Politics, Governance, and the Law

Making Sense of Violence in Latin America: Social Scientists and Networks of Expertise in Colombia and Mexico

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The intensity and varied nature of violence in Latin America has confronted social scientists with an urgent object of study. This essay examines how, by studying different processes of violence, social scientists have become embedded in wider networks of expertise spanning across civil society and the state. By participating in these networks, Latin American students of violence have enacted important intellectual and political interventions. I examine how the expert commissions for the study of violence launched by the Colombian state in 1958 and 1987 made landmark contributions to Colombian social sciences and produced representations of the country's past that amplified calls for the transformation of the political regime as it existed in the 1950s and 1980s. I also analyze how, by putting forth the concept of *feminicide* to describe the violence faced by women and girls in Mexico, feminist scholars opened the door for holding the state accountable for its inaction against these crimes, paving the way toward reshaping the country's criminal code and the implementation of social policies that adequately protect women's lives. Investigating these interventions in the context of wider networks of expertise evidences how the study of violence in Latin America has pushed social scientists out of the ivory tower, moving them to engage other social actors not only as informants but also as partners and allies.

Violence is a dominant feature of life in Latin America. Home to 10 percent of the world's population, the Americas concentrated 37.4 percent of the world's homicides in 2017 (UNODC 2019, 11). That same year, the homicide rate in the Americas was the highest in the world: 17.2 intentional homicides per 100,000 people compared to a global homicide rate of 6.2 (UNODC 2019, 11). As striking as they are, homicide figures fail to portray the full scope and nature of violence on the subcontinent. Lethal violence in Latin America has been the consequence of revolutions, dictatorships, and civil wars. It has also emerged because of illicit economies, unequal gender relations, and gangs. Recent estimates calculate the welfare costs of crime and violence to be at least 3.5 percent of Latin American countries' GDP, a figure that approximates the income share of the region's poorest 20 percent (Jaitman et al. 2017, 29). Faced with violence on this scale, a host of actors in Latin America, from NGOs to universities to governments, have sought to understand its origins and describe its contours in order to prevent its spread and repair the damage. This essay reflects on two such experiences making sense of violence to trace the different ways in which its study has pushed social scientists to collaborate with the state and civil society. I review the work of some of Colombia's state-appointed expert commissions for the study of violence and their impacts on both politics and the academy; and I discuss the role of feminist anthropologists in establishing *feminicide* as a legal category to name and prosecute violence against women in Mexico. These experiences illustrate how the study of violence has pushed Latin American social scientists out of the ivory tower and implicated their own research in broader projects of social change.

To identify the outcomes of Latin American social scientists' engagement with different types of violence, I think of them as actors operating within networks of expertise. These networks attempt to achieve an enhanced capacity to accomplish a given task (Eyal 2013)—namely, understanding violence and addressing its causes. Eyal's conceptualization of expertise is particularly fruitful here because, rather than focusing on certified experts (academics, for example) and processes of social closure around their specific knowledge domains, it invites us to focus on how different actors—not all of them certified or credentialed experts—work together to intervene in the world (Eyal 2013). Applied to the study of the development of the social sciences in Latin America, this approach explicitly asks us

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to consider how scholars at universities collaborated with other social actors in order to co-produce knowledge. I complement this framework with Eyal and Buchholz's notion of intervention: "the movement, [...] by which a historically specific truth-producing practice becomes an effective tool of intervention in the public sphere" (Eyal and Buchholz 2010, 123). Taking the intervention as a relevant unit of analysis alerts us to variation along two crucial dimensions: the nature of the coalitions between credentialed and noncredentialed actors, and the distinct effects of their efforts on the public domain. Therefore, my focus will be on how the partnerships between social scientists and other actors enhanced or limited the reach of their knowledge projects in the public sphere. Because of this focus, I will make only passing references to the institutionalization and professionalization of social scientific disciplines.

In what follows, I examine two instances where social scientists became embedded in networks of expertise regarding different processes of violence: civil war and violence against women and girls. In the case of civil war, I center on two episodes of the Colombian internal armed conflict, the first one known as La Violencia (1945–1965) and a second period from 1978 through 1991. In the case of violence against women, I analyze Mexico since the 1990s. I will pay special attention to the ways in which human rights activists, social scientists, and the state approached violence in these contexts to characterize two different interventions in the public sphere. I will show how Colombian social scientists set in circulation or amplified representations of the nation that contributed to unsettle the political regime as it existed during the late 1950s and late 1980s, and the ways in which Mexican feminist scholars and activists introduced the novel concept of *feminicide* and translated it into a legal category to push for the protection of women's lives.

COLOMBIA: UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE TO TRANSFORM THE POLITICAL REGIME

Colombia has lived through various waves of violence since the mid-1940s, all of which display important differences in their specific dynamics (Safford and Palacios 2002, 629). In this section, I will focus on two periods to examine their relationship to a particular truth-producing practice: state-sanctioned commissions for the study of violence. The first period, known as La Violencia (1945–1965), "refers to some twenty years of crime and impunity facilitated by political sectarianism" (Palacios 2006, 138), which resulted in approximately 300,000 deaths (Palacios 2006, 136). Between 1949 and 1953, conflict between the Liberal and the Conservative parties for control of the central state became increasingly radicalized and violent, feeding sectarian confrontations across the country (Palacios 2006; Safford and Palacios 2002). In response to the political disarray, a military coup took place in 1953. The new president, General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, offered an amnesty to liberal guerrillas, which helped reduce the overall levels of violence in the country (Palacios 2006; Safford and Palacios 2002). In 1958

the military government was replaced by the National Front (1958–1974), a power-sharing agreement between the Liberal and the Conservative parties. This new regime was promptly confronted with a new threat to public order: the emergence of left-wing revolutionary guerrillas, most notably the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, in Spanish) in 1964 and the National Liberation Army (ELN, in Spanish) in 1965. The birth of the revolutionary guerrillas reshaped the dynamics of political violence in the country.

