

**Angélica Durán-Martínez.** *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico.* New York: Oxford University Press. 2018. 308pp. Pb.: £23.49. E-book: £20.89. ISBN: 978-0-19-069596-5.

Over the past several decades, Latin America has witnessed the end of almost all armed conflicts, but there has not been a corresponding reduction in levels of violence. Instead, the decline of insurgencies has created conditions favourable for powerful criminal and paramilitary organizations to control territory and illicit markets. Angélica Durán-Martínez's *The Politics of Drug Violence: Criminals, Cops and Politicians in Colombia and Mexico* is a rigorously researched investigation into the dynamics underpinning the high levels of 'drug violence' in Latin America. Durán-Martínez makes an agenda-setting contribution to the rapidly growing field of scholarship on criminal violence, by demonstrating that violence needs to be conceptualized in terms of visibility as well as frequency.

Durán-Martínez begins by explaining the immense variation in violence in major drug-trafficking countries. She differentiates her research agenda from those seeking to explain only the variation in the frequency of violence, by highlighting a puzzle that hides in plain sight: why do some criminals go to considerable lengths to publicize their violence, while others go to similar lengths to conceal it? To this observation, she adds the further variable that frequent violence sometimes involves spikes of intense violence. Durán-Martínez argues that the frequency of violence is determined by the degree of competition within local illicit markets, whereas its visibility is determined by the cohesion of the state security apparatus in the area. Spikes in the frequency of violence result from the outsourcing of violence to local gangs. By disaggregating violence into the twin considerations of visibility and frequency, Durán-Martínez is building on a body of work that examines the limitations of the scholarly reliance on homicide statistics as the best measure of violence. Extending the scholarship to

consider visibility is important in order to demonstrate that it can be strategically manipulated by criminal groups to influence the perceived frequency of violence.

Durán-Martínez also disaggregates the key actors in her study, examining the complex interactions among them. The state and organized crime are not two monolithic antagonists. Among criminal groups, the book highlights important interactions between street gangs and more hierarchical criminal organizations. Similarly, the state is more than just the cops and politicians of the book's subtitle; it is a fractious aggregate of governors and mayors, rival political parties, branches of the military and police forces. Durán-Martínez has assembled a wealth of richly detailed data on case-studies of five cities in Colombia and Mexico to support her argument. She uses media reporting to identify trends and then examines the processes at work within them through a huge body of interviews with diverse actors.

The case-studies are spread across three chapters that demonstrate Durán-Martínez's argument in close and careful detail. The organization of these chapters is a model for the comparative method. Chapter four is a longitudinal study of the city of Medellín, examining variation in the patterns of violence within the city over time. Chapter five is a 'most different' comparison of the cities of Cali in Colombia and Culiacán in Mexico, analysing why cities with very different profiles experienced periods of high frequency but low visibility violence. Chapter six is a 'most similar' comparison of the Mexican border cities of Tijuana and Juárez, exploring why two cities with similar profiles saw periods of high frequency and visibility violence, but with Juárez exhibiting much sharper spikes.

Beyond the theoretical contribution of this book, several other important concerns become evident across the chapters. Durán-Martínez situates her study within a broader regional and historical context, which she analyses in chapter three. While focusing on local dynamics, she is attentive to external pressures – and particularly to the influential role of US drug policy on outcomes within her cases. Furthermore, throughout

the book, the author revisits to the common assumption that drug-trafficking markets are inherently violent. The range of variation captured in her study demonstrates that this is not the case. Each city case includes periods of time when drug-trafficking was present, but violence was low. Finally, Durán-Martínez connects her research to an important policy point, namely that the current international drug prohibition regime is not achieving its goals. The book concludes with a strong statement to this effect: security will only improve in Latin American cities when the prohibition regime is fundamentally rethought.

*The Politics of Drug Violence* puts the visibility of violence on the scholarly agenda, persuasively arguing that this concept should not be overlooked in analyses of the micro-dynamics of violence. Inevitably, given the scope of this area of investigation, the book raises more questions than it can answer. Two, in particular, merit further research.

First, in matters of visibility, an important question is: visible to what audience? Durán-Martínez acknowledges this question, and for the purposes of her study the answer seems to be the state, or at least those positioned close to the central state. Even if the state is the intended audience, it is unlikely that the intended audience is ever the only audience, and it is also likely that violence will not be visible in the same way to all audiences. A victim of no real importance to the state might be a highly visible and important local actor, especially among marginalized communities. Additionally, non-criminal actors may play a role in making violence visible to different audiences. Journalists, activists and other local public figures act as mediators, such that visibility is not a direct output of the strategic interests of criminal groups. In the famous case of the missing 43 students of Ayotzinapa in Mexico, for example, the victims' families have mobilized to ensure violence would not be ignored.

Second, this book finds a connection between the cohesion of the state security apparatus and variation in the visibility of drug violence. Further investigation should establish the mechanism connecting these variables, and, specifically, it must specify how the perpetrators of violence are able to gauge the cohesiveness of the security apparatus in

order to decide on the type of violence to engage in. This is important, because in some of Durán-Martínez's cases, the triggers for fragmentation of the security apparatus are unexpected. For example, the deployment of the military to conduct policing operations fragments the security apparatus in some instances, even as it projects state power. For criminal groups to recognize the fragmentation of the security apparatus, they must be able to correctly read the state. This suggests that the visibility or legibility of the state is also an important—but rarely theorized—consideration.

That this book opens so many fascinating directions for further research is an indication of its contribution to scholarship on organized crime and violence. The work should be essential reading for anyone concerned with criminal violence in Latin America, but it will be of interest to other audiences too. Scholars of civil war will appreciate Durán-Martínez's careful work to disaggregate key actors and dynamics, and can benefit from looking beyond frequency as the only reliable measure of violence. This new approach to viewing violence will also make the book a valuable resource for policy-makers, journalists and activists.

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