

**BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS**

## Criminal Violence in Latin America

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This essay reviews the following works:

**Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean.** By Enrique Desmond Arias. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 301. \$75.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781107153936.

**Sharing This Walk: An Ethnography of Prison Life and the PCC in Brazil.** By Karina Biondi. Edited and translated by John F. Collins. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. Pp. vii + 194. \$24.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781469623405.

**Los Zetas Inc.: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico.** By Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pp. ix + 379. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781477312759.

**The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil.** By Graham Denyer Willis. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 192. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520285712.

**The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops, and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico.** By Angélica Durán-Martínez. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 328. \$29.95, paperback. ISBN: 9780190695965.

**Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America.** By Benjamin Lessing. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. vii + 326. \$34.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781316648964.

**En la niebla de la guerra: Los ciudadanos ante la violencia criminal organizada.** By Andreas Schedler. Mexico City: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, 2015. Pp. 282. \$17.99 paperback. ISBN: 9786079367480.

**Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador.** By Sonja Wolf. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. Pp. vii + 304. \$29.95 paper. ISBN: 9781477311660.

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Latin America is, by far, the world's most violent region. Despite being home to just 8 percent of the globe's population, the region is responsible for about a third of all global violent deaths annually. Latin America has seventeen of the twenty most violent countries and forty-three of the fifty most violent cities. Such levels of violence are particularly surprising considering they have coincided with the spread of electoral democracy and human rights throughout the region. The end of Latin America's armed conflicts and the transition from authoritarian political institutions has not brought about less violent societies. Instead, many of Latin America's democracies have given rise to a plethora of nonstate armed groups including prison and street gangs, drug-trafficking cartels, smuggling networks, militias, and vigilante groups. Today, these armed groups are present in virtually every country of the region and impact the daily lives of millions of Latin Americans.

Unlike the predominantly rural guerrillas and insurgents of previous eras, Latin America's criminal groups are overwhelmingly urban. Rapid urbanization in the twentieth century produced densely populated cities with sparse investment in public housing, infrastructure, and social services, extreme economic inequality, and strained relations with policing institutions—the perfect conditions for the persistence and expansion of criminal organizations. Even so, criminal violence is not ubiquitous. In fact, we observe incredible variation across the region. In some cases, criminal groups engage in violence at the level of conflict, competing with each other for territorial control and local dominance. Some criminal groups have even been known to directly confront state security forces. In other contexts, one organization has become dominant or multiple groups manage to cooperate, which often leads to very low levels of violence. Many of these groups have also colluded with state representatives and agents to provide a high degree of stability and security. These outcomes remain a puzzle for social scientists.

### **An Emerging Research Agenda**

A new generation of scholars has emerged to address these puzzles. In this essay, we review eight recent book-length projects—just a small portion of those published on this topic in recent years—that build on an already massive and sprawling literature. From the humanities and history to all the social sciences, academics of nearly every discipline have used the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological tools at their disposal to try to understand the origins, causes, and consequences of criminal violence. The books in this review make significant contributions to these ends while demonstrating how criminal groups throughout the region are fundamentally restructuring state-society relations and transforming the daily lives of tens of millions.

Because of the large number of works to be considered, we do not offer complete summaries and extended discussions of each book. Instead, we point to three overarching themes around which these groundbreaking books can be organized and the various ways they illuminate these larger questions, highlighting several ways that future research can and should build on them. First, each of the authors confronts the existing categories and ontologies concerning criminal groups and violence. How should we understand these organizations and their use of violence? What are the important differences among them? And are they comparable to other nonstate armed groups such as insurgents? Second, another persistent set of questions concerns the internal functioning of these groups and relations between them. How exactly do criminal groups structure themselves? How much of their violence is dictated by the leadership versus the uncontrolled behavior of their rank and file? And what kinds of inter-criminal dynamics lead to the exacerbation or reduction of violence? Finally, each of the books struggles to understand the multifaceted relations criminal groups maintain with the state. Under what circumstances do criminals and the state work together to suppress violence? When and why do they confront the state directly?