The second period I focus on spans from 1978 through 1991. During this time, the national homicide rate skyrocketed, reaching an all-time high of approximately 80 homicides per 100,000 people in 1990, from approximately 25 in 1978 (Bello Montes 2008; Bonilla 2010). Throughout the 1980s, two interrelated transformations took place. The first one influenced the realm of violence directly: the appearance of new nonstate armed actors (drug cartels and paramilitaries), and the strengthening of existing ones. Guerrillas became more heavily militarized, coordinated, and reliant on illicit rents (Pécaut 1991; Safford and Palacios 2002). Paramilitary groups confronted the guerrillas, terrorized populations, and assassinated labor organizers, human rights activists, and left-wing politicians (Comisión de la Verdad 2022; Palacios 2006; Pécaut 1991). Drug traffickers launched a war against the state in 1986 to force the Colombian government out of its extradition treaty with the United States (Comisión de la Verdad 2022; Palacios 2006; Pécaut 1991). The second transformation was political. After the end of the National Front in 1974, the Liberal and the Conservative parties held on to power but continued to lose legitimacy. President Julio César Turbay (1978–1982) enacted a particularly repressive Security Statute (Palacios 2006; Pécaut 1991). Without doing away with these repressive laws, his successors Belisario Betancur (1982–1986) and Virgilio Barco (1986–1990) both launched ambitious peace attempts. Parallel to this, new civic movements pushed for an opening of the political regime through general strikes and by calling attention to human rights abuses, linking them to political repression and to the various strands of armed conflict (Comisión de la Verdad 2022; Palacios 2006). The pressure applied to the political system from below, as well as the crisis of legitimacy caused by widespread violence, resulted in the Constituent Assembly of 1991 (Comisión de la Verdad 2022; Jaramillo 2014).

Having reviewed the context of two distinct periods of violence in Colombia, I now turn to two iterations of a peculiar truth-producing practice that emerged, in their midst, to make sense of it: the expert commissions for the study of violence of 1958 and 1987.

FROM THE 1958 INVESTIGATORY COMMISSION TO "LA VIOLENCIA EN COLOMBIA"

The work of the 1958 National Investigatory Commission on the Causes and Current Situations of Violence in the National Territory (Comisión Nacional Investigadora de las Causas y Situaciones Presentes de Violencia en el Territorio Nacional, hereafter Investigatory Commission) inaugurates

Colombians' relationship to violence as "a problem of knowledge" (Karl 2017, 9). Devised during the transition from Rojas Pinilla's military dictatorship to the National Front—the power-sharing agreement engineered by the Liberal and the Conservative parties—the Investigatory Commission was part of a strategy by the new political regime to "reconcile and rehabilitate" the country (Jaramillo 2014, 35). In line with the National Front's spirit of rapprochement, the Investigatory Commission brought together Liberal and Conservative politicians, representatives of the army, and two priests from the regions most affected by violence.[1] One of the priests, Father Guzmán Campos, cajoled the other commission members to leave their desks in Bogotá, pushing them to visit some of the regions most affected by the violence (Guzmán Campos 2007). While gathering information that would allow the state to understand the full scope of the violence, the commission also managed to pacify some of the regions most affected by partisan fighting by brokering local peace deals (Guzmán Campos 2007; Jaramillo 2014; Karl 2017).

Although the Investigatory Commission did not produce a public report, its archive provided key source material for the book *La Violencia en Colombia* (*Violence in Colombia*), first published in 1962 (Guzmán Campos 2007). Written by former commissioner Father Guzmán Campos along with sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda and lawyer Eduardo Umaña Luna, *La Violencia en Colombia* is considered the first canonical work of Colombian social science. Sánchez, for example, argues that the book marked a breaking point between the existing literature on the period—distinguished by apologetic depictions and testimonial texts—and the beginning of empirical studies on the subject (Sánchez 2007, 23). Palacios explains that *La Violencia en Colombia* "[molded] the literate middle classes' understanding of the phenomenon" (Palacios 2006, 137). Through the book, the three authors offered the literate class of the period a rich discursive apparatus to think about Colombia. Guzmán Campos portrayed a national soul tarnished by violence and hatred; Fals-Borda described a country pushed to violence by the pressures of an incipient social transformation; and Umaña Luna diagnosed that weak state institutions ultimately lead to violence (Guzmán Campos, Fals-Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962a; Jaramillo 2014). Together, these accounts set in circulation ideas that consolidated enduring collective understandings of the country's moral, institutional, and social-structural characteristics, all of which were thought to contribute to violence (Jaramillo 2014).

