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Author(s): Anthony W. Pereira and Diane E. Davis

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Introduction

New Patterns of Militarized Violence and Coercion in the Americas

by

Anthony W. Pereira and Diane E. Davis

This issue, like the preceding one (March 2000), is devoted to the study of the causes and consequences of new forms of violence and coercion in the Americas. All but one of the articles (that by Jorge Zaverucha) were originally written for a conference sponsored by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation held at the New School for Social Research, New York City, on April 16-17, 1998. The articles in Part 1 dealt with states and militarized forces and the military-police nexus. The four articles in this part address the demilitarization that has taken place in some Latin American states and societies and the trade-offs that this has frequently entailed. A theme of all of these articles is the tension between demilitarization from above and demilitarization from below. This distinction mirrors processes of militarization such as Mexico's (discussed in Part 1), which has occurred as much as a result of local processes "from below" as from elite negotiation.

"Fragile Democracy and the Militarization of Public Safety in Brazil," by Jorge Zaverucha, examines the relationship between a preeminently national institution, the military, and police forces organized at the state level. Zaverucha argues that despite the military's tactical concessions to civilian politicians at the level of elite politics, its control over "everyday" security issues on Brazil's streets and in its public spaces is quietly growing. Unlike Angel López-Montiel, who examined the increased use of the military in policing in Mexico in the previous issue, Zaverucha sees the increasing role of the military in police operations as almost entirely negative for democracy. Highlighting some less well-known mechanisms by which the military's role

Anthony W. Pereira is an associate professor of political science at Tulane University. He is the author of *The End of the Peasantry: The Emergence of the Rural Labor Movement in Northeast Brazil, 1961-1988* (1997). Diane E. Davis is an associate professor of sociology at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York City. She is the author of *Urban Leviathan: Mexico City in the Twentieth Century* (1994) and recently received a grant from the John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation for research on the police in Mexico City. They thank Richard Stahler-Sholk for comments on an earlier draft of this introduction. The collective appreciates their work in organizing this issue.

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in public safety has grown in recent years in Brazil, he argues that the tendency of politicians to call in the military to deal with difficult political problems is widespread and cuts across ideological and party affiliations. From its constitutional role of defending “law and order” to its control over various aspects of police equipment, training, and budgets, the military’s power over important decisions regarding public security seems to be increasing, he suggests, in ways that are inimical to democracy.

Deena Abu-Lughod’s “Failed Buyout: Land Rights for Contra Veterans in Postwar Nicaragua” deals with the aftermath of a major episode of recent violence that provoked considerable passion within the United States as well as in Latin America. It focuses on the role of the peasantry in this violence and on how the settlement of the conflict affects landholders and the distribution of land. Abu-Lughod shows that land resettlement schemes after the end of the Contra war favored insurgents, giving comparatively large amounts of land to former Contras and marginalizing campesinos who had not participated in the war. Short-term political expediency on the part of the Chamorro government—mainly the desire to neutralize the potentially destabilizing Contra army—motivated this policy, which both established an injustice and laid the basis for future insurrection along class and nationalist lines. Former combatants excluded from the land redistribution scheme—from both the Sandinista and the Contra army—have banded together against better-placed individuals who were once their comrades in arms. That war veterans were entitled to state benefits eroded equality of citizenship, and many of those excluded viewed the new peace as illegitimate and searched for ways to undermine it through force of arms. Furthermore, the government’s own program was undercut by market reforms, which made it difficult for recipients of land to hold onto their properties in the face of intense commercial competition in agriculture.

The article by Susan Burgerman, “Building the Peace by Mandating Reform: United Nations–Mediated Human Rights Agreements in El Salvador and Guatemala,” focuses on differences in the role of the military in domestic coalitions in the two Central American countries. These differences, argues Burgerman, caused the peace processes of the 1990s in El Salvador and Guatemala to differ markedly. The Salvadoran military’s dependence on U.S. aid gave leverage to the United States and the United Nations in bringing El Salvador to the bargaining table. The United States, in particular, was able to use the threat of military-aid reductions to coax the Salvadoran military into negotiations. Because of the relative strength of the Guatemalan military (it depended less on U.S. aid and also felt less threatened by the guerrilla armies than did its Salvadoran counterpart), the negotiations were more protracted and less susceptible to outside pressure. In contrast, because the

Salvadoran conflict was a military stalemate, peace talks were controlled by elites and reintegration of combatants took precedence over socioeconomic reforms. The Guatemalan military, for its part, did not see itself as involved in a military stalemate, and therefore civil society organizations took a more active role in the negotiations and the Guatemalan pact involved more socioeconomic reforms, at least on paper.

