

**Armies without Nations:
Public Violence and
State Formation in
Central America,
1821–1960**

ROBERT H. HOLDEN

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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To *Mary Louise Chubb*
and *Edgar J. Williams, Jr., 1916–1999*

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I drew the evidence for this book's arguments from archives and libraries in six countries, starting with the United States in 1991. In late 1992 I turned to Central America, spending more time in Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica than in El Salvador and Guatemala, in large part because archival records—especially any related to military or police matters—were considerably harder to come by in the latter two countries. Of course, public records of any kind are not easily accessible in Central America; typically they are not even catalogued, and their availability to any particular researcher is notoriously subject to the whims of the functionaries who guard them. But if there was too little in Central America, there was too much in Washington, where I was immersed in an ocean of paper records so immense that no single researcher could ever hope to read all the relevant documentation.

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ARMIES WITHOUT NATIONS

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Introduction

Loose talk about globalization seems to have spawned a new historical specialty, “global history,” and an interesting discussion among historians about its utility. A global historian keeps “a global vision,” specializing in a problem that can be “conceived globally” but investigated locally.¹ According to historian Bruce Mazlish, there is no single global history but “many global experiences,” each of which merits its own history.² Although not much of anything could have been globalized before about 1500, it seems clear enough that certain institutions have been globalized—that is, diffused around the globe—at different times at distinctive rates.³

This book seeks a better understanding of the history of two sequential but closely related global experiences. The first was the formation of modern states, one of the earliest (and lengthiest) examples of globalization.⁴ The second embraced the increasing capacity of the agents of those states, as well as their collaborators and adversaries, to more efficiently monitor, threaten, kill and maim ever greater numbers of people and to destroy more and more of their property. This second trend, which I call the globalization of public violence, did not really become manifest until the twentieth century. It affected the first in a paradoxical way, enhancing the coercive power at the disposal of the state’s agents, while at the same time empowering those who sought to challenge or undermine their authority. What accounted for the globalization of public violence? What kept it going? And what difference has it made?

My response to these questions begins with an account of the role of public violence in state formation. It ends by showing how that violence was globalized

(and transformed) by the new opportunities for military and police collaboration with the U.S. government that arose during the Cold War. The process began with World War II, expanded tremendously during the Cold War, and has clearly outlived the end of the Cold War. Although the factors that account for the surge in the globalization of public violence during the second half of the twentieth century may be associated—only loosely in some cases, much more directly in others—with the Cold War, it would be wrong to identify the process entirely with the international rivalry between the two camps led by the United States and the Soviet Union.

This inquiry focuses mainly (but not entirely) on a region of Latin America with a distinctive political and cultural history: the five states of the isthmus of Central America, namely, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The globalization of public violence was launched in this region in a decade or two with cataclysmic effects. Studying a specific region also offers unique opportunities for comparison of the process and its effects, not only among five superficially homogeneous countries that are nevertheless different in some surprising ways, but also between them as a whole and the rest of Latin America. Because certain aspects of the isthmian countries' experience can be readily observed elsewhere, those who specialize in other regions will find grounds for fruitful comparisons in this book.

I elaborate my particular use of the concept "public violence" in chapter 1 and fully define "globalization" in chapter 8. Briefly, "public violence" draws together the killing, maiming, and other acts of destruction committed by rival *caudillos*, guerrilla "liberators," death squads, and state agents such as the armed forces and police, all of whom act within what I will identify as the "field" of state power. My appropriation of the word "globalization" is meant to overcome the tendency to think only in terms of the familiar, mutually exclusive, and misleading spatial hierarchies of local, regional, national, and international. Public violence itself has been globalized, its agents and its victims linked in ways that render rigid notions of the "local" and the "national" practically meaningless; the idea of a self-contained, self-directed national "state" is, partially as a result of these very trends, anachronistic. I do not wish to make a case for indiscriminate "lumping" against some infernal clique of "splitters," but to propose a way to discriminate more precisely by crossing certain boundaries—in this case, between particular acts of violence and between particular national societies.⁵ This book therefore shifts perspectives as needed—from the global, to the Latin American, to the North American, to the Central American, and finally to the level of individual countries of Central America—to illuminate connections and sharpen comparisons. Every *place* nests within an imbricated series of spatial situations, each one of which imparts meaning to the past they share. "Nicaragua" is at once inescapably "Central America" and "Latin America" and the "Western Hemisphere" and "global."

Chapter 1 defines the core problem: the relationship between public violence and the state formation process in the context of Latin American history. The pattern of public violence that unfolded in Central America after independence in 1821 did not differ substantially from that of other former American territories of the Iberian empires, where public violence has been a prominent aspect of the state for-

mation process. Chapter 1 analyzes the expression of that violence as well as its sources. Without completely rejecting class-based sources (such as labor recruitment practices) to explain Latin American violence in general, I argue that patrimonial politics—as expressed in its Latin American form, *caudillaje*—contributed at least as much as class differences to the level and persistence of violence in the course of state formation. *Caudillaje* was governed by a rule of violence, a *habitus* that saturated the field of power surrounding the state.

Part I applies my formulation of public violence to Central America, elaborating it against the history of the isthmus as a whole, and then against each of the ex-states (later republics) of the defunct federation of Central America. The focus of part I is the role of public violence in the early state formation process, with special emphasis on two closely related problems: the emergence of what I call the *improvisational state*, whose defining characteristic was the continuous need to improvise its coercive authority by bargaining with *caudillo*-led armed bands of various kinds, and the concomitant problem of how those forces were gradually superceded, at different times and with different results, by a single army that was “national” but only in a narrowly juridical sense. Emerging with great clarity in the nineteenth century, these problems persisted, with awful consequences, well into the twentieth century and the Cold War period’s globalization of public violence. Central America’s “armies without nations” were the rival fighting forces that contended for power within each country up to the early twentieth century. Later they became the military institutions that gradually consolidated their grip on state power from about the middle of the century in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Another legacy of patrimonialism was the absence of any coherent, inclusive, and embedded sense of national purpose or identity that might have blocked the warping of the state by the tyrannical ambitions of a *caudillo* or the armed forces.

