

Review

Policing Democracy: Overcoming Obstacles to Citizen Security in Latin America

Mark Ungar. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2011. 389pp.

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Latin America is more democratic today than in the recent past, yet in places also far more violent. Parts of the region suffer the world's highest crime rates, and a widespread sense of insecurity fuels calls for tougher policing. Understanding the origins of this problem, and suggesting ways out of it, is Mark Ungar's aim in this ambitious and insightful book.

Ungar compares the evolution of policing in Latin America to other places, such as Europe and North America. There, local policing in the 19th century was replaced by national policing in the middle of the 20th century, and by community policing in recent decades. In Latin America, by contrast, where national police forces were often used by authoritarian regimes as tools of repression, the third stage of community policing has largely failed to take hold. This kind of teleological analysis—comparing the way in which Latin American policing has evolved against how it should have evolved according to the North American and European models—forms the backbone of the book.

“Problem-oriented policing” (POP) is the standard Ungar uses to gauge the successes and failures of police forces in Latin America. In this model, which has been

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widely adopted throughout North America and Europe, police forces operate according to “SARA”: they Scan for problems, Analyze data, use that data to Respond, and Assess the efficacy of their actions. In Latin America, by contrast, POP is hampered by weak institutions, few opportunities for citizen participation, poor police training and management, generations of mistrust between police forces and society, and the strong support for tough on crime policing driven by widespread fear of insecurity. Ungar argues that insecurity “has become a crisis in Latin America, primarily by feeding off the weaknesses of democracy” (69). The contemporary wave of democratization in Latin America has crested together with the neoliberal dismantling of many core state functions. As a result, crime and insecurity have become problems at the same time as Latin American states’ ability to address them has diminished.

Ungar explores these issues in three in-depth case studies. In a chapter on Honduras, he points out that even though people recognize the benefits of POP, the police remain wedded to fighting crime forcefully and without accountability or oversight. In Bolivia, POP has made some inroads, but the police also remain recalcitrant. And much the same is true in Argentina, where the successes of police reform are tempered by widespread calls for tough on crime approaches. In each of these cases, Ungar notes that POP remains the standard by which to measure reform. The bulk of the book traces the reforms that have been tried and explains why they have failed. But in some of the more optimistic passages, for example on Bolivia, Ungar argues that the forces of history are stacked against the recalcitrant police forces, and that “as historical changes yank them forward, the police will not have much of a choice” but to reform (231).

And herein lie the strengths and the weaknesses of Ungar’s book. On the one hand, it is a thorough and comprehensive account of the challenges of policing in Latin America. Ungar’s book sheds a great deal of light on the history of police reforms in the region, and on why they have so often failed. On the other, Ungar is convinced that POP is the standard against which to measure what has been done and what remains to be done. There are several reasons for skepticism.

The first is Ungar’s assumption that history is inexorably moving in a particular direction, and will necessarily yank police forces forward along with it. Why should that be the case? Ungar’s own findings about the recalcitrance of police forces are some of the best reasons to be skeptical. There is no reason to presume that policing will inevitably become more, rather than less, democratic or repressive. Even in the United States, which

has much more closely followed the POP model, police violence and corruption remain serious problems.

The second is the whiff of missionary zeal in Ungar's discussion. He wants to spread the good news of police reform, for which he must first dissect what has gone wrong. In every case, even where POP has been tried and reforms have failed or police forces remained recalcitrant, Ungar's response is that it has not been tried enough, and that historical forces will in the end yank police forces forward. Substitute "free market economics" for POP, or even "the word of God," and you get a sense of the reasons to be at least somewhat skeptical of this kind of thinking. Evangelism is not convincing analysis.

The last reason for skepticism is contained in chapter 7, which lays out the keys to reform. Among other things, the ingredients include modern management and information-based evaluation techniques, along with "structured citizen engagement." The irony is that while Ungar rightly blames the neoliberal era for weakening the state's ability to deal with the problem of insecurity, he concludes by offering a somewhat neoliberalish set of policies: a new public management ideal of a well-managed and transparent state. It is telling that not only is the state supposed to be well managed and transparent; through "structured citizen engagement," arguably, so is society. Given Latin America's history of repression and marginalization, public reticence about being managed and controlled should not come as a surprise.

Ungar's book has many strengths, not least among them the depth of the author's knowledge about police forces in the region and the challenges reform efforts face. Its weaknesses reflect less on the author than on a widely held set of assumptions. No one doubts the seriousness of the insecurity problem, or the importance of reforming often repressive and corrupt police forces. But democracy is often messy, and involves citizens' open resistance to existing structures of engagement. We have seen such resistance in recent years, as many Latin American societies have challenged core neoliberal political and economic pillars, demanding better participation and engagement. In this light, there are good reasons to question the assumption that the route to better policing necessarily leads back to the structured citizen engagement and well-managed state of the neoliberal ideal.