Before delving into these themes, we begin by providing a brief overview of the breadth and scope of these works. First, the books straddle a variety of disciplines and, therefore, build from wildly different epistemological starting points. For instance, political scientist Benjamin Lessing, operating within a game theoretic tradition, develops a highly instrumental and strategic account of when and where drug-trafficking cartels engage in anti-state violence. Such a generalizable theory contrasts sharply with the approach of Karina Biondi, a Brazilian anthropologist, who rejects the tendency toward oversimplification of Anglophone social sciences, for which “the social comes to be a thing to be explained, constituted, and ‘invented’ instead of being approached as a series of relations in flux” (23). While such epistemological disagreement creates inherent tensions in reading these works together, we believe these divergent perspectives offer valuable insights for scholars who are willing to step outside their disciplinary echo chambers. In fact, cross-disciplinary reading and dialogue should be a prerequisite for anyone working in this area because it will force them to question their most basic assumptions and think across multiple levels of analysis.

Disciplinary differences aside, the authors share a common devotion to intensive, long-term fieldwork in the region. Such dedication is commendable not just because of the significant time and resources spent in difficult and, at times, dangerous field sites but because on-the-ground knowledge is especially important in this area of research. In general, there is little reliable and accessible data on criminal organizations and their use of violence. The capacity of criminal justice systems to register and record violent crime is uneven at best. Many municipalities, subnational regions, and even entire countries do not systematically collect or make such data available. Another confounding factor is that Latin American citizens have extremely low levels of trust in their public security institutions and, as a result, a huge quantity of violence and crime goes unreported. Moreover, criminal organizations are purposely clandestine. They actively prevent their activities and whereabouts from becoming known, often going to great lengths to hide their more violent

activities. They frequently implement “laws of silence” to prevent citizens from divulging information to the authorities or media in areas where they operate. As a result, there is much we do not know.

All the authors in this review have made incredible efforts to reveal the inner workings and violent behaviors of criminal organizations. Most of the books include dozens if not hundreds of interviews with members of criminal groups, politicians, activists, academics, and public security personnel. Some have done so while also engaging in immersive participant observation in the anthropological tradition (Biondi, Denyer Willis),<sup>1</sup> while others have conducted such interviews as part of extended case studies of cities, neighborhoods, or organizations (Arias, Durán-Martinez, Correa-Cabrera, Wolf, Lessing). Several of the authors have also combined quantitative data with their qualitative work through the use of government statistics (Durán-Martinez, Lessing), public opinion data (Schedler), or content analyses of media outlets (Durán-Martinez, Lessing, Wolf). In the end, each book incorporates different kinds of data to verify information on these murky and sensitive empirical phenomena.

## The Ontology of Organized Criminal Groups

The first key conceptual issue arises out of the exact terms that scholars use to refer to organized criminal groups. The books employ a vast array of names to refer to them: gangs, *clicas*, *combos*, *posses*, *bandas*, *oficinas*, *pandillas*, *maras*, factions, *quadrilhas*, *comandos*, militias, cartels, syndicates, movements, families, and traffickers. The abundance of terms illustrates the remarkable proliferation of these groups across the region. Although the labels often refer to their specific origins and characteristics, there is much commonality across them. For instance, Desmond Arias in *Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean* notes the diversity of names used to describe local-level criminal enterprises but argues that what holds them together “is a willingness to seek to control and defend a particular territory as an operational base for illicit activities” (20). Similarly, in *Making Peace in Drug Wars*, Benjamin Lessing refers to the various drug-trafficking groups in Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico as cartels because they each have “the organizational capacity to engage the state in sustained armed confrontation” (2). In *The Politics of Drug Violence*, Angélica Durán-Martinez refers to Colombia’s and Mexico’s cartels and paramilitaries-turned-traffickers as drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs), another generalizable term. In the end, using a single term makes some sense because of both the ubiquity and similarity of the phenomenon across the region.

However, such a focus on what makes criminal groups similar can also obfuscate the very different origins and activities within and across them. For instance, in *Mano Dura*, Sonja Wolf emphatically disagrees with policymakers’ and scholars’ characterizations of the MS-13 and El Barrio 18 as “transnational organized crime.” Although the *maras* have transnational origins and a significant presence in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States, Wolf contends they should not be considered organized crime or even drug gangs, both of which denote a more professional and highly coordinated group of criminals. Instead, she argues, the *maras* are street or youth gangs that fulfill a variety of social needs for adolescents and young men in impoverished and marginalized neighborhoods. Despite engaging in some violent and antisocial behaviors, they are not clearly motivated by criminal imperatives or violence.

