

BOOK REVIEW

David Smilde, Verónica Zubillaga, and Rebecca Hanson (eds), *The Paradox of Violence in Venezuela. Revolution, Crime, and Policing During Chavismo*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press. 2022. Notes, bibliography, index, 312 pp.; hardcover \$55.
doi:10.1017/lap.2024.59

¡Y habrá un baño de sangre!—warned Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro publicly of a bloodbath during his campaign for a third term, should he lose the election. The harsh reality is that since Chavismo came to power 25 years ago, an unquantifiable toll of Venezuelan citizens' blood has been shed as the result of an exponential increase in criminal and homicidal violence, which has placed Venezuela among the most violent countries in the world. This happened against the background of an initially far-reaching oil wealth redistribution policy that substantially reduced poverty and social inequality indexes. And there is where a paradox arises when contrasting the Venezuelan case with mainstream scholarly assumptions on the interplay between poverty and violent crime, as an atypical correlation becomes manifest in an exponential increase in violence on par with poverty and inequality reduction. Hence, this book examines the Venezuelan case to challenge well-established sociological and criminological theories and offer more nuanced explanations on the dynamics of interpersonal violence—an umbrella concept denoting rational and deliberate practices used by certain social actors to capture resources, assert control and dominance in social relations, and assessed qualitatively mainly through the crime incidence and violent homicides rates.

To unravel this paradox, this comprehensive edited volume provides an empirically rich analysis of the interplay between crime, revolutionary governance, and policing to grasp the exponential and rampant rise of homicidal violence in Bolivarian Venezuela. Based on different theoretical and methodological approaches from sociology, political science, law, psychology, and criminology, this book provides a rich interdisciplinary framework for addressing the dynamics of crime and homicidal violence in Venezuela and elaborating on their implications for the social fabric, political rulership, and state institutions, particularly for citizen security agencies and policing practices. Thus, by examining a deviant single case, this book invites readers to critically revisit broader theories and debates on the intertwining of crime, violence, and social inequality, by positing that other mutually reinforcing social and politico-institutional intervening variables may affect the patterns of causal interaction among these three factors. By disentangling this dichotomy, Venezuela serves as a paradoxical example to show that conflicts and struggles within the political movement in power, a singular model of socialist-like political governance, hypertrophic growth of the state under constant and garbled institutional change and fragmentation, lack of coherence in public security policies, and ambivalent endeavors to reform law enforcement and criminal justice system may foster—and even encourage—a dramatic increase in criminal and homicidal violence in any social context despite significant improvements in the performance of social indicators. Particularly, this is likely to happen if such an amelioration is only limited in scope, as unaddressed structural inequalities and disadvantages persist in lower-strata sectors and some state-sponsored policies are not universal but depend on specific demographic characteristics and personal or political connections, so creating new forms of inequality and fostering new lines of social conflict.

In line with these explanatory factors, the book's contributors untangle the Venezuelan paradox by positing as central arguments that economic boom, revolutionary governance,

militarized policing, and flawed crime control policies are deeply ingrained in the expression of homicidal violence in the country, as the Twenty-First Century Socialism political project and resource abundance due to a windfall of petrodollars caused institutional atrophy by eroding the capacity—and even willingness—of the state to effectively manage its institutional apparatus, monopolize violence, ensure social order, deliver security, and dispense justice throughout the country. Therefore, Venezuela's surge in violence should be rather understood as the interconnected outcome of erosion, fragmentation, atrophy, tensions, and competition among the formal institutions of social control and the rule of law—namely, the police, the military, and the judicial system—and a poorly implemented citizen-oriented police reform. Hence, the Venezuelan case shows that the state may become a pivotal actor that deliberately fosters, facilitates, and perpetrates violence through its actions, omissions, and decisions, but also indirectly through a decentralization of violence due to informal alliances with and a policy of tolerance toward armed non-state actors of a criminal nature. These linkages—in exchange for support for political authority and dominance against rivals, or control over given territorial spaces—split into a pluralization of violent actors that deregulated and destabilized state–society relations, fragmented the state security apparatus, and led to more frequent and visible occurrences of lethal violence, largely due to battles for dominance among criminal networks or later reassembled to face counter-crime militarized security policies.

These arguments are explored and substantiated in the four sections of the book, which bring together different empirical analyses on violence in Venezuelan society through a palette of diverse social science research methods ranging from ethnography, statistics, content analysis of structured and non-structured interviews, as well as theory-guided interpretation. The contributors offer a full range of in-depth single or comparative cases of violence to evince that such a phenomenon is multicausal, multifaceted, and triggers different reactions in the social and political dynamics. In this vein, the book addresses in a sequential way the shapes of violence from statistical and geospatial perspectives (Chapters 1 and 2), their causal processes and cycles by considering mostly socio-economic and institutional variables and the role of subjectivities (Chapters 3 to 5), the interplay between spiraling violence with the attempted and later rolled-back civilian police reform and the resurgence of militarized policing conducive to *mano dura* policies and state-sponsored necropolitics (Chapters 6 to 9), and the citizens' responses to violence at the local basis via community activism and peace initiatives (Chapters 10 to 11). To close, a conclusion is drawn that—rather than taking stock of the chapters' findings on a comparative basis—offers an outlook by sketching some emerging agendas for future research on the changing dynamics of violence and beyond. Through an eclectic scholarly exercise, the contributions blend and articulate different empirically based interdisciplinary approaches to bring to light the interrelated causes, dynamics, manifestations, and responses to criminal and homicidal violence in contemporary Venezuela. However, despite their richness, the chapters of the book are not related enough to each other, so their linkage to the central arguments and a critical reflection of the relevance of the core findings for the substantiation of the initial assumptions are missing.