Part II picks up the theme of the globalization of public violence, now unmistakably manifest in the first truly world war, that of 1939–45. The opening chapter, which first summarizes the conclusions proffered in Part I, develops the idea of globalization in world-historical terms before turning to the novel systems of transnational military and police collaboration that sprang up during and after World War II. Subjected, during the Cold War, to a ceaseless process of financial, technological, and diplomatic adjustment, those systems globalized public violence for the first time. Subsequent country-specific chapters show how U.S. military and police collaboration interacted with distinctive political traditions to reshape the capacity of isthmian states to deploy violence up to 1960. That year marks the opening of a new phase of collaboration, one that responds to the abrupt appearance in Latin America of communist-oriented insurgent forces, the agents of a heavily ideologized Cold War variant of counterinstitutional public violence. An account of that phase will appear in a subsequent volume, *Armies Without Nations: The United States and the Transformation of Public Violence in Central America, 1961–1991*.

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Part I

1821–1939

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Historical Dimensions of Public Violence in Latin America

For historians violence is a difficult subject, diffuse and hard to cope with. It is committed by isolated individuals, small groups, and by large mobs; it is directed against individuals and crowds alike; it is undertaken for a variety of purposes (and at times for no discernible rational purpose at all), and in a variety of ways ranging from assassinations and murders to lynchings, duels, brawls, feuds and riots; it stems from criminal intent and from political idealism, from antagonisms that are entirely personal and from antagonisms of large social consequence. Hence it has been hard to conceive of violence as a subject at all.

—Richard Hofstadter

To “conceive of violence” as a subject of historical inquiry may be only slightly less challenging today than it was in 1970 when Hofstadter synthesized the range of difficulties posed by the systematic study of a subject so ubiquitous and momentous, yet disparate in form, origin, and effect.¹ Since then, a torrent of scholarship has poured forth on subjects closely allied with the expression of violence—war, rebellion, revolution, protest, terrorism, and government repression, to name a few. Although it is not hard to find the word “violence” in any bibliography of the social sciences or the humanities of the last thirty years or so, Anthony Giddens’s pronouncement remains apt: “the neglect of what any casual survey of history shows to be an overwhelmingly obvious and chronic trait of human affairs—recourse to violence and war—is one of the most extraordinary blank spots in social theory in the twentieth century.”²

To speak of violence in a general, collective way, as a social phenomenon, risks forgetting the meaning of violence at the personal level. As Hedley Bull pointed out, the personal level is the only level that counts in the end.³ Is there a greater affront to the natural dignity and freedom of a person than an act of violence? The severity of the affront is not diminished in the least when applied by the state in its deployment

of what its agents call “force,” to resort to the conventional way of distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate violence. Indeed, “force” when used as a deterrent by the state against enemies internal or external is intended to be an assault on human dignity, for that is precisely what makes it a deterrent. Nor do the agents of states always distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate applications of violence.

In order to capture analytically the lived reality of a particular kind of violence experienced by individuals, this chapter stakes out the boundaries of a field of historical research that I call public violence. The concept draws together types of violence that historians usually treat independently, as when they habitually separate the violence committed by states from that of revolutionaries, by army factions from that of guerrilla groups, by *caudillos* from that of death squads, and so on. An overly meticulous concern for these distinctions can obscure their common character and purpose—and their common source. The persistence of public violence in Latin America originates in the patrimonial institutions—among them, patron-clientage—that have ruled the region since the sixteenth century.⁴ By this I do not mean that the inhabitants of Latin America are more or less “violent” than anyone else, nor that the character, intensity, or scope of public violence in Latin America has remained unchanged for five hundred years. I claim that the enormous potential for violence embedded in patron-client politics is so great that it overshadows ideology or class interests, or regional, familial, or ethnic identity, as independent sources of public violence.⁵

No discussion of violence should begin without acknowledging the twentieth century as humanity’s golden age of killing, in both the monumental scale and the astonishing inventiveness of the planning, organization, financing, execution, and legitimization of killing. The killing’s great catalyst, advocate, and consolidator was the modern state. The production and continuous perfection of the instruments of death were typically the responsibility of firms recruited by the state and often heavily subsidized by public revenue.⁶ Not merely the industrialization of war itself but the creation of what Giddens called a “world military order” emerged from the interaction of industrial capitalism and the state.⁷

The prominent role of the advanced industrial sectors of the world’s richest economies, as the junior partners of their respective states, by no means implied that the killing was limited to those particular societies. On the contrary, by the second half of the twentieth century, their partnership made the killing almost entirely an export product, thus globalizing the violence. In addition to the consolidation of the joint private-public nature of the great killing and its globalization, another feature took on even greater importance during the twentieth century. As the power of states expanded, so did their ideological and coercive capacities to incite collaborative killing by groups and individuals who were not technically its direct agents—death squads, semi-private militias, secret armies, and “off-duty” officers of military and police agencies. As states concentrated violence in their own institutions and successfully held themselves out as its only legitimate source and licensing authority, violence that could merely be associated with the state—be it that of the state’s own informally deputized agents or its sworn enemies—as well as violence that was

directly sponsored by the state, was sanctified and ritualized as never before. Thus, although the actual “apparatus” of the state has not been the only direct source of the kinds of organized violence that made the twentieth century the golden age of killing, the state has undoubtedly constituted the main arena within which the killing took place, as the agents of states both contended and collaborated with their competitors and associates, both internal and external. As various theorists have noted, outside the confines of the state apparatus itself, political and military power are typically wielded by groups that either aspire to make their own state or to control some space within the state.⁸ The spatially oriented concept of a social “field” of power surrounding the state, rather than that of a monolithic structure of state power from which springs discrete acts attributable solely to the state apparatus, is a way to acknowledge the disparate yet systemic character of twentieth-century public violence.⁹