As the first attempt to advance a sociological understanding of the partisan fighting, the book rendered con-crete the scope and consequences of the conflict and firmly established violence as a feasible object of study for the academy (Jaramillo 2014; Pécaut 1998; Segura Escobar and Camacho Guizado 2017). Moreover, *La Violencia en Colombia* further consolidated the public and scientific relevance of the Faculty of Sociology at the Universidad Nacional (National University), of which Fals-Borda, one of the authors, was a leading figure (Guzmán Campos, Fals-Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962a, 25; Segura Escobar and Camacho Guizado 2017). These institutionalizing effects on Colombian social science contrast with its destabilizing effects on the political regime. The book was the focus of intense public debate at the time of its publication. It was widely reviewed in the press and was even discussed in Congress—in fact, Fals-Borda devoted his introduction to the second volume to a content analysis of the book's reception (Guzmán Campos, Fals-Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962b). Although the authors insisted on not assigning responsibility for the violence, repeatedly writing that "we could all be guilty, by omission or commission" (Guzmán Campos, Fals-Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962a, 27), *La Violencia en Colombia* was read by many as an accusation against the Conservative party, triggering a vigorous backlash against the book's intellectual merits and its political relevance (Guzmán Campos, Fals-Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962b; Jaramillo 2014; Karl 2017). However, as more sober readings of *La Violencia en Colombia* appeared in the late 1960s, the book became a key reference point for elites and scholars to think about violence in the country and how it should be addressed (Jaramillo 2014).

THE 1987 EXPERT COMMISSION

Amid a full-blown war against the state launched by drug cartels, following the failure of Belisario Betancur's (1982–1986) peace attempt in 1985, and facing empowered guerrillas and paramilitaries across the country, in 1987 Virgilio Barco (1986–1990) created the Commission for the Study of Violence (Comisión de Estudios sobre la Violencia, hereafter Expert Commission). In contrast to the 1958 Investigatory Commission, which included politicians, military officers, and religious leaders, eight out of the ten members of the Expert Commission were academics, and most of them were sociologists.[2] For its investigation, the Expert Commission relied on existing academic research on violence, administrative data on crime, and interviews with other experts and state officials (Jaramillo 2014). The resulting report, *Colombia: Violencia y democracia* (*Colombia: Violence and Democracy*) was published in 1987. The report offered both a taxonomy of the different types of violence that plagued the country and specific policy recommenda-

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1 Liberal politicians were Otto Morales Benítez and Absalón Fernández de Soto; the Conservative party was represented by Augusto Ramírez Moreno; the army was represented by Ernesto Caicedo López and Hernando Mora Angueria; the priests were Fabio Martínez from Caldas and Germán Guzmán Campos from Tolima.

2 The Expert Commission brought together a historian (Gonzalo Sánchez, its coordinator), two anthropologists (Dario Fajardo and Jaime Arocha), five sociologists (Carlos Eduardo Jaramillo, Álvaro Camacho, Álvaro Guzmán, Carlos Miguel Ortiz, and Eduardo Pizarro), a retired military commander (Luis Alberto Andrade Anaya), and the dean of a regional public university (Santiago Peláez).

tions to address each of them. Most notably, the report distinguished between political violence, enacted by guerrillas, and other types of violence, such as those emanating from organized crime or from ethnic and social exclusion (Arocha et al. 1987). This distinction was important because, for the Expert Commission, the state could negotiate only with armed actors exercising political violence (Arocha et al. 1987).

The Expert Commission's legacy, considered one of the main interventions by sociologists in Colombian public life (Segura Escobar and Camacho Guizado 2017), was opening the seemingly monolithic nature of violence into a multifaceted array of violences, all which merited differentiated approaches from the state and society (Guzmán 1990; Jaramillo 2014; Pécaut 1998; Sánchez 1993). The report's findings informed operational changes within the armed and police forces, and inspired security policy in successive governments, especially during Cesar Gaviria's (1990–1994) (Camacho Guizado 1994; Jaramillo 2014). However, the report's influence on security policy had ambivalent consequences, as urban safety continued to be subordinated to military agendas (Camacho Guizado 1994). Its relevance also helped push academics out of the ivory tower and into the public sector. Five out of the ten commissioners went on to serve as advisors on peace, reconciliation, and security issues for national and local governments (Jaramillo 2014). Gonzalo Sánchez, the commission's coordinator, described this new type of intellectual as an "intellectual for democracy": a proactive academic ready to design, evaluate, and even lead government programs from appointed positions, all the while maintaining her critical autonomy and independence (Pécaut 1998; Sánchez 1998). Villaveces (1998) and Cartagena Núñez (2013) are more critical of this new relationship between intellectuals and the state, arguing that close collaboration with government produced a conformist, "bureaucratized intellectual" (Villaveces 1998, 95).

The report's classificatory achievement also drew criticism. For example, economist Fernando Gaitán argued that the commission defined violence so expansively that "whatever situation the Commission did not see as harmonious and filled with virtuous equilibria, it classified as violent" (2001, 78). This created the view that violence was endemic to the country (Gaitán 2001). This observation, alongside the lines of historical continuity that the report established between the generalized violence of the 1980s and previous episodes of violence, fed into the idea that violence was an inescapable feature of Colombian social life (Gaitán 2001; Jaramillo 2014). Yet this was an unfair evaluation of the report's argument—throughout the report, the commissioners insisted that Colombia's "culture of violence" could be placated by the widespread adoption of democratic and civic values (Arocha et al. 1987; Jaramillo 2014). Another critique, with which the commissioners later agreed, argued that the report put forth a fragmented account of violence (Jaramillo 2014; Sánchez 1993). Finally, critics also pointed out that, in highlighting the relationship between poverty, inequality, and different types of violence, the authors diminished the causal relevance of political exclusion in motivating violence, thus depoliticizing the nature of violence in the country (Jaramillo 2014; Sánchez 2000).

