

Critical Debates

Insurgency, Political Violence, and Democracy in Latin America

Nicolás M. Somma

- Alejandro Anaya-Muñoz and Barbara Frey, eds., *Mexico's Human Rights Crisis*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Abbreviations, figures, tables, notes, bibliography, index, 344 pp.; hardcover \$69.95, ebook.
- María Inclán, *The Zapatista Movement and Mexico's Democratic Transition: Mobilization, Success, and Survival*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Maps, figures, tables, bibliography, index, 184 pp.; hardcover \$74, ebook.
- Hillel David Soifer and Alberto Vergara, eds., *Politics After Violence: Legacies of the Shining Path Conflict in Peru*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019. Photos, tables, figures, bibliography, index, 392 pp.; hardcover \$45, ebook \$40.49.
- Ralph Sprenkels, *After Insurgency: Revolution and Electoral Politics in El Salvador*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2018. Photos, figures, tables, acronyms, notes, bibliography, index, 484 pp.; hardcover \$50, ebook \$39.99.

Once upon a time, pluralist (Dahl 1961) and modernization theories (Lipset 1959) described liberal democracy as a political regime that tended to exclude violence, insurgency, and corruption. A few decades later, Francis Fukuyama (1992) argued that in the long run, liberal democracy would triumph over other political alternatives, and about the same time Samuel Huntington (1991) revealed a massive wave of democratization (or redemocratization) in different parts of the world.

But these theses uneasily fit Latin America. O'Donnell's 1994 discussion of delegative democracies anticipated an argument that has recently received much support: governments democratically elected may behave in nondemocratic ways (Levitsky and Way 2010) or may erode democratic institutions without necessarily evolving into full-fledged authoritarianisms (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). A bird's-eye view of contemporary Latin America suggests that semidemocratic regimes or new democracies may deeply intermingle with organized violence, insurgency, and corruption, creating stable equilibria that benefit the most powerful players and therefore resist transformation attempts.

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The four books discussed in this essay illustrate these themes for El Salvador, Mexico, and Peru during the last three decades. These three countries transitioned from authoritarian to democratic or semidemocratic regimes in this period, and in the three of them, national governments were challenged by actors adopting insurgent, terrorist, or criminal strategies for pursuing their objectives. But these books also show that the timing of these challenges, the nature and success of the challengers, and the ensuing reactions by governments varied considerably.

INSURGENTS AFTER THE WAR

The Salvadoran Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) studied by the late Ralph Sprenkels is an intriguing case. Originating as a guerrilla movement, its definitive success was not on the battlefield but in the ballot box, where it won the national government in 2009 after reinventing itself as a political party. With impressive and creative ethnographic research, Sprenkels studies how the world of insurgents—their personal and political networks, dreams, illusions, and vital trajectories—evolved in the transition from war to peace. Many works examine the FMLN as a political party, its leaders, or the relations between insurgents and the broader political context. Sprenkels's study is unique because it digs deeply into rank-and-file insurgents.

The book has two parts. The first one explores the origins of the movement, maps its political-military organizations, uncovers its strategies for remaining clandestine, and describes the unfolding of the reconversion process. The second part reconstructs these processes from the perspective of the insurgents. It is based on qualitative data, including 16 months of fieldwork in El Salvador between 2008 and 2015, 89 interviews with former insurgents, and ethnographic case studies, as well as Sprenkels's own experience working for the FMLN for 4 years.

The story Sprenkels tells is not a sweet one. Wartime involved enormous sacrifices but was compensated by the gratification derived from strong personal loyalties, a sense of camaraderie beyond movement hierarchies, and the promise of a better future for all. Yet the reconversion of the FMLN from insurgent movement to political party unleashed internal tensions and conflicts, ultimately leading to a widespread sense of disillusionment among participants. While many former guerrillas made a livelihood based on reinsertion benefits—programs for distributing land, scholarships, or public jobs—the resources available for redistribution were scarce and were distributed unequally. Sprenkels identifies three sources of inequality.

