

COMPARING FAILED REVOLUTIONS

Recent Studies on Colombia, El Salvador, and Chiapas

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LANDSCAPES OF STRUGGLE: POLITICS, SOCIETY, AND COMMUNITY IN EL SALVADOR. Edited by Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004. Pp. 336. \$22.95 paper.)

WALKING GHOSTS: MURDER AND GUERRILLA POLITICS IN COLOMBIA. By Steven Dudley. (New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. 253. \$27.50 cloth.)

FEMINISM AND THE LEGACY OF REVOLUTION: NICARAGUA, EL SALVADOR, CHIAPAS. By Karen Kampwirth. (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004. Pp. 279. \$28.00 paper.)

VANGUARD REVOLUTIONARIES IN LATIN AMERICA: PERU, COLOMBIA, MEXICO. By James F. Rochlin. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003. Pp. 291. \$55.00 cloth, \$22.50 paper.)

LAS ABEJAS: PACIFIST RESISTANCE AND SYNCRETIC IDENTITIES IN A GLOBALIZING CHIAPAS. By Marco Tavanti. (New York: Routledge, 2003. Pp. 300. \$85.00 cloth.)

Revolution in Latin America has been marked by failure. In the post-World War II era only two revolutionary regimes have made it into power, and one of these (in Nicaragua) was voted out of office after little more than a decade. The other, in Cuba, has survived because it has refused to grant its citizens full political rights or hold free elections. Although consequently enduring, the Cuban revolution is hardly a success story. Its political legacy has been authoritarianism; its economic legacy, poverty. If the revolutionary project is about an egalitarian quest for social justice, then what is striking to any rational observer is its pragmatic bankruptcy.

Despite the obvious, much of academe continues to celebrate the tradition of armed revolt in Latin America. The reasons for this are not easily explained. Certainly one factor is that, within Latin America, a university student-infused subculture of film, popular literature, rock

music and gimmickry has romanticized revolution. Within the United States, graduate students and professors studying the region invariably discover U.S. complicity in political violence and economic exploitation. Finding this morally repugnant, they embrace the 'right' of the oppressed to find justice through a collective violence of their own. As David Stoll has hypothesized in his controversial study of Rigoberta Menchú, embracing the revolutionary cause of the oppressed fulfills, for many North American academics, a moral need.¹

The overwhelming majority of revolutionary movements in the post-war era have been crushed by the State. Employing an ever-increasing arsenal of sophisticated surveillance and intelligence technology, military and security apparatuses have easily outgunned and dismantled insurgencies in nearly all urban settings. Rural insurgencies have proven more resilient, but since the mid-1980s even these have greatly waned. The resource curve for the powers-that-be has been particularly striking since the early 1980s, when hefty increases in funding under Ronald Reagan helped bring on-line a host of new technologies—digital-based, satellite-interfaced surveillance systems, path-breaking communications interception, and highly proficient night-vision and detection equipment, among them. If successful revolution was made difficult with the advent of better transportation infrastructure and communications in the late nineteenth century, today it is all but impossible. Even rural insurgencies can now be fairly easily snuffed out, especially when the State has no qualms about exterminating part of the civilian populace in the process. Torture, too, is integral to information-gathering—for the simple fact that it works. Finally, the power of mass media, especially the statistical analysis of polling data coupled with television, has equipped the State with a level of refined propaganda that could have made Josef Goebbels blush.

There is, in the contemporary age, a revolutionary dialectic. When insurgent forces rouse a populace with promises of liberation and carry out their first acts of redemptive violence, they invariably trigger a massive retaliatory strike on the part of the State (which often employs at this juncture unsavory characters and allows for acts of sadism). This, in turn, produces a revolutionary surge, as the populace is alienated by the initial bloodletting and aligns with the revolutionaries in a quest for self-defense and empowerment. The problem, of course, is that modern revolutionaries have neither the military resources nor the organizational sophistication to arm an entire populace. Finding themselves at the mercy of a brutal military, with no options, civilians will inevitably swing back

1. David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 242.

into line with those in power as their only means of survival. As they do so, the authorities will reign in the most unsavory and sadistic, even while employing selective violence to eradicate the revolutionaries themselves. In the midst of this counterrevolutionary project the organized political Left is invariably annihilated, leaving a country even more vulnerable to political manipulation and economic exploitation than it was before the revolution began. In this way, failing insurgencies are actually beneficial to North Americans and others who have money in a world of tremendous economic disparity.