Despite these criticisms, the Expert Commission's report further amplified the view that, to address violence, Colombia had to deepen and strengthen its democracy. This resonated strongly with the demands coming from social movements and civil society, which called for a broadening of democratic politics in the country. At the same time, like *La Violencia en Colombia*, the report did not explicitly assign responsibility for the violence to specific political actors or sectors of society (Jaramillo 2014). The report portrayed a country segmented and stratified in its exposure and vulnerability to violence, but united in its responsibility for it. The commissioners' main recommendation, that Colombia's "culture of violence" had to be "substituted by a culture of peace and democracy" (Arocha et al. 1987, 27), appealed to the state for institutional reform but saw civil society as the one ultimately responsible for rooting violence out of social and political life (Sánchez 1993). Because of this, many commissioners see the 1991 Constitution as the materialization of the report's recommendations (Jaramillo 2014).

EXPERT COMMISSIONS AND THEIR EFFECT ON THE POLITICAL REGIME

The 1958 Investigatory Commission and the 1987 Expert Commission evidence a peculiar modality through which the Colombian state sought to make the seemingly chaotic nature of violence intelligible to both state elites and wider publics: an appointed commission bringing together either recognized public figures or certified experts—between 1958 and 2007, the state launched seven expert commissions of this kind (Jaramillo Marín 2011). Jaramillo describes these commissions as "institutional devices whose role is to represent, narrate, and manage what happens in the context of [continued] war" (2011, 233). As such, these commissions set specific representations of the country in circulation, with effects on both the academy and the political regime. Although the 1958 Investigatory Commission did not produce a public report, its archive provided the raw data for what became *La Violencia en Colombia* (Guzmán Campos, Fals-Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962a). In contrast, the findings of the 1987 Expert Commission were synthesized and made publicly available in *Colombia: Violencia y democracia* (Arocha et al. 1987). The two books were important academic contributions in their own right. The first one established violence as an object of study for social scientists in Colombia, and the second one produced a typology of the different kinds of violence observable in the country. In addition to this, both had unsettling consequences for the political regime. According to Jaramillo (2014), *La Violencia en Colombia* was an indictment of the political class and proposed concrete steps to transform national social structures. *Colombia: Violencia y democracia*, in contrast, put forth a solution to the problem of generalized violence, albeit a very vague one: "a culture of democracy" (Jaramillo 2014). However, the idea that a strengthened democracy would eliminate violence was already heavily

influential among the institutional and civic movements that led to the 1991 Constituent Assembly, which effectively opened up Colombian politics (Jaramillo 2014).

MEXICO: NAMING VIOLENCE TO PROTECT WOMEN'S LIVES

Between 1985 and 2016, 52,210 women and girls were killed in Mexico (SEGOB, INMUJERES, and ONU Mujeres 2017, 18). The issue gained notoriety in the early 1990s, when the bodies of brutally murdered women began to appear in the border city of Ciudad Juárez. In Juárez alone, 2,376 women were killed and 282 disappeared between 1991 and 2021 (Guillén 2022). The city became a paradigmatic case to understand the levels of violence to which women and girls were exposed and exemplified the impunity with which such crimes were committed. The victims' relatives organized to bring attention to the murders and to condemn state inaction. Many family members, especially mothers, started organizations such as Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, Justicia para Nuestras Hijas, and the Mesa de Mujeres de Ciudad Juárez. They held demonstrations pressing for justice, maintained records that could help future investigations, and invited artists and academics to Juárez to help them make sense of what was happening. At this juncture, a distinct truth-producing practice was inaugurated: moved by the outrage over the situation in Juárez, at the behest of the victims' relatives and, on many occasions, relying on the information compiled by local human rights organizations, social scientists and other intellectuals arrived in Juárez to try to understand the nature of these crimes and to compel the state to bring justice to them. In this context, feminist intellectuals, anthropologists in particular, started describing the killings in Juárez and other parts of Mexico as *feminicides* (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2006; Monárrez Fragoso 2010; Segato 2013).

The emergence of the concept of *feminicide* marked a turning point in the quest to bring justice to the Juárez murders and helped galvanize a broader movement to protect the lives of Mexican women and girls. *Feminicide* locates the source of violence against women in gender oppression, with lethal violence being but the most extreme manifestation of a host of other violent practices to which women are routinely exposed due to gender-based discrimination (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2010, xxiii). Moreover, *feminicide* is conceived as a state crime because its prevalence is linked to impunity in prosecution—between 2000 and 2010, only 10 percent of all presumptive murders of women and girls in Mexico resulted in sentencing of an accused (Incháustegui Romero 2014, 397). For proponents of the concept, a crucial aspect of *feminicides* is the state's inability or unwillingness to uphold the rule of law to protect the lives of women (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2010, xxiii). These conceptual innovations paved the way for an important intervention in the public sphere. First, by framing *feminicide* as the consequence of gender-based discrimination, scholars adopted a language of human rights aligned with international treaties such as the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

(CEDAW) and the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women (Convention of Belém do Pará) (García-Del Moral 2016, 1022). Second, characterizing *feminicide* as a state crime opened the door to hold the Mexican state accountable for it in supranational courts (García-Del Moral 2016, 1022).

