



THE POLITICS OF VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

Edited by Pablo Policzer

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EDITED BY **Pablo Policzer**

The Politics of Violence in Latin America

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The idea for this book emerged from a series of discussions and meetings at the University of Calgary and the Banff Centre in 2008 and 2009. In retrospect, although we didn't know it at the time, this was a period of transition in the way we think about the problem of violence. In the 1990s, ethnic conflict and other forms of violence emerged in many parts of the world, criminal violence related to the drug trade became a serious problem in parts of Latin America, and the seemingly intractable civil war in Colombia grew even more deadly, despite efforts to bring it to an end. While authoritarian rule and later the transition to democracy had preoccupied a previous generation of analysts in Latin America, by the 1990s the focus had begun to shift to the problem of violence and insecurity. The region might have become more democratic than in the recent past, but fear and insecurity related to complex combinations of armed conflict and criminal violence persisted. In addition, the news from places throughout Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and elsewhere contributed to the impression that even though the Cold War had ended, new forms of violent conflict were making the world a more insecure place.

That view began to change by the turn of the millennium. New datasets were beginning to show that, contrary to our popular impressions, all forms of violence—from interstate war to genocide and crime—were in fact declining around the world. I first encountered this research as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia, where the Human Security Centre was located at the time. The Centre's *Human Security Report 2005* broke new ground by showing that, notwithstanding the headlines of the 1990s, major wars and other forms of armed conflict had in fact *declined* dramatically. This argument made an impact in mostly academic circles until the publication of Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels*

of our Nature in 2011. Pinker's book, which drew on much of the same new evidence contained in the *Human Security Report*, was widely read, and it has substantially changed how we understand and discuss the problem of violence. The common notion that the world is becoming more violent is simply no longer a given.

The discussions at the University of Calgary and the Banff Centre, which included the authors featured in this book as well as other colleagues, aimed to question assumptions around what might be structurally given in different patterns of violence in Latin America. True, rates of criminal violence, especially, have skyrocketed throughout the region, giving it the dubious honor of being the most violent place on the planet. But by contrast to others who sought to make sense of the emergence of violence or of societies driven by fear, we believed it was time to assess the debate over the politics of violence. Violence has not always been a feature of Latin American societies, nor is it evenly distributed. Without underestimating the seriousness of the problem, we shared the conviction that it was important not only to take a broad view on the question of violence, but also to assess it from different angles.

It has been a pleasure and an honor to work with the wonderful and diverse group of authors in this book. They responded to all stages of this project—from the initial invitations to the final edits—with enthusiasm, grace, and generosity. In bringing together this group of academics and practitioners, we benefitted from the generous help and support of a number of people and institutions. The United States Institute of Peace provided funding for a meeting, as did the Latin American Research Centre, the Institute for United States Policy Research, and the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary, where Christon Archer and Stephen Randall, especially, encouraged this project from the beginning and provided excellent guidance and support.

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Pablo Policzer
Calgary
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Introduction:

Structural vs. Contingent Violence in Latin America

Pablo Policzer

Latin America is the most violent region on the planet.¹ The continent has suffered waves of repressive authoritarian rule, organized armed insurgency and civil war, violent protest, and, especially in recent decades, very high rates of criminal violence. Born of the clash between Europe and the New World, violence has been a staple of Latin American history, culture, and politics since the colonial period. It is a recurring theme from Bartolomé de las Casas's *Apologetic History of the Indies* to Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund's *City of God*. In recent decades, scholars, policymakers, and advocacy groups have also paid attention to the pervasive problems of violence in the region.² Indeed, many analysts who previously ignored violence as a problem—focusing instead on issues such as the collapse of democracy or the transition from authoritarianism to democracy³—have turned their attention to the fact that when states are unable to provide basic law and order, democracy suffers as violence becomes endemic.⁴