In *Sharing This Walk*, Karina Biondi similarly disagrees with attempts to categorize São Paulo’s Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) as a criminal organization. Based on her ethnographic research, she argues that the Brothers of the PCC consider themselves members of a movement or family and contends that characterizations of the PCC as “organized crime” or a “parallel power” are misleading and counterproductive. According to Biondi, “The PCC, when examined through the prism of so-called organized crime, gains form and renown as a phantasmagoric figure that, in addition to revealing little about its actual workings, ends up veiling and misrepresenting a variety of names, faces, histories, gestures, words, and desires, as well as practices, collisions, struggles, strategies, plans, and wars” (97). Both Wolf and Biondi are cognizant of the tendency of state officials, policymakers, and the media to criminalize young men and adolescents from impoverished backgrounds. Therefore, they argue for greater differentiation between the various types of criminal groups.

While we might forgive whatever disparities arise between the authors given their various levels of analysis, cases, and specific research questions, the problem is not just an academic one. The terms we use to refer to these groups matter for how we envision their behavior and the possible policies that can be used to deal with them. For instance, understanding the *maras* as “transnational organized crime” called forth a

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the use of ethnography in this research area, see Diane E. Davis, “The Routinization of Violence in Latin America: Ethnographic Revelations,” *Latin American Research Review* 53, no. 1 (2018): 211–216.

particularly violent and aggressive set of policies called *Mano Dura* (Iron Fist), which Wolf argues “glosses over street gangs’ structural roots and overstates their criminal activity. The assumption that organized crime and street gangs are similar, when they are in fact quite different, only leads to inappropriate forms of gang control” (69). Not only did *Mano Dura* in El Salvador fail to dismantle the *maras* but, in fact, it increased the number of men willing to join and facilitated their expansion throughout the country’s prisons.

While the search for generalizable terms and categories across Latin America’s countless criminal organizations is admirable, this discussion should serve as a reminder of the very real differences across these organizations. Scholars should be wary of applying off-the-shelf terms or categories adopted from public discourse as they are often based on misunderstandings. Although the study of criminal violence and organized criminal groups in Latin America has made great strides in recent years, a cohesive conceptual framework has yet to emerge. Without further conceptual development in this area, it will be difficult to bring together the fascinating and growing academic work, particularly country- or city-specific case studies.

Another conceptual question pertains to how we compare criminal organizations to other nonstate armed groups with a similar capacity for violence. Many policymakers and scholars have argued that the violence experienced by many Latin American countries—highly organized, territorial, and sometimes against the state—justifies using “civil war” or “insurgency” as more than just a metaphor. Andreas Schedler’s book *En la niebla de la guerra* makes this argument most emphatically, pointing out that the levels of violence produced by Mexico’s drug-trafficking groups far surpasses the conventional threshold of annual battle-related deaths (one thousand) to be considered a civil war. Although Mexico’s drug-trafficking organizations do not seek regime change, they are profit-seeking, “greedy” organizations. Therefore, in Schedler’s view, Mexico is an example of a “new” civil war, a concept applied to understand intrastate conflicts in the post-Cold War era. Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera in *Zetas Inc.* also considers Mexico to be experiencing a civil war. She argues that although the country’s well-armed cartels initially just fought each other to control access to illicit markets, they eventually confronted Mexico’s armed forces after former president Felipe Calderon began a militarized crackdown in 2006. Both of these authors believe that such armed confrontations between nonstate armed groups and state security forces can and should be considered on par with other armed conflicts around the globe.

Most of the other authors, however, disagree with such a direct comparison with civil war. Arias, for one, suggests caution in applying the lens of war to contexts of extreme criminal violence because it “blinds us to the real relationships state actors maintain with criminal groups and, as a result, reifies official claims that a government is pursuing a war on ‘drugs’ or ‘organized crime’ even as its officials collude with criminals” (10). Arias argues that the proliferation of criminal groups in Latin America coincides not with state failure or fragility, as it does in most civil war contexts, but with relatively stable democracy. In fact, high levels of violence and the presence of numerous armed groups in the region are produced by ongoing relations between criminals and the state and not their breakdown.

