



The New War on the Poor: The Production of Insecurity in Latin America

John Gledhill (2015). *The New War on the Poor: The Production of Insecurity in Latin America*. London: Zed Books, 2015, 248 pp.

The study of peace, war and security in Latin America brings a contradiction in terms. On the one hand, the low frequency of inter-state conflicts means the region is often depicted in the literature as a ‘zone of peace’—especially in the sub-region of South America—as noted by authors such as Arie Kacowicz and often claimed by members of the diplomatic agencies of these countries. On the other hand, when we take into consideration another unit of analysis, this scenario changes:

the region turns into one of the most violent in the world. Both the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and numerous institutes concerned with conflict analysis, think-tanks and experts are going beyond the state-centric logic, claiming that Latin America is one of the most dangerous areas of the world, with alarming rates of killing and violent crimes.

In an effort to understand this paradoxical logic, *The New War on the Poor* provides an unparalleled analysis of the security

situation in Latin America. John Gledhill—Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester— has a unique perspective, based on an analysis grounded in consistent ethnographic research throughout his career.

The work is divided into six chapters, the first of them representing a key point in the author's argument. It explores the fundamental concepts and theoretical framework that justify thorough research on the securitization of poor areas of Brazil and Mexico. In this sense, the book 'follows the tradition of Marxist thought in treating capitalism as a system of social relationships that is inevitably contradictory in its working, but whose logic needs to be unpacked' (9). Thus, he examines the situation of insecurity and lack of peace in Latin American society as closely related to a mode of production that makes the state an instrument of economic interests. Such context brings a criminalization of poverty and securitizes poor areas of the region. Additionally, he assumes that 'transnational and global processes are extremely important, and they are both geopolitical and economic in nature' (1). Therein, more than a local

problem, the drug wars and the criminalization of the poor areas are also related to interests of foreign powers in ways that overlap traditional conceptualizations of state sovereignty.

John Gledhill explores important concepts for reflection on how the state treats people and violates their rights when it securitizes popular neighbourhoods and villages. Ideas such as securitization, poverty, security and development are extensively explained by the author. A minor drawback of the book is that the author oversimplifies the conceptualization of violence, especially when he explains the limitations presented by the concept of structural violence introduced by the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung. Furthermore, he does not discuss, even critically, the concept of cultural violence from the same author. On the one hand, such a brief explanation is comprehensible given the theoretical-conceptual nature chosen for analysis, focusing on the state as an instrument of violence on behalf of the ruling class. But the Latin American context shows a type of violence that could be historically explained using multiple causal explanations. Together, culture and social injustice struc-

tures can be regarded as central constituents when considering the history of slavery, dictatorships and the naturalization of prejudice in Latin America. If connected to Glendhill's theoretical framework, the concept of *galtungian* violence could help him 'explore how multiple forms of violence intersect and what effects of that intersection are' (3).

However, as stated earlier, this is a minor drawback. When analysing the work as a whole, the analytical capacity of the author and his consistency in ethnographic research make the book an essential read for researchers who study high crime rates in poor areas of Latin America. In chapters 2 and 3, the author combines close scrutiny of documents with ethnographic analysis to understand the characteristics of violence in Brazil. His research shows similarities in police violence performance and limitations of pacification policies when comparing different urban areas, such as Salvador, Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. Glendhill also provides an historical analysis showing how violence 'is nothing new in Latin American societies and that much of it has been meted out historically by elites in the name of "order and

progress" and social cleaning' (37).

One of the highlights of the book is chapter 3. The author presents ethnographic material collected in the *Bairro da Paz* neighbourhood, Salvador. The logic of the 'law of crime' is explained in detail through his interviews and participant observation. Additionally, Glendhill allows us to understand the idea of 'securitization as a reproducer of insecurity' in which the state's presence embedded with an authoritarian approach creates more tension than pacification.

In chapters 4 and 5, the case of the war on the poor in Mexico is explained. While in chapter 4 the author explains the history of wars against insurgents in the states of Guerrero and Chiapas, in chapter 5 the focus is the state of Michoacán. Extensive time spent in the field positions the author to astutely link the historical reality of oppression of the peasant population with the current context of the drug war among cartels, in which there is a strong involvement of state officers. His explanation provides a powerful critique to common sense that the war against cartels can be resolved only through law enforcement.

Finally, chapter 6 is conclusive when presenting the implications for the people of the securitization of the drug war in the Brazilian and Mexican cases, presented in detail in the previous four chapters. He concludes that the suffering victimizes mainly the poorest class, who are unable to reside in safe —and rich— areas, the only option remaining to live in the turmoil of criminal violence.

John Gledhill's new work is a must-read for any scholar concerned with studying Latin American peculiarities. The data and information explained by him open a valuable window of opportunity for work aiming to understand the *sui generis* case of a continent that is treated as peaceful but has alarming levels of violence.

In addition, social scientists concerned with other contexts of violence in urban centres in places like Colombia, Venezuela, Honduras, Guatemala and the North/North-east of Brazil certainly will benefit from the methods of ethnographic analysis developed by Gledhill. The book will further critical analysis of issues such as crime, police performance, corruption and, most importantly, the challenges

involved in building justice and peace in the midst of extremely violent scenarios.

Marcos Alan S.V. Ferreira

To cite this article: Marcos Alan S. V. Ferreira (2016): The New War on the Poor: The Production of Insecurity in Latin America, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2016.1231366