



Book Review

Book Review – Making Police Reform Matter in Latin America and Policing and Politics in Latin America: When Law Enforcement Breaks the Law

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Books: Mary Fran T. Malone, Lucia Dammert, and Orlando J. Perez. *Making Police Reform Matter in Latin America*. Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 2023; ISBN: 9781685853532 (hardcover).

Diego Esparza. *Policing and Politics in Latin America: When Law Enforcement Breaks the Law*. Boulder: Lynne Reiner, 2022; ISBN: 9781955055505 (hardcover).

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The consolidation of democracy in many (but not all) Latin American nations has led scholars and policymakers to examine how newly accountable institutions have performed basic governmental functions. At the same time, the growing strength of illicit organizations linked to gangs and the transnational drug trade has raised concerns about Latin American governments' ability to perform the most basic function of providing order and safety for their citizens. The books reviewed in this essay reflect these concerns. Their deep and broad analysis of policing and police reform could not be timelier. Both books' historical, theoretical, and empirical rigor make them important contributions not only to the specific issue of public safety in Latin America, but also to the more general issue of how governments perform basic functions in a newly democratic region.

The volume by Malone, Dammert, and Perez focuses on no fewer than seven case studies. Their ambition pays off in several ways. They provide an important service in bringing in the often-neglected case of Panama, which represents a (mostly) striking success of reform and demilitarization since the 1989 US invasion. They are also able to distinguish among the generally successful, although far from perfect, cases of Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay, and the far more varied cases of Nicaragua, Colombia, and Peru. They set up Peru as their least successful case; they note genuine progress in Colombia since the 1980s and 1990s, and troubling setbacks in recent years in Nicaragua. One criticism of their choices in cases is that inclusion of cases such as Mexico, Venezuela and the violence-wracked Central American nations of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala would have allowed deeper analysis of nations that are comprehensively failing in policing.

The authors provide a granular narrative of police reforms in each of these seven nations. They acknowledge the importance of entrenched conditions such as regime types, crime levels, economic development, and inequality (p. 5). But even more crucial to their analysis is the concept of a "critical juncture:" the key "moment of choice" (p. 6) at which specific narrow political (and perhaps even personal) factors can allow policymakers to transcend given constraints and take steps that then reshape underlying conditions. The authors emphasize that these junctures can both stymie and encourage meaningful reform. Thus, in the case of Chile, the right-wing Pinochet coup of 1973 and the leftist social protests of 2019 are both viewed as "critical junctures:" as are the overthrow of Nicaragua's Somoza dictatorship in 1979, and the election of Daniel Ortega in 2006; Costa Rica's demilitarization in 1948; the US invasion of Panama in 1989; the region-wide post-Cold War movement to democracy; and the drafting of the new Colombian Constitution in the early 1990s. This concept allows for greater understanding of the complex issue of political agency in the context of constraints imposed by socioeconomic and global forces. But the tremendous variety of phenomena included in this category points to a missed analytical opportunity. More precise concepts would have allowed for focused theoretical conclusions about the impact of social revolutions, outside intervention, democratization, or social protests (to name a few) on police reform.

The authors finish the book with a comparative theoretical chapter, which points to four crucial elements for police reforms: political stability; "sustained political will," which should transcend partisanship; accompanying investments in social services and human capital; and a commitment to apolitical policing (pp. 212-214).

In their greatest theoretical contribution, the authors apply rich analysis and comprehensive data to address the complex relationship between public perceptions of violence and police reform. Thus, in the case of Peru, they argue that overwhelming popular concerns about violence and related tolerance or support of police extralegal action (including torture), is an important element in understanding the overall failure of police reform (p. 181). In contrast, the generally peaceful

Uruguayan setting and broad support for the police as an institution is a crucial factor in understanding successful police reform (p. 205). These specific points lead the authors to conclude, based on quantitative data and statistical analysis, that “higher levels of trust in police create space for more preventive public security policies” (p. 214). This positive dynamic can lead to a “virtuous circle” of trust and genuinely constructive and effective police reforms which engage with communities. On the other hand, lack of trust in police reform can “lead to spirals of ever-increasing militarization and deteriorating public security,” and the empowerment of the military and private security forces at the expense of the police (p. 214).

Diego Esparza’s book is an equally rich account of policing and police reform in Latin America. His primary political and theoretical concern is to understand what encourages the institution of the police to adopt a logic of either “predation” or “protection” toward its citizens (p. 125). Esparza presents broad historical chapters on the three cases of Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, and a thoughtful and nuanced explanation for his selection of these cases. His choices reflect an interest in exploring cases with contrasting histories of political violence, democratization, police professionalization, and—crucial to his argument—centralized structures of government and police management. Esparza devotes considerable attention to these nations’ early political history. The entire book is based on his acknowledgment of “the struggle that states face when digging themselves out of their Spanish colonial legacies” (p. 125). On a more specific level, he points, for example, to the way in which Chile’s failed experiments with decentralized political management of the police force in the 19th century led to high levels of centralization from 1927 on. His presentation of these historical developments is convincing (and engaging). It sets the stage for his in-depth analysis of more recent efforts at reform.

