

RECOVERING FROM STATE TERROR:
The Morning After in Latin America

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STATE VIOLENCE IN GUATEMALA, 1960–1996: A QUANTITATIVE REFLECTION. By Patrick Ball, Paul Kobrak, and Herbert F. Spirer. (Washington, D.C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1999. Pp. 154. \$10.00 paper.)

DEATH SQUADS IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE: MURDER WITH DENIABILITY. Edited by Bruce B. Campbell and Arthur D. Brenner. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. Pp. xvii+364. \$49.95 cloth.)

CHILE UNDER PINOCHET: RECOVERING THE TRUTH. By Mark Ensalaco. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. Pp. xv+280. \$47.50 cloth.)

UNSPEAKABLE TRUTHS: CONFRONTING STATE TERROR AND ATROCITY. By Priscilla B. Hayner. (New York: Routledge, 2001. Pp. xii+340. \$19.99 paper.)

SOCIETIES OF FEAR: THE LEGACY OF CIVIL WAR, VIOLENCE AND TERROR IN LATIN AMERICA. Edited by Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt. (London: Zed Books, 1999. Pp. xii+335. \$65.00 cloth, \$27.50 paper.)

CHILE, PINOCHET, AND THE CARAVAN OF DEATH. By Patricia Verdugo. (Coral Gables, Fla.: North-South Center Press, 2001. Pp. ix+230. \$49.95 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

In Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*, an individual victim of shattering human rights violations serves as a metaphor for her entire society, as she struggles to recover truth, justice, and stability. Her anguished confrontation with the vagaries of memory, the temptations of vengeance, and the limits of pacted transitions mirrors the political history reflected in these works (Dorfman 1991). In a similar spirit, in the immediate aftermath of Latin America's democratic transitions I suggested that the "emerging democracies"—then lauded by U.S. policymakers and some "transitologists"—were more appropriately labeled "recovering authoritarians" (Brysk 1994). The individual

analogy of “recovering alcoholics” was intended to highlight the ongoing legacy of decades of abusive and pathological behavior, which cannot be overcome until it is confronted, and restructured on a daily basis—with the help of broader support networks. The works under review, and the experience of the intervening decade, sadly confirm that Latin America is a hemisphere populated by “recovering authoritarians,” and demonstrate the challenges and pitfalls of amnesia and impunity.

Recovery begins with memory, and memory is a key slogan and project for most of the continent’s human rights movements. Three of the books here illustrate the main strategies of memory pursued in Latin America: Priscilla Hayner chronicles truth commissions; Patrick Ball, Paul Kobrak, and Herbert Spierer compile statistical documentation; while Patricia Verdugo exposes hidden history through investigative journalism. This form of human rights scholarship directly contributes to the “information politics” which is one of the main mechanisms of transnational transformation (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Thus, it is an ironic but not unexpected testament to the importance of these projects that recent threats to human rights in Latin America focus on the architects of truth, ranging from widespread persecution of journalists to expulsions of forensic anthropologists.

Restructuring is an even more contested and incomplete aspect of recovery, often contrasted with “reconciliation.” In different ways, several of these works demonstrate the price of impunity: the continuation or even reactivation of repressive networks and institutions (Campbell and Brenner), the distortion of political culture and the destruction of social capital (Koonings and Kruijt), and the ultimate delegitimation of the democratic institutions that reconciliation is designed to stabilize (Ensalaco). These books begin to show how societies as diverse as Guatemala and Chile are impaired by untamed militaries and unresolved social conflict, in addition to the direct impact of the trauma of repression.

However, global support networks do attempt to contribute to recovery. Human rights scholarship often chronicles and sometimes participates in this healing process. Hayner is an international consultant to the United Nations and emerging truth commissions, which have been influenced greatly by international expertise, models, and even testimony. Kruijt and Koonings helped to negotiate the Guatemalan peace process. Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer work with the American Association for the Advancement of Science and Human Rights Program. Their report on Guatemala is specifically designed to provide data processing and international legitimation unavailable in Guatemala, and was presented to that country’s Commission for Historical Clarification. Kruijt and Koonings bring together a diverse network of

European and Latin American scholars, while Chilean journalist Patricia Verdugo received LASA's Media Award in 2000. Both Ensalaco and Verdugo show the influence of international pressure on the Chilean transition and subsequent attempts at legal accountability.

