

ORGANIZED VIOLENCE

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**CAPITALIST WARFARE
IN LATIN AMERICA**

**EDITED BY
DAWN PALEY AND
SIMON GRANOVSKY-LARSEN**



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INTRODUCTION

ORGANIZED VIOLENCE AND THE EXPANSION OF CAPITAL

Simon Granovsky-Larsen and Dawn Paley

In early 2007, a public prosecutor in a suit with short, spiky hair, backed by hundreds of police and dozens of individuals with their faces covered to prevent identification, entered the lakeside lands occupied by Indigenous Q'eqchi' people near the town of El Estor, Guatemala. Conflict had been ongoing for generations (Grandin 2004), and it came to a head again after local people grew tired of subsisting on tiny lots, and began to build houses on farmlands claimed at the time by Vancouver-based mining company Skye Resources. The lands had lain fallow for decades before Syke Resources attempted to reactivate the project, which was sold to Hudbay in 2008 and again to the Solway Group in 2011.

Filmmakers and journalists—including one of the editors of this volume—documented the evictions, which escalated from forced removal of community members by hired labourers, to the participation of soldiers and the burning of houses the next day, to the gang rape of eleven women in a more remote community days later. Following the dramatic and painful incidents in 2007, Adolfo Ich Chamán was shot and hacked

to death by company security guards in 2009, and Germán Chub was shot and paralyzed in the same incident (see chocversushudbay.com).

The spectacular and organized violence set off against Q'eqchi' people near Lake Izabal ten years ago was intended to clear the way for a nickel mine: Skye Resources planned to restart the Fénix Project, first floated by the Canadian mining company Inco in the 1960s. An array of state and non-state armed actors has participated in repressive violence in the region since the first arrival of Inco. During the evictions in early 2007, Guatemalan soldiers ran between houses in formation, taking up position around the community members as their houses burned. Mynor Padilla, a former army colonel and head of security for the mine, was tried and eventually acquitted of the 2009 shootings in 2017.

In 2011, Hudbay sold the project to the Solway Group, a private Russian company based in Cyprus. Disgraced President Otto Pérez Molina, a former general and an architect of Guatemala's genocidal internal armed conflict who is now in jail on corruption charges, inaugurated the mine in El Estor in 2014. The project is still mired in controversy. A twelve-day peaceful blockade of the open-pit mine in 2017 was met with repression, as local fishers demanded an end to the contamination of nearby Izabal Lake. One demonstrator was killed and four police injured. City hall was set ablaze (Cuffe 2017).

After more than ten years of observing the case of El Estor and the struggles of local communities against the nickel mine, it is clear that the underlying dynamics in the conflict are about what Mina Lorena Navarro Trujillo (2012) calls *despojo multiple* (dispossession in multiple dimensions): physical dispossession from lands and goods, but also political and social dispossession. Families forced off of lands that could support them not only lose access to those lands, they also lose important community ties and are stripped of the potential to organize their own governance systems, or to push for access to services like water, electricity, or education. Mainstream press coverage, however, largely follows the state line, which is to criminalize Q'eqchi' people who resist toxic mining and assert sovereignty over lands their families have occupied since time immemorial.

Through the case of the Fénix mine in El Estor, Guatemala, we can begin to see how criminalization and repression work to undermine resistance. This violence is portrayed as necessary for the security of all, when, in fact, it is mainly necessary to ensure the security of transnational

capital—in this case, a Canadian/Russian mining company. A handful of ongoing court cases in Canada—one involving eleven rape survivors and another involving the wounded Chub and Ángelica Choc, wife of murdered Ich Chamán—has revealed intersections between power brokers, armed groups, and mineral extraction in Guatemala.

All across Mexico, Central America, and South America, there are conflicts similar to the one in El Estor, with one key difference: there is little international media attention. Instead, members of local communities are forced from coveted housing blocks, valuable coastal lands, or communal territories to make way for new industrial projects. In many cases, whole communities are criminalized; state troops using lethal force are portrayed as having arrived to clean up or pacify an area. And, to varying degrees, the mass media repeats official discourse from offices in Mexico City or New York: that violence in the Americas today is an unintended consequence of drug trafficking and illegal activity, a side effect of criminal efforts to control drug distribution in cities, or to dominate trafficking routes in remote areas. Together with the authors of this volume, we point to how discourses centred on the so-called wars on drugs and crime serve corporate and state interests, depoliticizing violence that often appears to have more to do with extraction, production, finance, or social control than it does with cocaine or gangs. All too often, little mind is paid to a key driver of violent conflict the world over: securing profit and the expansion of capital through the control of land, labour, and natural resources.

