

VIOLENCE, STATE FORMATION, AND EVERYDAY POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA*

John Bailey
Georgetown University

Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina: The Gray Zone of State Power. By Javier Auyero. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp. 208. \$70.00 cloth, \$22.99 paper.

Rituals of Violence in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico: Individual Conflict, Gender, and the Law. By Astrid Cubano Iguina. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. Pp. 209. \$59.95 cloth.

Salt in the Sand: Memory, Violence, and the Nation-State in Chile, 1890 to the Present. By Lessie Jo Frazier. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. Pp. 405. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.

Popular Injustice: Violence, Community, and Law in Latin America. By Angelina Snodgrass Godoy. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006. Pp. 250. \$19.95 paper.

Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia, 1875–2002. By Marcos Palacios. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. Pp. 315. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

Guatemalans in the Aftermath of Violence: The Refugees' Return. By Kristi Anne Stolen. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Pp. 280. \$59.95 cloth.

The books reviewed here address two important topics in studies on Latin America and the Caribbean: the origins and formation of the state in the nineteenth century, and the political uses and effects of violence in everyday life. Comparatists are increasingly focused on the significance of state weakness and the poor provision of security and justice as factors contributing to the low quality of democracy in the region.¹ Also, the dual political and economic transitions beginning in the late 1970s were accompanied by significant upsurges in criminal violence, to the point

* Gustavo Flores-Macías and Kate Henvey have provided helpful research assistance.

1. See, e.g., Guillermo O'Donnell, Jorge Vargas Cullell, and Osvaldo M. Iazzetta, eds., *The Quality of Democracy: Theory and Applications* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

that *delincuencia* ranks as one of the top two issues cited in the 2007 Latino-barómetro report.² Weak states and poor-quality justice amid a heightened sense of insecurity undermine public support for democracy.

By the (good) luck of the draw, most of the works reviewed here deal with outliers in the sense of their atypical routes toward state formation (Chile, Puerto Rico) or of the degree to which violence marks their daily life (extreme in Colombia and Guatemala; comparatively less in Argentina). Outliers can provide interesting clues about violence, state formation, and everyday politics.

VIOLENCE AND THE ORIGINS OF MODERN STATES

How important are the origin and first years of the state for its subsequent coherence and effectiveness? Students of path dependence argue that origins are critical for creating incentives to follow given paths, and that departures from these paths become less likely over time.³ It is surprising that most scholars, with few exceptions, focus on the 1870s as the starting point for their analyses of the origins of the modern state. Implicitly, they discount the importance of the extraordinary violence and instability of the wars of independence and their aftermath, or roughly 1810 to 1860.⁴

Related to path dependence, the bellicist theory of state origins suggests that interstate wars can have positive effects on the formation of effective nation-states.⁵ Oversimplified, the notion is that such wars force states to raise revenues and field an army, which requires competent bureaucracies that can extract resources and regulate behavior. Successful extraction and regulation also implies functioning police-justice systems. War making, especially when successful, can promote solidarity and patriotism, thus reinforcing the nation-building project.

2. Respondents citing *delincuencia* as their country's most serious problem rose from 6 percent in 1995 to 17 percent in 2007, to tie with unemployment. Of the countries reviewed here, Guatemala, Chile, and Argentina (at 38 percent, 30 percent, and 25 percent, respectively) scored well over the average, while Colombia is a surprisingly low 6 percent (Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Informe Latinobarómetro: Bancos de datos en línea*, Noviembre 2007 (<http://www.latinobarometro.org>)).

3. Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

4. Fernando López-Alves, who focuses his analysis of state formation in the 1810s–1880s, is an exception. See his *State Formation and Democracy in Latin America, 1810–1900* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

5. Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, 3–84 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975).