The problem is real and this attention is welcome, but the time is ripe for a critical assessment of the debate over how to understand the causes of violence in the region, and by extension, the policies by which the problem may be addressed. Is Latin America doomed to violence? The question is deliberately posed somewhat informally, to draw attention to an assumption that bears scrutiny. With few exceptions, scholars and others have approached the problem of violence in Latin America from various types

of (sometimes pessimistic) structural perspectives. Whether understood as “enduring social arrangements [that] people take for granted and allow to shape their actions,”⁵ or as the “past social relations [that] constrain present social relations,”⁶ or as “the basic institutions, arrangements and imaginative preconceptions that circumscribe our routine practical or discursive activities and conflicts,”⁷ structural perspectives emphasize the *given*, inherited constraints on social and political life.

In Latin America, violence has been attributed to such diverse factors as Spanish colonialism or American neo-imperialism;⁸ socioeconomic inequality and class conflict;⁹ entrenched partisan or cultural divisions;¹⁰ illiberal constitutions that give too much power to the region’s armed forces to use extraordinary force to suppress dissent;¹¹ difficult geography;¹² or the region’s structurally weak states,¹³ which results in what some have called “low-intensity citizenship,” whereby states are unable to enforce the rule of law, and citizens lack the tools to make states accountable.¹⁴ Indeed, a number of scholars have expressed deep pessimism regarding the potential for democracy in the region, given its structurally embedded relations of violence. Arias and Goldstein, for example, argue that democracy is less likely in Latin America than “violent pluralism.” From this perspective,

violence [is] critical to the foundation of Latin American democracies, the maintenance of democratic states, and the political behavior of democratic citizens. In contemporary Latin American society violence emerges as much more than a social aberration: violence is a mechanism for keeping in place the very institutions and policies that neoliberal democracies have fashioned over the past several decades, as well as an instrument for coping with the myriad problems that neoliberal democracies have generated.¹⁵

In a previous work, Goldstein also argues that the existence of mobilized civil-society groups, “rather than serving to promote democratic institutions and values and advance the cause of civil and human rights, instead operates to constrain to limit those rights” and to justify greater state repression.¹⁶ Arias in turn points out that “violence in Rio stems from a

particular articulation of state, social and criminal relations which actively deploy state power in the service of criminal interests.”¹⁷

There are important differences among the perspectives highlighted above. Those who focus on institutional failures, for example, argue that violence is rooted in the weak and ineffective states that plague the region, and the consequent absence of the rule of law. Others focus on the way in which powerful interests, especially those rooted in fundamental economic relationships, have used state power to perpetuate domination through violent means. These views echo those of classic thinkers, especially Weber and Marx, and emphasize a wide range of different factors. Nevertheless, they are grounded in a similar set of assumptions—that there is a given, and relatively limited, set of possible or imaginable orders to choose from.

The institutional perspective is grounded in a tradition that certainly encompasses Weber, and dates back to Hobbes’s view that life outside a well-ordered state with a clear monopoly on coercion is dangerous (or “nasty, brutish, and short”). With this diagnosis, the solution to the problem of violence is straightforward—namely to reinforce the state, and to guarantee basic rights, liberties, and the rule of law. In other words, an institutional problem requires an institutional solution: something resembling the liberal-democratic state, ideally with a clear monopoly on coercive force. The interest perspective, on the other hand, is grounded in the Marxian idea that powerful economic interests determine fundamental political relationships. They are the basis upon which the structure of politics is built, and which in turn perpetuate the policy failures that result in entrenched patterns of violence. While it points to a different set of factors than the institutional perspective, the interest perspective assumes a similarly narrow and fixed set of given possibilities. Insofar as structures are patterns of social relationships that shape behavior over time,¹⁸ both of these are structural perspectives, even while pointing to different sorts of factors, whether institutions or interests.