This dialectic has been played out in various degrees in Colombia, El Salvador, and Chiapas—three places where insurrections have failed in recent decades. Analysis of an emerging body of historical and political scholarship, however, suggests that both the dialectic and the inherent shortcomings of revolution in the modern age are still not fully appreciated.

COLOMBIA: REVOLUTION IN SLOW MOTION

The complexity of Colombia's revolutionary and counterrevolutionary experience has made it difficult to grasp. Indeed, many would-be students seem ready to throw up their hands and simply dismiss the nation's recent political history as an unintelligible mess. The scholarly literature on Colombia's ongoing civil wars is uneven and rather thin. Native authors have been, predictably, scarred by their own deep divisions; U.S. and European academics over the past two generations have largely avoided travel to the dangerous and bloodstained land.

With this backdrop, all scholars can heartily welcome the contribution of Steven Dudley, who worked in human rights accompaniment and served as a journalist in Colombia before engaging graduate studies at the University of Texas. At the heart of Dudley's sources for *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia* is an impressive array of interviews—Fernando Landazábal and Carlos Castaño, among his subjects—coupled with a thorough grounding in secondary works and periodicals. The result is a powerful narrative that is arguably the most cogent and articulate account of Colombia in the 1980s yet written.

The focus of the book is the destruction of the Unión Patriótica (UP), a political party launched by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) with the purpose of giving the insurgency an urban front. When Belisario Betancur's government concluded its peace accords with the FARC in 1984, it guaranteed the UP security and the right to freely organize. What 'B.B.' and his negotiators did not appreciate, however, was the brewing wrath of a nascent paramilitary movement (several Colombian accounts see a more sinister government hand

behind the betrayal). “El Mejicano” Rodríguez Gacha and other land-hungry drug lords sanctioned the slaughter of the UP by their growing private armies, joined by disgruntled army officers who resented the inefficiency of Colombia’s armed forces and limitations placed on them by civilian authorities.

Dudley narrates this political genocide through the lives of a few ‘walking ghosts’—UP survivors who live fatalistically in anticipation of their violent deaths. Employing a journalistic style that features lucid short sentences, his prose is highly accessible, making the book idea for entry-level college courses (although already affordable, one hopes that Routledge will quickly move it into paperback). Teachers might want to supplement it with the 2003 Colombian film *El Baile Rojo*—an hour-long documentary by Yezid Campos that features poignant interviews with UP survivors. Dudley’s competent analysis includes an understanding of the complex relationship between the UP, the FARC, and Colombia’s dogmatic Communist Party. He examines the movement within the UP, under Bernardo Jaramillo in the late 1980s, to break with the orthodox party and, amazingly, he gets Carlos Castaño to acknowledge Jaramillo’s subsequent murder as “a mistake” (204). He also highlights the career of Alonso de Jesús Baquero (“Black Vladimir”), the sadistic FARCista-turned-paramilitary who executed much of the first wave of terror in the Middle Magdalena Valley.

Despite its many merits, the primary thesis in *Walking Ghosts* must still be questioned. Dudley attributes the destruction of the UP to the Communist Party’s and the FARC’s wedding of political struggle with armed insurgency—a strategy known as *la combinación de todas las formas de lucha*. Certainly it was naïve and even stupid of the revolutionaries to think that they could peacefully organize in the cities while retaining their guns and plotting renewed violence in the countryside. But did the Castaño brothers and other paramilitaries exterminate the UP because the FARC was still armed and dangerous? The corollary of Dudley’s thesis is that, had the revolutionaries abandoned the *combinación* strategy and wholly committed themselves to peaceful political change, the UP would have been spared and could have flourished. But the case of the Movimiento-19 (M-19) demonstrates that this is not true. The UP was obliterated not because it was the revolutionary Left sticking its head above ground while its body remained below, with guns-in-hand; the UP was obliterated simply because it was part of the revolutionary Left. The enemies of the FARC and Communists hated them enough to kill and continue killing, whether they started to play the political game fairly or not.