HEMISPHERIC WAR FOR CAPITAL

In this book we contextualize patterns of violence in countries generally considered to be allies of the United States: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, and Paraguay. This is not to diminish violence, and state violence in particular, in countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela, where domestic and foreign policy has been less aligned with us foreign policy goals, but where, to differing extents, economic participation by transnational corporations is encouraged and where extractivism is a key economic driver (North and Grinspun 2016; Postero 2017; Webber and Carr 2012). The countries the authors focus on in this volume are solid us allies, their domestic policies structured around responding to the dictates and desires of the United States and, increasingly,

Canada. The authors examine subordinate countries within the current phase of imperialism in the hemisphere, one in which military intervention, transnationalized capitalist expansion, and a return to coup d'états follow the economic and political interests of northern governments and investors, as well as their elite local allies, interests that pay particular attention to the whims of the dominant power of the continent, the United States (Gordon and Webber 2016; Harvey 2004; Klassen 2014; Robinson 2014; Shipley 2017).

Our choice to focus on US-allied states can be understood in part through a return to the notion of worthy and unworthy victims developed by Herman and Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent*. “A propaganda system will consistently portray people abused in enemy states as *worthy* victims, whereas those treated with equal or greater severity by its own government or clients will be *unworthy*” (Chomsky and Herman 1988, 37). Thirty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the once (mostly) black and white geopolitical world map that contrasted the “free world” and “state socialism” has been replaced by the drab grey-scale of neoliberalism: no matter the gradient, each nation is stained by its participation in global capitalism.

In the Americas, there are governments that have held public positions against the United States, most often shrouded in traditional discourses of anti-imperialism (Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Cuba). In countries with tense relations with Washington, the expansion of capital carries on under different names, and often in wretched conditions absent dramatic violence. Hugo Chávez encouraged “21st century socialism,” while Bolivia’s Vice-President Álvaro García Linera speaks of a transition towards socialism via “Andean-Amazonian capitalism” by increasing state participation in the economy, building the proletariat, and strengthening communitarianism (García Linera 2006). By and large, these strategies are akin to alternative formulas for managing capitalism in extremely unequal societies, even as transnational capital continues to exercise economic dominance (Webber 2014).

Ongoing popular and Indigenous protest and organization—to the extent they have not been captured through Left governance and the expansion of the state to increasingly remote areas—continue to mobilize for autonomy and dignity, and in defence of urban spaces and rural territories that allow for some degree of economic, political, and cultural autonomy (Zibechi 2012). In countries like Argentina and Chile, the

expansion of capital today is, with some important exceptions, taking place in a manner that appears peaceful, especially in comparison with the countries studied in this book. It is important to recall that this appearance of peace rests on the wars of the 1970s and 1980s, in which thousands of dissidents, activists, unionists, campesinos, and others were disappeared or murdered (Menjívar and Rodríguez 2005).

To the chagrin of progressive commentators who prefer to focus on the “Pink Tide,” there remain a host of states in Latin America where elite politics continue to be subsumed to the dictates of transnational capital, as well as to the political beck and call of Washington and Ottawa (North and Clark 2017). Devising a list of client states is as problematic as it is necessary, as these nations correspond to a crucial subset, a key shade of grey, in a geopolitical map of global neoliberalism. One way to establish clientelism could be to count the number of confirmed US military bases: ten in Colombia; a strategic major base at Soto Cano in Honduras, and twelve others accessed by the US Army and the US Drug Enforcement Administration in the same country; and the presence of US military troops in Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Peru, and elsewhere. This metric, however, is weakened when we take into consideration the US military base and illegal prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the country with the most oppositional position vis-à-vis the United States in the hemisphere.

Another metric of clientelism could be to take the US government at its word. Mexico, which, because of its unique location and history has no US military bases, “is one of the United States’ closest and most valued partners” (White House 2016). Chile, possibly the country with the most transnationalized economy in South America, is “one of the United States’ strongest partners in Latin America” (US Department of State 2016). Trading blocks like the Pacific Alliance, which includes Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Mexico, also delineate clear and strong ties with Washington.

Alternatively, we could discern pro-US or imperialist relations through a series of coup d’états that have pushed governance rightward, from the military coup in Honduras in 2009 (as well as the fraudulent elections of 2013 and 2017) to the legislative coups in Paraguay (2012) and Brazil (2016) (Castillo 2016). Then again, we could use US foreign aid as a barometer: Colombia topped the list at nearly \$400 million projected for 2017, followed by Haiti (\$218 million), Guatemala (\$145 million), Mexico (\$135 million), Honduras (\$105 million), and Peru (\$81 million). By comparison,

Bolivia was not projected to receive any foreign assistance from the United States in 2017, and other Central and South American countries received much smaller amounts (ForeignAssistance.gov 2016). Or perhaps we could use the “openness” of national economies as a barometer, but here again there are shades of grey: Mexico had a fully nationalized energy sector that was far more restrictive to foreign investment than that of Venezuela or Bolivia until constitutional changes opened the door to foreign investment in late 2013.