Like Arias, Lessing differentiates between civil war and what he terms “cartel-state conflict.” In conventional civil wars, insurgents and the state are locked in a battle for territory, in which conquest and the use of brute force are the name of the game. Cartel-state conflict, on the other hand, is a war of constraint. That is, criminal organizations use violence against the state not to take it over but in their effort to change state agents’ behavior. They target politicians, bureaucrats, and judges to change *de jure* enforcement policy, or public security personnel in their effort to deter *de facto* enforcement. In the end, Lessing argues that anti-state violence by criminals has a very different logic than insurgency or ideologically minded terrorism, and any comparison between the two misses this essential difference.

Neat separations between political and criminal forms of violence, however, are also misguided. Conventional distinctions become especially muddled when criminal organizations regulate social life not only by providing material goods and services but by adjudicating disputes between citizens. In *The Killing Consensus*, Graham Denyer Willis explores how the PCC in São Paulo has become the dominant authority in the city’s periphery, determining when violence can be exercised. By implementing such an informal though effective rule in many impoverished neighborhoods, the PCC, like many other criminal groups, takes a form analogous to the state. To argue that the PCC is merely a group of criminals with no political motives or objectives misses essential aspects of this organization.

Moreover, several authors note how previous or ongoing episodes of political violence are deeply implicated in the origins and makeup of the region’s criminal armed groups. Most obviously, insurgents and paramilitaries in Colombia became increasingly active in illicit markets to maintain their political projects. For example, Medellín’s paramilitary groups originally formed to combat the country’s guerrilla forces but, over time, transformed themselves into a full-fledged drug-trafficking group, incorporating numerous lower-level street gangs and criminal groups into their organization (Durán-Martinez, 128–138;

Arias, 51–55). Similarly, El Salvador's long-existing street gangs were once incorporated into the insurgent networks of the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) during that country's civil war before later being absorbed by the *maras* (Wolf, 9). In Rio de Janeiro, the Comando Vermelho (CV) faction famously originated during Brazil's military dictatorship when revolutionaries and common criminals interacted inside of prisons (Lessing, 175–176). Finally, the Zetas, Mexico's most violent criminal group, was originally composed of former Mexican and Guatemalan special forces units that fought brutal counterinsurgency campaigns before transforming themselves into the armed wing of the Gulf cartel (Correa-Cabrera, 21–22, 57–58; Durán-Martínez, 98; Lessing, 203).

Overall, we agree that direct comparisons between civil war and large-scale criminal violence conceal more than they reveal, yet scholars should remain cognizant of the ways in which “political” and “criminal” violence are not, in fact, mutually exclusive categories. Even if not motivated by regime change, criminal groups are heavily involved in and shaped by local politics.<sup>2</sup> Criminal groups frequently shift back and forth across the political/criminal divide as circumstances change and opportunities arise. Hard-and-fast categorizations fail to capture these fluid and evolving relationships. Finally, the region's transition to democracy did not bring an end to “political” violence within these countries. Authoritarian specialists in violence have continued to act with impunity as members of state security forces or by providing cover to a variety of nonstate armed groups.<sup>3</sup> Scholars must continue to interrogate these categories and to develop new conceptual frameworks for understanding the various ways in which criminal violence is shaped by political processes and vice versa.

### Criminal Structures and Relations

The preceding discussion lends itself to a more concerted engagement with how criminal organizations are internally structured and how they relate to one other. As many of the books contend, these structures and relations are essential to understanding when and where violence explodes or is contained. Most of the criminal organizations investigated in these books can be considered more or less hierarchical in nature. The very use of the term “criminal organization” implies a hierarchical structure that can be differentiated from other more networked or diffuse groupings or categories. For groups that must be willing and able to forcefully defend their members and illicit interests against would-be competitors, a clearly delineated command structure can facilitate decision-making and coordination while making leadership transition less volatile, especially for groups whose leaders face high probabilities of arrest or death.

For Benjamin Lessing, such a highly centralized leadership structure is most apparent in his analysis of the Medellín cartel and its total domination by Pablo Escobar. In fact, much of the anti-state violence in which the cartel engaged was dictated by Escobar's efforts to avoid his own extradition to the United States. Seldom, however, are the activities and evolution of such a massive and sprawling organization dictated by just one man. One of Lessing's other cases, Rio's CV, a prison gang turned drug-trafficking organization, is composed of dozens if not hundreds of gangs located in the city's favelas. Instead of a hierarchical structure with a cohesive and centralized leadership that dictates gang policy on a local level, the CV faction is better understood as a loose affiliation of gangs maintained through reciprocal and mostly horizontal relationships.

