

Book Reviews

Carlos A. Pérez Ricart, *Cien años de espías y drogas. La historia de los agentes antinarcóticos de Estados Unidos en México*. Mexico City: Penguin Random House, 2022. Bibliography, 375 pp.; paperback MX\$349, ebook MX\$249.

Political scientist Carlos Pérez Ricart was studying for a doctoral degree abroad when the violence in his native Mexico prompted him to scrutinize the activities of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). *Cien años de espías y drogas* was born of a decadelong endeavor to understand how this violence could develop the way it has. Based on extensive archival research, memoirs, and interviews, this historical account of Mexico's drug war is a welcome antidote to much of the existing literature's concern with the reconfigurations of criminal groups and the impact of the bloodshed.

The book seeks to elucidate the operations of US federal antidrug agents in Mexico since Prohibition and to demythologize an unwinnable conflict. Over nine chapters, the volume reveals how the DEA became a powerful agency whose agents operated with little oversight. The 1985 torture and murder of Enrique Camarena, the first DEA agent murdered overseas, plays a central role in this story.

Before it points the finger at the cynicism of the drug war, the volume offers some fascinating insights into the longstanding cultivation of marijuana, poppy, and coca in Mexico. It was only the creation of the global drug prohibition regime in the early twentieth century that made drug trafficking into the United States a lucrative and often violent business. On both sides of the border, conservative forces generated perverse incentives for a punitive policy that would never reduce the availability of drugs yet would have a severe human rights toll. For example, while presidents Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan built their electoral campaigns around a drug war ostensibly to stamp out criminality, the Mexican state became complicit in, and profited from, drug smuggling early on.

Cien años is perhaps at its most compelling when it turns the spotlight on the ideology and politics behind the dominant counternarcotics approach. The drug war, Pérez Ricart argues, is a narrative construct concocted by reactionary groups, the pharmaceutical industry, and drug control agencies to exaggerate the dangers of illicit substances and justify inflated enforcement powers and budgets. The institutional and political motivations for maintaining a failed (because supply-focused) policy are similar in both countries. But the electoral imperatives that have driven Mexico's militarized security strategy and Andrés Manuel López

Obrador's puzzling U-turn on his promise to tackle crime through "hugs, not bullets," are absent from the analysis.

During Mexico's drug war, the criminal groups have fragmented and confronted both each other and the security forces through brutal tactics. Pérez Ricart notes that official narratives have tended to misrepresent the nature of drug-trafficking structures and have minimized state agents' contribution to violence. He adds to these armed actors the DEA. Created in 1973, the agency proved capable of capitalizing on Camarena's murder to expand its manpower and operational freedoms. Publicly, Mexico may have demanded respect for national sovereignty, but in what Pérez Ricart calls a case of "colonization by invitation" (110), its government welcomed the presence of US counternarcotics agents in its territory.

The agents were tasked with obtaining intelligence and prohibited from carrying firearms, but the reality has always been more complicated. Aside from participating in undercover operations, DEA agents have paid unscrupulous informants to falsely incriminate suspects and have protected corrupt police officers perceived as committed to the drug war. In fact, Pérez Ricart suggests, the agents often overstep their boundaries. How can agents stationed overseas be held accountable for their misconduct? This question, the author realizes, is not high in the minds of policymakers whose priority is the drug war, regardless of the human cost it incurs.

The second half of the book comprises the profiles of four US counternarcotics agents. For the reader, it is unclear why these individuals were selected from a large pool of agents or how representative they are of this law enforcement community. At various points throughout the volume, however, the author implies that the typical agent is prepared to bend the rules to suit personal or institutional needs. The profiles allow Pérez Ricart to take a closer look at the modus operandi of drug enforcement officers, as well as at broader issues alluded to elsewhere in the book.

Much of the analysis revolves around the bungled investigation of Camarena's murder. Finding no definitive answers in the archival documents he uncovered, this scholar recognizes that the probe was nonetheless key to establishing the DEA as the lead agency in the drug war and forging a shared identity among its personnel. The most absorbing of the four stories are those of Alvin Scharff and Joe Arpaio. The chapter on Scharff stands out for a discerning account of a medical doctor from Durango who, in the first half of the twentieth century, pioneered a harm reduction and drug education program in Mexico. The United States undermined that public health approach to drugs, and paradoxically, the author observes, continues to champion the irrational drug war in other nations, even as some US states have already legalized the medicinal and recreational use of marijuana.

