

REVIEW

Countering Police Violence After Dictatorship

by Gregory Weeks

Contesting the Iron Fist: Advocacy Networks and Police Violence in Democratic Argentina and Chile. By Claudio Fuentes. New York: Routledge, 2005. 271 pp. US\$75.00, hard bound. ISBN 415971691.

Claudio Fuentes, currently the director of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) in Chile, has been studying and publishing on civil-military relations for a number of years. The problem of the persistence of police violence, the topic of *Contesting the Iron Fist*, has many similarities to the dilemma of democratizing the role and behavior of the armed forces. Both involve exerting civilian control over a repressive apparatus (and in post-authoritarian contexts like Argentina and Chile, repression was intense during the era of dictatorship) and enacting reforms in the face of institutional resistance. Such reforms have been historically weak across Latin America. Analyzing the struggles to limit police abuses and to establish oversight mechanisms, the author provides a clear and theoretically-informed analysis of the failures of police reform, using both qualitative and quantitative data for support.

Fuentes focuses on the impact that human rights advocacy groups have had on agenda setting, promoting legal reforms, and monitoring police practices. Have activists in Argentina and Chile been successful? The quick answer is a sobering “no.” Not only are citizens’ rights routinely abused by the police, but efforts at reform have advanced little and, in some cases, have actually been reversed.¹ The “political opportunity structure”—the domestic context that makes policies possible—all too often favors the status quo.

There is a large and ever growing literature on transnational advocacy, which offers a view that—unlike Fuentes—is often optimistic, as it emphasizes the positive connections that domestic and international human rights groups can make.² For example, the former have the greatest knowledge of a particular country, while the latter have far greater resources. However, Fuentes argues that pro-order forces can take advantage of opportunities just as much as those promoting a pro-human rights view. This seems especially relevant in the post-9/11 period, a time when the United

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States government has drastically changed its modus operandi with regard to domestic security, and has encouraged Latin America to join the “war on terror.” Citizens, even those living in countries that suffered military regimes in the not-too-distant past, can be convinced to accept and even support “iron fist” policies they believe will make them feel safer.

The book sheds analytic light on the incentives that tend to lead policy makers to maintain the status quo, and also raises important questions about the facilitating conditions for reform. How can we know when a critical juncture—a moment when real change can occur—is upon us? This is an important question for activists as well, since these moments in time may be brief, and the opportunity to enact reforms may not come again for some time. Fuentes discusses the facilitating and inhibiting factors³ and the need to recognize “windows of opportunity.”⁴

One interesting conclusion to be taken from the book is the importance of identifying unlikely allies at the right time. In 1998, Chile prohibited police officers from arresting suspects simply on the basis of “suspicious activities,” even in the absence of significant human rights activism. As Fuentes argues, the main reason was that even the moderate right agreed that such a move would aid in the overall effort to reform the judicial system.⁵ In Argentina, reform to limit the time a suspect could be held while trying to verify his or her identity occurred even over a presidential veto, after police beat to death someone in custody. At these times, even many in the pro-order camp agreed change was necessary.

The sad truth, however, is that many such reforms were quickly undermined or reversed by some combination of various pro-order groups. Fuentes argues that the civil rights coalition in Chile has missed opportunities to act due to lack of effective leadership, social networks, and resources.⁶ In Argentina, that coalition has been better organized and able to draw attention to specific issues, but continues to face stiff resistance.

This is a useful book for those interested in human rights advocacy, in general, and police reform in Latin America, in particular. Even though the last era of Latin American dictatorships is fading into the past, Fuentes effectively demonstrates that the democratization of police forces remains a goal rather than an accomplishment.

Notes

¹ Fuentes, *Contesting the Iron Fist: Advocacy Networks and Police Violence in Democratic Argentina and Chile*, 4.

² In these regards, the work of Kathryn Sikkink is particularly notable.

³ Fuentes, *Contesting the Iron Fist*, 38-40.

⁴ Fuentes, *Contesting the Iron Fist*, 137.

⁵ Fuentes, *Contesting the Iron Fist*, 85-86.

⁶ Fuentes, *Contesting the Iron Fist*, 73.