While Lessing spends little of his masterful book focusing on how these different organizational dynamics impact anti-state violence, Angélica Durán-Martínez makes the organizational structure of DTOs central to her analysis of drug violence in Mexico and Colombia. In five persuasive city case studies (Medellín, Cali, Ciudad Juárez, Tijuana, and Culiacán), she argues that where violence truly explodes, it is due to the way in which DTOs choose to source their violence. They can, alternatively, provide weapons and support to youth or street gangs, what she refers to as “outsourcing,” or they can incorporate these individuals and other specialists in the use of violence directly into their organization by “insourcing.” In the latter case, the DTOs can more easily discipline and control the violence of these young men. In outsourcing, however, better-armed and incentivized gangs will not just engage in violence against the DTO's enemies but will use the opportunity to combat their own rivals, thus leading to an explosion of violence.

Although Desmond Arias focuses little on the internal structures of criminal groups, he demonstrates through six expertly researched paired comparisons of neighborhoods in Medellín, Kingston, and Rio de Janeiro that where a single organization consolidates its control, it is able to expand its influence over local

<sup>2</sup> See also Juan Albarracín, “Criminalized Electoral Politics in Brazilian Urban Peripheries,” *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 69, no. 4 (2018): 553–575; and Nicholas Barnes, “Criminal Politics: An Integrated Approach to the Study of Organized Crime, Politics, and Violence,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 4 (2017): 967–987.

<sup>3</sup> See José Miguel Cruz, “Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America: The Survival of the Violent State,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 53, no. 4 (2011): 1–33; and Guillermo Trejo, Juan Albarracín, and Lucía Tiscornia, “Breaking State Impunity in Post-Authoritarian Regimes: Why Transitional Justice Processes Deter Criminal Violence in New Democracies,” *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 6 (2018): 787–809.

life. While there are obvious downsides to consolidated criminal control, there are also significant benefits. For communities that often maintain troubled relationships with public security institutions and in which violence and confrontation between criminals can be frequent, the end to open conflict between criminals dramatically improves the local security environment. Even though some violence with police may continue, extreme episodes of violence are less common. Residents no longer need to fear shootouts, abuse at the hands of competing groups, or cycles of revenge killings in their neighborhoods. Interestingly, such vast improvements in public security often have little to do with the effectiveness of policing but are largely dictated by shifting relations within and between these organizations.

Departing from these more unitary and hierarchical understandings of criminal groups, Karina Biondi's fascinating ethnographic account argues that the PCC maintains a radically horizontal structure. According to Biondi's history of the PCC, the group originated in the 1990s and rapidly expanded throughout São Paulo's prison system due to massive overcrowding, the brutality of guards, and pervasive violence between prisoners. During its initial phase of expansion, the group's original leadership attempted to dictate policy and implement a set of rules and norms that were imposed from above. Over time, however, and especially after a man nicknamed "Marcola" assumed the leadership of the group, the PCC transformed itself into a more egalitarian and democratic organization. They added the word "equality" to their motto and moved to construct a "command without command" (85). Biondi documents how the Brothers engage in frequent debate and discussion concerning the application of norms and rules within prisons. Unlike more hierarchical groups, discipline is never imposed from the top down but only arrived at through consensus.

In contrast to Biondi, Denyer Willis in his equally compelling book describes the PCC as a "fledgling but covert bureaucracy" (62), capable of keeping detailed accounts of members' "baptism" (initiation) dates, place of residence, drug sales, violations of PCC norms, and the sanctions they received for such misbehavior.<sup>4</sup> While Denyer Willis does not envision the PCC as a purely hierarchical organization in which the leadership determines the behavior of local affiliates and members, he does depict an organization that is characterized by greater organizational stability, bureaucratic capacity, and more institutionalized processes of decision-making than Biondi would allow. For Denyer Willis, the cohesiveness of the organization is the cornerstone of a system of governance in São Paulo's prisons and urban peripheries that allows it to maintain a central position of authority over life or death in Latin America's most populous city.

