Understanding Violence in Latin America Today: Untying the Gordian Knot

by Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba

The 2010 Lozano Long conference, Republics of Fear: Understanding Endemic Violence in Latin America Today, which took place at the University of Texas at Austin on March 4–5, was a broad discussion on one of the most pressing issues in Latin America at present. Twenty specialists were invited to exchange reflections from a diversity of perspectives, which resulted in one of the most inspiring dialogues we have witnessed in our careers and showed that studying violence must be an interdisciplinary endeavor.

The discussion was based on the exchange of two main forms of knowledge or methodological approaches: while one sector of participants contributed quantitative data, the other approached the problem with interpretations of representations of violence. This is not to say that we have set positions toward the problem, but only that we have different methodologies and angles of approach. The conference, however, clearly revealed a desire for an open dialogue to define the main questions that would lead to an understanding of this problematic reality.

Indeed, violence is problematic from the moment we attempt to define it. Is it the result of recent economic processes? Does it originate in the failures of public policies? Can it be attributed to cultural factors such as gender structure and political customs? Emphasizing one perspective or another allows only a partial view; including a broad range of perspectives is what is required to untie the Gordian knot of violence in Latin America today.

The many topics addressed in this conference show the breadth and complexity of this phenomenon: gender violence; intimate violence; organized crime; political, state, and pro-state violence; structural violence (poverty, forced migration, racism, discrimination); and the responses to violence, including public policies, activism, and representations.

In the first panel, “Sexual and Gender Violence,” Patricia Ravelo and Cecilia Menjívar addressed methodological issues to study the subjectivity of mothers of victims of femicides and of women affected by domestic violence. In the case of Ciudad Juárez, victims’ relatives are key political actors in the public arena regarding violence, where pain is transformed into activism aimed to promote social change. It has been one of the most effective tools for intervention, instrumental in bringing cases to the international courts and in passing legal initiatives intended to ensure women a life free of violence. Menjívar, for her part, addressed the strategies of Ladina women in Guatemala who in their daily lives are transforming the victimizing gender structure of that country. Daily private life is the best space for antiviolence politics, although it occurs within a grid of asymmetrical power relations.

Ileana Rodríguez and Gloria González-López discussed the public implications of incest and the systemic violence that it constitutes. Rodríguez addressed media representation of incest scandal and its implicit endorsement in the public sphere, referring to cases published in the Nicaraguan media. Incest, she argued, is a privilege granted by patriarchy to the paterfamilias at the root of any gender-based violence, and patriarchy is reaffirmed in the private space. Gloria González-López underscored the frequency of incest stories in Mexico, which demonstrates...
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activities. The difficulty of reducing violence is tied to inequalities that criminalize the poorer sectors of society and to the performance of officers who convert the legitimate coercive force of government into a criminal organization. Violations of human rights by soldiers and police, as well as their participation in criminal businesses, de-legitimates official forces and impedes the decrease of crime in the region.

In the panel on political mobilization against violence, María Victoria Uribe commented on a document about the displaced people from Mampuján, Colombia. As in the panels on violence representations and gender violence, Uribe brought to the table grassroots-generated reactions to victimization. In this case, religion is a factor of cohesiveness and peaceful tactics for dealing with the armed forces that threaten Colombian towns. Angelina Snodgrass Godoy reflected on lynching as a response to the inefficacies of the Guatemalan state in the postwar period. Community-based resistance toward government abuses was one of the topics dominating a great deal of the conference discussion, as we saw in works by Ravelo, Leu, and the members of this panel. Most of these responses deal with the strategies of government to inflict its coercion and control of the population. In this sense, the work by Javier Auyero underlined the role of inequality in state violence as a form of institutional violence by describing the difficulties of disadvantaged Argentine populations in accessing public services. Gustavo de la Rosa pointed to the irregularities in constitutional guarantees and human rights in Ciudad Juárez, characterizing the government as a criminal institution.

Two opposing forces define the prevailing conflict that redraws the political arena in Latin America in the post–Cold War period. On the one hand is a diversity of environments and interests that foster violent activities: gangs and Lynchings in post–civil war areas in Central America, the harassment of the poor in Brazil and Argentina, the conflicts between guerrillas and the paramilitary in Colombia, and the criminal organizations linked to officials in Mexico; on the other hand, communities have been creative and independent of traditional political institutions (i.e., political parties) in developing forms of resistance: religious manifestations, the taking over of public places, the replacement of state coercive functions by communal forms of punishment, and a myriad of aesthetic expressions that promote awareness and healing of social traumas.

Violence has motivated the emergence of new aesthetics and subjectivities that challenge scholars to rethink methods and languages. One issue that arose is the role of emotion when addressing this subject. Ravelo proposes abandoning emotionalism and sensationalism, since they can paralyze the process of addressing violence with rationality in political and academic debates. Nevertheless, we cannot discredit accounts by victims of abuses just because they exhibit emotions. The supposed objectivity of quantitative approaches to violence also has to be revised. Often, we hear the justification for omitting information because it cannot be generated or published. Most quantitative works are based on official sources, which, for topics like human right abuses and the participation of officials in crime organizations, may not be reliable. The fact that criminal events occur in a sphere of illegality limits the scope of the study of violence to testimonies and other narratives like media reports and literature.

One of the proposals of the concluding roundtable is that we need to address the genealogy of violence, since in the recent history of Latin America we can recognize a paradigm shift in the political arena, academic discourses, and artistic production, three of the main concerned sectors. At present, we are experiencing new forms of violence in our societies that demand we update our methodologies and databases and conceive innovative theoretical frameworks allowing a more effective production of knowledge on the subject. As we incorporate these emergent forms of violence into our research agendas, we also need to listen to the perpetrators as a key to understanding this phenomenon.

The political landscape in which violence is taking place compels us to consider that the problem of violence and criminality in Latin America cannot be separated from structural conditions such as poverty, economy, and segregation in which the state has a central role. In fact, there was a broad agreement among conference participants that governments regularly foster, tolerate, protect, and perpetrate violence against populations in most Latin American countries. How have these countries come to the point of being culprits and agents of complicity in the perpetration of violence? Distinctions between the public and the private have to be reconsidered, since much of the violence occurs in the private sphere while protected by public institutions, and is of public interest. If, as Menjívar and Ravelo propose, politics against violence emerges in private spaces and in daily life, politics can no longer be understood as solely a public affair. If society has responded to violence with methods and goals that surpass what is expected in institutionalized democracies, we can see that one of the most important social consequences of violence is the transformation of Latin American political culture itself.

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