Drawing on Charles Tilly and others, Miguel Centeno writes that “Latin American state power has always been shallow and contested.”⁶ Violence in the region has been more internal than interstate. Centeno contrasts “total war” in the European case with “limited war” in Latin America, finding that the latter is more likely to incur large debts, promote the development of a professionalized military with little popular participation, hamper the creation of patriotic symbols and unifying myths, and retard economic growth: “The most generalizable trend may be that limited wars rarely leave positive institutional legacies and often have long-term costs. Instead of producing states built on ‘blood and iron,’ they construct ones made of blood and debt. It is precisely this latter pattern that we may observe in Latin America.” For as Centeno goes on to emphasize, it is “not war in itself that provides the ‘sinews of the state.’ Rather, it is war *in conjunction with* an already dominant group within a state apparatus that makes it possible to extract resources from a recalcitrant society.”⁷

Chile, Colombia, and Puerto Rico are atypical cases in the region. Chile’s early stability and political coherence under Portalian democracy, institutionalized in the Constitution of 1833, set the stage for the early codification of law and, arguably, for success in foreign wars. Colombia, in contrast, experienced marked instability in the early years of independence and acute internal violence in subsequent phases. Puerto Rico remained a comparatively stable vestige of the Spanish empire into the late nineteenth century, which created conditions for the strengthening of justice administration by a relatively progressive metropole.

At opposite ends of the Andes, Chile’s early stability and Colombia’s initial breakdown and disorder present stark contrasts with respect to state origins and the effects of violence. In *Salt in the Sand*, Lessie Jo Frazier focuses on the 1890s to 2005. She does note, however, that early state formation in the Chilean case set the stage for a complex struggle among elites and subaltern groups to privilege certain meanings about state violence in relation to the national project.⁸ She posits that “the nation-state is always in formation, a process that persists regardless of whether or not there are changes in state forms; however, the state generates its own lin-

6. Miguel Ángel Centeno, *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America*, 14–15 (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2002).

7. *Ibid.*, 23, 29; original emphasis.

8. The nation-building effects of early struggles by the government against bandits and indigenous groups on Chile’s southern frontier in the 1820–1830s are explored by Pilar M. Herr, “Indians, Bandits and the State: Chile’s Path toward National Identity, 1819–1833” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2001). For a useful discussion of Andrés Bello and the origins of code law in Chile in the 1850s, see Iván Jaksic, *Andrés Bello: Scholarship and Nation-Building in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

ear narrative of progress, one that obscures the more entangled story of its making" (5). Her historical ethnography of memories of Chilean state violence "shows how nation-state formation, rather than being a narrative of increasing democratization marked by an odd setback (the 1973 coup), has entailed a push-and-pull tension between moments of exclusion and incorporation of non-elite sectors and of civil collectivities outside the state" (16). She centers her analysis on Chile's northern Tarapacá region, noting that: "Political conflict has been particularly terrible in the North because this frontier region has been the locus for contradictory affective meanings and alliances in Chile: from the military conquest of new territories and defense of the nation from outside, to the legacies of working-class militancy, to state violence against non-elite and oppositional sectors, to political party formations across the political spectrum, to symbols and sites of national glory in military history, including very personal connections to major figures in Chilean political history" (238).

Frazier employs a complex conceptual framework of types of memory (empathetic, sympathetic, and nostalgic) that corresponds broadly with successive periods of modern Chilean history. Her notion of state draws on Michel Foucault rather than on Max Weber, which is appropriate to her interest in exploring the emotions that attach to memory and counter-memory.⁹ She uses oral history, poems, songs, and ceremonies, as well as historical documents, to interpret the ongoing struggle over what versions of Chile's national memory prevail at particular junctures. Her theory and method are quite complex and the portrait-in-progress is plausible, but the empirically inclined might balk at the inherently subjective nature of her approach.

