Homicidal Ecologies

Why has violence spiked in Latin America’s contemporary democracies? What explains its temporal and spatial variation? Analyzing the region’s uneven homicide levels, this book maps out a theoretical agenda focusing on three intersecting factors: the changing geography of transnational illicit political economies, the varied capacity and complicity of state institutions tasked with providing law and order, and organizational competition to control illicit territorial enclaves. These three factors inform the emergence of “homicidal ecologies” (subnational regions most susceptible to violence) in Latin America. After focusing on the contemporary causes of homicidal violence, the book analyzes the comparative historical origins of the state’s weak and complicit public security forces and the rare moments in which successful institutional reform takes place. The evaluation of regional trends in Latin America is followed by the presentation of original case studies from Central America, which claims among the highest homicide rates in the world.

Deborah J. Yashar is Professor of Politics & International Affairs at Princeton University. She is lead editor of World Politics, co-chair of SSRC’s Anxieties of Democracy project, and a series editor for Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics. She is the author of Demanding Democracy (1997) and Contesting Citizenship (2005), as well as co-editor of Parties, Movements, and Democracy in the Developing World with Nancy Bermeo (2016) and States in the Developing World with Miguel Centeno and Atul Kohli (2017), both with Cambridge University Press. She is the recipient of Fulbright, USIP, and other awards.
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Homicidal Ecologies

Illicit Economies and Complicit States in Latin America

DEBORAH J. YASHAR
Princeton University
For Sarah and Rebecca
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Acknowledgments

This project was unexpected. I traveled to Central America over a decade ago to start a new research project about civil wars and the third wave of democratization. I left the field with a sense of urgency about a different topic: the violence that was taking place not before but after the democratic transition. Everyone I interviewed politely entertained questions about the past, but they wanted to talk about the violence that was occurring at that moment, in the aftermath of civil wars and military rule. People felt unsafe. They recounted witnessing homicides on street corners, uniformly noted how unsafe it was to take buses, and cautioned against the seeming randomness of violence in poor as well as wealthy urban neighborhoods. Political affiliations no longer seemed like a good predictor of who would become the next target of violence. Homicides were becoming commonplace. The question was why homicides had become so widespread in this period of civilian rule and why homicides were reaching epidemic proportions in some places and not others. There was an urgency to the discussions with colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. I left Central America certain that there was an academic and normative imperative to analyze the violence after civil war and dictatorship.

Over the course of the next decade, I worked on this project, hoping that the problem would subside. It did not. While homicide rates saw some variation in Central America, a key comparison remained: violence was rampant in the northern triangle, while it was much more contained in the southern part of the isthmus. Violence rates, moreover, were high or becoming higher in other parts of the region as well – Mexico and Venezuela, in particular. Brazil’s homicide rates were always
notoriously high and remained quite alarming, particularly once subnational variation was taken into account. Thus, the project started with a focus on Central America but necessarily placed these cases in comparative perspective.

Given the scope of the project, I was fortunate to have a wonderful team of colleagues and research assistants (RAs). A few people were pivotal in helping me plan subsequent forays into the field. I am deeply grateful for the early advice provided by Consuelo Cruz, David Holiday, Rachel Sieder, Elisabeth Wood, and Loly de Zúñiga. They helped me identify my first round of interviews, especially when I first started to work on El Salvador and Nicaragua. Loly de Zúñiga provided invaluable logistical support in El Salvador, and I thank her for her wonderful assistance so many years ago.

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This volume also benefited from collaborations on three other projects. I am particularly grateful to Miguel Centeno and Atul Kohli, with whom I coedited the book *States in the Developing World;* Nancy Bermeo, with whom I coedited *Parties, Movements, and Democracy in the Developing World;* and Peter Kingstone, with whom I coedited the *Handbook of Latin American Politics.* These three very different projects provided a stimulating theoretical backdrop to the issues raised in this book, and I thank my coeditors for their terrific insights, collaboration, and friendship. I am sure they will see the footprint of these edited volumes in the pages of this book. I thank in particular Miguel Centeno, who offered more than once to comment on my manuscript and gave me
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As I complete the project, I continue to be outraged at the ongoing violence in the Latin American region and the implications for the next generation of children. While they are victims of the homicidal ecologies in which they were born, they are also victims of a torturous escape route and an unwelcoming and cruel response by many North Americans. I despair at their disadvantage and hope that this book contributes, if only in some small way, to a better understanding of their plight and a more informed and compassionate response to their plea for a better life in the Americas (both in their sending and receiving countries).
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