Without denying the validity of structural perspectives and explanations in some cases, there are reasons to be skeptical of structural accounts in all cases. For example, much of the current concern with the outbreak of criminal violence in parts of the region stems from the consequences of the drug trade. This is no doubt a difficult problem posed by a complex

phenomenon, but the drug trade has a distinct beginning, has evolved over time, and it is at least possible to imagine its end. Like the proliferation of violence associated with Prohibition in the United States, today's "narco violence" in parts of Latin America is also arguably rooted in a historically contingent set of social, economic, and political factors. Some observers have noted that the prohibition of narcotics itself creates the conditions for violence, and that legalization may be a "least bad" type of solution.¹⁹ Without entering into a debate over the merits of legalization versus prohibition, it is worth noting that this is the opposite of a deeply embedded structural factor over which actors have little control.

Put differently, the problem with structural generalizations is not that there is no room for change. (Indeed, some of the best-known structural accounts—such as Marx's—encompass large-scale economic, social, and political change.) The problem—which is arguably why structural accounts are so often pessimistic—is that the possibilities for change are limited by a narrow set of imaginable alternatives. Although less deterministic than Marx, Weber also imagined a limited range of possible institutional arrangements that would serve to preserve political order. By contrast to these perspectives, we can point to the fact that many of the institutions and interests that we might think of as given, fixed, and limited, are in fact the product of a historically diverse and highly contingent set of circumstances: they are not given, or fixed, and they vary over time and space; they were created under particular circumstances, and can therefore be recreated under others.

By contrast to the standard social science distinction between structure and agency, or the capacity of individuals to exercise their free will, in this volume we suggest that contingency is the appropriate, and often overlooked, counterpoint to structure. Contingency certainly encompasses individual agency, but it emphasizes a different point in questioning the "givenness" or necessity of social structures. Instead of being the product of necessary historical processes or relationships, many structures are in fact rooted in more historically contingent arrangements and outcomes, often determined by individual agents. Such outcomes need not have happened, and might have turned out differently. Pointing out the historical, political, and legal contingency of what appear to be structural

phenomena is often the first step toward overcoming them. The pessimism of necessity can be replaced with the optimism of possibility.²⁰

Another reason to doubt the general applicability of structural accounts of violence in the region is simply that violence has not been a general or uniform phenomenon. Criminal violence has arisen in some places (with parts of Mexico and Central America, for example, the focus of much current concern), but it has decreased in other areas that were previously seriously afflicted. The experience of Colombian cities such as Bogotá and Medellín, where violence has decreased, draws our attention to an ultimately contingent set of political, social, and economic factors causing this drop. Something similar may also be observed in Brazil, where criminal violence is not evenly distributed. The crime rate in Rio de Janeiro is higher than in São Paulo, for example, even though both cities share many of the same underlying structural conditions outlined above.

A brief look at other cases beyond Latin America and other debates beyond the issue of violence also suggests reasons to be skeptical of generalizations based on structural accounts. In Sweden, for example, the often intensely violent struggles between unions and employers until the early part of the twentieth century were replaced by the now well-known Swedish model of a generous welfare state overseeing peaceful corporate bargaining and accommodation. Similar “transitions from mistrust to trust” have also been observed in other countries in Europe and elsewhere.²¹ Other debates in political economy suggest that structural perspectives pertaining, for example, to the necessary presence of Fordist modes of mass production have been replaced by those emphasizing the contingency of the forms of economic organization and production.²²

While some of the pessimism regarding the potential for democracy in Latin America today stems from the prevalence of violence, it is also worth remembering that in a previous generation it stemmed from a different set of seemingly given structural factors, such as those associated with culture. Latin America was thought to be a poor locale for democracy because Latin Americans were not culturally predisposed to the values of self-discipline, honesty, toleration, and respect that modern democracy required. During a time when democracy had an admittedly weak foothold in the region, such structural explanations (e.g., modernization theory) were widely accepted as valid. From today’s perspective,

and notwithstanding serious challenges to democracy that remain in the region,²³ the notion that Latin Americans are culturally not prepared for democracy is no longer valid. Authoritarian regimes have largely been replaced by democratic ones that, despite their shortcomings, dispel the notion that Latin American culture is structurally incompatible with democracy.²⁴ Recent alarm over the rise of antidemocratic elements in parts of the world where democracy was previously thought to be consolidated, such as Western Europe and the United States, puts to rest the notion of culture as a structural precondition for democracy.²⁵