Beyond its innovative approach and strong argumentative and empirical soundness, this edited volume delivers a much-needed systematic and critical examination of the scope and effects of violence in Venezuela, highly useful for grasping the complex dynamics of state-society relations during the Bolivarian Revolution and the changing and adaptive nature of the interaction patterns among violence, crime, poverty, and inequality. In particular, the examination of this paradoxical case delivers novel insights to comprehend the dynamics of violent crime in left-wing welfare states in Latin America and reinterpret those underpinning theories from sociology, criminology, and political science used to comprehend such processes. From a practical relevance, this book constitutes a valuable tool for analysts and policymakers to better understand interpersonal violence in contexts of profound social and political changes and thus, be able to design and implement appropriate and effective citizen security policies and shape policing practices that meet the singularities of the underlying context.

Amid these strengths, the book has a few blind spots that were poorly addressed and would have been of great value to offer a rounded analysis of the causal processes and changing dynamics of violence in Bolivarian Venezuela. The first criticism relates to addressing political violence. While the editors claim in the introduction that the exponential rise in homicidal violence in the country does not relate directly to political action or institutional politics, in the book it is somewhat underweighted that Chavismo has been a sponsor and condoner of political violence linked to a distinctive manner of revolutionary governance. Throughout the process of consolidating Chavismo's political authority and hegemony, the Bolivarian Revolution has brought about high levels of social polarization that have facilitated and fueled politically motivated violence in the form of physical aggression and murders, particularly during the various waves of mass unrest (i.e., in 2002–4, 2007, 2014, 2017, 2019). Throughout the transition to a closed autocracy, Maduro's government has acquired gradually the contours of a proto-totalitarian regime underpinned by a police state, similar to those observed in the right-wing national security dictatorships. Therefore, state security agencies (mainly SEBIN and DGCIM, behind the walls of detention and torture centers known as La Tumba and El Helicoide) have become the perpetrators of selective political killings of opposition figures and regime critics. In lockstep, Chavista politicians have actively encouraged an informalization of politically motivated violence by armed non-state actors (particularly the pro-government militias known as *Colectivos*, and through alliances with criminal gangs and organized crime groups), which with endorsement and acquiescence by the government have resorted to physical violence to control territories, and preserve and uphold the political status quo as a deterrence strategy—in the form of establishment coercion and suppression of political deviance using harassment, intimidation, bullying, beatings, and even random killings—against political enemies, demonstrators, and social activists.

The second criticism concerns the validity of the central assumption underlying the book's inquiry throughout the entire period under review. While a paradox in the correlation between poverty, inequality, and violent crime can undoubtedly be noted in the Chávez era, the decade in power under Maduro has been rather marked—particularly after the 2014 oil price plunge—by an unprecedented exacerbation of impoverishment and income inequality, and a sharp and widespread deterioration in the quality of life of the Venezuelan population. Discursively, the book gives the erroneous impression that the Bolivarian Revolution has distinguished itself over 25 years by effective and far-reaching policies to alleviate poverty and inequality, and this has certainly not been the case but rather the improvement in social indicators was the outcome of short-sighted and unsustainable policies of oil revenue redistribution and social investment. While the boundaries of the Venezuelan paradox are questioned in the conclusions against a backdrop of an economic downturn that seems to corroborate the assumption of “less money, less crime” (as violence reduction through a drop in homicide rates since 2016 is observed), these patterns are to a large extent the byproduct of a “pseudo-pacification” through militarized policing, official truces between the government and criminal groups—the best example being the so-called *Zonas de Paz* established since 2013—and outmigration of organized crime. Moreover, for a more thorough analysis of the changing dynamics of violence in today's Venezuela, there could have been perhaps an additional chapter on how an aggravation of state-engendered structural violence has occurred over the last decade and manifested in an increase in deaths indirectly attributable to the government's inability to fulfill and perform basic functions—such as providing medical care, food, or basic services such as safe water and electricity to citizens, and this has resulted in no small number of deaths from curable or opportunistic diseases, fatal accidents, and suicides. These two minor criticisms, far from undermining the soundness of the book, open avenues for future research by other scholars interested in crime and violence research or Venezuelan studies.

On balance, despite a few missed opportunities in the overall analysis and some loopholes in the interlocking between empirical chapters and central arguments, this edited volume represents a highly valuable scholarly contribution that should be on any reading list for academic and

policy-making audiences due to its encompassing conceptual framework, multidimensional approaches, and deeply rich case analysis. The book concludes in an open manner by outlining future challenges in terms of accountability, prosecution, and penal responsibility for the perpetrators of homicidal violence, as a sort of roadmap toward a political transition and reconciliation process involving the construction of a new social pact. Who answers for the spilled blood of Venezuelans caused by unrestrained violence? What is the limit of state responsibility when these deaths—and other grave human rights violations—occurred with acquiescence, sponsorship, or complicity of the state, or were even perpetrated by security forces following decisions and orders from high-ranking politicians? Can this same state perpetrator effectively deliver justice under a marauding and corrupt criminal justice system? Would internationally sponsored transitional justice processes be needed in a scenario of political transition? The book does not provide concrete answers to these questions but suggests looking comparatively at the experiences under post-conflict and post-authoritarian transitional environments in other countries of the region and worldwide to learn from their experiences, rights, and wrongs.

Stiven Tremaria 
German Police University, Münster, Germany