Burgerman draws a parallel between the peace talks in Central America and those initiated in 1998 between the Pastrana government and rebels in Colombia. Because the Colombian military is heavily supplied by the United States and this aid is increasing rather than decreasing, military autonomy from the government is enhanced, and pressure for a settlement may be ineffective. At the same time, some of the various guerrilla factions are fragmented and intransigent. There is no mutual perception of stalemate, at least not yet, and this does not bode well for the progress of the talks.

The last article, "Conscription and Violence in Peru," by Eduardo González-Cueva, draws on the provocative and influential analysis of Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1979). Foucault writes that violence produces agents and order as well as repression and victims. Violence becomes an intrinsic part of institutions, bodies, hearts, and minds, so that it is not simply George Orwell's image of a boot endlessly stamping on a human face (1984 [1949])¹ but part of ordinary human beings, part of "us," guiding everyday actions and attitudes. Furthermore, since power produces domains of knowledge, violent power is rooted in certain notions of truth, and certain kinds of discourse reinforce, justify, and "normalize" violence (Foucault, 1979: 194). Studying discourse that supports violence is therefore just as important in understanding violence as studying the physical acts themselves. These insights also animate the study of police rationalizations for violence discussed in Part 1 by Huggins and elsewhere by Holden (1996) and Poole (1994).

González-Cueva argues that discourse helps solve the puzzle of how young lower-class Peruvian males can enter the military and come to exercise, in his words, "sexist violence against women, racist violence against indigenous groups, and class violence against the poor." This was the violence employed in the Peruvian highlands during the war against Sendero Luminoso, which involved so many human rights abuses on both sides. It is the brutality of poor Peruvian youth who are forcibly militarized and pitted against their "own kind" by the state. González-Cueva examines a pivotal moment in the production of this violence: the press-gang (*leva*), which the army uses to fill its conscription needs when volunteers are insufficient. (Peru, like most Latin American countries, has a formally universal system of

military conscription, but hardly any middle- and upper-class youth lack the desire and the means to evade service.)

González-Cueva argues that various kinds of discursive violence reinforce the violence of the *leva*, but he chastises reformers who seem to feel that the mere outlawing of the *leva*—the solution of the problem in the formal-legal, verbal realm—can demilitarize Peruvian society and diminish the state’s violence. After all, he points out, the *leva* has always been illegal. What is required for real demilitarization, he insists, is the development of social conditions and material forces that can give impoverished Peruvian youth the power to resist the military’s arbitrary, selectively applied draft. González-Cueva’s analysis of discourse, then, gains power from its linkage with material and institutional structures.

When read with the four articles in the previous issue, these articles present a complicated picture of changes in the pattern of coercion and violence in the Americas. Clearly, the promise of the democratic transitions to reduce levels of state and societal violence has not been fully realized. This is a significant failure, because the social movements that helped to dismantle authoritarian rule were movements for justice as well as democracy. Without a strong state that can approximate a monopoly of legitimate violence and without popular control over the employment of violence and coercion by the state, democracy is vitiated for many even if regular elections are held. The “rule of law” has rightly been invoked as a desirable goal in the next round of state reforms sweeping over Latin America, but without some understanding of the conflicts that are producing current violence, it will be a hollow shell. It is to the understanding of those conflicts and the children, women, and men all over the Americas who are its victims that we dedicate this issue.

NOTE

1. In George Orwell’s novel, the protagonist, Winston Smith, is interrogated and tortured by a state functionary called O’Brien, who at one point declares: “If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—for ever” (Orwell, 1984 [1949]: 206). Smith, of course, does eventually internalize the state’s violence in the manner alluded to above and comes to “love” the leader, Big Brother.

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