A major intervention by proponents of the concept of *feminicide* was accounting for them as a consequence of gender oppression exacerbated by state inaction. But to what extent were these phenomena empirically distinct from other homicides? To demonstrate that violence against women was the result of a particular arrangement of gender relations, feminist scholars evidenced that the homicide rates of women and girls were, among other things, less responsive to overall changes in violent activity and occurred in specific urban or rural places, and that the perpetrators used different types of weapons than in other crimes (Incháustegui Romero 2014). This exercise was aided by a linguistic turn: in reformulating the notion of *femicide* proposed by feminist scholars Jill Radford and Diana E. H. Russell (1992), Lagarde y de los Ríos translated it not as "femicidio" but as "feminicidio." Lagarde y de los Ríos explains that she changed the word in part because of the resemblance between *femicide* (femicidio) and *homicide* (homicidio) in Spanish, which would have furthered the misconception that *feminicides* were just homicides in which the victims were women (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2010). Establishing a distance from the category of homicide was crucial. It highlighted, linguistically and empirically, that *feminicides* were the result of patriarchal gender ideologies that devalue the lives of women and allow not only their murder but also the systematic violation of their human rights (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2010 xxiii). The category of *feminicide* therefore does more than just specify the gender of a homicide's victim: it invokes the entire symbolic system underpinning gender relations and identifies it as a source of women's heightened vulnerability to a wide array of violent practices.

To incorporate *feminicide* into the Mexican penal code and create state institutions charged with protecting women's lives, human rights organizations and feminist scholars had to do more than propose a sound new concept. To compel the Mexican state to address the issue, human rights activists relied on *feminicide*'s resonance with the language of human rights to enlist national actors such as Mexico's National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) and, later, international actors such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights as allies in a transnational "shaming" campaign against the Mexican state (García-Del Moral 2016, 1022). This effort reached its apex in 2004 when the Inter-American Court of Human Rights opened *González and Others 'Cotton Field' v. Mexico*, a complaint against the Mexican state for its failure to prevent and properly investigate the murders of three women in Ciudad Juárez (García-Del Moral 2016, 1022). The court decided against the Mexican state in 2009. Parallel to the transnational "shaming" campaign, activists and scholars also worked within the Mexican state, especially in Congress. Women across

party lines, not all of whom identified as feminists, worked together to mobilize Congress into action; female legislators were united in their indignation at male indifference toward the murders (García-Del Moral 2020). In 2001 the Mexican Chamber of Deputies created the Special Commission to investigate the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez. Later, in 2004, it launched a Special Commission to investigate *feminicides* across all of Mexico. The Special Commission on *feminicides* was presided over by anthropologist Dr. Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, one of the most prominent advocates of the concept. Lagarde y de los Ríos's jump to federal politics was crucial for translating *feminicide* from an academic concept into a penal category (García-Del Moral 2016, 1027).

The work of the Special Commission on *feminicide* was the first time that the state attempted to diagnose the scale and scope of the phenomenon across Mexico from 1999 to 2006 (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2010). This effort on the part of the legislature transformed the truth-producing practice that started in Ciudad Juárez in the early 1990s. Instead of using only the archives compiled by victims' relatives, scholars, and human rights organizations, the Special Commission also worked with data produced by the state. Relying on official data proved challenging not just because some agencies were uncooperative but also because *feminicide* was operationalized to capture both intentional and unintentional homicides in order to emphasize that the avoidable deaths of women, inasmuch as they are the product of patriarchal exclusion, constitute violent deaths (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2006, 2010). Yet, in using data provided by state agencies, the concept of *feminicide* achieved new empirical valence. The Commission's findings were summarized in a diagnostic report, which helped persuade Congress to adopt the General Law of Women's Access to a Life Free from Violence in 2007. Alongside the General Law, the state also inaugurated a data bank on cases of violence against women; launched a special monitoring system to track *feminicides*; and established an interagency coordination platform to design policies that would further address the issue (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2007). In 2012, after numerous Mexican states had incorporated *feminicide* into their penal codes because of the 2009 *Cotton Field* ruling, *feminicide* entered Mexico's Federal Criminal Code.

Incorporating *feminicide* into the conceptual and legal apparatus of the Mexican state was an enormous victory for the feminist and human rights movements. The public and legislative discussion that led to the General Law was a unique opportunity for feminist academics and human rights advocates to set a novel concept in circulation, one that described a peculiar kind of violence. At the same time, the process of organizing to bring attention to the issue triggered the creation of several truth-producing practices, from local archives of cases compiled by NGOs to information-gathering efforts within the state itself, all of them increasingly anchored in the concept of *feminicide*. The popularization of the term *feminicide* and its adoption as a legal category are a testament to the success of these endeavors. Moreover, the expansive quality of the concept as it appears in the law—where violence against women emerges

from a complex interplay between gender ideologies and state practices by way of exclusion—hints at larger transformative projects. The goal of the General Law and its accompanying mechanisms goes beyond merely prosecuting criminals (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2006). Instead, it gestures toward "a political reordering to eradicate the causes of violence [against women]" (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2006, 225). In that sense, the institutionalization of *feminicide* is a distinctively feminist intervention in the public sphere, not only because the concept originated among feminist scholars but also because the trajectory of the idea itself models change as construed by feminist social movements: concepts borne out of feminist thinking and organizing have the double goal of naming gender injustice and addressing it (Ordorica 2022).