The divergence in these two understandings of the PCC's structure illuminates two of the enduring problems in the study of criminal organizations. First, how much do the leaders of these groups really matter? While the PCC does maintain a variety of different roles within the organization (pilots, housekeepers, brothers, and cousins) and at least a nominal leadership (towers), the degree to which these men dictate policy and control the behavior of other members appears, at least according to Biondi, to be minimal. For the maras of Central America, Sonja Wolf likewise argues that "street gang leadership is typically more flexible and diffuse than police officials portray. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the stereotypical gang leader is an individual with a reputation for criminal activity or a willingness to engage in violence, who tends to have little actual influence over other gang members. Rather, leadership is dispersed and shifts over time" (69). Together, these accounts represent a dramatic departure from how the other authors in this review understand the internal functioning of most criminal organizations.

The second issue concerns the evolution of these organizations. Criminal organizations are seldom stable entities. Their structures and activities are constantly adapting to shifting circumstances. Biondi's account of the PCC demonstrates its capacity for rapid and significant evolution. Prison officials in São Paulo initially attempted to combat the PCC by moving known leaders to other penitentiary units, often without warning. The PCC responded by making all of the leadership positions temporary and easily replaceable, eventually producing an organization that Biondi describes as constantly "in flux. [The PCC] is circumstantial, transitory, situational, and in motion" (140). In the same vein, Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera argues that the Zetas in Mexico developed an organizational structure characterized by a network of interconnected and decentralized cells (or franchises) with further divisions (drug trafficking, human trafficking, extortion, piracy, etc.). Although the Zetas had leadership posts that provided general guidelines to the organization, they granted considerable autonomy to their different territorial cells and divisions. In this way, they functioned more like a transnational corporation, such as ExxonMobil, than a hierarchically organized criminal group. Correa-Cabrera suggests that this structure, akin to corporations (hence her title, *Zetas Inc.*), enables the organization as a whole to survive after leadership decapitation or when problems arise within a cell or division.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See also Benjamin Lessing and Graham Denyer Willis, "Legitimacy in Criminal Governance: Managing a Drug Empire from Behind Bars," *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (2019): 584–606.

<sup>5</sup> This is remarkably similar to the organizational innovations of many terrorist organizations.

We suggest two paths forward for this fledgling research agenda. First, perhaps even more than violence, we continue to have little reliable and comparative data on the inner workings and evolutions of most criminal organizations. Such a lack of data prevents us from understanding how internal structures and relations between criminals influence their use of violence and other behaviors. In this regard, we believe further research needs to be conducted not just *on* these groups but *with* their current and former members. While most of the authors included here engaged in significant fieldwork and on-the-ground interviews, little of the data come directly from members. Only Biondi, whose access to São Paulo's prisons was facilitated by her incarcerated partner, and Wolf, who worked with an NGO composed of former mara members, had significant interaction with criminal group members. Such research obviously presents ethical and security concerns, but the insights will help connect internal and external understandings of criminal group behavior, disabuse scholars and policymakers of their biased analyses, and, ultimately, unlock a vast new area of research.

Second, we encourage scholars interested in Latin American criminal organizations to incorporate research on armed groups from other regions. On the one hand, sociologists within the United States have long studied how urban gangs organize themselves, and the role of leaders within them. While there are some important differences between American gangs and criminal organizations in Latin America, so far there has been little work to integrate these literatures.<sup>6</sup> We believe that there is significant room for cross-pollination here. On the other hand, while several of the authors have addressed comparisons between political and criminal forms of violence, they have yet to fully incorporate the insights of the microdynamics of civil war and rebel governance literatures.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the recent explosion of research on the organizational components of armed groups could be illuminating when applied to criminal violence in Latin America.<sup>8</sup>

## Relations with the State

Contemporary scholarship on criminal violence in Latin America necessarily involves a discussion of the role and actions of the state. Popular understandings view the absence and incapacity of the state as the fundamental condition for the emergence of criminal groups. Within this perspective, violence results from the inability of the state to effectively monopolize violence and suppress criminal groups. The works reviewed in this essay challenge these assumptions and provide a more nuanced view of the relations between the state and organized criminal groups.

First, the state and criminal groups are not necessarily antagonists engaged in zero-sum competition, but often maintain multifaceted, mutually beneficial relationships. In *Criminal Enterprises*, Arias rejects the notion that violence is a direct result of a breakdown of the rule of law and state absence or weakness. As his previous scholarship has argued, the dynamics of criminal violence and (dis)order in Latin American cities are better understood by exploring the way through which criminal groups and state actors compete, cooperate, and negotiate. He describes how various law enforcement agents and politicians in Rio de Janeiro, partisan groups in Kingston, and politically oriented armed actors in Medellín are incorporated into their respective political landscapes. He delves into the microdynamics of crime and violence, arguing that higher degrees of collaboration with the state lead to less public and indiscriminate forms of violence. However, when criminal groups and the state clash, or in the absence of a stable agreement between them, public and indiscriminate violence will erupt.

