Societies of FEAR
The Legacy of Civil War, Violence and Terror in Latin America
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Introduction: Violence and Fear in Latin America

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In September 1989, one of the authors, acting as a member of a negotiating mission to the Christian Democratic government of Guatemala, participated in a lengthy dialogue with the then vice-president of the country, Lic. Roberto Carpio Nicolle. The national government, the first civilian one after a long period of military rule, was trying to attract technical and financial support from European donor countries. Guatemala had become eligible for European aid, not only because the country needed to be rebuilt after the gruesome civil war and the crisis of the 1980s, but also because it had become a politically fashionable recipient, after all those years of pariah status within the international community. Mr Carpio had been the president of the constitutional reform committee during the transition period from military rule to a civilian government. As the constitutional vice-president, he was the head of the national public sector, and, at the very moment of the interview, the acting president as well. At the end of the last negotiating session – the topic was a support project for his ambitious national anti-poverty and micro-enterprise programme – the delicate theme of human rights was touched upon. When the delegation leader insisted upon guarantees against paramilitary forces and death squads while executing the agreed project, the Guatemalan vice-president turned red and, with his face flushed, began to argue in the following way:

You are asking for specific guarantees and I cannot give you an adequate response. It is not in my power to promise you a clear-cut solution in your fine European terms. I have been a leading journalist during the years of the military and the repression. I have been threatened and had to go abroad to be safe. Now I am the vice-president, even the acting president of this country. I have written the essential parts of the constitution. Apparently I am invested with all political power. But in fact, my friends, I have to share power with a
lot of players, some of them invisible. In this country, the military are still in command. This is Guatemala, my friends, you cannot implement a government programme without their implicit permission. Then, of course, there are the paramilitary forces, the death squads, as you said. OK, can you suggest something I can do with them? They are present and absent at the same time. They are nowhere and everywhere; and they ask for their share. Then there are the drug dealers, the mafias. Of course, I should negate their very existence, as I should with the military, the police, the criminals and the drug lords. But we are here in Guatemala and their presence is a reality. And then there is the problem of CACIF? They consider a small increase of taxation by 2 or 3 per cent as communism, and the military believe them! CACIF controls the entire national economy. So, reconsidering these facts, what kind of guarantees are you asking for?

Thus he expressed in a nutshell the problem under study. Latin America has a legacy of terror, of violence, of fear. Of all the countries on the continent, Guatemala is one of the most significant examples of a ‘society of fear’. The constitution of this kind of society and the persistence of its characteristics – in other words, the long-term consequences of violence, repression and arbitrariness – are recurrent features of the Latin American political landscape. Unfortunately, these problems have not vanished from the continent’s social and political scene despite almost two decades of efforts to end authoritarianism and civil war and to rebuild democracy and legitimate civil governance.

Since the late 1970s, Latin America has been experiencing profound and often painful processes of economic, social and political change. The region had to face the double challenge of coping with the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, while also having to move forwards along the road of democratic transition and consolidation. At the same time, these changes were complicated by numerous internal social and political contradictions and conflicts. It is therefore not surprising that the advances made along the way have in many cases been ambiguous, partial and unstable. In most cases the transition towards ‘normality’ has taken a zig-zag movement. Economic recovery came late; it proved to be fragile and did not produce the expected result of rapidly reducing poverty and inequality. Formal democratization has proceeded in often quite impressive ways, but the process has been permanently bedevilled by institutional confusion, political turmoil, conflicts and violence.

Toward the end of the present century, the region finds itself at a crossroads, marked by a fundamental dilemma. On the one hand, most countries in the region have been working to establish civic democratic governments during the past ten to fifteen years with which to replace authoritarian regimes that governed partially or wholly on the basis of arbitrariness and institutionalized violence. This so-called ‘democratic consolidation’ has been followed, in a number of countries, by an apparent economic recovery which marked the end of the cycle of stagnation, debt and impoverishment of the 1980s. On the other hand, many social and political problems continue to haunt Latin America. These problems do not go unnoticed, as they cast a shadow on the status of Latin America as a promising region of ‘new democracies’ and ‘emerging markets’, but they are still relatively ignored in the recent boom of literature on Latin American re-democratization.