State institutions operate within—and typically dominate—the field of state power but they seldom monopolize it. The boundaries of the field of state power, constituted not so much by structural borders but by fluid social relationships, vary over time and space. The killing, maiming, and destruction that take place in this field is “public violence,” owing to its compatibility with all the conventional senses of the word “public”—in other words, its wide visibility, potential to affect great numbers of people, and connection with government.¹⁰ Its “public” character was further enhanced by the range of acts of violence typically identified as terroristic (owing to their capacity to induce fear and submission among those who witness the violence) as well as display-oriented acts of violence aimed, in certain historical contexts, at impressing its witnesses with the protagonist’s ability to rule. Public violence encompasses war in the conventional sense, within as well as among states, but also events typically associated with such disparate categories as “political violence,” “collective violence,” “revolutionary violence,” and acts of violence committed by death squads, vigilantes, and self-declared popular armies of liberation. Under certain conditions, the violence carried out by some criminal organizations may, in its origins and effects, be practically indistinguishable from the violence of the latter groups. Examples are militias associated with business enterprises that trade in proscribed goods and services such as cocaine and prostitution, and the bandit gangs (*maras*) that began to terrorize much of Honduras and El Salvador in the early 1990s and had become, by 2003, major threats to their national security. A strong case might be made for a conceptual distinction between the legitimate, state-sponsored use of force and illegitimate violence that reflects the reality of life in, for example, Canada, the United States, or the Netherlands. But it would be much harder to make a similar case for Argentina, Mexico, or Guatemala. In a global sense, the validity of the distinction had already begun to wear thin with the massive aerial bombardment of civilian targets during World War II. It practically disappeared during the Cold War, when nuclear “strategic planning” of the most powerful states became a euphemism for the organization of mass murder, and as so-called covert action by intelligence organs of the state, proxy wars, and insurgencies sponsored by foreign states routinely targeted noncombatants.

The difference between public and private violence may be ambiguous at times, because agents of each can ally to achieve different objectives. Nevertheless, it is a decisive difference because of the vast disproportion in the potential scale of each. In the twentieth century, no person could be excluded as a potential target of public violence, and no number of victims could be considered too high. On the deployment side, no upward limit on the number of the agents who might be recruited to deploy public violence, not to mention any control over how they did it, could be imagined. The unlimited nature of public violence has remained as characteristic of civil war as it has of war between states, as characteristic of revolutionary violence as it has of postrevolutionary “pacification.” Any given act of private violence, on the other hand, must be restricted to the work of just one or at most a few agents, and the scope limited to one or at most a few victims.¹¹ I adhere, provisionally, to Alvaro Camacho’s definition of private violence as acts of destruction that operate “on the basis of the direct personal business of people in their strictly private lives,” acting in “their own name” and neither challenging nor defending “any social order.”¹²

Latin America

If it is true that, as one eminent specialist put it, “constructive and peaceable processes have dominated human relations” in the history of the United States,¹³ it would be hard to deny that the opposite is the case in the history of the Latin American countries. Yet the overwhelming majority of Latin Americans live in nations that achieved their independence no more than four decades after the United States. These countries, therefore, cannot be grouped with the “new nations” of Africa and Asia, where violence is often attributed to a more recent colonial past. Just as the persistence of Latin America’s comparative economic backwardness—despite nearly two centuries of independence—has long been the central preoccupation of economic historians, the persistence of violence after such a long period of self-government deserves investigation. Even though the disjunction between violent and nonviolent means of contesting power is one of the staple themes of the historiography of Latin America, the violence itself has not received enough attention. Instead of being treated as a variable on its own terms, public violence tends to disappear through the apertures of one conceptual or theoretical grid after another: militarization, class conflict, political instability, economic structures, democratization, revolution, authoritarianism, popular mobilization, culture, electoral freedom and integrity, identity, ethnicity, status, race, and gender. The violence is merely what happened as groups and individuals pursued certain goals—“statemaking,” perhaps, or personal enrichment, identity construction, economic development, or “resistance”—goals analyzed with due reference to their “implications” for class, economic change, access to land, gender and ethnicity, but in ways that seem to blot out any consideration of the persistence and intensity of the violence itself.¹⁴ The lacuna in question is not the absence of historical research in Latin America about

violent events or violent processes like revolution, riot, *golpes de estado*, guerrilla warfare, civil war, terrorism, torture, death-squad killings, or political repression but a failure to systematically consider them as manifestations of a certain historical pattern or category of behavior. The varieties of public violence are equated with “instability,” analysis of which is limited to its presentation as an “obstacle” to be overcome in the pursuit of something, such as economic growth. In the latter case, a kind of dialectical process is identified in which export-driven economic growth finally produces tax revenues allowing states to establish political stability, but at the cost of political repression and economic inequalities that merely supply the grievances for later outbursts of violence from below.¹⁵

Violence and the threat of violence generate fear and therefore preparation for violence. This is one of those grimly familiar cycles of human behavior that is nevertheless far from being understood, as the social theorist Norbert Elias observed.

