Book review of „Geography of Violence: Power and Counter-power in Latin America”

In May 2022, the official number of desaparecidos in Mexico exceeded 100,000 people. This overwhelming figure of documented cases of forced disappearances represents only the tip of the iceberg of a human rights and violence crisis, according to the human rights network Red TDT - Todos los derechos para todas y todos (Red TDT, 2022)

Mexico is by no means a statistical outlier in terms of violence in Latin America, but rather an emblematic case to which many of the contributions in the book refer. Violence in Latin America in the last century was characterised by the context of authoritarian regimes, in which responsible military governments and their apparatuses could be clearly named. In recent decades, violence has now "developed a seemingly unstoppable momentum of its own" that is more untransparent than the political violence of the 20th century because it stems from different actors and does not seem to pursue an obvious goal (Dorsch, Flörchinger, & Nehe, 2022).

"Geography of Violence. Power and Counter-power in Latin America" is rarely about the shocking statistics on homicides or forced disappearances that are cited in press articles day in and day out. The edited volume reviewed here is understood by the editors Timo Dorsch, Jana Flöchinger and Börries Nehe as an approach to the many expressions, effects, understandings, and forms of resistance concerning violence in Latin America. The book, published by the Mandelbaum-Verlag in April 2022, includes revised contributions by actors from civil society and academia that emerged at the 2019 conference organised by the same name in Frankfurt. The edited volume is divided into four sections: Narrar (Narration), Cuerpo (Body), Comunidad (Community) and Memoria (Memory).

Narrar

The basic problem addressed by various contributions in the first section of the book is the need to unravel patterns in the excessive and everyday violence to subsequently put them into words. It is considered normal "in the fog of war not to understand [...] what is happening and why it is happening" says Marcela Turati. In her reportages, she deals with the so-called drug war in Mexico and its effects on individuals and society (Turati, 2022, p.43). It is a matter of moving "from confusion to complexity", says Carlos Beristain, a medical doctor and psychologist who has been working for decades on human rights violations in Latin America and Africa. He has provided his expertise as an independent consultant in truth commissions in Colombia, Guatemala and in the case of Ayotzinapa in Mexico, among others. According to him, the conflict in Colombia, for example, is a complex conflict, which is thus perceived as incomprehensible. Conflicts appear confusing when they do not fit our usual models. This realisation, he says, makes it possible to "understand the geographies of violence" through careful analysis of its dynamics (Beristain, 2022)

A key component of Beristain’s is to understand violence as control of populations. "Sometimes violence aims at controlling routes, sometimes at controlling the border and sometimes at the control of what is situated 'underfoot', that is, what has to do with the extractive industry. But the logic remains the same" (Beristain, 2022). This linkage of violence to the extractive industry carried out by capital-rich interests is made particularly clear by looking at the high number of killings (and more subtle forms of intimidation) of environmental activists and journalists covering these connections.
The international NGO Global Witness noted in its annual report for the past year that three out of four of the environmental and land defenders murdered worldwide were cases from Latin America. This was particularly documented for Colombia (65), Mexico (30), Brazil (20), Honduras (17), Guatemala (13) and El Salvador (12) (Global Witness 2022). Not exposing these "mechanisms of horror" would mean that this horror continues to be produced and spreads to other areas, according to Beristain (p. 23).

To obtain information at all, on the basis of which a profound analysis of the mechanisms of violence becomes possible, is associated with enormous dangers. This is again illustrated by Turati's descriptions of "zones of silence" (Turati, 2022). This is how she and other journalists name places where intimidation at the local level is so extreme that obvious human rights violations go unreported for years. Recounting a conversation with a local reporter in the state of Coahuila, Mexico, she recounts, "So I asked him, "But how come you didn't do anything, why didn't you ask for help?" He replied, "Who am I going to ask for help when the police and the narcos are one and the same? Who will come to help me" (p. 57).

Another difficulty with reporting on violence in Latin America is that it presents itself in a "tension between total visibility and total illegibility". The "mix of spectacle and manipulation" of media coverage is characterised by sensational graphic representations of corpses and statistics such as the "ejecutómetro" (execution counter). This goes hand in hand with the impossibility of "giving meaning to experience and observation" (p. 9). Literally "not being able to speak" is also expressed in the practices of violence. The search for disappeared relatives has gone through a process of first speaking of murdered people, then of corpses, and when these were missing, of disappeared people. In the meantime, collectives of family members of the disappeared have been forced to become forensic experts who search the vast deserts of Mexico on foot for burnt "bone fragments as big as teeth" in the hope of identifying the remains of their relatives and gaining sad certainty about their deaths (p.52). This new kind of violence in many regions of the Global South produces, "a black hole of imagination, speechlessness and imagelessness" (p. 7).