The scholarly discussion of contemporary Latin American development has focused mainly, up till now, on the political economy of adjustment, upon the mechanisms of democratic transition and consolidation, or on the relationships between the two (especially through the notions of governance and governability). Much less attention has been given to the recent and current manifestations of conflict, violence, repression and terror, their consequences, and their social, political and cultural preconditions. These phenomena seem to be at odds with the image of gradual economic and political development towards a supposed status of liberal and democratic ‘modernity’. It is by no means certain that stable, civic forms of rule and social integration will prevail or endure in Latin America. This caution is inspired by the legacies of repressive dictatorships and civil wars, as well as by the persistence of poverty, inequality, and social and political exclusion. The latter form the backdrop to new and perturbing forms of violence that seem to be on the rise in post-authoritarian Latin American societies.

This volume aims to address one particularly distressing aspect of this problem: past and present forms of violence, conflict and terror. In the chapters that follow, a number of authors deal with violent social and political conflicts in Latin America by analysing the variety of its backgrounds, manifestations and consequences. In this introductory chapter, we will try to provide a first demarcation of the issues of conflict, violence and fear that have plagued Latin American societies in the past and continue to do so in the present. In fact, it is our assertion that social and political violence has been an endemic and permanent feature of the pattern of nation-building in Latin America and the conflicts generated by this process. We will suggest a typological distinction between three kinds of violence in the history of Latin America: violence related to maintaining the traditional rural and oligarchic social order; violence related to the problem of the modernization of the state and the incorporation of the masses in politics; and, finally, violence related to the present-day difficulties of consolidating democratic stability, economic progress and social inclusion. We then proceed to discuss two enduring background features that underly, in our understanding, the tenacity of social and political violence in Latin America. In the first place, it is nurtured by long-lasting patterns of social exclusion of large parts of the population. It has been observed that Latin America has experienced relatively few fundamental social revolutions despite the almost permanent ‘pre-revolutionary’ nature of the profound social cleavages within the region's
social fabric. It may be true that current social inequalities seldom lead to massive violent reactions by the poor and excluded; violent protests seem to be localized, focused and of short duration. Still, as we will argue, these cleavages lead to what we call the 'informalization' of society and the subsequent erosion of the notion of citizenship. We feel that this tendency runs counter to the prospect of institutionalizing and pacifying political life. Second, we point at the legacy of violence engrained in the dynamics of the state and politics. We especially refer to the institutionalization of arbitrary violence within the state and the effects this has, in terms of generalized fear, on politics and on social life in general. Finally, we present the outline of the book, using our discussion of violence and fear as a conceptual framework to situate the issues discussed in each of the remaining chapters of the book.

**Violence and Nation-building in Latin America**

Of course, the problem of violence and the tenacity of violent conflicts in thwarting democracy, stable institutions and hence, in the end, undermining social consensus, is not new in the history of modern state formation and nation-building. Nor is it unique for Latin America. Indeed, the past decade has witnessed a new wave of violence that was part and parcel of varied manifestations of social, regional, ethnic or religious contenstions that have been challenging established forms of 'national' legitimate authority. Such tendencies run counter to conventional images of 'nation-building' that stress the cumulative pacification and institutionalization of conflicts within modern societies. The state is supposed to embody this kind of progress, not only by taking charge of the monopoly of the legitimate means of collective violence, but also by forming the frame of reference for the notion of citizenship and the peaceful settlement of social differences within civil society. From this point of view it is tempting but erroneous to see the recent forms of violence either as 'deviant', that is to say, as being related to underdevelopment or incomplete modernity, or as transitory, meaning a return to a 'normal' legitimate civic order in some near future, once its basic conditions have been restored. In fact, a number of scholars have been paying attention to the violence intrinsically involved in the construction of the modern world. Moore, echoing the classics, has shown that so-called 'modernization', the transition from agricultural societies to urbanizing nation-states, typically involved violent forms of elimination and re-accommodation of social classes. The complex processes of modern state formation were to a large extent based on the deployment of military violence by contending polities, as has been demonstrated by Tilly. Still, he sees this as the prelude to modernity in which the 'relative non-violence of civil life' prevails. Keane, in contrast, offers us a transcending image of the delicate balance between