

## **BOOK REVIEW: Human Rights in Latin America – A Politics of Terror and Hope**

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Latin America has long been a region of foreign intervention and turmoil. From the annihilation of millions of natives of South America by the imperial powers of Europe to the involvement of the United States and its military in the local affairs of almost all the different nations of Latin America, the people of Latin America have faced many obstacles and have been oppressed by many entities throughout its history. A movement in favor of human rights and the power to defend it has slowly gained steam in the last two decades, but a history of human rights violations still haunt the memory of those who lived through the many coup d'états, revolutions and military juntas that plague Latin America's history.

In *Human Rights in Latin America: A Politics of Terror and Hope*, Sonia Cardenas focuses on the myriad of human rights violations that have taken place in Latin America. She specifically aims at discussing issues post-1970s, including the path that human rights have taken and how it they developed in the region – particularly in relation to both successes and failures. Cardenas offers an insightful view of the current situation in Latin America and how the human rights movements there have surely changed the way the people and the governments of Latin America view human rights.

Cardenas addresses three major topics in her work: the roots of human rights violations in Latin America, the path to political reform that has changed and has yet to change the situation on the

ground and improve the human rights situation, and holding entities of power accountable for their actions or inactions in relation to human rights standards.

It is said that violence and conflict have always existed in Latin America; the natives of the continent took part in war, slavery and sacrifice, with increasing violence occurring when colonialism was introduced to Latin America by the Europeans. A rapid and systematic process of annihilation took hold in the continent, and millions of natives lives were lost to the European war machine as well as to disease that was brought over by the conquerors. The systematic destruction and enslavement of a people began and opposing the new structure of power meant certain death. Cardenas briefly writes about the effects of colonialism on the people of Latin America and how it is, even today, still an issue that is present in society. The thought of biological, moral, racial, and economic superiority by certain ruling classes marginalized and led to the killing of thousands of natives as recently as the 1980s. The belief that those with European ancestry are superior to those with native blood pushed genocidal agendas in countries such as Guatemala and Nicaragua. Cardenas should have addressed the change in mentality among the people of Latin America after such harsh events throughout its history, however. How much more prone to accepting violations are Latin Americans because of the amount of violations that they have endured since the beginning its history? I believe Cardenas should have addressed this in her book and to complement her approach for analyzing the people of Latin America.

Cardenas also writes about the trends of human rights in Latin America since the 1980s, when a transition began to occur. Military dictatorships, with no regard for human life or human rights, began losing control of the populations as democratic systems began gaining popularity and support from the people. In the 1980s, several countries began transitioning from governments with dictators or military regimes to governments elected democratically by the people. With the rise of democratic governments, human rights began to become an even more important issue for the general populace and governments. The condemnation of human rights abuses that occurred during a dark period of Latin

American history, combined with the implementation of policies that pushed human rights forward and made them an issue of national concern, moved the region toward rights protection. Cardenas notes that Latin America achieved major strides in the human rights field in the 1990s but even more so in the 2000s. She states that Latin America has shown the “greatest overall improvement in human rights conditions” (p. 27) since 2000 and that is not because of a random occurrence, but rather because of the pro-human rights governments that have emerged recently and a civil society that is gaining strength and popularity. One thing worth further exploration, however, is how much this forward momentum can be attributed to interventionist policies by the United States. That aspect of the story is under-explored by Cardenas.

Cardenas considers not only of the strides that have taken place in Latin America, but also the horrible violations that occurred throughout many countries in different time periods. For instance, in 1973 Chilean armed forces (led by an American-backed general named Augusto Pinochet) bombarded *La Moneda*, the official residence of the President of Chile, while President Salvador Allende was still inside. This brought about one of the bloodiest military governments that took hold in Latin America. During Pinochet’s regime, thousands of Chileans were abducted, tortured, and killed by the dictator’s forces, marking one of the darkest periods in Chilean history. Cardenas writes about the terrible military junta in Argentina that also participated in massive political abductions and murders, as well as the torture of thousands of its citizens. To this day, the whereabouts of thousands of Argentinians remains unknown, labeled simply as *Los Desaparecidos* (the Disappeared Ones). Cardenas discusses similar situations that took place in other countries such as Brazil, Peru, and Guatemala among others. Human rights violations were rampant in the twentieth century, and such violations occurred most of the time under military dictators or juntas that were supported by the United States because of the fight against communism and their stance during the Cold War. Although such events are analyzed by Cardenas, the level of analysis of these events and their impacts on their respective countries is not as well examined

as one would expect in a book that talks about human rights violations and why they occurred. More of the blame should be given to the United States, particularly for their part in supporting repressive regimes in their fight against communism.