The shift from structural to contingent perspectives also entails an epistemological shift, from describing a relatively narrow range of fixed underlying structural factors to examining a broader range of mechanisms—understood as discrete processes or actions that causally link inputs and outcomes—that produce more contingent outcomes.²⁶

Explanations of violence need to do more than simply assert the relationship between variables such as class conflict or neo-imperialism and violence: they need to examine the precise mechanisms by which such variables are related. The opposite of a mechanism where the role of each part is clear is a “black box,” which ignores the precise connections among different factors.²⁷

Another consequence of the shift from structural to contingent perspectives is political. As suggested above, structural perspectives can lead to pessimistic assessments of the prospects of democracy, to choose one example. By contrast, a focus on more contingent outcomes—such as the replacement of systems of violence and mistrust by systems of peace and trust—suggests reasons for optimism. Without underestimating the complex challenges faced by Latin Americans in building more peaceful societies, shining a light on the contingent, and not just the structural, opens up new possibilities and solutions. It is not necessary to change everything in order to change some things; and changing some things has clear—and potentially significant—consequences.

With this in mind, this book aims to critically assess some of the principal accounts of violence in Latin America. Our aim is not an exhaustive account of all manifestations of all types of violence throughout the continent and across different historical periods. Indeed, we include neither the full range of possible case studies nor strict typologies. Instead,

through a variety of distinct settings and disciplinary perspectives, we aim to compare and contrast the differences between structural and more contingent accounts of the patterns of violence in the region. We do not reject structural accounts, which are valid in some cases; we aim, rather, to introduce contingent accounts, which are also valid in different cases, and to shed light on the contingencies at the center of even some seemingly deeply embedded structures.

If structural accounts are valid anywhere, they should apply to the first cases we consider: the coordinated operations by authoritarian regimes in the Southern Cone, and the structural determinants of violence in Haiti, the poorest country in the region. In each case, however, we find that although the structures determining violence—whether coordinated authoritarian state repression in the Southern Cone, or widespread civil and political violence in Haiti—are deep, there is also a great deal more contingency and choice than we might at first assume. Even though the structures are real and powerful, they are not set in stone.

Andreas Feldmann's chapter shows that in Haiti we find many of the strongest structural causes of violence: frequent and widespread repression and corruption, a state incapable of maintaining the monopoly on coercion, deep poverty, and massive ecological damage. In recent years, these have been joined by further structural changes brought on by the difficult and incomplete transition to democracy and the entry of organized crime, along with the spread and increasingly easy availability of small arms and light weapons. If ever a place was structurally predisposed to violence of different types, it is Haiti. Feldmann notes that Haiti (along with Colombia) offers probably the strongest proof that violence is structurally embedded. Yet even here, in this critical case, Feldmann argues that "structural conditions do not in and of themselves seem able to provide a full, convincing account for the changes in the nature of violence experienced in Haiti over the last two decades." Once we open up the black box of the structural causes of violence, we find contingent conditions derived from the process of political and economic globalization. In particular, Haiti's difficult transition to democracy and the spread of organized crime and small arms are important—yet historically contingent—mechanisms that have shaped violence in recent years.

None of these factors is easy to change. The forces of globalization are powerful and weak countries like Haiti are more often than not in the position of having to respond to such forces instead of being able to control them. Yet we know from other countries and other examples that even powerful forces are not immutable. Poor countries with weak governments can develop, just as rich countries with strong governments can run aground. Haiti's problems are deep and seem intractable, yet Haiti is also a critical case. It is by far the poorest country in the region, with the weakest institutions. Without minimizing the significance of Haiti's problems, the structural determinants for violence in the rest of the region are less powerful than in Haiti. Various countries have made choices to undertake sometimes radical transformations. The problems of poverty, corruption, repression, crime, and the availability of weapons are experienced beyond Haiti, but the resources to combat these problems are greater in these countries as well.