If the opponents of the FARC were determined to destroy the Left no matter what, isn’t the line between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ clear, and isn’t revolution justified? Dudley is correct that the revolutionaries bear much of

the responsibility for the violence that engulfed the UP. However, he may be wrong in his identification of *why* they bear so much responsibility. Their responsibility stems not from their unrealistic combined military-political strategy but, rather, from their earlier acts of violence that initiated an ever-accelerating cycle of retaliatory violence. In particular, the FARC made an administrative decision in the 1960s and 1970s to use kidnapping as a means of raising money and delivering 'revolutionary justice.' If, in fact, revolutionaries had obligated the rich and drug lords to pay a *de facto* tax to the people through ransom payments, theirs would have been a work similar to that of Robin Hood. But what happened, in reality, is that greed got in the way. As time passed and the kidnapping of unarmed civilians came easily, the revolutionaries asked for more and more money. The case of Carlos and Fidel Castaño's father, Jesús, is typical. The Castaño brothers paid a sizable ransom to the FARC not once, but twice, when still another demand was placed upon them. When they could not meet this third demand, the FARC killed their father (the current president of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe, also lost his father to the FARC). Embittered victims of the FARC's violence were in no mood to tolerate their enemies' quest for legitimate political power years later.

Dudley discusses the case of Jesús Castaño and mentions the FARC's kidnappings, but still attributes the UP's destruction to the *combinación* strategy, instead. Had he spent more time on the FARC's incipient violence, his narrative would have taken on more "shades of gray" (xvii), making paramilitary leaders and their actions at least comprehensible, if not justifiable. After all, in the 1984 peace accords the FARC promised to halt its kidnappings (a fact mentioned in passing by the author) at the same time that the government promised to protect the UP (a provision quoted, in its entirety, three times by the author). The bottom line is that nothing the Communists or the FARC did by the mid-1980s could have appeased their enemies and brought peace to Colombia. The cycle of violence was already spinning wildly upward, and the retaliatory violence of the State was in full swing. The extermination of the UP shocked the nation's conscience, and created the customary, if delayed and haphazard, revolutionary surge in favor of the FARC. In the mid-1990s the State reined in some of the worst human rights abusers, such as the sadistic Black Vladimir, while the inability of the FARC to deliver liberation prompted the general populace to gradually swing back into the arms of the governing authorities.

Joining Dudley in analysis of Colombia is James F. Rochlin, who attempts an ambitious comparison of its insurgencies with those in Peru and that of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN or Zapatistas) in Chiapas. Though writing in a traditional scholarly vein, Rochlin spares his readers unnecessary jargon and pedantic pronouncements; this,

too, is a book that could work in the classroom. Its depth and perceptivity suffer, however, from serious limitations. With regard to Colombia, Rochlin addresses the FARC and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), but inexplicably omits the M-19. This produces a noteworthy gap in his analysis, since the M-19 played a critical role in the deadly dance of Colombia's political factions in the mid-1980s (the M-19 is also the most logical guerrilla component for comparison with the Sendero Luminoso, since both drew heavily upon disenchanted middle class college students). Rochlin divides his book into three subsections that address "the origins, ideology, and support base" of each group, followed by examinations of "concepts of strategy, security, and power," while placing all under a broad umbrella that interfaces concepts from classical thinkers such as Machiavelli and Sun Tzu. But instead of producing a sophisticated and nuanced theoretical framework, the book offers up somewhat choppy and at times facile parallels. Rochlin astutely makes repeated reference to the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs, but he rarely gets concrete about it.