First, former guerrilla leaders, by developing a wider network of contacts during the transition process, ended up obtaining stable and well-paid jobs in the state or local governments or in senior positions in NGOs. Rank-and-file insurgents did not fare that well. They became disillusioned and cynical toward their former leaders. Although some became loyal members of the FMLN party, some abandoned it and voiced their discontent. While Sprenkels emphasizes this cleavage, he also shows that there were differences among political-military organizations; some organizations benefited more than others. Furthermore, those with higher education and an

urban background also fared better than the rest. All these tensions encouraged nasty strategies, such as conspiracy and personal intrigues, worsening even more the relationships among former comrades.

Chapter 6 is perhaps the most creative part of the book. Sprenkels asked former insurgents to help him reconstruct the postwar life trajectories of guerrilla members appearing in 11 photographs taken during the civil war. His reconstruction of 191 trajectories yielded interesting results. For instance, 18 percent of those identified migrated outside El Salvador. Those who occupied the highest positions in the rebel army tended to develop postwar trajectories within the FMLN. Also, those with rural descent and little formal schooling were often hired as municipal security forces.

The book makes an important contribution to the literature on peacebuilding and transitions from armed conflicts. While such literature often conceptualizes peace settlements as new beginnings, Sprenkels shows that looking inside the movement reveals a great deal of continuity between the war and peace eras. The organizations, collective identities, personal networks, loyalties, and affective ties that insurgents built during wartime strongly shaped their lives after pacification.

In addition, some issues could have merited more development. The analytical payoff is thin, considering the wealth of the empirical material. Although a section of the last chapter is titled "Toward a Theory of Postinsurgency," what follows is rather a summary of themes already presented in the book. Also, while one cannot generalize from a case study, a clearer engagement with analytical questions would have resulted in a theoretically more compelling book. Under which conditions does the war era strongly shape the postwar era, as was the case in El Salvador? Should we expect former insurgents to become disillusioned in every postwar situation, or does this depend on the availability of resources, the design of postwar compensation, or the preexisting tensions among political-military organizations?

Furthermore, the conceptualization of postinsurgency as a social field and the scattered references to Bourdieu across the book are provocative but rather loose. Which are the generic types of actors, capitals, and strategies one would expect to see in a postinsurgent social field? How does the latter relate to other social fields in Salvadoran society? How to conceptualize a critical juncture such as the advent of peace from a field-theoretical perspective? Beyond these observations, however, this superbly researched and nicely written book is a much-needed addition to the peace-building literature.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS

Combining social movement and democratization theories, María Inclán presents an in-depth study of the Mexican Zapatista movement (ZM hereafter) from its inception in 1994. The book attempts to solve a puzzle for one of the most famous Latin American social movements: why did the ZM not achieve its political goals or become an influential political player, given its impressive initial levels of mobilization and strong network of supporters?

To solve this puzzle, Inclán develops the concept of sliding doors of opportunity, and differentiates among opportunities for mobilization, success, and survival. The Zapatista insurgency opened the first set of “doors” for sustained mobilization, but the second set of doors—those providing opportunities for success—failed to open. However, the initial mobilization opened opportunities for the ZM’s survival across time, despite subsequent mobilization declines and lack of political success. Throughout the book, Inclán develops this argument by skillfully combining protest event data, interviews with activists and political elites, qualitative analyses of news articles, and secondary research. The result is an engaging narrative of one of the most notable movements of the region.

Inclán’s book makes two important theoretical contributions. First, democratic transitions may not provide full opportunities to social movements if they are protracted and incomplete and the resulting democracies are not committed to the incorporation of subordinate sectors. Second, Inclán further develops political opportunity theory by differentiating among opportunities for mobilization, success, and survival, showing that these opportunities operate in different ways and considering opportunities at both the national and the local level.

Regarding the book’s structure, chapter 2 discusses the literature on democratic transitions and political opportunities, differentiates among types of opportunities, and presents the sliding doors argument. The remaining three chapters illustrate the argument with the ZM as a case study.

Chapter 3 explains the contradictory opportunities for mobilization opened by Mexico’s democratic transition. At the national level, democratizing openings and electoral reforms in the 1990s facilitated the Zapatista uprising. But mobilization declined as elections became routinized and activists became disillusioned with new progressive forces, such as the PRD. Intriguingly, the protest event analysis at the municipal level shows that Zapatista mobilization was higher in the more closed and repressive municipalities, in those dominated by the PRI, and in those facing less competitive local elections. Inclán interprets these unexpected findings by arguing that the ZM strategically refocused its activities on the more challenging local environments, which required more progress.

