoliberalism was introduced early under the dictatorship, with Argentina, where it was promoted post-dictatorship by President Menem in 1989. In Chile, the dictatorship orchestrated the privatization of television media; post-Pinochet the alternative critical media lost their international solidarity and support, and the democratic governments equated a market-based media system with democratic media. Concentration of media ownership favored a conservative agenda, especially profitable crime stories. In Argentina, the neoliberal market-based media system after 1989 enabled the concentration of private media ownership in the late 1990s, and despite an effort by the Kirchner government—aimed primarily at the breakup of the Clarín group—the president retained executive power to distribute state advertising. The politicization of crime, security, and policing reporting reflected “state-media clientelistic negotiations” (74), with the ascendancy of tough-on-crime rhetoric over human rights apparent in electoral campaigns.

Thus the neoliberal media structures public discourses of the problem of crime in ways that, despite regime change, have favored punitive and electorally profitable militarized policies. Bergman also noted the subjective panic over crime in the lower-crime countries, but his explanation is that these countries

have in fact experienced a considerable relative increase in crime. Bonner looks more deeply at the shaping of this subjectivity and the disproportionate power of market-driven media in which state actors respond to and shape journalistic practices in ways that favor punitive voices, including those of the police (123). Civil society groups, which in Argentina have included strong human rights groups that struggled against the dictatorship and for justice afterward, became more dependent on market donations and less political, weakening their communicative capacity to mobilize for state accountability. Bonner calls for a different set of media reforms that encourage diversity of journalistic sources and more watchdog journalism. Here Bergman's differentiation between low and high crime equilibria is helpful, as in the latter, for example, Mexico, many journalists have been killed precisely for their watchdog role. Bonner, however, provides an important reminder that the political economy matters to this topic. Bergman links rising crime to prosperity and limited state deterrence. However, the kind of prosperity generated by neoliberalism stimulated a form of consumerism (as Bergman acknowledges) that increased demand for cheap (often illegal) goods within society. Organized crime, on the other hand, drew on the spectacular profits to be made from drugs, which in turn could appeal to the consumerist aspirations of individuals within state institutions, including the police.

What emerges from this literature is that we need these multiple lenses to analyze and explain violences and criminality in Latin America. This leads us to a book that explores the favored tool of violence in the region: the gun. This is the subject of Sophie Esch's fascinating study, *Modernity at Gunpoint: Firearms, Politics, and Culture in Mexico and Central America*. All studies of violence in Latin America, including the most recent 2018 UNODC report previously cited, confirm the high level of homicides committed by guns in Latin America in particular. Esch treats the firearm as a cultural and symbolic artifact rooted in the history as well as the present of the region she focuses on: Mexico and Central America. Firearms offer an interplay between function and symbolic meaning (6). This reinforces the argument that emerges from this review: that violence is laden with and generates meaning, and the firearm is an extraordinarily effective instrument for this with its visual, literary, and other connections. As Esch expresses it: "Letting the arms speak in the form of an insurgency, a collective revolt against authority, is a form of negotiation, an act both vis a vis and within the state apparatus, part participation within the states formation" (16). The fact that violence remains embedded in state formation in Latin America and across varied regime types—at times centralized and at other times dispersed, but never through the construction of noncoerced legitimization and effective and equitably accessed legal rules—is one of the great challenges of Latin America.

### **The Reproduction of Violences and Criminalities in Latin America: Explaining Continuities**

Violences and criminality are a continuous thread through the time frames and varied political regimes covered by the books reviewed. The political regime only partially explains the particularities of these at any one time, and an interdisciplinary conversation is indispensable to explain fully this continuity and the multiple and varied expressions of these phenomena. It is important to turn to ethnography (e.g., Auyero et al.'s work in Buenos Aires, Gay's in Rio de Janeiro) to gain a sense of the "routinization of violence in Latin America," as Diane E. Davis titled her review of such approaches in *LARR*.<sup>13</sup> However, Bergman's criminological approach offers pathbreaking new conceptualizations for interpreting rising and differentiated criminalities across the region, while political sociology casts light on the subnational processes at play. Sociology and cultural sociology bring the importance of subjectivity formation through discourse and symbolism. And history is vital for evaluating the continuities and ruptures over time. History highlights the central question of state formation rather than political regime. The role of elites does not appear much in Bergman, but without understanding their relationship to violence and the rule of law (and state formation), could we understand why impunity persists? Distinguishing political, criminal, and social violences emerges as a problem not as illuminating categorizations. While state violences are not seen as criminal, we see that social violences are rarely seen as political. Yet interdisciplinary conversations can challenge these time-honored categorizations. They enable us to raise the questions that help us to rethink boundaries imposed by our own knowledge systems. Indeed, they need to be rethought if we are to find explanations for Latin America's violences and criminality that enable the region to address them.

<sup>13</sup> Diane E. Davis, "The Routinization of Violence in Latin America: Ethnographic Revelations," *Latin American Research Review* 53, no. 1 (2018): 211–216. This includes a review of Javier Auyero and María Fernanda Berti, *In Harm's Way: The Dynamics of Urban Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

## Author Information

Jenny Pearce is research professor in the Latin America and Caribbean Centre at the London School of Economics. From 1992 to 2016 she was professor of Latin American politics and from 2004 to 2014 director of the International Centre for Participation Studies (ICPS) in the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford. She has published widely on issues of violence, conflict, social change, and social agency in Latin America, and in 2020 published *Politics without Violence? Towards a Post-Weberian Enlightenment*. She is particularly interested in participatory research methods in contexts of violence and insecurity. She was principal investigator on the ESRC/Newton research project “Co-constructing Security Provision in Mexico: A Methodology and Action Plan from Communities to the State” (2016–2018) and is part of a two-year follow-up impact study. She continues her long-term research commitments in Colombia and the Northern Triangle countries, in particular on the role of elites and violence.

**How to cite this article:** Pearce, Jenny. 2020. Political Regime and the Reproduction of Violence and Criminality in Latin America: An Interdisciplinary Conversation. *Latin American Research Review* 55(4), pp. 859–868. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.1288>

**Submitted:** 01 September 2019

**Accepted:** 08 May 2020

**Published:** 22 December 2020

**Copyright:** © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**LARR**

*Latin American Research Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

**OPEN ACCESS** 