With regard to Colombia, both Dudley and Rochlin overplay the potency of the FARC and neglect thoughtful analysis of the mass media. It's true that, in the dialectic, the extermination of the UP outraged many Colombians and inspired a revolutionary surge in the 1990s. The FARC boomed and acquired snappy new uniforms and equipment, prompting a worried Clinton administration to flood the Colombian military with a lavish aid package at the end of the decade. But even at its height the FARC was outnumbered by at least 14 to 1 by the Armed Forces (including the National Police), had absolutely no chance of seizing or holding major cities, and continued to lack formidable military resources (it has always had to use, for example, unreliable homemade cylinder bombs instead of RPGs). In contrast, the past fifteen years have seen dramatic changes in the potency and effectiveness of Colombia's mass media which, today, really amounts to a highly effective propaganda machine. Dudley hints at the changed nature of the Colombian media in his closing chapters, but still relies heavily on it, at times, for information (drawing especially on *Semana*). Far more inexcusably, Rochlin leans frequently on *El Tiempo*, without skepticism. No scholar, to my knowledge, has yet fleshed out the dynamics of Colombia's intriguing establishment media—which has incorporated a sophisticated Government Media Office (run by former NBC executives who filter international access to the nation's 'news') and has produced an array of ironic fabrications (UP presidential candidate Jaime Pardo Leal's assassination car was utilized by a government-hired U.S. public relations firm, which photographed its bloody interior and reminded Americans of the sacrifices of Colombia's *security forces* in the fight against *drugs*!).

ACADEMIC REVOLUTIONARY FANTASIES: EL SALVADOR AND CHIAPAS

Postwar insurgencies in Central America have been dismal failures. Today, the Left has almost nothing to show for decades of revolutionary struggle. And yet the academic praise for revolution goes on—in books like Karen Kampwirth's *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* and Marco Tavanti's *Las Abejas*.

Kampwirth's book is based on a series of interviews with women's movement activists in the 1990s, most of whom had participated in 1980s' insurgencies (the same interviews produced her earlier work, *Women and Guerrilla Movements*). This distorted sampling is a reason for much of the book's analytical weakness, because it omits the significant role of women in undercutting the revolutionary project. In Nicaragua, for example, women were integral to ousting the Sandinistas from power and sustaining the counterrevolutionary government of Violeta Chamorro. But Kampwirth silences these women's voices, dwelling instead on the activities of disillusioned *guerrilleras*, who emerge from the ashes of war to create "vibrant feminist movements" (a phrase that appears a half dozen times in various forms—albeit always with the adjective 'vibrant'). Any cautious reading of the narrative, behind the theory, reveals quite the opposite: that while women on the Left set up myriad organizations and held many conferences in postwar Nicaragua and El Salvador, theirs was a divided and marginalized cause (though the Salvadoran organizations have enjoyed a modicum of political clout because of generous financial gifts from USAID). A convoluted comparative chapter attempts to contrast these 'successes' with anti-feminist revolutions in Iran and Poland. The author's subsequent favorable review of feminist gains in revolutionary Cuba can be called into question, most recently by the poetic observations of Alma Guillermoprieto.²

Sociologist Marco Tavanti does for Native Americans what Kampwirth has done for women: he listens to only a select few of them—those with which he has ideological affinity—silences the rest, and creates a one-sided political paradigm noteworthy for its simplicity and its distorted perceptions of the tragedy of civil strife. *Las Abejas*, as many readers will likely know, are an indigenous group named after the stingless Yucatanese bee that has been brutalized, along with their Zapatista allies, by the Mexican army and its surrogate paramilitaries. The most famous incident came in December 1997, when forty-five *Abejas*, mostly women and children, were gunned down and chopped up at Acteal. Tavanti's account of Acteal is remarkable, primarily because he provides a narrative of the massacre without ever mentioning who did it (9–14). The "aggressors,"

2. Alma Guillermoprieto, *Dancing with Cuba* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 169–73.

he later acknowledges, were other poor Indians. But why would Indians kill other Indians? Why would a majority of women support counter-revolution? Tavanti seeks answers only from among *Las Abejas* and their allies, just as Kampwirth contemplates political conditions only from the perspective of her feminist interviewees. This popular academic technique, of silencing a large contingency of a subgroup in order to promote the political ideology of revolution, evades the central question that must haunt the postwar Left: why do revolutions fail?