Chapter 4 diagnoses the ZM’s failure to become an influential political actor and achieve its political goals. Although the political elites approved an indigenous rights bill in the early 2000s, it failed to empower indigenous communities and recognized their autonomy only at the sublocal level, ultimately legalizing their submission to local governments. Why this outcome? Inclán argues that because democratizing negotiations in Mexico were crafted by political elites without the participation of insurgents, agreements revolved around electoral issues and excluded more substantive social demands. Also, since peace negotiations between Zapatistas and authorities ran parallel to democratizing negotiations, the former could not shape the latter.

Frustrated by an unresponsive political status quo, in 2003 the ZM abandoned dialogue and protests and turned to a new form of mobilization—the creation of the *juntas de buen gobierno* in their autonomous territories. Inclán buttresses this argu-

ment by briefly comparing the ZM with the South African and Salvadoran insurgents studied by Elisabeth Wood. By becoming counterelite actors during the democratization processes, insurgents in these countries could achieve their political goals—but with the internal tensions Sprenkels shows for the FMLN in El Salvador.

Chapter 5 explains why the ZM survived despite political failure and declining mobilization levels. The answer lies in the creation of a strong solidarity network—domestic but especially transnational. The ZM early developed a skillful use of the Internet and spread its cause, emphasizing universal principles of justice, dignity, direct democracy, and struggles against globalization. This attracted the support and resources of foundations and NGOs from the developed North. In turn, this allowed the ZM to sustain autonomous communities, deploy resistance campaigns, and shield itself from indiscriminate military repression. However, by shifting the discourse from local and national to international issues, the ZM became less salient for Mexican political elites, which ignored it without major political costs. It also grew more distant from Mexican public opinion and the national media, which decreased their attention to the movement.

Fascinating as it is, one could dispute the book's assertion that the ZM was not politically successful—after all, an important indigenous rights bill was approved thanks to Zapatista mobilization. Also, one wonders whether a more robust theoretical alternative could have emerged after the many findings contradicting political opportunity and democratization theories. Beyond these issues, Inclán's book will surely become a classic in the literature on Latin American social movements.

THE SOCIOPOLITICAL LEGACIES OF VIOLENCE AND TERRORISM

None of the usual themes in the postconflict literature—peace negotiations and accords, international intervention, the social reintegration of former combatants, or reconstruction projects—became salient after the internal armed conflict (IAC hereafter) that ravaged Peru during the 1980s under Shining Path (SP). This makes especially welcome the volume edited by Hillel Soifer and Alberto Vergara, which is a systematic exploration of the IAC's legacies in Peruvian society and politics. In the introduction, the editors warn us about the difficulties for disentangling the impact of the IAC from other autonomous processes in Peruvian society. For this daunting task, they devise a framework that differentiates among three causal channels: wartime mechanisms (direct, short-term impacts derived from the experience of violence); postconflict legacies (middle- and long-term impacts after the conflict); and the political struggle over legacies (how political actors frame and manipulate the narratives of the conflict for advancing their interests). Additionally, the framework distinguishes four areas that the IAC may have affected and that structure most of the book: state institutions, civil society, political parties, and public opinion.

The first two chapters provide a historical overview of the conflict. José Luis Rénique and Adrián Lerner explore the political and ideological bases of SP, the onset and development of armed actions, and the reactions from the Peruvian state

and security forces until SP's military demise under Alberto Fujimori. Livia Isabella Schubiger and David Sulmont place the Peruvian guerrilla in comparative perspective, discussing the particularities and commonalities of SP's warfare technology, ideology, identity, mobilization, and governance practices in light of existing research on armed groups.

Chapters 3 to 5 study the IAC's impact on state institutions. Maxwell Cameron argues that the emergency derived from the IAC facilitated the adoption of a neoliberal and authoritarian constitution in 1993, encouraging a governing style that weakened collective movements. Soifer and Everett Vieira investigate the IAC's effects on state capacity. The conflict increased the effectiveness and cohesiveness of the armed forces and promoted the learning of new counterinsurgency doctrines, but other changes were more ephemeral. Then Eduardo Dargent and Noelia Chávez study the impact of the IAC on Peru's public universities, where SP first spread. Violence weakened public universities in different ways. It created, among elites and the population at large, an image of public universities as chaotic and radicalized settings; it promoted the migration of better-off students and high-quality professors to private universities; and it weakened student collective action, limiting student capacity to press for much-needed educational reforms.