The armed forces are also the focus of Patrice McSherry's chapter on Operation Condor. Like Feldmann, McSherry tackles a critical case for structural accounts of violence in Latin America: state repression under authoritarian rule in the Southern Cone countries. Building on her previous work on Operation Condor,²⁸ McSherry explores the structural and contingent factors that shaped this covert "black operations" collaboration between six Latin American countries and the United States. Authoritarian regimes and their operations during this period often appear as powerful monoliths, leading many to see them as confirmation of structural accounts of violence and repression, including as an expression of US hegemony in a strategically important region during the Cold War. In this chapter, like in her previous work on Operation Condor, McSherry provides evidence of the widespread patterns of collaboration that created and perpetuated Condor, making it a fearsome and powerful force. What at the time seemed intractable—authoritarian repression with the full support of a global superpower—nevertheless came to an end, and it rested on what turned out to be a much more contingent set of conditions. To be sure, US Cold War strategic-hegemonic interests and national-security doctrines throughout the region were powerful forces. Yet even these receded as different actors chose to disengage from Condor and authoritarian rule as a whole. In hindsight, what seemed deeply rooted and

immovable was in fact based on a complex and powerful yet contingent set of forces. McSherry emphasizes the importance of choice in putting an end to violence and repression. Her chapter does not suggest that change is easy or that everything is contingent. Yet it does belie arguments about violence rooted in timeless and unchanging structures, and it highlights the fundamental importance of choice in changing even deeply rooted structures.

The second part of the book addresses a number of mechanisms that produce and reproduce violence, as well as those that can curb it. Mechanisms are different from structures, insofar as they emphasize the importance of actors over variables.²⁹ Actors' choices are not unlimited, and they often face very real constraints. But keeping the focus on actors and choices suggests the need to question assumptions based on variables and structures devoid of abstract agents. As the chapters in part I suggest, even deep structures rest on the contingency of choices made or not made. Part II does not provide an exhaustive account of all mechanisms that either perpetuate or curb violence in Latin America. Even if such an account were possible, our aim is more modest: to list some examples of different mechanisms and how they work.

Pablo Piccato's chapter sheds light on such a mechanism. Murder is not simply a crime. Piccato shows that it is also a "communicative act intended to be received and decoded by an audience." The communicative dimension of murder is critical to understanding not only the evolution of patterns of crime over time, but also the public concern about it: concern about crime has risen even though, somewhat surprisingly, crime has in fact decreased in Mexico. Piccato focuses on the development of the *nota roja* sections of Mexican newspapers, the crime stories that are relegated to the back sections of "serious" newspapers or to the more popular tabloid press altogether. These crime stories lend themselves to exquisitely graphic treatment and are widely read. They convey a sense of dramatic urgency even though over time the overall crime rates may have decreased rather than increased. Public concern over rising crime is often driven by the graphic and brutal messages communicated through the *nota roja* sections of the press, instead of the far less graphic and dramatic rise and fall of statistical trends. The press is an important mechanism both for the increase and decrease of violence. By magnifying and distorting the

patterns of murder, the *nota roja* shape the public's opinion, and provide a venue for murderers themselves—such as drug traffickers and other criminals—to send messages to potential rivals as well as to the public at large.

Violence has a deliberate public meaning that is used to shape what type of crime is discussed and how, and it can force governments to take particular actions against crime. The *nota roja* display graphic images of crime scenes, reinforcing the message that it is the victim who is likely to be humiliated, and that there is little public respect for their fate. When charges are laid, the police news allows the criminals to tell their story, further robbing the victims of their perspective. Because the newspapers are the medium through which violence is communicated, criminal actors attempt to influence the way in which violence is depicted—including violence and coercion toward journalists—in order to shape the message being sent to the government, the public, and their criminal rivals. Once understood in this way, the element of choice is made clear: the press can but need not act this way. There are other possibilities.