Yet, for all its promise, the process of incorporating *feminicide* as a legal category and as a concept capable of reorienting state action also led to conflicts that illustrate the challenges of translating ideas from the academy into public policy. The first challenge is conceptual: what do we lose by classifying all cases of killing of women and girls as *feminicides*? In this respect, Rita Segato contends that the use of *feminicide* that took root in Mexico does not contribute to an adequate understanding of the different dimensions of violence against women (Segato 2006). Segato bases part of her critique on her own diagnosis of the situation in Ciudad Juárez (Segato 2013). She argues that the crimes in Juárez should be considered "crimes of a Second State" (Segato 2013). For Segato, these murders were enacted to demonstrate sovereignty over a territory and its population—"the dominated classes" of Ciudad Juárez (Segato 2013, 43)—which were represented by the women. The killings, she argued, sealed a bond of complicity and solidarity among "the group or network that administers the rights and duties of a parallel state," made up of legal and illegal entrepreneurs benefiting from the unbridled accumulation of wealth triggered by Juárez's strategic location as a border city in the context of NAFTA (Segato 2013, 43). This "Second State" killed women to communicate its power and (re)produce a state of exception in Juárez where neither the judiciary nor other regulatory institutions would be allowed to operate. For Segato, the more expansive definition of *feminicide* that was written into law prevents a nuanced understanding of the peculiar modalities of violence against women that occur in different territories, and that might call for differentiated solutions (Segato 2006).

On a practical level, reliably classifying instances of crimes against women as *feminicides* has proven challenging for prosecutors across Mexico. Araiza Diaz, Vargas Martínez, and Medécigo Daniel (2020) identify three factors that explain this. First, there are political concerns that the expansive rules for classifying *feminicides* will lead to an explosion of cases, discrediting local governments and judiciaries. Second, prosecutors are not always adequately trained to distinguish cases. Because of this, in 2020 Mexico's prosecutor general simplified the requirements for a homicide to be classified as a *feminicide* (Morán Breña 2020). Last, because of Mexico's federated system of gov-

ernance, states have developed different rules for classifying, prosecuting, and preventing *feminicides*. In addition to these elements, there are also political factors that explain the lag between the General Law's approval in 2007 and *feminicide* entering the Federal Criminal Code in 2012. García-Del Moral describes this lag as a case of "gendered resistance" on the part of men inside the Mexican state, who "simulated" formal alignment with feminist agendas while stalling their implementation (García-Del Moral 2020). Finally, Araiza Diaz, Vargas Martínez, and Medécigo Daniel (2020) also note that fully translating the conceptual apparatus behind the idea of *feminicide* into a penal category is especially difficult because the specific nature of gender-based violence runs against the universalizing logic of the law. For example, *feminicides* are not equivalent to aggravated homicides insofar as the latter contemplate a host of other kinship relationships, such as siblinghood or parenthood, which might not respond to the distinct power imbalances that concern male-female relationships (Araiza Diaz, Vargas Martínez, and Medécigo Daniel 2020). Similarly, the General Law's framing of *feminicides* as a human rights issue brings with it the compounded challenge of securing and protecting a host of rights that are interdependent with the right to a life free of violence (Araiza Diaz, Vargas Martínez, and Medécigo Daniel 2020). In short, implementing the category of *feminicide* in the daily operations of justice administration opens up varied challenges, from practical classificatory difficulties to incompatibilities between the concept's ambition and the possibilities of current legal frameworks.

Despite the political, conceptual, and practical challenges that accompany the implementation of the General Law, the process through which *feminicide* entered the vocabulary of the Mexican state illustrates how concepts developed in the Latin American academy to make sense of violence can be translated into public policies. In this case, the network of expertise operated "from below." The truth-producing practice that resulted in a successful intervention in the public sphere began with human rights organizations and victims' relatives working to bring attention to the issue, compiling their own archives and enlisting artists and academics to make sense of the situation. Rita Segato, Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos, and Julia Estela Monárrez Fragoso, feminist academics who made important conceptual contributions to the development of *feminicide* as a category, all visited Juárez to meet with local grassroots organizations. To understand what they saw in Juárez, feminist intellectuals adapted the concept of *feminicide* from Radford and Russell's idea of *femicide*, reformulating it to fit the language of human rights while also emphasizing the fact that *feminicides* in Mexico were partly a function of the state's indifference toward and even complicity in the deaths of women and girls. This new framing facilitated a transnational campaign against the Mexican state, which resulted in a ruling against it by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2009. International pressure, alongside the work of a coalition of female legislators, feminist intellectuals, and human rights organizations, pushed the Mexican state to establish *feminicides* as a particular form of vio-

lence anchored in gender relations and operationalize it for it to be prosecuted more effectively. In short, through the mobilization aided by the emergence of *feminicide* as a concept, a network of expertise was able to make "the [Mexican] state itself a target of its own punitive power" (García-Del Moral 2020, 845).