Chapters 6 and 7 study the IAC's impact on civil society. For instance, in chapter 7, Maritza Paredes argues that although the IAC damaged indigenous organizations, it also unintentionally promoted the emergence of human rights NGOs with important legal skills and human rights advocacy expertise. These NGOs, later on, built alliances with indigenous organizations, helping them to take advantage of a favorable international context and contributing to the revitalization of indigenous activism.

Chapters 8 and 9 show how the IAC transformed Peruvian political parties. Paula Muñoz argues that the IAC dramatically weakened the political left by decimating leftist leaders and militants, which were targeted by both SP and state repression. Moreover, unable to reject unambiguously SP's political violence, leftist organizations were easily delegitimized by rightist forces, which associated the left with terrorism. Vergara and Daniel Encinas (chapter 9) look at the other end of the political spectrum. They describe a transition of right-wing forces from organized yet ideologically fragmented to disorganized but highly committed to neoliberalism—a "conservative archipelago." Then they argue that the IAC contributed to this transformation. By devastating the left (chapter 8), the IAC facilitated right-wing hegemony and the rise of technocracy, which gained popular legitimacy when presented as a decisive force in SP's defeat.

Chapters 10 and 11 explore the impact of political violence on Peruvian public opinion. Arturo Maldonado, Jennifer L. Merolla, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister use survey data to evidence Peruvians' comparatively high fears of terrorist attacks. An online experiment further shows that the public's exposure to news stories about domestic terrorism spurs divergent reactions: while it prompts *Fujimoristas* to become more supportive of iron-fisted policies, among *anti-Fujimoristas* it fosters more democratic and tolerant attitudes.

In the concluding chapter, Steven Levitsky recalls the challenges of making causal claims in a country where many things changed beyond political violence. He also raises two Peruvian peculiarities in comparative perspective: the lack of empowerment of social movements and leftist forces and the weakness of paramilitary forces and other armed actors after the conflict.

Overall, the volume excels in providing a unified assessment of an important and difficult question—the sociopolitical legacies of violence and terrorism. It should become a model for others addressing similar research questions. Understandably, the rigor of the causal assessments and the quality of the data used for making causal claims vary across chapters and themes. Also, at times the distinctions between direct and indirect, and short- and long-term effects, are unclear.

HUMAN RIGHTS CRISES, FAILED GOVERNMENTS, AND ORGANIZED CRIME

Anaya-Muñoz and Frey's edited volume addresses Mexico's current human rights crisis from different angles. It describes the kinds and scope of human rights violations, identifies their causes, challenges political and theoretical misconceptions, and proposes ideas for public policies. The introductory chapter, by Anaya-Muñoz and Frey, states that human rights violations in Mexico mostly appear in three forms: extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and torture. These three forms, whose increases across time they document with statistics, result not only from the actions of criminal groups and drug cartels but also from police forces and state agents often acting in connivance with criminals.

Anaya-Muñoz and Frey identify two factors behind the crisis. President Felipe Calderón's war on drugs of the mid-2000s, by empowering the Mexican armed forces, ended up boosting violence. Also relevant is the state of impunity in Mexico, in which only 4.5 percent of crimes are investigated and only 1.1 percent end up in convictions. The chapter ends with policy suggestions at different levels, including the development of reliable data on human rights violations; the need to address impunity and improve investigation, prosecution, and criminal punishment; and the development of independent and efficient institutions shielded from drug organizations.

The rest of the book is organized into three parts. Chapters 1 to 4 explore how the war on drugs and impunity encouraged massive human rights violations. For instance, Catalina Pérez Correa, Carlos Silva Forné, and Rodrigo Gutiérrez Rivas (chapter 1) present a lethality index, based on information about civilians killed and wounded in clashes with Mexican security forces. Although the number of clashes and corresponding civilian deaths has declined since 2012, lethality remains very high in Mexico. The chapter presents simple statistics about the evolution of lethality across time and selected states, begging for more complex analyses about how the characteristics of states and localities shape lethality levels.