We are encouraged to perceive countries less aligned to the United States as undemocratic nations that use repression to undermine basic rights, while client states are held up as democracies where violence—including extreme violence and acts of state terror like aerial bombings or mass disappearances—are divorced from politics and positioned as a necessary response to criminal activity. The peace process in Colombia, through which the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—FARC) guerrillas were demobilized (see Chapter 6), completes this illusion, removing armed struggle for left-wing ideals, however flawed, from the equation. But neoliberal peace is not meaningful peace.

It is urgent that we update the propaganda model described by Herman and Chomsky. We have established that systems of US clientelism in the hemisphere remain vibrant, and that victims of state and parastate violence in these countries are rendered particularly *unworthy* of attention. In the countries we examine in this book, there is a routine depoliticization of ongoing acts of terror (including massacres and disappearances) and other forms of economic, social, and political violence that forces outward migration and internal displacement. Rather, as mentioned, violence in US-allied countries tends to be linked, by governments and the mainstream media, to criminal activity or the drug trade. What is not often told is that this violence can take on a reactionary character, and its victims were, often in nontraditional ways, participating in local autonomies or acts of resistance, or building towards alternative futures (Dinerstein 2015).

In this book, our overarching goal has been to bring conversations about contemporary violence and capitalism in Mexico, Central America, and South America into dialogue. We look at economic transformation under neoliberalism alongside violence not as separate phenomena, but as generative and mutually reinforcing elements that buttress capitalism in its current stage.

ORGANIZED VIOLENCE AND THE EXPANSION OF CAPITAL

A nuanced look at current affairs requires us to go beyond easy notions of Pink Tide progressivism in South America and of dehumanized drug cartel monsters in Mexico, Colombia, and Central America. We take an approach that instead allows us to understand events in their specific regional and global context without falling into determinism, examining economic processes at the same time as we address ongoing acts of coercive violence. It is clear that the grinding, daily violence of capitalism proliferates worldwide, and we are living in times of unprecedented inequality: by 2017, five men owned over \$410 billion of wealth, compared to \$400 billion shared among the poorest half of the world's population (Buchheit 2017). As we wrapped up the final draft of this volume in early 2018, austerity programs and privatization, advanced under the banner of reform, efficiency, and competition, remained the macroeconomic policies du jour in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, and Paraguay, the countries examined within. These economic policies fit within a broader frame of global capitalism, a system that has made unwavering use of violence in order to ensure power, allowing for the continuous expansion of capital. In the words of Geoff Mann, "Capitalism is premised upon two kinds of power: (1) private economic power that comes from the control of property and profit-making; and (2) coercive power exercised by states in (and often beyond) bounded national territories" (2013, 48).

Following Mann's definition of power within capitalism, in this volume we introduce the notion of organized violence as connected to the structural political-economic conditions of capitalism, a definition that allows us to consider systematically the violence perpetrated by drug cartels, guerrillas and soldiers, or paramilitaries and police.

Existing academic literature tends to define the concept of organized violence in relation to the nature of the organized group. Perhaps the most common use of the term comes from the research and dataset of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), which understands organized violence as being comprised of three subsets: state-based armed conflict, non-state conflicts, and one-sided violence by either state-based or non-state groups (Allansson, Melander, and Themnér 2017). Other major works on contemporary organized violence adopt the UCDP definition implicitly in looking to a determinant factor in the organization of people into armed groups (see Koonings and Kruijt 2004; Daly 2016).

While not disagreeing with this categorization, we believe a key factor is missing in this understanding of organized violence: recognizing the relationship between violence and its surrounding political-economic context. This is the way the concept of *organized violence* is mobilized across the chapters of this volume: violence as organized not only due to the formal structure of armed groups but also organized in its relationship to capitalism. We do not consider more localized instances of violence, such as armed robbery, or its violent retribution by community members to fall within this definition. These acts may be organized as such, and they are, of course, not untouched by the socio-economic system within which they occur, but they are not necessarily connected directly to economic projects, to the state, or to the interests of local, national, or transnational elites.

As examples, then, drug cartels discussed in chapters on Mexico in this volume are instances of organized violence due to their relationship to a war driven by neoliberalism and economic expansion; the violence of Paraguayan police and *sicario* hit men alike (see Chapter 4) present instances of organized violence because they are connected to the expansion of transnational soya projects, to the interests of local landowning elites, and to the US-led militarization of the country; and, as Paula Balduino de Melo demonstrates using testimony from Afro-Colombian women in Chapter 5, the left-wing FARC guerrillas in Colombia also exercise organized violence that responds to US-led militarization and disputes the control of resource-rich territory.