MAKING SENSE OF VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

Violence in Latin America is, above all, an urgent social problem. Identifying its origins, diagnosing its scope, and trying to reduce its intensity has thrust various actors—social scientists among them—into contact with each other. Yet, through the stylized accounts presented above, I do not want to convey that these encounters were always harmonious. Studying violence is an exercise fraught with conflict. Tracing the emergence of memories of violence in Latin America, Crenzel and Allier-Montaño (2015) write that "[ever] since the very development of the processes of violence, naming and explaining what happened has been [...] a field of contention between [different actors]" (Crenzel and Allier-Montaño 2015, 1). Conservative leaders in Colombia thought that the book *La Violencia en Colombia* was merely "four hundred pages of concentrated sectarianism, purified as much as possible through a 'sociological' filter" (Karl 2017, 159). Mexican lawmakers repeatedly dismissed the need to create a law specifically intended to protect the lives of women and prosecute the crimes against them (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2006). Furthermore, resistance to these projects for understanding violence has itself been violent. Making sense of violence is a risky endeavor. The authors of *La Violencia en Colombia*, for example, received death threats, and some went into exile (Guzmán Campos, Fals-Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962a). Other Colombian social scientists studying violence and its consequences, like sociologist Alfredo Correa de Andréis, have been persecuted and killed (CNMH 2022). Mexican activists working to end impunity for *feminicides* have also been the target of violence: Marisela Escobedo was fatally shot in 2010 as she protested outside the State Legislature in Chihuahua, calling for her daughter's killer to be prosecuted (Redacción BBC News Mundo 2020). Activists and scholars have persisted in their efforts even in the face of threats to their lives and safety.

The coalitions that emerged from the encounters between social scientists and other actors have been necessary for undertaking the task of understanding and intervening in violence. Neither governments nor NGOs nor intellectuals would have been able to do it by themselves. Because of this, I characterized two emblematic instances of investigating and addressing particular forms of violence (Colombia's armed conflict and violence against women and girls in Mexico) as networks of expertise. Focusing on the task of understanding violence has allowed me to trace how a social problem, violence, has created a field of study for Latin American social scientists that has demanded scholars' constant interfacing with actors beyond the university who were not always informants but also al-

lies and stakeholders. Therefore, as I recounted the experiences of two of Colombia's expert commissions for the study of violence and the process of criminalizing *feminicide* in Mexico, I emphasized two dimensions that are analytically relevant for the study of expertise: *who* participated in the truth-producing practice, and *what* were the consequences of these actors' intervention in the public sphere. Comparing these experiences along these two dimensions illustrates the extent to which the study of violence has taken Latin American social scientists out of the ivory tower.

The efforts to make sense of violence in Colombia and Mexico have assembled different social actors into networks for the co-production of knowledge. This coming together enhanced their capacity to understand the phenomena at hand and address its ascribed causes (with varying levels of success). In both cases, the network of expertise included the state and social scientists. In Mexico, human rights activists also played a crucial role.[3] Yet, more than the distinct composition of each network, a crucial difference between the cases resides in who *initiated* the formation of the network. In Colombia, the network of expertise was initiated from above, while in Mexico it started from below. The Colombian expert commissions on the study of violence launched in 1958 and 1987 were both devised and assembled by the state—namely, the executive. Members of the 1987 Expert Commission, which authored the report *Colombia: Violencia y democracia*, were recruited by the minister of government (Jaramillo Marín 2011). The 1958 Investigatory Commission was created by the outgoing military junta (Guzmán Campos, Fals-Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962a). Although the work of the 1958 Investigatory Commission did not result in a public report, *La Violencia en Colombia*, the book written based on its archive and coauthored by former commissioner Father Guzmán Campos, sociologist Fals-Borda, and lawyer Umaña Luna was made possible by the intervention of President Alberto Lleras Camargo (1958–1962). President Lleras Camargo urged Father Guzmán Campos to write the book, and liaised with the Catholic Church to secure a license for him to spend time at the National University in Bogotá preparing the manuscript along with the other authors (Guzmán Campos 2007). In Mexico, victims' relatives became activists and spearheaded the network that ultimately led to the criminalization of *feminicide*. They compiled their own archives about each woman's death and invited intellectuals and artists to help them bring attention to the issue and understand what was happening. In these encounters, feminist anthropologists, through the concept of *feminicide*, provided a frame that resonated with other publics and enhanced the work of activists and victims' relatives to end state inaction in prosecuting the crimes (García-Del Moral 2016).

What were the effects of the work by these networks in the public sphere? To show that the study of violence in Latin America has had impacts both on the social sciences themselves and also beyond the academy, I have privileged the political effects of these networks' interventions while also drawing out intellectual contributions. Colombia's expert commissions on the study of violence had a significant impact on the development of the social sciences. The book *La Violencia en Colombia*, an indirect product of the 1958 Investigatory Commission, established violence as a viable field of study in the university. The report by the 1987 Expert Commission, *Colombia: Violencia y democracia*, proposed a rich taxonomy of the different kinds of violence found in the country, opening avenues for their further investigation. The expert commissions also had effects on Colombia's political regime. *La Violencia en Colombia* broke the silence surrounding the most dramatic moments of La Violencia (1945–1965) and positioned a representation of the country's recent past among the literate classes that ran counter to the climate of concord sought by the promoters of the National Front. *Colombia: Violencia y democracia* influenced the design of security policy during the 1990s and amplified the calls for democratization that ultimately led to the 1991 Constituent Assembly. Although identifying the institutional overhaul produced by the Constituent Assembly as a consequence of the commission's work would mean overstating its impact, the report was firmly embedded in the discursive universe that sustained mobilization for the Constituent Assembly.