Journalists write against this speechlessness with projects such as Geografía del Dolor (Spanish for: Geography of Pain; Geografía del Dolor, 2015) or Romper el Silencio (Spanish for: Breaking the Silence Ruiz Parra, Emiliiano, Rea, & Almazán, 2017) and oppose "narratives that criminalise victims and relatives" because this justifies the omission of state investigation. The aim of these projects is to reconstruct the identity of the disappeared and thus restore dignity to stigmatised victims and give expression to the sorrow of relatives (p. 103).

Cuerpo

In the article "Women's bodies as the territory of war", Rita Segato relates the context of violence in Latin America to colonialism and racism. She speaks of a "world of permanent coloniality" in which the "plundering of territories and bodies" did not stop with the independence of previously colonised states and instead has recently intensified (Segato, 2022, p. 112). At the centre of the "coloniality of power" is racism, which, in a process linked to interests, classifies bodies into a position in history and landscape. Racialisation is "alienation, an otherness based on a biological attribution that is grounded in a historical process [...], rather than in a substantive characteristic, in the essence of bodies" (p. 113).

Thus, Segato also refers to violence against women, as a strategy of population control. In an understanding of binary gender relations, women are the neuralgic point in community networks she argues. Consequently, through violence against women, the stability and cohesion of an entire social structure is strategically attacked. Segato substantiates this thesis by referring to a manual on warfare in Guatemala addressed to soldiers, which demonstrably ordered rape as a war strategy. The 2016
judgment on these crimes against humanity acknowledges that sexualised violence was systematically used as a weapon of war for years (pp. 122-123).

Emanuela Borzacchiello’s examination of feminicides establishes why this phenomenon is dealt with as a political crime. In her research, she analyses the change of territories within which acts of violence against women intensify. In doing so, she links public and private space. Using the cities of Ciudad Juárez and León in Mexico as an example, she shows how the increase in violence against women correlates with the development of the cities in recent decades. Privatisation, job insecurity, the rise in crime and violence are a breeding ground in which feminicidal violence has taken on increasingly brutal forms. She indicates that it has become a common pattern in feminicides to display the bodies in public spaces (Borzachiello, 2022). This is interpreted by her as a perversed patriarchal demonstration of control over female bodies. In contrast to the term femicide, the category feminicide considers a patriarchal state structure of violence:

In the case of Mexico, she characterizes the state as one "that, in all its fields of action - from education to health, from access to justice to the workplace - not only fails to take preventive measures and to eradicate violence, but instead contributes to its permanent reproduction by not investigating, not punishing, and not considering reparation for the victims. The hand that kills is also the hand of a society that underestimates, ignores, or conceals violence against girls and women. It thus allows this very violence to become a phenomenon that is inseparable from our everyday lives" (p. 151).

Beside the structural character of feminicides, Borzachiello also emphasises the resistance practice of feminist groups through which they "re-exist". After the Tlatelolco massacre, in which hundreds of students were murdered by military units during demonstrations in Mexico City in 1968, feminist groups were the first to free themselves from the paralysing fear and collectively reappropriated public space. It is precisely from a geographical perspective that it becomes visible that women "by pushing back the centre of power" re-exist and provide "an existence to the territory" (pp. 157-158).

Alex Wischnewski adds a transnational perspective to the phenomenon of feminicides by suggesting understanding them as a continuum. She links everyday experiences, such as sexist phrases, which contain patriarchal forms of violence, with feminicides as an extreme expression of the overall violent conditions (Wischnewski, 2022, p. 163-164). In her view, linking everyday experiences with fundamental social critique contains an unexploited mobilisation potential for feminist resistance (p.171).

Comunidad

As already mentioned by Beristain, the panorama of violence in Latin America is embedded in a context of massive resource extractivism. In the tradition of dependency theory and Wallerstein's world system theory, Segato argues that Latin America, globally speaking, continues to play the role of exporting primary goods: "There are not several worlds, there are not two worlds. There is only one world and extractivism. The latter, with its focus on life, bodies, and territories, connects this world" (Segato, 2022, p. 112). Accordingly, Jonas Wolff argues in his analysis of extractivist conflicts, that different scales are relevant. First, the local one, i.e., the territory that is directly affected by resource extraction. Then there is the national scale, where the central political decisions on extractivist projects are usually made, although the regional scale is often relevant in this respect as well. Traditionally, foreign, or multinational companies also play a major role, as most raw materials are exported, which gives extractivist conflicts a trans- or international dimension (Wolff, 2022, p. 238).
Various contributions also point to the "unholy connection" between neoliberalisation processes and violence in Latin America, whose mechanisms have long been in the spotlight in research on "authoritarian neoliberalism" (Jenss, 2022, p.223-224). An important aspect addressed by Verónica Gago's research on so-called "financial extractivism" is the pressure to do any kind of work. This is fuelled by the means of small and large credits that have been granted massively to private individuals in recent decades (Gago, 2022, p. 203). She uses an extended concept of extractivism here, which not only refers to the exploitation of natural resources, but also to the exploitation of the human body and its labour. The exploitation inherent in this is an important dimension of violence that is far less addressed than other forms.

