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Political Policing: The United States and Latin America by Martha K. Huggins

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In the closing pages of Political Policing: The United States and Latin America, Martha Huggins uses the analogy of a “protection racket” to illustrate the role of social control in the creation of new states. Essentially, in the creation of a protection racket, a government, “by providing protection from violence . . . builds up its capacity for control and hegemony” (199). Through this analogy, Huggins proposes that the United States’s attempt to save Latin America from the threat of communism contributed to the creation of authoritarian regimes that pursued social control by exterminating personal liberties. Herein lies the great irony of U.S. intervention: as the United States sought to protect its hemisphere from the evils of imported communism, it fostered the creation of authoritarianism, a form of government ill-suited to promote the fundamental American values of life, liberty, and freedom.

Huggins is clear in her analysis of U.S. motives in Latin America: the United States needed absolute assurance that the dreaded “domino effect” of communism would not occur in its own backyard. To gain this absolute assurance, the U.S. infiltrated internal security systems of those Latin American countries most at risk of embracing communism. Through training foreign civilian police, the United States established a network of loyal and trusted contacts within Latin American governments who allowed the U.S. access to sensitive information, information which permitted the U.S. to monitor communist and other subversive activities. The surface motive was to promote criminal justice in Latin American governments. However, as evidenced by intervention programs in Guatemala, Bolivia, Chile, and most notably Brazil, U.S. training of civilian police forces had the consequence, whether intended or unintended, of further suppressing human rights. An abundance of information confirms that U.S. training taught Latin American police methods of torture, riot control, and public execution. Though difficult to pinpoint Huggins’s overarching thesis, her series of micro-theses illustrate how U.S. assistance to Latin American police helped centralize Latin American internal security forces and make them more militarized, authoritarian, and subversive.

Throughout her book, Huggins uses a sociological approach to present her information concerning political policing. Biased by her discipline, Huggins seeks primarily to describe how U.S. political policing affected the “sociology of policing” in Latin America (ix). Huggins seeks to re-create for the reader the culture of fear.
experienced by oppressed Brazilian citizens. Using personal accounts of both victims and prosecutors, particularly in the final chapters of her book, Huggins shows how U.S. training centralized, professionalized, and politicized the Brazilian police, which in turn demoralized members of Brazilian society. Huggins clearly shows how the United States silently watched as Brazilians lost their freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom from arbitrary detention. Huggins’s use of specific detail gives a unique perspective, especially concerning how comic strip writers and fashion designers responded to this oppression. At the same time, Huggins’s use of detail also shows that her analysis primarily focuses upon the social rather than the political or economic effects of political policing. It is evident that the study of police oppression drives Huggins, shown by her in-depth analysis and research throughout her book. Moreover, it is apparent that Huggins carries an emotional attachment to her subject. This attachment may have biased Huggins, causing her to exclude positive information concerning U.S. foreign police training, as well as negative U.S. responses to police oppression of the civilian population.

Despite Huggins’s personal biases, her sources are outstanding. In the preface, Huggins admits the inherent difficulties of her research, primarily in uncovering proof of U.S. actions recorded in covert documents. Because of these difficulties, past scholars have done little research, leaving Huggins with very little to draw from. Therefore, relying almost completely on primary data, Huggins searched government documents, including congressional hearings, FBI contact information, and, most importantly, information from the infamous Office of Public Safety (OPS). To her credit, in the face of much difficulty Huggins was able to conduct personal interviews with twenty-seven former members of Brazilian police forces. Such first-hand information from those involved in police actions is extremely convincing, though emotionally charged.

Because Huggins’s research appears to be groundbreaking, this book could easily become an essential text for those studying political policing in Latin America. While this book is significant for those studying U.S.–Latin America relations, this information could also be useful for political scientists and sociologists. Huggins’s greatest strength is the quality of her research; she certainly provides adequate evidence to support her thesis. At the same time, however, Huggins fails to remain focused, adding information that does not tie into her central thesis. In her discussion of intelligence-gathering information organizations, for example, Huggins has a great deal of breadth, but at times insufficient depth. Rather than including scattered information on less-significant internal security programs, Huggins’s research could be strengthened by additional analysis of the most important organizations, such as the OPS.

What could Huggins’s research mean for the future of U.S.–Latin American relations? Perhaps Huggins’s most significant achievement is exposing information about the depth of U.S. involvement in what some would see as a nonheroic and immoral mission. Huggins’s research details an unfavorable view of U.S. world motives. Thus, the greatest impact of her research is that it decreases trust in the U.S. government—from American citizens who were protected from such “sensitive” information, and from Latin Americans who suspected, but perhaps did not fully believe, that the United States was capable of permitting such grave violations of fundamental human rights.

—KACEY WIDDISON-JONES