Sandra Hincapié (chapter 3) documents how Mexico's armed conflict disproportionately affects women. Both drug lords and state agents coerce women to obtain money through human (including child) trafficking, prostitution, pornography, and drug trafficking. The chapter also shows how women's movements have courageously denounced gender violence and the inaction of state authorities. Unfortunately, gender violence remains pretty much invisible, and women remain vulnerable.

The second part of the book (chapters 5 to 8) explores the crisis of migrants. Javier Treviño-Rangel details how security forces and criminal organizations, often working in tandem, extract profits from undocumented Central American migrants trying to cross Mexico to reach the United States. Through mass kidnapping, extortion, and disappearances, transmigrants become superfluous, dehumanized commodities. This shows that the practices and values of the authoritarian period persist in supposedly democratic times.

Benjamin James Waddell (chapter 6) explores the connections between mass emigration and the human rights crisis. On the basis of qualitative research in the state of Michoacán, Waddell argues that the persistent emigration of young people to the United States drained Mexican localities of the social, economic, and cultural capital that prevents crime and encourages accountable authorities. Families receiving remittances developed consumption patterns that, via emulation, encouraged working-age men to join drug cartels for enrichment, ultimately strengthening criminal organizations and legitimizing violence. Waddell's chapter cries for subsequent research to test his wholly sociological argument with quantitative data from a wider array of Mexican localities.

The third part of the book (chapters 9 to 12) focuses on the role played by institutional conditions—both domestic and transnational—in the human rights crisis. Daniel Vázquez traces Mexico's human rights crisis to the failure to consolidate democracy. While in recent years Mexico transitioned to an electoral democracy with power alternation, many authoritarian features remained in place, aggravating human rights violations. This "Mexican-style democracy" is characterized by weak freedom of expression, the absence of alternative development models (although it is unclear how this affects human rights violations), the lack of central regulation of state-level politics, and clientelism. More proximate causes of the crisis are the governmental strategies of denial and "simulation"—government actions that simulate addressing real problems but are notoriously inconsequential. The combination of these features seems to discourage politicians from addressing human rights violations.

In chapter 11, Karina Ansolabehere brings the transnational context to the fore. Moving beyond the common diagnostic of impunity as a cause of the crisis, she emphasizes a contradiction in Mexico's federal judiciary. Although Mexico recently carried out a constitutional reform based on international standards, it was insufficient for improving the accountability for human rights violations. Because a "justice filter" prevents most accusations from being fully investigated, those responsible for human rights violations are not brought to trial, and the victims receive no reparations.

All in all, the book provides a rich, multidisciplinary approach to a painful reality. The volume denounces the role of Mexican authorities in the crisis and blames President Calderón's "war on drugs." Far from weakening criminal organizations, this initiative encouraged them to move to other economic niches, creating more societal damage and unleashing brutal and indiscriminate violence by state forces. While this approach is relevant, one wonders about a more balanced perspective that might also include an explanation of the growing power of drug organizations in the first place. Other, less-explored factors that invite further inquiry are the role played by poverty and socioeconomic crises, cultural models (see Waddell's chapter), and the reactions of third actors, such as the business sector, neighbor organizations, labor unions, and churches.

Beyond their differences in themes, approaches, and methodologies, these four books illustrate the complex relationships between insurgency, political violence, crime, and social movements in contemporary Latin America. They reveal that insurgency and violence can thrive despite democratization processes, declining poverty rates, growing middle classes, and economic and cultural globalization. They also evidence the powerful legacies of authoritarianism, war, and violence in times of democracy and peace, and warn us about the unintended effects of political actions—from the manifold consequences of armed conflict in Peru to the revitalization of drug cartels after Calderón's war on drugs in Mexico. Furthermore, they document the physical and emotional pain created by terrorism, organized crime, and state repression.

While each book centers on a specific country, taken together they suggest comparative questions both at the country level—e.g., why Peru defeated political terrorism but in Mexico organized crime runs unabated—and at the mesolevel—e.g., why the FMLN evolved into a successful political party but the Zapatistas did not. Addressing comparative questions of this kind may be the first step toward a more comprehensive framework for analyzing the relationships between insurgency, violence, and democracy in Latin America—a task for which these books provide solid foundations.

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