In Mexico, the network's intervention also had effects on both the academy and the broader public. In terms of intellectual innovation, the concept of *feminicide* represents a significant contribution from Latin American feminism to global feminist thought (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010). While the concepts of *femicide* and *feminicide* both speak to the issue of violence against women, they do not invoke the same set of situations and meanings. In contrast to *femicide*, the focus of *feminicide* is "not just on gender but also on the intersection of gender dynamics with the cruelties of racism and economic injustices in local as well as global contexts" (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010, 5). Moreover, the concept effectively transformed Mexican criminal policy regarding violence against girls and women. First, its emergence allowed human rights organizations and victims to prosecute the Mexican state in supranational courts by locating the situation under a human rights framework (García-Del Moral 2016). Second, institutionalizing the concept through legal reform in Mexico resulted in a significant information-gathering effort to diagnose the scope of the problem, and in a variety of interagency efforts to address it (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2007). Finally, through the criminalization of *feminicide*, the coalition of victims, activists, legislators, and social scientists turned "the punitive power

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[3] Civil society and the organized human rights movement—especially victims of violence—have also played a key role in revealing the full scope of violence in Colombia and devising ways to tackle it. I do not wish, under any circumstances, to write them out of this history. Yet these organizations were not the protagonists of the processes linked to the 1958 and 1987 expert commissions on the study of violence.

of the state against the state itself" (García-Del Moral 2020, 846). To summarize, in Mexico, naming a particular kind of violence (*feminicide*) led to legal change and an institutional transformation to protect women's lives. The political effects of the Colombian expert commissions, while unsettling for the dominant political regimes of the late 1950s and the late 1980s, were much more diluted as they operated primarily through the reception of books and reports by the general public.

In their ethnography of one of the laboratories at the Salk Institute, Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar argue that scientific facts are created through "operations on statements" (1986, 87). These statements are produced by "inscription devices" (Latour and Woolgar 1987, 51), which range from pen and paper to the most sophisticated pieces of scientific measuring equipment. People working in the lab constantly intervene in these statements by refuting, expanding, or qualifying them based on other statements (Latour and Woolgar 1987, 87). These activities either enhance or diminish each statement's credibility. In the end, if all these operations become routine and taken for granted by the members of a scientific community, a statement becomes a fact (Latour and Woolgar 1987, 76). In this respect, Latour and Woolgar write that "readers are only fully convinced when all sources of persuasion," the different operations on the statement, "seem to have disappeared" (Latour and Woolgar 1987, 76). In other words, the information we seamlessly assimilate as factual is itself the product of a routine, and somewhat imperceptible, process of contestation.

Journalist Leila Guerriero evokes a similar process in her profile of the Argentine forensic anthropology team that worked to identify the bodies of those forcibly disappeared by the Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983) (Guerriero 2007). She describes the team's work: searching and putting together bones found in mass graves across Argentina, then "[looking] for wounds compatible with blows or bullets, and then bureaucracy: recording everything on infinite notecards" (Guerriero 2007). If we ignore that these anthropologists are encountering the traces of unspeakable violence, searching, putting together, and recording all seem like mundane tasks. Team member Sofía Egaña describes it more poetically, when she says that her job is to connect a bone with a story (Guerriero 2007). Each bone works like one of Latour and Woolgar's statements: it must be intervened in by the anthropologist's brush, described in a manner acceptable to forensic practitioners, and contrasted against hundreds of records of clandestine operations and reports of disappearances scattered across different archives (Olmo 2002). The finding must then be accepted by a court. Only then can a family finally mourn their murdered relative. When we think of violence, the lab is never as circumscribed as the one Latour and Woolgar write about.

In this essay, I have attempted to recount how bones—the experiences of different types of violence across Latin America—have been connected to stories, representations of reality capable of having an impact on social life. I have traced how different social actors have worked together in networks of expertise to render seemingly inscrutable processes of violence into intelligible arrangements of events, facts, and interpretations. After intense episodes of violence in the late 1950s and late 1980s, the Colombian state appointed expert commissions to produce explanatory accounts of the recent past. These commissions had effects on both the development of the social sciences in the country and on Colombian politics. The work of the 1958 Investigatory Commission provided the archival material for *La Violencia en Colombia* (Guzmán Campos, Fals-Borda, and Umaña Luna 1962a), the country's first systematic sociological investigation of violence. The book also revealed the scope of the violence the country had suffered through the 1940s and early 1950s, shaking the foundations of Colombia's uneasy political pact, the National Front. The 1987 Expert Commission authored *Colombia: Violencia y democracia* (Arocha et al. 1987), which proposed deepening and strengthening Colombian democracy as an antidote to the multiple types of violence present in the country—a claim that resonated with the social movements that ultimately pushed for a Constituent Assembly in 1991. In Mexico, relatives of women who had been brutally killed in Ciudad Juárez organized to understand what was happening and to urge the state to adequately prosecute the crimes. The work of these relatives catalyzed the emergence of a coalition of activists, artists, and academics. In this context, feminist scholars proposed the concept of *feminicide* to highlight that, in Mexico, women were being killed and abused with such impunity because of patriarchal ideologies that devalue their lives. The emergence of this new concept helped activists compel supranational courts to prosecute the Mexican state for its inaction and, once *feminicide* was translated into law by academics-turned-legislators, it effectively transformed Mexican criminal justice and other social policies. Connecting bones to stories is not an easy task. It is risky and demands collaboration. Yet, in drawing these connections, Latin American social scientists have not only carved out a field of study for themselves. Through partnerships with other actors, they have also paved the way toward a less violent future.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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