In the early twenty-first century, a plethora of group categories carry out organized violence according to our definition. Along with the more formal armed actors that dominated violence in the twentieth century—military (local and foreign, including significant involvement by the United States), police, death squads, and guerrilla armies—today, headlines (and body counts) in Latin America are dominated by armed groups with opaque entanglements with overtly political affairs. Paramilitary armies continue to operate alongside official armed forces, especially in Colombia and southern Mexico. Drug cartels have increased their firepower and enmeshed their activities into networks of cooperation and coercion with police forces and armies, sharing many traits with paramilitary organizations. As documented in Part II of this volume, these groups, which control territory and commerce through tactics ranging from spectacular displays of violence to house-to-house extortion,

dominate much of the terrain between Mexico and Colombia. Separate from cartels, but with a great deal of overlap, youth gangs—and especially the *maras* of northern Central America—exercise horrific violence in their efforts to bring neighbourhoods and populations under their influence, always in concert with certain elements of the state structure (see, for example, Domínguez 2018). Finally, groups that are smaller in size and area of operation also exercise significant influence: local death squads and *sicario* hit men who provide anonymity for those who hire them, and private security companies, lending legitimacy to the violence of economic interests.

Koonings (2012; see also Koonings and Kruijt 2004) separates these armed actors into categories of “new” and “old” violence. Old violence, for Koonings, was essentially political, with a purpose to protect or challenge state power. While militaries and guerrillas fit this category, their engagement in violence was reduced significantly as dictatorships gave way to formal democracies, and large-scale armed conflicts drew to a close over the 1980s and 1990s. The remainder of armed groups outlined above, which together comprise the main drivers of new violence in Koonings’s binary, instead exercise violence in pursuit of economic or social goals.

The categories of new and old violence suggested by Koonings demonstrate a central concern with the state—the state as armed actor, or state power as an ultimate goal—that is shared by many analyses of contemporary armed groups. With violence now increasingly privatized and dispersed, recent theoretical work on violence in Latin America has contributed in important ways to our understanding of the relationship between state institutions and non-state armed groups. Méndez, O’Donnell, and Pinheiro grapple with the problem of “lawless violence” in *The (Un)Rule of Law and the Underprivileged in Latin America* (1999), which highlights the ways in which incomplete democratic transitions encourage, often intentionally, a weakening of the state’s supposed monopoly of violence. Arias and Goldstein (2010) explore the ways in which non-state violence helped in the creation and maintenance of democratic states, and offer the term “violent pluralism” to discuss the operations of non-state violent actors within state institutions. Pearce (2010) argues that the importance of non-state violence for Latin American states has a much longer history than recent democratic transitions. A “perverse” form of state formation was historically common,

Pearce argues: local elites intentionally undermine the state's monopoly of violence in order to hang onto the use of violence in support of their own power. This argument is supported by Holden's work on Central America (2004), which discusses the importance of private armies in the formation of newly independent states.

Acts of violence can be difficult to accurately document and track. Court cases regarding paramilitary activity around mining sites in Colombia, for example, demonstrate how plausible deniability by the corporate sector is deployed in the face of the testimonies of affected community members (see Chapter 6). As the cases presented in many chapters of this volume attest, when states award symbolic and material impunity to armed actors, these groups often carry out coercive violence that reinforces state power and corporate profits.

If the state and armed groups of all kinds are deeply involved in many scenarios, there are equally enmeshed relationships between states and private economic interests. In the neoliberal era, when many commentators conclude that the state is retreating from the management of domestic economies and global finance, these cases show that states, in fact, continue to set local conditions for capital accumulation and hold on tightly to their role as economic arbiters. We find no contradiction between the provision of legal and material guarantees for investors to ensure the viability of megaprojects in states that erode the rights of local people through austerity and violence. Rather, the dual processes of security and rule of law for capital on the one hand, and insecurity and injustice for people and communities on the other, are, in fact, attractive to investors (see Chapter 6). Regulation and deregulation, legislation, and even the blind eye turned to illegal acts all allow states to have unmatched influence over shaping the context for capital accumulation.

Similarly, states continue to set the stage for organized violence in the neoliberal period. Non-state armed actors throughout the region operate within a context of state-driven militarization and state-sanctioned impunity for repressive violence. When instigating or hiring out organized violence, private economic actors do so within favourable conditions largely set out through the actions of both local states and the intervention of their foreign counterparts.

Whether in the current period of post-authoritarian transition or in earlier stages, non-state armed groups have without a doubt worked across Latin America in ways that support the functioning of the state

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