Along the same line, Denyer Willis attributes the dramatic decline of homicides in São Paulo over the last decade to the PCC's consolidated control over the city's criminal underworld. Denyer Willis points to an existing informal consensus between state actors (in particular, the civil police) and the PCC about "who can die, where, and under what conditions" (31). By choosing not to investigate certain homicide cases that bear the mark of the PCC, police forces tacitly accept the PCC's authority to punish certain subjects who are viewed as "expendable" by both sides. Sharing control over the right to kill—conceptualized by Denyer Willis as "dual sovereignty"—contradicts conventional understandings of the modern state as the only institution that should possess this right. Yet, in the case of São Paulo, it is this dual sovereignty that has led to a considerable reduction in homicides.

Other authors focus on how the characteristics of the state shape relations with criminal groups. For one, Durán-Martinez demonstrates how the fragmentation of the state security apparatus incentivizes criminal

<sup>6</sup> Two exceptions are John M. Hagedorn, *World of Gangs: Armed Young Men and Gangsta Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); and Dennis Rodgers and Jennifer M. Hazen, eds., *Global Gangs: Street Violence across the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> For an extended discussion of how these two literatures might be combined, see Stathis N. Kalyvas, "How Civil Wars Help Explain Organized Crime—and How They Do Not," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 8 (2015): 1517–1540.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent recent review of this topic, see Sarah E. Parkinson and Sherry Zaks, "Militant and Rebel Organization(s)," *Comparative Politics* 50, no. 2 (2018): 271–293.

groups to engage in highly visible violence. The inability of state actors to coordinate indicates to criminal groups either that they cannot get credible and predictable protection from the state or that enforcement actions against them will be inefficient. In these contexts, committing highly visible acts of violence is a way for criminals to demonstrate their power to rivals and local populations as well as a way to pressure the state. Durán-Martínez argues that democratization generally reduces the cohesiveness of the state by creating greater turnover and competition between different factions within the state. For example, during the seven decades of authoritarian rule by the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), the party was able to provide credible protection to criminal groups while also regulating their behavior, leading to less frequent and visible forms of violence. With the emergence of opposition parties and increasing political competition, however, the PRI lost its ability to credibly protect criminals and deter their use of violence, which led to exponential increases in visible violence across numerous subnational states and cities.

For other authors, it is less the characteristics of the state itself and more the types of public security policy that shape criminal-state relations. Overwhelmingly, Latin America's governments have responded to criminal violence by militarizing their public security apparatuses and, in some cases, mobilizing their armed forces to more forcefully confront criminal groups. In many cases, they have focused their efforts on capturing and killing the leaders of these organizations. However, despite billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of police and military personnel brought to bear, they have largely been incapable of defeating, dismantling, or even effectively controlling the violence of criminal organizations. Many repressive public security policies and decapitation efforts have, in fact, contributed to the escalation of violence and, paradoxically, to the strengthening of some criminal groups. Wolf and Biondi, for example, discuss how crackdowns and hardline incarceration policies facilitated the expansion and influence of criminal groups in El Salvador and São Paulo. According to Correa-Cabrera, militarized responses to criminal violence in Mexico led to the fragmentation of the drug-trafficking cartels and exacerbated violent conflict between them.

Lessing's book also demonstrates how unconditional and repressive approaches to policing tend to trigger or worsen conflict between criminal groups and the state. Policies that condition the state's enforcement efforts on criminal groups' behavior tend to have violence-reducing effects. If such strategies of conditional repression effectively incentivize criminal groups to restrain their use of violence, why then are governments in the region mostly engaging in unconditional crackdowns or *mano dura* strategies? Lessing focuses on two factors: first, for conditionality to work "authorities must credibly threaten to correctly identify and attribute cartel violence, and respond to it swiftly and proportionally" (245). This requires a high level of coordination from state agencies and considerable capacity for intelligence gathering, two characteristics many Latin American states lack. Second, there are acceptability constraints. Dealmaking with criminal groups is generally viewed as immoral. Toleration of criminal groups and some criminal activities are vehemently rejected by large sectors of civil society and the general public. Office-seeking politicians are thus less inclined to implement these strategies.