Up to the present, there has been relatively little understanding of how the use of violence by a particular group against another gives rise with a high degree of probability to the use of violence by the other group against the former, as soon as there is the slightest chance to do so. The violence of the second group then in many cases triggers off increased violence from the first group. If such a process, a double-bind process, is once set in motion, then it is exceedingly difficult to halt; it often gains a momentum of its own. It gains a self-perpetuating and very often escalating power over the people, the opposing groups which constitute it, and becomes a trap forcing each of the participating sides, out of fear of the violence of the other side, to fight each other with violence.¹⁶

The context of the quoted passage makes it clear that Elias considered his observation to have universal validity, even though he was particularly interested in the persistence of the double-bind process in the Weimar Republic, when communist and fascist groups each targeted both one another and the state itself. In that particular case, Elias blamed the escalation of violence on the weakness of the Weimar state and its limited control over the armed forces and the police.¹⁷ This is a conclusion commonly reached by students of Latin America’s history, who associate state strength with high levels of cohesiveness, clarity, and stability in the state’s organizing ideology and institutions. Weak states—by definition incoherent, obscure, and unstable both ideologically and institutionally—were therefore subject to higher levels of violence.¹⁸ A slightly different interpretation associates violence with a kind of evolutionary stage in the state’s natural development from weakness toward strength, suggesting the inevitability of endemic violence in all states at certain moments as they mature.¹⁹

But it is not obvious why public violence should necessarily emerge under conditions of state weakness and disappear when the state is strong. “Strength” and “weakness” are such crudely conceived measures that they serve little useful purpose as explanatory variables. In Latin America, violence co-existed in a continual state of rivalry with nonviolence as techniques of both joined the repertoire of tools available to contenders acting within the field of power dominated by the state. What

may be distinctive about Latin America is that this tension dominated the process of state formation for so long, well beyond any period of time that might be proposed as a standard “maturity” cycle of state growth. More pertinent than state strength was the molding of states and the dispositions of statemakers over the course of nearly two centuries by the constant tension between violence and nonviolence, by the cycle of fear and preparation for violence that “gains a self-perpetuating and very often escalating power over the people,” to quote Elias. If we include the agents of extra-state violence within the field of state power, the state itself is no longer seen as a failed monopolizer or as a strong player or a weak player, constitutional or illegitimate, popular or oligarchic. Instead, the agents of the state are trapped in the same cycle of fear that also characterizes activity by others who are contending in the wider field of state power.²⁰

The Agents and Sources of Public Violence

I classify the agents or perpetrators of public violence as institutional, counterinstitutional, and para-institutional.²¹ Institutional violence emanates from the state itself when it deploys the armed forces, the police, judges and their accessories, instruments through which the state seeks to claim absolute sovereignty. Institutional violence also includes that associated with the formal allies of the regime in power, such as regional strongmen (*caudillos*) with their armed retainers and political parties with their respective militias. Counterinstitutional violence emanates from groups bent on seizing or reforming the state, either from within established state institutions (such as military plotters) or from without (such as a guerrilla army or a disaffected *caudillo* and his followers). Counterinstitutional agents even include the perpetrators of the more or less spontaneous, class-based violence deployed to protest, for example, food shortages or tax rises. The public character of violence may be most distinctive when it seeks either to affirm or contest the authority or legitimacy of the state.

Sharing in varying degrees the characteristics of both institutional and counterinstitutional violence, the third type of agent is para-institutional. In general, this violence is committed by groups that are loosely—and usually covertly—affiliated with organs of the state, that may depend on them for support, and that may even have been created or licensed by the state itself to collaborate in the elimination or intimidation of its enemies. Some para-institutional groups may have legal status as private, state-chartered organizations that are nevertheless led, organized, and manned by agents of the state itself. Others operate without any such charter even though they typically operate on behalf of some or all of the state’s coercive agencies and under their informal (if partial) sanction. Successful bandit groups, to the extent that they depend on the political protection of local notables, may be required to pay for that protection by making war on their sponsors’ political enemies. Exemplary para-institutional organizations in Latin America have been the *caudillo*-led bands that were most prominent in the nineteenth century, and the

death squads and other vigilante-type groups that became informal instruments of state terror in the second half of the twentieth century.²² Under certain conditions, official or semi-official para-institutional organizations can escape the control of their institutional sponsors.²³ An example of this sort of degeneration was the hodgepodge of armed bands known as the “contra,” initially sponsored by the Argentine state and later by the United States, to undermine the Nicaraguan state in the 1980s. They frequently fought among themselves, carried out criminal operations against unarmed civilians in cross-border sanctuaries in Costa Rica and Honduras, and worked out covert but shaky arrangements with elements of the governments of the two bordering states. Like institutional and counterinstitutional violence, para-institutional violence has a theatrical dimension that encompasses selective acts of terror and other gestures intended to dramatize power.

Public violence in Latin America draws on three kinds of power—economic (emphasizing class), cultural (emphasizing status), and political (including party)²⁴—in ways that account not just for the persistence of public violence but for its hardening into what has from time to time been called a “culture of violence.” So, instead of deploying the concepts of class, status, politics, and culture to build models (“authoritarianism,” “democracy,” “militarism,” “development”) that filter out or subsume public violence, I will use them to try to capture it and analyze it.