Unfortunately, few answers can be found in an otherwise interesting anthology about El Salvador entitled *Landscapes of Struggle*. Editors Aldo Lauria-Santiago and Leigh Binford argue for a more encompassing view of Salvadoran history that takes into account local dynamics, but they dilute the project by stretching it over too broad a chronology. In the opening chapter Lauria-Santiago examines an 1898 land dispute, interfacing it with national political alliances; land occupations in the mid-1990s, and the ideologies that lay behind them, provide fodder for a later chapter by Lisa Kowalchuk. In one of the collection's stronger essays, Eric Ching revisits the dictatorship of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, finding that it rested as much on a network of political patronage as on raw militarization. Several closing essays speak to the after-effects of the 1980–1992 civil war: Elisabeth Wood addresses internal migration as she narrates the first case of repatriating displaced villagers to their homes—an effort facilitated by the Catholic Church and a private development agency; Irina Carlota Silber attempts to grapple with the contradictions of a post-revolutionary society in Chalatenango that is now half-heartedly engaged in NGO-driven developmental projects subservient to the economic dictates of neoliberalism; Ellen Moodie reflects on endemic post-war violence in El Salvador, while David Pedersen finds strange transnational bonds between Salvadoran villagers and expatriates now living in the United States.

There are certain assumptions that permeate *Landscapes of Struggle*, among them the efficacy of revolution, an ironically modernist sense of human progress, and the vogue scholarly concept of empowerment from below ('agency' and most of the other code words are here). By the very nature of the book's sweeping chronology, the pivotal essay—the one that speaks most directly to the 1980s' revolution and its origins—is penned by co-editor Leigh Binford. Like several other contributors, Binford does commendable fieldwork that, at one level, is genuinely enlightening. He studies Liberation Theology-infused catechists in Morazán, their training, and their subsequent politicized activities among the indigent. But at several critical junctures he asks either the wrong questions or asks no questions at all.

For example, essential questions arise with regard to the relationship of catechists and a Liberation Theology priest, Miguel Ventura, to the

upstart Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP). While Binford alludes to "clandestine political and military activities" (122) on the part of catechists, these are neither specified nor flushed out. Were there local acts of redemptive violence on the part of the ERP that triggered the repression? Revolutionaries are, by the nature and limits of their military resources, 'one punch wonders.' Their earliest actions are sparks that ignite the conflagration. Instead of exploring these acts, however, almost every narrative—in *Landscapes of Struggle*, Kampwirth, and Tavanti—introduces a blinding repression without context or explanation.

As the revolutionary dialectic ran its course in El Salvador in the late 1980s, the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional) was reduced to sabotaging electric power stations while a vulnerable and war-weary populace again submitted to the authority of the State. While several contributors in *Landscapes of Struggle* allude to emerging "democracy" and various FMLN political victories since 1992, conditions for the political Left in contemporary El Salvador are not quite so sanguine. The FMLN has largely abandoned its revolutionary platform, with many of its leaders openly embracing neoliberal economic tenets and political conservatism. The rightist ARENA Party has easily and repeatedly retained the real seat of political power (the presidency), while an honorary Brigadier General holds the office of Archbishop. As is the norm after a revolutionary debacle, labor has been sent back to its point of departure. By 2000 nearly 80,000 Salvadorans toiled in 229 textile (sweatshop) operations, not one of which had a recognized union—a sharp contrast to the vibrant labor organizations in San Salvador in the mid-1970s. While one can find many an impoverished Salvadoran who now questions the merits of revolution, the quest for such a sentiment among North American academics remains difficult, indeed.