Michelle Bonner's chapter also focuses on the media as a mechanism in the production and perpetuation of violence. Bonner examines the Chilean police's repression of student protests that took place in Chile on 30 May 2006, and how these events were covered by the national media. She focuses in particular on *El Mercurio*, the leading elite newspaper. By contrast to the claims about the media's potential as a mechanism of social accountability,³⁰ Bonner focuses on the limits of such potential. In Chile, *El Mercurio* framed the 2006 student protests as a law-and-order, rather than a human or civil rights, issue.

Although news coverage of the protests clearly ascribed the greatest responsibility for the excesses to the *Carabineros* (police), Bonner shows that there was very little social accountability following the protests. There was some horizontal accountability when President Bachelet condemned the police's actions and dismissed ten policemen and several officers. Due to legal restrictions against offending or harming the morale of state authorities, however, these criticisms cautiously focused on the excesses of individual members of the police and generally ignored institutional change or larger-scale accountability by the *Carabineros* or its senior leadership. In other words, Bonner argues that "high levels of police repression of social protest are not simply structurally determined; they are

in part contingent on media coverage.” The media’s failure to perform its social-accountability role is an important, though contingent, mechanism in the perpetuation of state violence.

Anthony Pereira’s chapter addresses a similar problem as Bonner’s—police violence—but from the perspective of a different mechanism to curb it: Brazilian police ombudsmen. These institutions are relatively new, having been introduced in Brazil over the past couple of decades, and Pereira acknowledges that “more is unknown than known about the impact of ombudsmen on levels of police violence in Brazil.” Nevertheless, ombudsmen are a potentially significant mechanism by which to curb violence. Pereira compares ombudsmen in São Paulo and Pernambuco and finds that the former has a much higher degree of capacity and autonomy—that is, they are able to gather information about police abuses without interference from the police itself and the secretary of public security. Although it is too early to tell whether and in what way the ombudsmen’s offices can contribute to the reduction of violence in Brazil, Pereira’s chapter highlights two key issues that run counter to what structural perspectives may suggest: first, that it is possible to create institutions with the potential to curb violence; and second, that societies have a choice about these institutions’ design and operation. Social structures are not simply given or predetermined. Societies can choose to create them or not, and can determine how to operate them.

Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín’s chapter examines the phenomenon of kidnapping in Colombia, long considered an especially invidious aspect of that country’s civil war. The practice of kidnapping for ransom was adopted by the guerrillas, especially, but also by other actors. It was incorporated into the “repertoire of violence” in Colombia and it must be explained as such. Gutiérrez Sanín shows that kidnapping is neither a structural feature of violence, nor a response to a clear rational calculation. Especially puzzling is the fact that kidnapping emerged during a period of substantial democratic expansion. Threat theory, a key explanation of repression, holds that states respond proportionally to the threats they face. Yet Gutiérrez Sanín argues that in Colombia the state responded in a more muted manner than is often thought. Violence in Colombia has undoubtedly been widespread, and often intensely brutal. But as Gutiérrez Sanín shows, the state’s formal institutional response to kidnapping was

weak. Instead, the state responded through the informal and illegal mechanism of paramilitary violence. In this sense, by limiting the possibilities of a more intensive institutional response, democratic checks and balances contributed to the expansion of an illegal—and deadlier—form of repression. Gutiérrez Sanín traces the evolution of kidnapping alongside the development of democratic institutions in Colombia, and he documents the failed efforts by political elites to respond through democratic channels and the successful efforts by other elites to resort to illegal back channels instead.

In this sense, Gutiérrez Sanín's chapter accounts for an important element in the repertoire of violence by explaining the mechanisms that introduced it, shaped it, and helped it grow. Kidnapping in Colombia emerged from a complex and surprising interaction of structural and more contingent elements. Understanding these mechanisms, including the ways in which democratic institutions may have created unintended incentives that contributed to the expansion of violence, is a key step toward replacing the pessimism of necessity with the optimism of possibility. Gutiérrez Sanín focuses on the emergence of kidnapping in the decades before the recent peace process and subsequent accords. Since that time, rates of kidnapping in Colombia—along with other types of violence—have decreased.³¹ While this is good news, Gutiérrez Sanín reminds us that if violence is not necessarily structural, neither is peace. Formal institutions and structures can have complex and surprising unintended consequences.