Economic/Class

No explanation for public violence is more widely assumed (if not actually asserted) than economic or class differences, especially for Latin America. This is at least partially because the privileged access to resources is well known to be even more disproportionate in Latin America than in other world regions. With so much at stake, incentives among the privileged for defending the status quo are as powerful as the incentives among the lowly for challenging it. In the historiography of the five countries of the isthmus of Central America, for example, the foundational nature of an inevitable conflict between economic classes underlies nearly every explanation of social and political contention of any kind. The ultimate, subterranean source of that conflict is typically understood as an agro-export production structure that has been controlled for at least a century by groups and individuals with privileged access to land and labor. “Elite” owners and managers used the power of authoritarian states (either directly, or indirectly through military proxies) to protect their control over land and their supply of cheap labor, brutalizing the lower classes into submission and virtually forcing them to resort to revolutionary violence. The poor and weak have been oppressed, often violently, by the rich and the powerful, and responded with violence, which triggered more counter-violence. Nothing could be simpler, more obvious, nor more intuitive; societies *are* class divided, and the most violent often turn out to be the most class divided.

But class identity—how people perceive their own class situation and how they assign class boundaries to others—can shift abruptly. And even when the boundaries and identities remain stable, elements of different classes seem at least as likely

to form alliances as they are to contest one another violently. Perhaps the most important question, for the claim of class-based violence to be convincing, is: Precisely what minimum proportion of any given subordinate class's total "membership" should one expect to discover among groups ostensibly fighting on its behalf? Class affiliation can be undermined rather easily, particularly by patrimonial forms of political organization, making political and military alliances notoriously fluid and almost impossible to predict on the basis of economic or class interests or identities.²⁵ One study of Guatemalan public violence, although sympathetic to the guerrilla movement, nevertheless speculated that the Guatemalan armed forces succeeded in liquidating the movement in part because many of the rural-based small property owners who composed a segment of the guerrilla army "deserted as soon as the repression became more intense, even joining with paramilitary groups in the service of repression, which shows that the motive for participation in the guerrilla war included a good deal of adventurism and inclination toward violence, common among the inhabitants of the eastern region of the country."²⁶ A study of one region of Guatemala showed how two different ethnic-class blocs (Ixils and Ladinos) refused to kill each other in the name of either the class-oriented guerrillas or the equally class-oriented military government.²⁷ In Nicaragua, old kinship and regional loyalties weighed heavily among the Marxist Sandinista revolutionaries in both their insurgent (1970s) and governing (1980s) phases. In fact, it would be hard to find a better example of the weaknesses of an exclusively class-based analysis of the sources of public violence than the Nicaragua of the 1980s.²⁸

Finally, it is telling that almost all of the killing carried out by armed groups of all kinds in Latin America—whether army, militia, guerrilla *frente*, or death squad—has invariably been the work of the *soldado raso*, the private who is "recruited" (often coercively) from among the poorest classes of Latin American society, whereas the intellectual authors, the ideologists, and strategists of the killing, are usually among the most privileged. The examples of intraclass killing during situations of public violence, in which individuals target members of their own economic class, are well documented. How much more often, indeed, has violence actually hindered the expression of class interests, instead of advancing it? To the extent that violence can be used to move oneself from a lower social class to one of higher status, it can weaken class solidarity.²⁹ It is not that class doesn't matter, but that the concept has infiltrated the analysis of violence to such an extent that it has tended to obscure its many cross-class attributes. In the Latin American context, it is a force that must be reconciled with patrimonialism.

Culture/Status

In Latin America, culturally constructed status hierarchies have created and distributed power even more effectively than the economically constructed differentiations of class.³⁰ A theoretical elaboration of status hierarchies emerges in Roberto DaMatta's studies of Brazilian society, highlighting what DaMatta called the "personalistic," "relational," and "holistic" characteristics that have survived alongside or

tended to overpower individualistic and egalitarian tendencies. Two separate status hierarchies (one ascriptive, traditional, and Latin America; the other achievement-oriented, modern, and North American) have cohabited, not only in Brazil but in Latin America generally: "We will not advance toward significant understanding of Brazilian and Latin American reality if we do not discover the deep relations between the impersonal commands of law (conceived as a function of 'individuals') and 'friends' (a universe governed by the implicit and personalized rules of *parentela* [i.e., extended family networks])." The "harsh impersonal hand of the law" has thus been forced to obey "the gradations and hierarchically differentiated positions that everyone occupies in a web of socially determined relations."³¹

Like economic class, personalistic status hierarchies organize power in highly asymmetrical ways, with interesting consequences for distinctive expressions of public violence. Roberto Kant de Lima has shown how those hierarchies can lead to comparatively more violent responses by state authorities in Brazil to perceived infractions of the law, as they apply "the general law of their society to a particular case."³² The kind of particularism practiced routinely in Latin America is frequently interpreted as "corruption" in the United States, as if it were simply a matter of the police or other authorities "obeying the law" when in fact they carry contrary systems of meaning. Official or state-sponsored violence isn't so much a matter of "corruption" in the North American sense of a legal or constitutional aberration, as it is an expression of distinctive premises having to do with status. In Brazil, for example, the application of the law "is always particularized, personalized, and negotiated with respect to special social circumstances, in contrast with the system of universal application of the local laws to particular individuals and cases in the United States."³³

Kant de Lima's reference to the prevailing pattern of rigid status hierarchies as "the core of another legal and political culture" points to one of the oldest themes in the scholarly literature on Latin America: the genealogy of an Iberian political culture, and its status as an explanatory variable for any number of purportedly distinctive traits—from underdevelopment and *machismo* to lawlessness and military rule. Richard Morse, relying heavily on DaMatta, argued that the primacy of patrimonialism over feudalism in Spain and her overseas territories led to a "relational ethic" yielding "structures of authority [as opposed to structures of legal-rational domination] and casuistical applications of principle."³⁴ The publication of Morse's study coincided with one of those surprising swings in academic fashion. After two decades of shunning and disparagement, political culture theory achieved a sort of comeback in the 1990s, as Gabriel A. Almond, its principal architect, was quick to declare.³⁵