Terrible as it is, Chile's internal violence pales in comparison with that of Colombia. Marcos Palacios observes in *Between Legitimacy and Violence* that in Colombia "the republican state had never been able to ensure political stability since the day it was founded" (17). He begins with the lead-up to the first of four major internal wars (that of 1876) and carries through to an epilogue on ongoing guerrilla-criminal violence in 2002. He presents a complex narrative without an elaborate methodology or conceptual framework, but with a thorough grasp of the historiography, and provides an extensive bibliographical essay rather than conventional references. The Colombian state (undefined) was historically weak, as seen in its in-

9. To pursue these contrasts the interested reader might begin with Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and their Critics," *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991): 77–96; and Joel S. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Centeno reflects on Foucauldian theory and the state in the Latin American context in "The Disciplinary Society in Latin America," in Miguel Ángel Centeno and Fernando López-Alves, eds., *The Other Mirror: Grand Theory through the Lens of Latin America*, 289–308 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

ability to collect taxes or enforce the law. Nineteenth-century Colombia was a thinly populated and geographically fragmented country of independent producers, which reinforced pronounced localism. The regeneration and Constitution of 1886 established a framework for the political system that endured, with significant amendments, up to 1991. The weak state linked its fragile legitimacy to the promotion of national economic growth. Everyday political life was shaped by tensions between the Liberal and Conservative parties, struggles that frequently broke into open warfare, reaching extremes in the War of the Thousand Days (1899–1902) and the Violence (La Violencia, 1946–1964).

The Violence, “twenty years of crime and impunity facilitated by political sectarianism” (Palacios 138) is central to our interests. Palacios breaks the Violence into four subperiods and traces its evolving nature over different regions of the country. One face was local warlordism. Another was the Conservative Party’s use of the national police and army as partisan tools against towns with Liberal majorities. A third was “the business of violence,” whereby violent entrepreneurs took advantage of disorder to take over key parts of regional economies. Over time, some militias became detached from elite leadership and adopted even more radical stances. The historical continuity of violence is remarkable. Palacios notes: “We can superimpose a map of the 1950s guerrilla hot spots of the Opón, the plains, and Sumapaz onto a contemporary map of FARC or ELN fronts, or onto a late-nineteenth-century map of public land concessions, and find substantial continuity through the three eras” (166–167).

Palacios argues that the Violence reflected the state’s weakness. Privileged elites “did not grasp and would not have believed that the Violence was part of a generalized contempt for law, a contempt they shared insofar as they evaded taxes, trafficked in import licenses, and made use of the parallel currency markets” (168). Contempt for law, the distant and largely illegitimate government of the National Front (1958–1974), the survival of old guerrilla forces (FARC), and the emergence of new ones (M-19, ELN) set the stage for the ascent of powerful violent groups in the 1970s and 1980s: first the drug trafficking organizations and then the self-defense forces. The state appeared helpless to provide security, as “[o]rganized crime, in effect, became the preferred way to solve any conflict” (199). The most significant challenge to the state was narco-terrorism, “defined as that aspect of drug trafficking which attacked the security of the Colombian state” (254). Although the state destroyed the Medellín cartel in 1993, the underlying problems remain. Law, police, judiciary, and the electoral system are a facade:

But the viability of the *de facto* powers depends, paradoxically, on the existence of a Colombian nation and state. The nation, as a nominally coherent entity, is what provides the intermediaries who give local networks meaning, and it is where the markets are located. The state is what provides legal cover and a cultural refer-

ence point: to a surprising extent, illegal actors adopt the forms of legality. . . . This country, then, is a permanent framework of legitimacy and violence, and even though its institutions are facades, they provide resources and the rules of the game to everyone, even the guerrillas. Although Colombia does not seem to be facing Balkanization, it is clear that the national balance of power is increasingly dependent on the "third country" located between islands of legitimacy and regions of de facto power. (264–265)

Puerto Rico, like Chile, is another exception to the regional pattern of independence followed by acute instability. Spain ruled the island until 1898, when the United States seized control. In *Rituals of Violence in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico*, Astrid Cubano Iguina analyzes the ways in which, between 1860 and 1895, law entered daily life in a northern Puerto Rican province and began to affect forms of interpersonal violence based in ritual masculine traditions.