Finally, Jennifer Schirmer's chapter offers a firsthand account of a very concrete mechanism for the reduction of violence—directly engaging armed actors to persuade them to abandon violence for peace. Schirmer, a trained anthropologist, draws on her extensive experience and insight as a practitioner—indeed a participant—in peace dialogue efforts. A common view holds that “spoilers” cannot be changed, or at best can only be “bought off.” The premise is that such actors are destined to remain intransigent, impeding progress toward peace and the consolidation of democratic institutions. Peacebuilding and democracy-promotion efforts often attempt to marginalize these actors by engaging and working with moderates to strengthen alternative networks and institutions. Schirmer challenges this view, suggesting that if peace processes marginalize armed

actors, they may create a self-fulfilling prophecy that confirms armed actors' reasons for taking up arms in the first place.

Instead of ignoring or deliberately marginalizing armed actors, the *Conversatorios* (or dialogues) Schirmer describes directly engage them. Instead of assuming that structural forces doom some sectors of society to violence, *Conversatorios* are premised on the idea that actors can be understood and can change. The *Conversatorios* were a Norwegian government initiative in Colombia in which Schirmer herself participated. Her chapter provides an in-depth account based on her own experience in bringing together military officers, especially, with civilians and former guerrillas. Begun during the height of the armed conflict in the early 2000's and held off the record, the *Conversatorios* have engaged scores of officers in different dialogues. In this broad and peaceful exchange of views, actors come to understand and also challenge each other's views regarding violence. Schirmer shows that while the *Conversatorios* do not aim to produce a specific outcome, certain "ripple effects" led to more participants being willing to discuss increasingly difficult subjects with "those they originally believed to be fundamentally antagonistic to their own and their institution's interests." In this sense, even though not formally connected, the *Conversatorios* were direct precursors to the more formal peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC, which culminated in the 2016 peace accord.

There are certainly limitations to the *Conversatorios*. If individual attitudes toward peace can change, they can also change back toward violence. And violence, moreover, is sometimes not simply the sum of individuals' preferences, but a more complex phenomenon that can occur in spite of what the sum of individuals in society might think. Yet the *Conversatorios* remind us that structural forces are not set in stone, and that in some cases individuals can bridge vast cognitive gaps to recognize and understand views radically opposed to their own. This kind of cognitive bridge-building is an example of agency at its deepest, reflecting individuals' capacity to transcend their frames of mind to reflect on their own experiences, values, and actions. We do not have to reject the importance of structural forces in general to recognize the significance of mechanisms like engagement and dialogue when it comes to breaking patterns of violence.

This book is not a handbook for how to reduce violence in Latin America, or anywhere else for that matter. Even if such a handbook were possible, it is beyond the scope of our task here. Instead, our aim is more modest: to question some of the structural assumptions embedded in a number of debates over the problem of violence in the region. Our perspective is less pessimistic than accounts that assume violence is structurally embedded in Latin American society. Violence is a complex and serious problem, but it is a contingent phenomenon, which depends on particular sets of mechanisms to emerge and develop. Latin America is not doomed. Our hope is that understanding these contingencies can be a first step toward changing the circumstances that created them.