Beyond marking the extent and limits of recovery, the current generation of human rights scholarship can help us to address a set of larger questions about social change with profound implications for understanding and preventing state terror. First, what is the connection between different forms of political violence? Is state terror the pathological response of a weak state to insurgency or crime, a calculated program of political transformation independent of threat, or the capture of state institutions by violent outsiders? Is state terror even a single phenomenon—are Brazilian death squads and Chile's DINA (Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia) really the same thing?

Second, how much is political violence an inevitable result of structural conflicts and how much a product of policy choice? Differential patterns of repression such as those discussed in this research—Guatemala's ethnic targeting, Brazil's proportionally lower numbers of disappearances, or the phenomenon of illicit military trafficking in "missing children" in Argentina—suggest that human rights violators exercise great latitude in pursuing their repressive goals. But the general thrust of Latin American studies, and especially the study of "bureaucratic authoritarianism," attribute military rule and associated repression to specific structural conditions and crises (Collier 1979).

Finally, how generalizable is the study of human rights in one country or region? Studies of the legacies of state terror may now draw on global constructs and comparative experience to illuminate the pattern and impact of repression and response across regions (Campbell and Brenner; Hayner). Nevertheless, "local knowledge" may be necessary to fully explicate the roots of political violence and plausible remedies (Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer; Verdugo). A third stream of middle-range scholarship documents Latin American phenomena, but situates them in an analytic framework that assumes or explains regional specificity (Ensalaco; Koonings and Kruijt).

ROOTS AND PATTERNS OF REPRESSION

Death squads have been a long-standing source of violence in Latin America—before, after, and during military rule. Death squads have been precursors and handmaidens of state terror in the Southern Cone and Central America, but more recently vigilantism which may be state-tolerated but is not wholly state-sponsored has emerged in the weak democracies of Central America, the Andes, and Brazil. Bruce Campbell and Arthur Brenner struggle (with limited success) to define the precise

boundaries of death squads as political entities, but they do offer a useful analysis of death-squad activity as a form of “sub-contracting” of state coercion. As such, death squads tend to arise during periods of state-building and critical junctures in modernization, which may occur at different times in different countries. This account assumes a fundamental rationality of political violence, although bounded by cultural context as to the meaning and historical vocabulary of violence. States sub-contract with the informal sector of coercion when they face unusual threats or seek to engineer a fundamental political transformation, but for some reason require “plausible deniability.” Unfortunately, the collection does not allow us to generalize as to the determinants of the need for deniability—although the editors offer the hypothesis that increased international human rights pressure on states may ironically push repressive governments towards deniable death squads.

Campbell and Brenner undertake a comparative and historical analysis of death-squad activity which is one of the contributions of the volume, but this means that only three of ten chapters focus on Latin America. The appendix shows death squads in many additional Latin American countries, and the editors note that the majority of documented cases have occurred in Latin America. Cynthia Arnon’s intensively documented chapter on El Salvador offers a damning indictment of U.S. knowledge and support of death squads, effectively shredding the vestiges of deniability. In a historical chapter with contemporary relevance, Martha K. Huggins chronicles the institutional roots and development of death squads as the informal sector of police violence in Brazil.

From the national level, Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer also explore the roots and patterns of repression. Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer use statistical data to provide a comprehensive map of the incidence and impact of state terror in Guatemala. Through their analysis of over 37,000 documented murders and disappearances—a mere fraction of the appalling total—these scientists establish important explanatory patterns, as well as a database of externally verified knowledge to contribute to the recovery of memory. The statistical data are framed by a careful and complete account of the historical context of political violence in Guatemala in a format other quantitative analysts of human rights would do well to emulate. Among other issues, Ball, Kobrak, and Spierer examine the relationship between (mostly urban) death squads and more overt army massacres in the countryside, which follows the patterns suggested above: state threat combined with plausible deniability. They also determine the relative responsibility of state-sponsored forces for 99 percent of the violations reported during a civil war; although the initial recourse to state terror does seem to correspond to increasing insurgent threat, its character was expanded drastically and disproportionately by Ríos Montt. As this study charts late-1970s expansion in the scope of victims

to virtually all peasants in affected regions, we are reminded how a coercive apparatus can take on an apparent life of its own (as it did in the quite distinctive setting of Argentina). Statistics can also chart the shift after the 1982 peak of massive indiscriminate counter-insurgency to a strategy of terror “directed against citizens working to challenge military control and defend the rule of law” (37).