One of the most suggestive statements of the connection between culture and public violence appeared in a study by a special commission of the Peruvian Senate, which daringly concluded that "In a generic way one can argue that the process of socialization in Peru, through the family, school, social relations and communications media, has collaborated in the creation of a *culture of violence* [emphasis in original], which stands in the background and reinforces other manifestations of

violence.”³⁶ Observing that this kind of “structural violence” has been present in the Andes even during nominally peaceful times, Enrique Mayer bifurcated the problem into different arenas of violence, one associated with domination and the other with subordination: “First, to what extent are there long-term institutionalized patterns of violence that have been imposed by state, church, and ruling elites? Second, regarding the responses from below, is there an Andean cultural pattern of violence?”³⁷ In this class-oriented configuration, the state and its allies initiate the cycle of violence, generating a distinctive “popular” kind of violence in response. A more holistic approach was suggested by James B. Greenberg’s study of the high level of daily violence among the Chatino people of Mexico, which he tied to the emergence of capitalist relations of production and exchange. As community violence came into contact with the patron-client structure of Mexican politics (itself, according to Greenberg, “a well-known source of rancor and violence”), local and regional political violence intensified.³⁸

State/Party

“Political power,” according to Mann, “derives from the usefulness of centralized, institutionalized, territorialized regulation of many aspects of social relations.”³⁹ In the context of postcolonial Latin America, the relevant institutions have been those of the state itself and of the parties and proto-party groups organized to compete for control of the state. Politics in Latin America share what Christopher Clapham called the “neo-patrimonial” character of politics in much of the Third World. What makes it “neo” is that patrimonial relationships “pervade a political and administrative system which is formally constructed on rational-legal lines.”⁴⁰ In other words, this is a political system that reflects the fusion, in DaMatta’s terms, of the two ideal-type status hierarchies: one oriented toward individual achievement and organized along bureaucratic and legal-rational lines, and the other ascriptive, particularistic, and personalistic. It is not the mere survival of particularistic status hierarchies, but the way in which they combined with liberal capitalist hierarchies that may make the Latin American case distinctive. Latin America’s “world time” experience with republican constitutional politics and liberal capitalist economic organization began with the infancy (or at least the adolescence) of modernity itself. The modern liberal forms did not so much displace the old status hierarchies as disguise them. That is just how Octavio Paz, writing in the late 1940s, seemed to interpret the constitutional principles that formally ruled the continent since independence:

In Spanish America they merely served as modern trappings for the survivals of the colonial system. This liberal, democratic ideology, far from expressing our concrete historical situation, disguised it, and the political lie established itself almost constitutionally. The moral damage it has caused is incalculable; it has affected profound areas of our existence. We move about in this lie with complete naturalness. For over a hundred years we have suffered from regimes that have been at the service of feudal oligarchies but have utilized the language of freedom. The situation has continued to our own day.⁴¹

What those constitutions merely disguised without extirpating was *caudillismo*, the Latin American variant of patrimonial or patron-client politics, or what Paz, more dramatically but less precisely, called “feudal oligarchies.” In one terrible, stunning phrase—“We move about in this lie with complete naturalness”—Paz captured, as few have, the *political* lineage of public violence. The constitutions were not mere adornments but functional disguises that enabled *caudillismo* to flourish amid electoral events and a formal but utterly irrelevant acknowledgement of the separation of powers. Hence the “naturalness” of the lie, for without the constitutional disguises that made it possible for political authorities to claim a purely legalistic but spurious legitimacy, the hard patrimonial core of politics could scarcely have survived.⁴² F.-X. Guerra’s analysis of nineteenth century Mexican politics brilliantly exposed that core as a “new form of *caciquismo*” whose agents enjoyed a freedom of action unknown in the colonial era; this new *caciquismo* was “an illegal power, hidden, shameful but inevitable” and the *cacique* himself was “an arbitrary authority, without juridical recourse, since legally he did not exist.”⁴³

By the nineteenth century, there was no longer any ideology available that was congruent with patrimonial practice, whose now lifeless ancestors were absolutism and divine right. What passed for an ideology was a hollow liberalism, shot through with a crude *pactismo*, the colonial-era relation of reciprocal rights and duties between ruler and ruled, now reconfigured “among diverse elements, which could subdivide themselves infinitely.”⁴⁴ Of nineteenth-century Latin American politics, Guerra and Demélas-Bohy wrote:

Family cliques, clientelist networks, municipal bodies, all these collective participants in the old society remained strong and healthy despite the adoption of new principles. Modern political life and its electoral dimension could not avoid being profoundly changed; electoral competition could not reflect the free opinion of individual citizens, since these were very much in the minority. Only those members of the elites . . . would confront each another in modern elections by mobilising, each in their own way, the old collective actors, . . . From this moment *caciquismo*, the structure so peculiar to the political life of the Hispanic countries, assumed the place that it was to occupy for a long time to come.⁴⁵

The link between *pactismo* and public violence derived from two implications of *pactismo*: A broken pact could mean war or other acts of violence among the parties already pacted. Even an unbroken pact implied unbending hostility toward those not pacted.⁴⁶