NOTES

- 1 The Igarapé Institute notes that while Latin America has 8 percent of the world's population, it experiences 33 percent of the world's homicides, far more than any other region. See Robert Muggah and Katherine Aguirre Tobón, "Citizen Security in Latin America: Facts and Figures," *Igarapé Institute Strategic Paper 33* (April 2018), <https://igarape.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Citizen-Security-in-Latin-America-Facts-and-Figures.pdf>; see also <https://homicide.igarape.org.br/> (both accessed 15 November 2018).
- 2 E.g., Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt, *Societies of Fear: The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 1999), and *Armed Actors: Organized Violence and State Failure in Latin America* (London: Zed Books, 2004); Juan Méndez, Guillermo O'Donnell, and Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, eds., *The (Un)Rule of Law and the Underprivileged in Latin America* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999); Diane Davis and Anthony Pereira, *Irregular Armed Forces and their Role in Politics and State Formation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Enrique Desmond Arias, *Drugs and Democracy in Rio de Janeiro: Trafficking, Social Networks, and Public Security* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Enrique Desmond Arias and Daniel Goldstein, *Violent Democracies in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Lucia Dammert, *Fear and Crime in Latin America* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Graham Denyer Willis, *The Killing Consensus: Police, Organized Crime, and the Regulation of Life and Death in Urban Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).
- 3 E.g., Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
- 4 E.g., Guillermo O'Donnell, "On the State, Democratization, and Some Conceptual Problems: A Latin American View with Some Glances at Postcommunist Countries,"

- World Development* 21, no. 8 (1993): 1355–69; Méndez, O'Donnell, and Pinheiro, *The (Un)Rule of Law*.
- 5 Anthony Giddens cited in Charles Tilly, *Explaining Social Processes* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 166.
 - 6 Tilly, *Explaining*, 167.
 - 7 Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Social Theory: Its Situation and its Task* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
 - 8 Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1997).
 - 9 Arias and Goldstein, *Violent Democracies*.
 - 10 Mary Roldán, *Blood and Fire: La Violencia in Antioquia, Colombia, 1946–1953* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
 - 11 Brian Loveman, *The Constitution of Tyranny: Regimes of Exception in Spanish America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993); Brian Loveman and Thomas M. Davies, *The Politics of Antipolitics* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1997).
 - 12 Frank Safford and Marco Palacios, *Colombia: Fragmented Land, Divided Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)
 - 13 Miguel Angel Centeno, *Blood and Debt: War and the Nation-State in Latin America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).
 - 14 O'Donnell, “The State, Democratization, and Some Conceptual Problems”; Méndez, O'Donnell, and Pinheiro, *The (Un)Rule of Law*.
 - 15 Arias and Goldstein, *Violent Democracies*, 5.
 - 16 Daniel M. Goldstein, Gloria Achá, Eric Hinojosa, and Theo Roncken, “La Mano Dura and the Violence of Civil Society in Bolivia,” in *Indigenous Peoples, Civil Society and the Neo-Liberal State in Latin America*, ed. Edward F. Fischer (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 49.
 - 17 Arias, *Drugs and Democracy*.
 - 18 E.g., Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 59–65.
 - 19 “How to stop the drug wars,” *Economist*, 5 March 2009.
 - 20 This distinction comes especially from Unger Mangabeira, *Social Theory*.
 - 21 Bo Rothstein, *Social Traps and the Problem of Trust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
 - 22 E.g., Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).
 - 23 Maxwell A. Cameron, “Citizenship Deficits in Latin American Democracies,” *Convergencia* 14, no. 45 (2007): 11–30.
 - 24 Peter H. Smith, *Democracy in Latin America: Political Change in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

- 25 E.g., Yasha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018).
- 26 Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg, *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Jon Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior: More Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 27 Elster, *Explaining Social Behavior*.
- 28 Patrice McSherry, *Predatory States: Operation Condor and Covert War in Latin America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).
- 29 Hedström and Swedberg, *Social Mechanisms*.
- 30 Catalina Smulovitz and Enrique Peruzzotti, "Societal Accountability in Latin America," *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 4 (2000): 147–58; Catalina Smulovitz and Enrique Peruzzotti, *Enforcing the Rule of Law: Social Accountability in the New Latin American Democracies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).
- 31 Robert Muggah and Katherine Aguirre, "How Violence is Changing in Post-FARC Colombia," *Americas Quarterly*, 14 August 2017, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/content/how-violence-changing-post-farc-colombia> (accessed 15 November 2018).

PART I