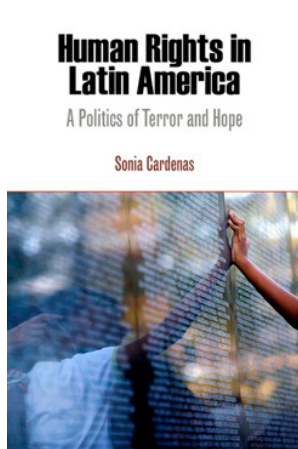
Apart from the historical approach that the book takes, Cardenas also approaches the issue of why people violate human rights. What compels a government to oppress, abduct, torture, or kill its own people? Cardenas gives the most widely known answers for this question, which are that animosity, evil, and cultural issues bring forth human rights violations. These reasons are what Cardenas labels “conventional wisdom” (p. 52). First you have the animosity assumption, or the belief that people simply can’t get along. Differences cause people to have natural friction and such friction causes human rights violations; these differences may be among groups such as communist or non-communist, rich or poor, African descent or European descent, immigrants or citizens. Such differences cause one side to feel like they can infringe on the other side’s rights because of said difference. The second assumption is the evil assumption, or that humans are inherently evil and therefore are prone to violating other people’s human rights if possible. Some even contend that Latin Americans are more violent or prone to violence (such as oppression of women) because Latin men are *machista*.

Cardenas goes beyond these assumptions, though, and states that human rights violations in Latin America majorly occurred because of decision-making factors, or the cost-benefit analysis of certain situations. Cardenas states that “decision-making approaches assume that leaders are rational actors who essentially undertake cost-benefit calculations whenever they decide whether or not to violate human rights” (p. 55). She connects that with having war time leaders agree to violate human rights more openly than leaders who are not faced with internal war or civil conflict. Cardenas also goes a step further than most social scientists by arguing that the wars that plague Latin America and the human rights violations that stemmed from such wars were, in fact, the result of huge U.S. involvement in the internal affairs of Latin American nations. She writes that the U.S. had direct involvement with

“Operation Condor, a regional network of intelligence agencies that coordinated repression” (p. 67). The U.S. clearly had a role in the oppression and violations that occurred in Latin America and provided the necessary instruments so that pro-American governments could remain in power no matter what the cost.

Cardenas also addresses the international and regional networks of organizations that promote and encourage human rights protections today. She points out that in recent years, human rights organizations, regional organization, treaties, commissions, courts, and transnational advocacy have taken a strong stand in their promotion of human rights and its protection. Cardenas praises “Latin America has one of the most developed region-wide mechanisms for regulating human rights” (p. 83). These mechanisms include the American Convention of Human Rights, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. All these mechanisms are in place so that human rights violations like the ones that occurred in the twentieth century never take place in Latin America again. Cardenas calls transnational advocacy networks the “key engines of human rights change” (p. 102). Non-governmental organizations, as well as local organizations, have played a major part in bringing to light the violations that have occurred in the past and discussing ways in which people can avoid such violations from occurring once again. According to Cardenas, transnational networks can exert pressure so that “ordinary people’s empathy for the way that other human beings are treated, their willingness to mobilize for the rights of others” makes it possible for human rights to change (p. 154). In ending her book, Cardenas discusses how having people remain genuinely accountable can deter human rights violations from occurring; leaders’ fears of being held responsible protects people from tyranny. She also notes that Latin America is the region with the most truth commissions in the world. Each truth commission has varying degrees of power and mandates, but they all are in place to bring to light the terrible violations that have occurred.

Overall this was an incredibly well-written book. It was very informative and offered a different perspective on human rights issues in Latin American that other authors and intellectuals have truly not discussed. Although more could have been done to attribute a large majority of the human rights violations to North American policies towards the region and the promotion of friendly dictators to the U.S., this is still an important book worth reading. The U.S. comes out with a few scratches in Cardenas' book, but hopefully future work will continue this discussion and delve even deeper into the past and future of human rights in Latin America.



#### **Book Information**

*Human Rights in Latin America: A Politics of Terror and Hope*  
Sonia Cardenas (2011)  
264 pp, University of Pennsylvania Press, \$23

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