In Brazil in the 1840s, according to Uricoechea, the monarchy’s vain attempt to centralize authority forced it to adopt a policy of “tacit pacts and tactical alliances with the privatized power of the local notables. Favors and privileges were suggested as moves to gain the sympathy and cooperation of local families and prominent landlords. . . . Mutual awareness that the state and the landlord each needed the other in equal measure gave rise to a tacit pact resulting in a pattern of exchanges and reciprocities, the state granting authority and status in exchange for the land-

lord's cooperation and service." By the middle of the century, as political parties became institutionalized, the pacts encompassed the provincial governments that were now seeking resources from the central government in exchange for electoral support: "The political system thus organized itself through a series of pacts of ever expanding radius."⁴⁷ Political banditry likewise illustrates the link between violence and patrimonialism. Agents of the state or regional power brokers, men with little coercive capacity of their own, hired gangs to kill or otherwise intimidate political enemies.⁴⁸

Without a congruent ideology to which patrimonial political authorities could appeal in order to dissolve conflict, violence became the standard arbiter for the settlement of disputes, so much so that it came to nest "naturally" within liberal democratic constitutional shells. Elections themselves functioned as opportunities for patrons to display clientage and ultimately therefore appropriate occasions for martial engagements. Richard Graham's magisterial study of the inner workings of Brazilian imperial politics shows the system to have been an artful blend of violence and electoralism.⁴⁹ David Nugent's study of provincial Peruvian politics between 1885 and 1935 found "endemic conflict" among elite-led factions over control of the region of Chachapoyas, or as he also called it, over "their efforts to become the single privileged client of the state." In seeking power or struggling to keep it, factions persecuted each other endlessly, in whatever ways they could. Those who wished to rule had "to demonstrate their ability to dominate, shame, and impose their will on their adversaries," even as both rulers and adversaries employed the liberal rhetoric of popular sovereignty and equality.⁵⁰ Once set in motion this "double-bind process" was hard to stop.

Today, ideology still counts for much less than the particularistic ties of clientelism and corporatism.⁵¹ One result, as Douglas Chalmers has argued in the case of modern Latin America, is the tendency for the political and electoral activities of the incumbent to merge with the administrative mechanisms of the state. To survive, the incumbent has to secure "the loyalty of factions within every accessible institution and organization" well beyond the formal authority that a constitution gives the president because "such 'personal power' is all there is, and it is necessary for survival."⁵² A more concise definition of patrimonial politics in its modern guise could scarcely be constructed. The patron-client dyad is an expression of a vertically structured pact, which also has its horizontal counterpart among the more or less equal patrons and chiefs who pact among themselves. And when personal power "is all there is," violence is likely to be deployed as an enactment of personal power and to be understood by its witnesses, victims, and perpetrators alike as a demonstration of fitness to rule.

Vengeance linked patrimonialism and violence.⁵³ In imperial Brazil, according to Uricoechea, any bureaucratic effort to redress a private wrong was interpreted as vindictiveness. "In a context where legal penalty was likely to be interpreted as a vindictive reaction, what was meant to be extirpated was actually fostered, and institutionalized means of redress were not considered restitutive actions but further crimes."⁵⁴ The power of vengeance was also an underlying motive force of "La Vio-

lencia,” the great wave of interparty strife that swept Colombia in the 1950s and 1960s: “Cruelty is inseparable from vengeance and is legitimated by vengeance,” and the desire for vengeance became all the more intense as rural rebels shifted their allegiance from national political leaders to local *caudillos* (*gamonales* in the political vocabulary of Colombia).⁵⁵ In his study of *caudillismo* along the Uruguayan-Brazilian border in the late nineteenth century, John C. Chasteen argued that partisan violence was a response to moral standards of “revenge and loyalty” in which “narratives of war” were crucial in constructing the identities of the two principal (and ever-opposing) Uruguayan political parties, Blancos and Colorados.⁵⁶ Posada-Carbó interpreted nineteenth-century violence in Colombia in a strikingly similar way to that of Chasteen: “[P]artisan feelings were based on the memory of bloodshed caused by previous battles and, as elections approached, old wounds were reopened in a highly politicized society.”⁵⁷ This was the politics of blood, “and not only,” as John D. Kelly noted, “the kind of blood you are said to be born with, but also the kind of blood you shed.” Kelly meant blood sacrificed “for nation.” I refer to blood shed for the party. In either case, “It is always very difficult to argue against death stories, and the fresher the blood and higher the body count, the more difficult this becomes.”⁵⁸

The Military

In the 1960s, the Latin American armed forces suddenly emerged as a major target of social scientific research. Studies of the military mounted rapidly over the next three decades in response to the growing tendency of Latin American military institutions to seize control of the state from elected, civilian governments. Although institutional rule by the armed forces (rather than rule by an individual military tyrant) was not unknown before the 1960s, it became habitual and widespread by that decade. Moreover, unlike earlier military interventions in government, the “new militarists” typically intended to hold the reins of government indefinitely.

The surge in research on the Latin American military tended, however, to magnify the armed forces’ responsibility for violence and authoritarianism, thus exaggerating the innocence of civil society and the latter’s capacity for engendering a democratic transition. Taken as a whole, the research tended to suggest that military participation in government could be conceptualized as a continuum between two poles, one being direct military rule and the other civilian control. Along the continuum were points at which power was shared between civilians and the military in different proportions depending on the proximity of those points to one pole or the other. One could detect points of “accommodation” or “relative equilibrium” between the two forces, civilian and military, tending in one direction or the other. It followed that policies directed toward reducing the military’s strength and augmenting civilian power would bit by bit drive society toward full civilian control of the military. Hence one could logically speak of a “transition to democracy” or “redemocratization,” or of a contrary “remilitarization.”