Lastly, understanding the role of public opinion in the formulation of public security policy is key. Andreas Schedler provides important insights as to why civil society in Mexico has been so reluctant to make drug-war related violence (*narco-violencia*) an important topic of public discussion and why, as a result, it has failed to shape political competition. He argues that evaluations about perpetrators and victims are ambiguous for this type of violence. Victims of *narco-violencia*, for example, are assumed to have some association with criminal conflict. According to Schedler, this helps explain the low levels of empathy and trust expressed toward victims' organizations. Moreover, traditional mechanisms to address violent situations—such as reporting acts of violence to the state and operating through the justice system—are generally seen as costly and ineffective (194–195). This is unsurprising given the extremely low levels of public trust in policing institutions and perceptions of generalized impunity.

## Conclusion

The books reviewed here reflect a much larger trend. The number of studies seeking to understand the high levels of violence in the region and the criminal groups involved has grown considerably over the last few years. This new generation of studies offers novel ways to explain the rise in violence by interrogating existing conceptualizations of criminal organizations, investigating how and why they organize themselves, and outlining their various relations with the state. In the process, many of them contribute to ongoing debates concerning the role of the state in Latin American society and how political and social order is constructed and sustained.

As this agenda moves forward, it is key that the interdisciplinarity and the diversity of methods that has so far characterized this research area be preserved. No single approach can provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of criminal groups and their violence. We believe that part of the considerable



progress that has occurred in this area is due to the (unusual?) willingness by scholars to constructively engage with work outside their fields. Research by political scientists has been enriched by the nuanced, critical, and contextualized understanding of criminal groups developed by anthropologists. At the same time, this deeply contextual work is complemented by generalizable theories and comparative analyses that demonstrate the similarity of the processes surrounding violence across the region. Interdisciplinary engagement, however, has some trade-offs: it might make it harder to reach a basic consensus about the ontology of criminal groups and their violence and, therefore, agree on the concepts and definitions upon which future research can build. These conversations, in our opinion, are worth having.

The study of criminal groups and their violence is marked by the difficulty of obtaining information. Scholars have responded to this challenge with multiple sources and creative strategies of data collection: interviews, ethnography, media reports, surveys, official documents and data, criminal archives, and original data sets. We need, however, to be especially mindful of how the sources we use affect the claims we make about criminal groups and their behavior. Secondary sources or media outlets, for example, will often reproduce bias and widespread assumptions about criminal groups and their behavior. Directly talking to members of criminal groups, while more dangerous and ethically complicated, may provide a more contingent, less monolithic understanding of these organizations. Searching through documents produced by criminal groups themselves may offer an alternative, less fluctuating view of the criminal group.<sup>9</sup> We need multiple sources of information but also consistent reflection on how our sources impact what we are seeing.

Finally, the research profiled here not only helps us understand and explain criminal violence but also provides important—lifesaving—insights about public security policies. The unconditional crackdowns and the militarization of public security that have become the dominant policy option of Latin American governments tend to increase violent conflict between criminal groups and between criminal groups and the state. Unfortunately, this same research helps explain why Latin American governments continue to pursue these strategies. Repressive policies can be very popular and are generally favored by elites who control institutions and media, hindering the possibility of organized civil society to advance alternative policy programs (Wolf). Public opinion seems unwilling to support victims of criminal violence and hold the state accountable, or feels these efforts are ineffectual with a corrupt and incapable state (Schedler). Normative constraints on public security policy, combined with states' inability to coordinate their own agencies, hinders the possibility of implementing violence-reducing strategies (Lessing). If under "normal" circumstances the cards are stacked against new policies and public security sector reform, they are becoming increasingly unlikely with the rise of right-wing populist governments in several Latin American countries. Their heightened and popular *mano dura* discourse foresees an intensification of violence, threatening the lives of tens of millions. The books reviewed in this article serve as a solid foundation for scholars to build on and, with any hope, encourage a set of public policies capable of securing a more just and peaceful future for Latin America.

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<sup>9</sup> See Lessing and Denyer Willis, "Legitimacy in Criminal Governance."

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