State Violence in Guatemala, 1960–1996 also provides important information about the effects of state terror, which are more local and specific to Guatemala. The authors’ data suggest that state terror in Guatemala was genocidal in impact, if not intention. Where ethnicity is recorded, 81 percent of the victims in their database were indigenous (89). State terror orphaned hundreds of thousands in the highlands—at the height of the counter-insurgency, one of eight reported victims of killing was a child under fourteen years old (88). State terror literally decimated human rights organizations, while the imposition of civil patrols laid the groundwork for rural death squads still active a generation later. Both the scope and the structure of repression documented in this study offer little hope for stable recovery in Guatemala.

Can the patterns of state terror in Guatemala—one of the hemisphere’s poorest, most ethnically divided, least stable countries—shed any light on the “night and fog” (95) which descended on Chile’s genteel democracy? Mark Ensalaco’s *Chile Under Pinochet: Recovering the Truth* documents the origins and operation of state terror, as well as the response by those affected and human rights advocates. Ensalaco’s work is a contemporary political history, rich in detail and local sources, but with only passing reference to wider models and comparative cases. Nevertheless, *Chile Under Pinochet* does provide a comprehensive and patterned account which could serve as a useful case study for teaching and comparative scholarship. Since the roots of Chile’s breakdown and the general impact of Pinochet’s rule have been treated quite capably by Oppenheim, Valenzuela, Roberts, and others, it becomes important to highlight Ensalaco’s specific contribution to the literature. This volume’s role in *Recovering the Truth* rests on its synthesis of evidence of human rights violations for the entire seventeen-year dictatorship, coverage of Aylwin’s human rights reforms, and exposition of the role of the armed left.

These three goals are achieved to varying degrees, and yield varying degrees of insight into the form of state terror in Chile. The comprehensive coverage of human rights violations is the book’s strength. Ensalaco depicts the shifting pattern of violence over time—from post-coup massacres to systematic covert death squads to authoritarian police brutality. The coverage of post-transition reforms does delineate the central dilemma of justice versus impunity, and it does include interviews with truth commission participants which provide new insight into the design and strategy of human rights policy. But this section comes late and

ends early—data used in this work extend to the mid-1990s, before the Pinochet extradition attempt and the resurgence of domestic legal action in selected human rights cases.

The inclusion of extensive material on the rise, repression, and resistance of Chile's armed left in this volume sits uneasily with the general position of Southern Cone human rights movements negating the military's claim of a "dirty war." Human rights activists and scholars usually stress the indiscriminate impact of repression on unarmed civilians to delegitimize the counter-insurgency claims of the juntas and to elucidate state terror as a violent program of political transformation. In Chile, as elsewhere, the majority of the victims of state terror were vulnerable civilian participants in movements or sectors which challenged the military's political goals and doctrine. But Ensalaco at times portrays the MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria) and others as a Central American-style "armed resistance" movement, granting equivalent status and coverage to combatants killed in firefights and Socialist lawyers who naively turned themselves in to the police after the coup. At other times, the author notes the armed movement's adventurism and political irresponsibility, such as the Manuel Rodríguez Patriotic Front's Aylwin-era assassination of the civilian theoretician of the Pinochet regime, which derailed distribution of the Rettig Commission's report and further consideration of its recommendations. Thus, the book's treatment of the armed left is also inconsistent and seems to call for further analysis.

In contrast to Ensalaco's panoramic account, Verdugo's *Chile, Pinochet, and the Caravan of Death* details a single critical episode in the generation of terror. The "Caravan of Death" was a series of October 1973 extrajudicial executions of 75 prisoners in the provinces, carried out by an elite death squad dispatched from Santiago. These prisoners of conscience, whose only crime was membership in opposition political parties or service in the previous government, were removed from jails and military bases in five provincial towns and murdered by a team of intelligence officers with direct authorization from Pinochet. Verdugo's painstaking investigative journalism combines primary and secondary documents, some previously unknown, along with interviews of witnesses, victims' families, and local military and police officials.