Cubano Iguino's study is based on court records from the Arecibo judicial district for the period 1860–1895, from which she gleans a total of nearly eight hundred cases related to violence. The vast majority concern simple man-to-man fights, with only fifty-seven cases related to women and about one hundred related to law enforcement agents. Her goal is not a quantitative analysis; rather, she uses the materials for a more qualitative interpretation of the expansion of capitalism, the survival of archaic forms of male violence, and the ways that law assumes greater importance over time:

In putting a check on violence, the judicial system responded to common people's demands of state-administered justice and was able to cement long-lasting alliances between the state and the people. In this sense, the rule of law came to be established under Spanish government, coinciding with such other key processes as the transition from slavery to free labor. As the law began to appear as a successful mechanism for class, racial, and gender conflict resolution, elite political discourse converged with the ideas of the rule of law. However, it is evident in a key elite practice of private justice considered honorable—namely, the duel—that the old notions of white male honor were preserved. Nineteenth-century criminal law and judicial practice, while attempting to control male individual gendered violence, introduced adjustments that allowed the continuation of old notions of male privilege. (2)

Cubano Iguino traces the uneven processes whereby the private justice sought through violence, whether on the street or in the home, was increasingly assumed by state authorities: "When people sought the law to protect them or render satisfaction after receiving an offense, they were helping shape new legal understandings" (7).

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The cases of Argentina and Guatemala show similar sequences of types of violence but with radically different levels of intensity. In both

countries, a period of military authoritarian political violence was followed by democratization, accompanied by an upsurge of criminal violence linked in complex ways to everyday politics.¹⁰ In addition, in both cases, dictatorships severely undermined social cohesion and state legitimacy. In the criminal violence that followed dictatorship, democratic governments proved ineffective in providing justice or citizen security. Argentina, however, presents a more coherent system in which political authorities can manipulate violence in a more calibrated fashion, whereas Guatemala shows more generalized violence, and greater overall instability, in which politicians have greater opportunity to employ violence for tactical advantage.

Javier Auyero's *Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina* breaks new ground in our understanding of the uses of police, party organizations, and patron-client networks to manipulate violence for political ends. He summarizes his central argument as follows: "*Clandestine connections count* in the making of collective violence and in routine political life. This book explores the available empirical evidence and unearths a set of concealed connections between established actors (political brokers, repressive forces, etc.) that shape the distribution and form of collective violence. It also offers several examples of the operation of clandestine connections in everyday, ordinary, politics. . . . I argue that political analysis should start paying *rigorous empirical attention to this gray zone* of semisecret political interactions" (7; original emphasis).

By "gray zone," Auyero refers to "the area of clandestine relationships where routine politics converges with extraordinary violence" (25). The key idea is that the weakness of formal institutions allows governing authorities, party activists, political brokers, and police agents to communicate and cooperate for clandestine purposes. The particular cases that interest him are food riots in two urban neighborhoods in December 2001, a time of popular resistance to economic structural adjustment. What at first glance appears to be spontaneous mob looting is actually the

10. In Argentina, the human costs of the military regime of 1976–1983 are estimated at more than fifteen thousand disappeared, though the precise number is disputed. In Guatemala, some two hundred thousand were killed from 1960 to 1996, the vast majority at the hands of the army (Human Rights Watch, *Reluctant Partner: The Argentine Government's Failure to Back Trials of Human Rights Violators*, December 2001, Section I [accessed January 29, 2008, at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/argentina/argen1201-01.html>]; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2007: Events of 2006* [accessed January 29, 2008, at <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k7/wr2007master.pdf>]). If we use homicide rates as a proxy for overall crime, Argentina's ranged between four and six per one hundred thousand in the 1990s; the comparable figure for Guatemala ranges between seventeen and twenty-eight. If we include intentional deaths from causes other than homicide, the numbers for Guatemala in the 1990s range between forty-seven and sixty-two per one hundred thousand. Interested readers can explore the World Health Organization mortality data (accessed January 29, 2008, at <http://www.who.int/healthinfo/morttables/en/>).