The chapter on Arpaio, who may be chiefly remembered as the former sheriff of Maricopa County, Arizona, offers valuable thoughts on the political drivers of punitive drug and immigration policy. Arpaio comes across as an unscrupulous agent who gave himself undue credit for arrests and narcotics seizures. The examination of his long career in the DEA makes clear how agents' small lies go unquestioned because they

sustain the bigger lie that is the drug war. The agency also, Pérez Ricart explains, gradually turned to hiring recruits with an immigrant background. Their ethnicity and language skills prove useful in undercover assignments yet also make them potentially untrustworthy in the eyes of their nonimmigrant colleagues. Readers interested in organizational culture may like to learn how the individuals concerned navigate such suspicions within the agency.

More broadly, *Cien años* exposes US hypocrisy on drug policy. As the book shows, the United States expects Mexico, through security assistance, for example, to pursue a futile source-country control strategy. Yet the United States is indifferent to the collateral cost of the drug war: the hollowing out of Mexican institutions through corruption and the human lives extinguished by violence, except when the victims are US citizens. At the same time, the United States shirks its own responsibility for more effectively reducing the domestic demand for illicit substances.

As a side note, Pérez Ricart's study raises striking parallels with other regional issues (gang violence and irregular migration come to mind) for which the United States outsources the enforcement to other nations. While this country has been aiding Mexico through training programs and policing strategies, this support may turn out to be a double-edged sword. Training programs, the author maintains, have provided Mexican police officers with perks and political capital while also spreading the prevailing counternarcotics paradigm. If, as the book demonstrates, DEA agents have no qualms about engaging in unethical or illegal behavior, what imprint do they leave on a society with a fragile human rights culture?

For Pérez Ricart, the DEA is directly responsible for human rights violations that occur in the context of Mexico's drug war. This conclusion may be overstated. After all, it is Mexican governments that, since 2006, have chosen to militarize public security rather than strengthen civilian institutions' investigative capacity. However, the author rightly criticizes the kingpin strategy, which the United States has employed in Mexico and Central America to "decapitate" the leadership of criminal groups and major street gangs—to little effect. This approach to combating organized crime wrongly assumes that the targeted groups will disintegrate once central figures have been removed. The strategy is ineffective at best, because new leaderships tend to emerge, sometimes after internecine infighting. While his critique does not explicitly mention the role of disaffected youth and women in criminal networks, Pérez Ricart acknowledges that a policy that ignores the social, economic, and political structures of illicit markets is destined to fail.

Based on academic research yet deliberately aimed at a general audience, *Cien años* is an accessibly written history of US counternarcotics agents in Mexico. Given this focus, the volume skims over many facets of a complex reality, such as the reasons that corruption is so pervasive in Mexican society or that citizens widely support military participation in public security. The book's contribution lies in its gaze behind the scenes of law enforcement, as well as the perverse incentives that keep the drug war alive. People's uncritical acceptance of official narratives about drugs, their users, and drug policing, the author argues, is part of the problem.

With *Cien años*, Pérez Ricart joins a growing number of academics who want their research to reach more readers than specialist publications can hope for. As with any scholarly output, the book's ability to raise awareness and promote change is uncertain. But the work serves as a reminder that writers should always aim to become better storytellers and find more meaningful ways of engaging with citizens.

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Jennifer Adair, *In Search of the Lost Decade: Everyday Rights in Post-Dictatorship Argentina*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, 208 pp.; hardcover \$85.00, paperback \$34.95, ebook \$34.95.

In Search of the Lost Decade is a deeply researched and highly readable exploration of an understudied period in recent Argentine history. The title signals how scholars frequently draw a direct line from the 1970s to the 1990s, connecting the way neoliberal policies began to form alongside the political violence of the last military dictatorship (1976–83) with the consolidation of these policies during Carlos Menem's presidency (1989–99). Adair focuses on the period between these decades to understand the tensions that accompanied this transformation during the 1980s. This analysis demonstrates that the rise of neoliberalism "was neither as seamless nor as inevitable" as many scholars and students of this period may posit (6).

In her analysis of Raúl Alfonsín's presidential campaign and presidency (1983–89), Adair examines negotiations of what democracy and human rights meant in Argentina in the first decade after the country's last military dictatorship. As she notes, the book intervenes in the broader scholarship on the topic, which has focused more on electoral politics and political groups than on the everyday navigations of political and economic systems. Adair argues that Alfonsín's focus on social issues, specifically hunger, was as much a part of his platform as the political and juridical components of his broader human and political rights agenda. By focusing on quotidian life—neighborhood, household economies, and the marketplace—Adair demonstrates that voters in the 1989 election evaluated Alfonsín's presidency as much on his ability (or failure) to make good on his promises to address hunger as his promise to reestablish democratic representation. She draws on a growing body of foodways scholarship to show how access to food not only was a social and economic issue but also became a "litmus test of