This incident reveals numerous critical features of the repression that granted the book great political weight in Chile. First, the Caravan of Death demonstrates the Pinochet regime's violation of its own military legality, a nearly sacrosanct feature of Chilean political culture even under military rule. Second, Verdugo's profile of the victims shows the indiscriminate and illegitimate choice of targets, as well as the human and social context of their lives and loss. Finally, the book's extensive interviews with several military officers who questioned the massacre

establish the existence of alternative norms within the military (from Constitutionalism to Catholicism to chain of command), and the internal persecution of reluctant repressors necessary to overcome their principled resistance. In keeping with Brenner and Campbell's framework, Verdugo's account shows the rise of Pinochet's SS-style intelligence service (DINA) as a personalistic force with greater plausible deniability than the military, as well as local pressures from rural paramilitary groups to increase persecution.

The author's coherent and dramatic rendition of highly credible information and the political implications of the massacres themselves gave this document special salience in Chile's recovery process. In the struggle for truth, Verdugo's book was reviewed and incorporated into the Rettig Commission's Truth Commission report. Following the Chilean publication of the book, the main perpetrator named sued the author for libel; however, the Chilean Supreme Court's rejection of the case in 1993 served to diminish military impunity, revive judicial independence, and protect the rights of journalists. This book, and the case it documents, later became a key part of the Spanish case for the extradition of Pinochet, as well as subsequent Chilean lawsuits against the former dictator. Since a number of the victims remain "disappeared"—an ongoing crime not subject to amnesties or statutes of limitations—Chilean courts have now pursued cases against half a dozen members of the special task force identified by Verdugo as the perpetrators, including one extradition from the United States. One of the officers removed for his opposition to the massacre recalled telling Pinochet in 1973, "some day all of us are going to be judged for these crimes. And especially you because you are commander in chief" (225). It is a measure of Chile's progress towards recovery that this premonition of accountability finally came to pass in January 2001, when Pinochet was indicted for planning the Caravan of Death.

LEGACIES AND REMEDIES

Societies of Fear takes up the next chapter of the story—the long-term political impact of this pathological violence on Latin American citizens and societies. Like *Death Squads in Global Perspective*, Koonings and Kruijt's comparative volume attempts to place diverse historical experience in a common framework of analysis—in this case, within the region. This analysis advances our understanding of "recovering authoritarian" systems by showing how the legacies of fear undermine formal transitions to democracy, deflating citizenship rights, eroding institutional stability, and conditioning collective action. Like Campbell and Brenner, Koonings and Kruijt treat violence as a long-term, structural phenomenon, and both volumes struggle to differentiate state terror from other forms of political violence. *Societies of Fear* usefully

distinguishes three types of violence: violence to maintain the traditional rural order, conflict generated by modernization and the political incorporation of the masses, and consolidation-era violence related to social exclusion. Koonings and Kruijt contend that the combination of these forms of violence produces a permanent dynamic of fear which perpetuates dominance and destroys the public sphere. Unfortunately, the subsequent organization of the book does not follow this promising rubric, and most chapters do not explicitly address the editors' analysis. Chapters 2–4 narrowly relate the mobilization and repression of indigenous insurgencies, while the ending chapters on Mexico and Cuba (10 and 11) simply narrate the prospect of unfolding transitions.