manipulation of routine political networks for violent ends. Looters do not simply rush into the streets and attack markets in a desperate frenzy. Looters tend to know one another, to act in groups, and may be invited by political brokers to a particular place at a given time. Some stores are targeted by looters while others appear to be protected by the police. A key mechanism is the corrupt alliance between police forces and political parties: police corruption helps finance party activities and political authorities protect police impunity. Auyero makes a plausible case that Peronist-orchestrated food riots in December 2001 hastened the end of President Fernando de la Rúa's administration.

We have long been aware of corrupt alliances between police and political authorities, and the ways in which these alliances block efforts to reform police-justice systems in the region.¹¹ Auyero's contribution is two-fold. First, he extends Guillermo O'Donnell's notion of brown areas of low state presence to the concept of gray zone, the clandestine networks that operate throughout the country.¹² Second, he provides useful guidance about how to analyze the interactions of routine party politics, clientelism, and everyday life in ways that help us to understand their significance and dynamics over time.

Guatemala is an outlier with respect to the scope and intensity of political violence from the mid-1970s up to the early 1990s, after which a high level of criminal violence continued to plague the country. The analyses presented by Angelina Snodgrass Godoy's *Popular Injustice: Violence, Community and Law in Latin America* and Kristi Anne Stolen's *Guatemalans in the Aftermath of Violence* overlap in key respects but also differ with respect to the effects of violence on community coherence.

Godoy explores the extreme case of lynching, a particularly grisly expression of popular reaction to fear of crime, in a country with a relatively high homicide rate.¹³ She conducted more than one hundred in-depth interviews with people from all walks of life in both urban and rural areas in several research visits from 1996 to 2000. She places the Guatemalan case in a broader comparative discussion of bottom-up expressions of

11. On Argentina and Brazil, see, e.g., Mercedes S. Hinton, *The State on the Streets: Police and Politics in Argentina and Brazil* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006); on Mexico, see Diane E. Davis, "Undermining the Rule of Law: Democratization and the Dark Side of Police Reform in Mexico," *Latin American Politics and Society* 48, no 1. (2006): 55–86.

12. On brown areas, see Guillermo O'Donnell, "The State, Democratization, and Some Conceptual Problems (A Latin American View with Glances at Some Post-Communist Countries)," in William C. Smith, Carlos H. Acuna, and Eduardo A. Gamarra, eds., *Latin American Political Economy in the Age of Neoliberal Reform, 157–180* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

13. Godoy defines lynching as "incidents of physical violence committed by large numbers of private citizens against one or more individuals accused of having committed a 'criminal' offense, whether or not this violence resulted in the death of the victim(s)" (184).

popular frustration with extreme inequality and poverty. The frustration is compounded by the inability of democracy to deliver justice, or even a sense of personal security. The key points of Godoy's analysis for our purposes are that the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s unleashed a war on society that decimated the social and political leadership of many communities, further undermined notions of legality, and sowed deep distrust among citizens. The transition to democracy in the 1990s was accompanied by real increases in crime and by widespread fear of violent crime.

There are several political implications of criminality. Some army personnel transition into prominent roles in organized crime and develop clandestine ties with political authorities, who provide protection and use criminal violence for their political purposes. In a broader sense, conservative interests use the public's fear of crime to promote *mano dura* policies with respect to police and justice administration. These policies give elites the tools to police the borders between haves and have-nots in a profoundly unequal society. In Godoy's account, the state is inept or an oppressive agent of elites against the poor, while civil society is weak and democracy fails to deliver on expectations for material progress and justice. She offers a disturbing insight: "I believe that lynchings suggest a dark side of what passes for democracy in contemporary Latin America, one too frequently overlooked in contemporary scholarship. In continuing to assume these incidents are isolated eruptions, we fail to understand what may be their most important, if unsettling, message: *this is what "democracy" looks like from here*. Or, more precisely, this is the unsurprising result of the juxtaposition of an ostensibly democratic legal order with the widespread denial of justice and the daily reality of mass exclusion and marginalization" (102; original emphasis).