By implying that the military, along with the state of which it was a part, had somehow managed to extirpate itself from society altogether, these researchers suggested that controlling the military was a matter of strengthening civil society vis-à-vis the state, or (in the Dahlian tradition) encouraging the formation of a plurality of institutions and associations capable of counterbalancing the state. According to this view, Latin Americans have a state but no civil society, or one stunted by insufficient information, mobilization, or organization. The tendency has been to see the military as an intrusive, and even alien, presence in society even as it interacts with other social forces.⁵⁹

Civil society, understood as that realm of public life beyond the grip of the state, is neither democracy itself nor is it necessarily capable of spawning democracy, particularly where clientelism predominates. If it is true that Latin America is now passing through a transition from authoritarianism and war to democracy and peace, it is a process whose prospects cannot properly be assessed without reaching beyond state-centered paradigms (“militarism,” “authoritarianism,” “democratization”).⁶⁰ Everywhere today, civil society—its creation, sustenance, and survival—is celebrated as the *sine qua non* of democracy. But civil society is also the incubator of public violence. “While civil society can aid democracy,” wrote one of the few skeptics, “it can harm and even help destroy it.”⁶¹ For example, Guillermo O’Donnell pointed out that during the dictatorship in Argentina from 1976 to 1984, the military officers could not have controlled society to the extent that they did without the collaboration of others. Thus, the inauguration of a democratic government is not enough; it is necessary to overcome the “strong authoritarian tendencies that exist in society—including in the culture—of our country.”⁶²

It is for this reason, perhaps, that attempts to control state-sponsored violence by copying into Latin American constitutions the U.S. constitution’s fiat that the president is the military commander in chief has so often proved futile. Although military officers have often enough exercised sovereign authority over a president, even elected, civilian presidents sought to manipulate and use the military for narrow political purposes. Military admonitions against partisan meddling by a civilian president, especially when constitutions were being made, are not difficult to find, and they suggest that the armed forces’ eagerness to declare itself “apolitical” should be interpreted less cynically.⁶³

Latin America and the United States

The United States and the countries of Latin America have found common ground in perfecting and perpetuating public violence in response to congruent interests built on some obvious incongruities.

In Latin America, public violence is dispersed, multidimensional, and subject to constant public observation; it is, above all, highly visible, habitually crossing the porous frontier between state and civil society, and typically meant to be contained

within national borders. Latin American public violence has been and continues to be lavishly diverse, spectacular, and abundant in source and form: state-sponsored terror, *caudillo* armies, party militias, death squads, guerrilla warriors, bandit gangs, peasant *jacqueries*, and the great landholder's private police.

In the United States, public violence has been practically invisible because it is almost solely a product for export, made by the state and its private-sector collaborators. Public violence has been channeled beyond the national borders of the United States in the covert operations of the Central Intelligence Agency against and for other states; in the partially overt programs of military and police "assistance" run by the Defense Department, the State Department and their private-sector collaborators; and in the occasional military invasion or bombardment of another nation.⁶⁴ As such, U.S. public violence remains embedded in the cells of minutely differentiated politico-military technocracies in which the public and private sectors overlap and combine with one another; an ideology of national security has tended to veil the less visible aspects of public violence (as an export product) from public observation and debate. Robin Luckham called these technocracies an "armament complex" that links scientists, security intellectuals, and security managers, who are in turn supported by the employees of an "armament culture"—including "interpreters," researchers, and publicists.⁶⁵ Within what is generally referred to as the "private sector," this kind of intermingling goes beyond the notorious self-dealing between defense contractors and government. The export of public violence to Southeast Asia in the 1960s and 1970s and to Central America in the 1980s relied heavily on the secret collaboration of private-sector enterprises as U.S. government "contractors." The U.S. government's secret use of private firms to carry out military missions in Colombia and Peru against drug producers and traders was exposed in 2001 after employees of an Alabama firm hired by the CIA mistakenly helped the Peruvian Air Force shoot down a plane carrying U.S. missionaries, killing two people.⁶⁶

Thus a complementarity has emerged, between the restricted sphere of the organization and deployment of public violence in the United States, controlled by Washington and its private-sector allies, on the one hand, and the requirements of societies in which public violence constitutes an everyday form of "convivencia," to quote Ernest Samper, the president of Colombia, as he reflected on the quotidian character of violence in his own country in 1995.⁶⁷ The historical convergence of deeply embedded political, social and cultural practices in North America and in Latin America created the conditions for complementarity. Those conditions had ripened sufficiently by the late 1940s for collaboration between the United States and Latin America to intensify massively during the Cold War and to continue after it ended. Just because the relationship has been collaborative rather than being, say, a mere exchange of services or products, its proper analysis forces us to abstain from separating "external" and "internal" variables, or to impose "national" and "international" levels of analysis. Even less justified would it be to identify the relationship as one of mere "dependency" or of some species of imperialism. In the case of Central

America during the 1980s, the results of the killing were re-exported in unexpected ways back to the United States, in the form of unwanted immigration, political polarization, deformations like the Iran-contra scandal, and fears associated with the risks of an expanding and unwinnable war (the “Vietnam syndrome”).

Conclusions

Instead of accepting the civil-military relations paradigm and its focus on the military and military rule, historians of public violence should draw into their research civilian bureaucrats, professional politicians, judges and their collaborators (within or outside the institutional boundaries of the state) and various contenders for state power, including self-proclaimed popular liberators, whose armies could only claim that they had better reasons than others to kill.

Latin America’s enduring patrimonialism accounts for a distinctive pattern of public violence. Of course, an argument for the prominence of clientelism and other practices associated with patrimonialism in Latin America would not surprise any reader of the region’s historical and social-science literature.⁶⁸ Yet when violence as an aspect of political clientelism has been considered at all, it typically has been as an expression of the coercive capacity of the patron over his clients, and not as a characteristic disposition of patrimonialism itself to which clients as well as patrons may be drawn—a disposition that became deadlier still as it was transformed through globalization in the second half of the twentieth century.