Esparza’s analysis of these reforms focuses on several crucial points. He provides a thorough discussion of what exactly is meant by professionalization, and argues that resources, in the form of good pay and benefits, are just as important as oversight and de-politicization in creating a professional police force. He looks closely at the impact of democratization—concluding that democratization is important but not sufficient for effective police reforms. He also explores the larger significance of what he calls “militarization” (but what might better be called military-style hierarchy). But it’s clear by the end of the book that the key factor in understanding the presence of real police reform, and a more constructive relationship between police and society, is the degree of centralization in the government and its system for funding, managing, and regulating the police force. National governments can provide political leverage and resources more effectively than local and state-level leaders and are less likely to be captured by local elites or illicit actors. This point is especially relevant to recent decades in Colombia and Mexico, marked as they were by the rise of powerful drug networks. But it also applies, for instance, to the economic elites that dominated remote areas of Chile in the 19th century.

He applies this model convincingly to recent attempts at reform in each of his three cases. In Chile, he describes the high levels of professionalization in “the best police force in Latin America” (p. 21). He notes that this centralization was crucial to the emergence of a functional police force in 1927, it was a fundamental feature of Chile’s strong democracy up to 1973, and it made it far easier to take the necessary steps to reform the Chilean police in the wake of the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1990s and the early 2000s. Colombia’s success with police reform has been far more recent. His description of the process through which Colombia transformed from one of the most violent nations in the world to one with a professional, highly regarded police force is compelling. He demonstrates that the nationalization of the police force was a crucial factor. Beginning in the early 1990s, successive administrations took steps to introduce a military-like structure to the national police force.

He points to a far different set of outcomes in Mexico, which faced a similar challenge from illicit

drug networks. Just as this challenge grew exponentially in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Mexico's political system was becoming more competitive politically at local, state, and national levels; and the government was experimenting with reforms which reduced the power of national-level authorities. Mexico's decentralized police force, operating in a decentralizing political system, was not up to the task of providing order in Mexico. National officials began to implement police reforms in the early 2000s, and attempted to nationalize what had been an almost entirely local and state-level institution. But these reforms came far too late, and the policing vacuum at the national level led directly to the government's efforts to incorporate the military in the so-called "drug war." The result was shocking levels of violence from both sides. In the meantime, local police were deeply implicated in corruption linked to the drug networks.

Esparza's carefully chosen cases bolster each of his main points, but none so much as his argument that police reform must be led by national authorities. The violence and disorder which plague much of Latin America can only be dealt with at this highest level. His deep analysis of these three cases is for the most part convincing in this regard.

But his analysis does leave some questions unaddressed. He attempts to provide an explanation for the police's significant role during the Pinochet dictatorship. But his explanation that a highly nationalized police force was simply doing the bidding of a violent, undemocratic government fails to explain this dramatic regression in police professionalization. The same can be said of his treatment of the violent police response to the 2019-2021 Chilean demonstrations, which he describes as "protest policing" (p. 58). Esparza is right to hail progress in Colombia. But the continued violence of smaller drug networks, the presence of right-wing militias, and the defiance of holdout revolutionary forces temper his more optimistic conclusions, even as a left-of-center President has taken power. Esparza makes an admirable attempt to summarize and evaluate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's approach to police reform; but the incomplete record (at the time of publication) and Lopez Obrador's inconstancy on the issue make larger conclusions difficult. Esparza's excellent historical work surely provides the basis for further study of interesting recent developments in Chile, Colombia, and Mexico.

The move away from dictatorship and civil war in many Latin American nations has led to attempts to understand more mundane aspects of how democratic and semi-democratic governments operate. Nowhere is this truer than in the area of policing, as police forces have taken over many of the functions brutally performed by militaries during darker times. The trend toward democracy has led to a sober, non-ideological effort to assess the ability of governments to perform basic functions: in areas such as taxes, order and policing, social welfare policy, and economic management. These efforts have been partly a response to the so-called "pink revolution"—and more recent leftist incarnations—because of the expanded government role implied by leftist ideology. But it's also true that efforts to expand government strength in these and other areas have transcended ideology: in some policy areas, pursued as much by centrist and rightist governments as by leftists. Much of recent and distant Latin American history has been marked by grievous failure on the part of governments to perform the most basic functions. Accounts of efforts to emerge from this failure are even more important. These books on police reform are among the best examples of these accounts, and they provide a tremendous service to those attempting to understand efforts by governments to assert themselves in the nations they rule.

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None.

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