If the state in Godoy's version of Guatemala is a generally nasty expression of violence and corruption, Stolen conjures up a more complex picture. Based on more than a hundred in-depth interviews conducted in 1998–2001 in several visits to La Quetzal, a community of some 1,200 mostly indigenous returnees from exile in Mexico, she examines the effects of memories of violence and exile on daily life. Perhaps because of her tight focus on a small group, Stolen emphasizes the varieties of responses to the violence inflicted mainly by the army during the 1970s and 1980s. Further, the experience in refugee camps in Mexico was positive in stimulating organization and participation: "Generally, the Guatemalan refugees became very well organized in spite of their precarious and poor conditions, and engaged in a proactive way in shaping their conditions in the camps. . . . The old authority structures eroded, and new elected leaders appeared who were more in line with the needs of the community" (116). Notions of identity changed from local to national for these refugees; they realized that being indigenous in Mexico meant exercising rights as

citizens. These changed notions of identity and citizenship carried over in the construction of more democratic and participatory governance in La Quetzal: "The returnees in La Quetzal do not fit the image of refugees as passive, traumatized victims of war, which is the image that is commonly spread by the media as well as by aid organizations" (152). That noted, Stolen also finds cultural inertia in gender relations: "When the returnee community became more established, the old structures, where the roles for women and men were more rigidly defined, were gradually reestablished" (197). Women were again excluded from key decision-making processes, not by explicit prohibitions but by more generally held values and perceptions about gender roles.

In part as a result of their exile experiences and new skills, and of Guatemala's democratic transition, the returnees hold contradictory notions about the state: "On the one hand, they see the state as violent and repressive—and this view is reflected in their avoidance of or resistance to certain state practices and institutions. . . . On the other hand, the returnees also see the state as benevolent and productive. It is the body with which one negotiates rights, somehow representing the will of the people; it is also a provider of services, and the returnees strive to become included" (205–206).

Having painted a nuanced picture, Stolen takes much of it back in a decidedly pessimistic postscript. Since finishing her fieldwork in 2001, she finds that Guatemala's overall condition has deteriorated: "The climate throughout the country is polarized, confrontational, violent, and full of despair" (209). There has been a shocking increase in drug trafficking, which has contributed to political decomposition and increased violence, exposing "clandestine groups which, with government's protection, are linked to drug and human trafficking as well as money laundering" (209). Perhaps Godoy's darker version stands up after all.

CONCLUSIONS

Work on comparative politics in Latin America increasingly focuses on the quality of democracy (instead of democratic consolidation), and this interest in governance logically leads to attention to the state. Too often, however, we read "drive-by" definitions of the state, where some simplified Weberian concept is tossed out the window while the scholar speeds on to another interest. The state is a complex set of institutions, practices, and emotions; and origins and path dependence matter a great deal. Furthermore, the state's typically limited capacity to formulate and implement law deserves more careful attention. Historical anthropology of the sort that Frazier and Cubano Iguina provide can teach us much about continuity and change in state-society interactions. By structuring their analyses around region, gender, class, and race, the methodological and

conceptual approaches of both authors take us beyond Joel S. Migdal's two-dimensional view of the state or his conception of "societies as a mélange of social organizations."¹⁴

Also, all sociopolitical systems operate with some degree of corruption, violence, and criminality. The interesting question is, At what point and in what ways do these elements take on sufficient importance that the analyst needs to include them as significant causes of systemic behavior? Whether they call this systemic behavior "gray zone," "brown areas," "third country," or "clandestine groups," these books make a persuasive case that crime, violence, and corruption should be treated as significant forces in everyday political life. Auyero goes further by offering a useful analytical map with which to explore these territories.

14. Migdal, *State in Society*, 49.