Using the example of police violence in Brazil in the context of the "war on drugs", which is primarily directed against the poor, young and black population, Vera Malaguti speaks of the "constitution of the killable subject" (Malaguti, 2022, pp. 211-213). According to her analysis, bourgeois democracies are in the process of becoming war machines, as public spending is increasingly redirected from health and education towards public security. From a historical perspective, she argues, that security policies in Brazil originated in the fear of enslaved people in the 19th century. This is still an important basis for maintaining a "deeply hierarchised and unequal society". "Deadly police violence is the most important evidence of this. Especially when we see that its victims always have the same profile: Young black people living in poverty".

**Memoria**

Mario Rufer highlights the important role of memory on violent acts in the last thematic chapter of the volume by pointing out that the central point of memory is not to recount a chronicle of violent events, but to develop an understanding of how they became possible (Rufer, 2022, p. 247). In this way, he broadens the field of study beyond the mere material perpetrators and victims of violence. Without complicity in the form of consent or passive approval of majorities, repeated episodes of violence could not be carried through. Drawing on the journalistic contributions in this volume, he understands forensics as a resistant practice whose concern is to name what is silenced. This practice also consists of linking acts of violence to circumstances that are "far away, [seemingly] dissimilar and belong to different times" (p. 248). Approaches to this idea are implemented by Segato or Wolff when they in the sense of Stuart Hall's "theory of articulation" articulate local extractivism conflicts with Europe's insatiable hunger for raw materials and energy. Accordingly, Malaguti also articulates police violence against poor and black people with the fear of the enslaved in colonial times. In this way, Rufer argues, an empirical condensation is made that links colonial violence to the present. He criticizes that historiography produces a historicity of ruptures and discontinuities and thus the idea that the past is a space that has been overcome (pp. 248-249). Yet the point is to analyse the modalities by which the modern constitutional state continues to act in a colonial, that is, racist, exclusionary, and plundering manner. Coloniality is so powerful precisely because it discursively presents itself as something else and denies the "spectral nature of its origin in the present" (p. 249).

In the 20th century modality of population control, dictatorships were primarily concerned with concealing certain information, he says. The governmentality of the 21st century, instead, is characterised by the fact that the "secret" lies in the abundance of data and information that must be articulated in an empirically meaningful way in a narrative (p. 255). In this way, articulated narration in the present time becomes a resistant practice that offers experiences a meaningfulness.

Following Rufer's postcolonial analysis of articulation, the complex - not confusing - structure of practices based on colonial roots precisely does not produce by accident failed states or anomalies: "Neither Mexico, nor El Salvador, nor Colombia, nor Brazil are failed states. They are states that are
geared to produce what is happening. The states serve as vehicles in the sometimes-diffuse mixture of corporations, criminal organisations, and state structures" (p. 260).

Concluding remarks

The common thread of the volume, which connects the thematic chapters, is the questions of what logic violence follows, how it can be explained and in what way it can be meaningfully narrated in a way that does justice to the pain of those affected. Reflections on resistant practices with forensics as a metaphor through which the "present is literally laid bare" (Hufschmid, 2022, p. 266) run through the edited volume in the quest to understand the complex geography of violence in 21st century Latin America. Just as the limbo of the "not dead, not alive" of the disappeared makes "the parting [for relatives] impossible [...] and the continuation of life difficult", the supposed senselessness of violence through imagelessness usually leads to "indolence and resignation".

The constant mutual referencing of the authors, as well as the illuminating analyses of the individual contributions, lead to an exciting reading experience. The obvious strength of the book is the combination of analytical approaches from journalism, civil society actors and a wide range of academic disciplines, including history, geography, sociology, political science, anthropology, cultural studies, and psychology. In this way, the multiple dimensions of violence in Latin America in the 21st century are illuminated using a variety of perspectives and methods. Exemplary for the richness of portrayal is a photographic portrait of a Nahua community, which illustrates the "struggle for life" (Coronel Paredes, 2022). The volume allows the reader to take part in how the authors struggle with the creativity necessary to grasp the constantly changing forms of violence in such a way that it does not leave the reader with mere indolence and resignation.

The various contributions to the book impressively combine much-needed images and ideas with plausible analyses that have a lasting effect. The exchange of ideas that takes place in this book offers both authors and readers new words, new impressions, new capacities to think about what destroys entire societies.

Reference List