Nevertheless, a number of the middle chapters make strong independent contributions to our knowledge and analysis of political violence. Alan Knight's essay on the historical trend of violence in Mexico provides a useful supplement to standard treatments of PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) stability, as well as introducing an important comparative case often slighted by human rights scholars focused on the more obvious forms of state terror in Central America and the Southern Cone. "Fear of Indifference" unpacks the rarely considered role of uninvolved bystanders during Argentina's Proceso, showing how their very existence evoked military anxieties that reveal the incipient totalitarianism of the project of state terror. Daniel Pecaout shows how the banality, persistence, and spread of violence in Colombia have produced anomie, destruction of social capital, and a splintering of all forms of identity. Silva's chapter on Chile traces the repressed form of "reconciliation," and subsequent steps towards recovery, to competing complexes of fear based on different readings of Chile's history. This speaks to the contemporary importance of the histories of Chilean repression presented by Verdugo and Ensalaco. Finally, Koonings' own treatment of Brazil suggests that the impact of violence has less to do with the unresolved authoritarian legacies that its neighbors buried under an amnesiac rule of law, and more to do with the failure to consolidate the contemporary rule of law atop massive poverty and gaping social exclusion. This violent enforcement of the gap between juridical citizenship and social marginality is clearly a phenomenon with broad implications for many Latin American countries, and may be emerging as the key human rights issue for Mexico now that it has entered a bona fide political transition.

The most direct and affirmative study of recovery from these legacies is Hayner's *Unspeakable Truths: Confronting State Terror and Atrocity*. Truth is a necessary, although not a sufficient, element of recovery—and it has been a widespread approach in Latin America, comprising four of Hayner's five in-depth case studies (she considers a total of twenty-one experiences). *Unspeakable Truths* is an extraordinarily comprehensive and

thorough examination of all recorded truth commissions: systematic investigations into past patterns of human rights abuse, usually but not always official. It is likely that truth commissions have had special salience in Latin America because state terror often involved the “disappearance” of victims. Truth commissions serve a variety of social functions, from providing personal resolution to victims’ families to establishing a base for policy change such as reparations. Perhaps most important, truth commissions combat the legacies of fear discussed above and rewrite the collective histories which form the basis for the consolidation of democracy. This book represents a masterful achievement which should be read by scholars of human rights everywhere. The appendices alone are more valuable than most journal articles. The book’s only drawback is that the level of detail on the commissions themselves for so many cases crowds out the potential provision of greater political context on the key cases, as well as limiting Hayner’s engagement with the theoretical and normative literature on transitional justice.

Unspeakable Truths goes beyond the valuable work of documenting a diverse history to analyze a set of critical issues in the design and impact of human rights investigations. Seemingly technical questions of the truth commission’s mandate can have tremendous political implications, as when Chile’s Rettig Commission was charged with investigating deaths but not the use of torture. The composition of such bodies can also be important; in the polarized post-war environment of El Salvador, only international participants could guarantee the legitimacy and security of the investigation. Hayner debunks the claimed trade-off between truth and justice, showing the linkage between investigations and trials in Argentina, reparations in Chile, and judicial reform in El Salvador. The book considers the impact of determining the responsibility of state versus opposition forces, as well as the importance of establishing the role of foreign powers where possible (as in Guatemala). Hayner also questions the conventional wisdom that testimony is cathartic, and points out the possibility of prolonging trauma in the absence of ongoing social support for victims. Finally, she highlights the role of human rights organizations in creating and supporting truth commissions—which can, in turn, further develop human rights movements.

But truth is only the first step. Since *Unspeakable Truths* was published, Chile’s legal cascade has continued—but in Guatemala, human rights monitors have been assassinated. Hayner outlines additional determinants of reconciliation: ending violence, acknowledgment, and reparations; and addressing structural inequalities (163–4). Since the foregoing analyses identify these very factors as sources of the political conflicts underlying state terror, the prospects for full recovery are highly uncertain.

THE MORNING AFTER

Awakening from the long night of state terror, Latin America stands battered, trembling, missing memories—and once again thirsty for oblivion from disturbing conditions. Comparative scholarship on human rights can help prevent the cycle from repeating. It can show us how state terror is related to other forms of violence and predisposed by structural challenges, yet ultimately a distinctive, dangerous policy choice which does not resolve underlying problems. These studies also map the extent of Latin America's unfinished business, from unmarked graves to unemployed "disposable people." Human rights research also suggests a program for recovery, based in truth, accountability, new solutions, and international support. The study of specific case histories and particular social syndromes confirms that countries, which are poorer, more socially fractured, less institutionalized, and have suffered higher levels of violence, face additional daunting challenges. What this literature cannot yet tell us is how to cope with the new forms of multi-faceted political violence emerging in deteriorating democracies such as Colombia. As we continue to support recovery from state terror, the next wave of scholarship must address a new generation of political pathologies.

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